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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 30 November 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

Local Government and Planning Reform

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

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the reform of local government and the planning system.

The Executive's vision for the future shape of local democracy is of strong, dynamic, citizen-focused local government built on vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable communities. Central to that vision is the provision of high-quality efficient services that respond to the needs of people and continuously improve. On the eighteenth of this month, the Executive brought that vision another step closer: first, by agreeing that I should consult on proposals for the reorganisation of local government; and, secondly, by endorsing my plans for a fundamental overhaul of the planning system. Consequently, today I launch a consultation process on policy proposals that will modernise the framework within which district councils operate, and those proposals will, in due course, be translated into a draft Bill for the Assembly to consider. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I also intend to introduce the Planning Bill at the earliest opportunity. In transforming the planning system, I will strengthen local democracy by devolving planning powers to the 11 new councils and putting locally elected politicians at the heart of the local decision-making process. I also propose to bring forward other initiatives to build on the work agreed by the Executive and to give my programme real momentum.

I turn first to the reorganisation and modernisation of local government. Members

will recall that the Executive's decision on the future shape of local government provides the foundation to develop strong, effective local government that will deliver improved outcomes for everyone in Northern Ireland. Strong civil leadership, based on effective and inclusive local democracy, is key to achieving these improved outcomes. I am pleased to announce today the launch of a consultation setting out proposals that I believe will achieve the Executive's vision. The proposals provide for efficient, fair and transparent decision-making across local government. They will ensure that the highest standards of behaviour are maintained. They set out a framework for a new community planning process, and they propose a new regime to help improve how councils deliver their services to ratepayers.

Before I outline the key proposals, I record my thanks to the strategic leadership board and its three policy development panels for the support and guidance that they provided in helping to frame the proposals. Indeed, the work of the board and panel members, who included elected representatives from each of the main political parties, has proved to be invaluable.

The first of the five areas that the consultation proposals embrace is the introduction of new governance arrangements. I want to ensure that councils operate to high standards, that they pursue equality and fairness within a framework of checks and balances and that there is openness and transparency in how they conduct their business.

The second area is the introduction of a new ethical standards regime for local government. That would include a mandatory code of conduct for councillors, with supporting mechanisms for the investigation and adjudication of appeals.

The third area is the development of a new council-led community planning process. I

believe that an effective, statute-based community planning process, led and facilitated by new councils, is critical to delivering the Executive's vision for local government. The process will enable councils to work in partnership with the full range of other sectors to link the delivery of effective, joined-up services in their area to meet the aspirations of local communities. The transfer of responsibility for the delivery of a range of new functions, allied to the community planning process, will enable councils to address the needs and aspirations of local communities. However, I appreciate that district councils can do only what legislation empowers them to do, and I recognise that there may be actions that they wish to take that are not specifically provided for in their legal responsibilities. To provide for that eventuality, it is proposed that district councils have a new power of well-being. That new power would enable councils to take any action that is not already the responsibility of another agency so that the well-being of their district can be promoted or improved.

The fourth key area that the consultation proposals embrace is the introduction of a new service delivery and performance improvement framework for local government. That would involve a revised, more expansive statutory duty for councils, requiring them to secure best value and to continually improve the services they deliver to the ratepayer.

Finally, I propose to establish a partnership panel for Northern Ireland to formalise the relationships between the Executive and district councils and to provide a forum to consider strategic issues collectively. I propose that the panel consists of Ministers, particularly those whose Departments have a significant policy relationship with local government, and representatives from each of the 11 new councils. Full details of these reform and modernisation proposals are set out in the consultation document that I am publishing today.

I believe that these proposals, allied to the reforms of the planning system, which I will shortly outline, are fundamental to our local democracy. They will strengthen local decision-making and give elected representatives, who understand the needs and aspirations of their community, the opportunity to shape the areas in which they are elected.

Planning reform is also vital to the success of local government reform, but it is in itself

designed to improve the way in which the planning system operates. Such reform has long been needed, but it is now a crucial element of the Executive's programme to support economic recovery. I intend to take forward the reforms of the planning system through a mixture of legislation and other means. On the legislative side, with your permission, Mr Speaker, I intend to introduce the Planning Bill at the earliest opportunity, and I look forward to the Second Stage debate.

The Planning Bill will provide for the transfer of development plan and development management powers from my Department to councils within a timetable to be agreed by the Executive. Councils will no longer be consultees; they will be the planning authorities, responsible for drawing up their own development plans and making the vast majority of planning decisions. The 11 new councils will be able to use the new local development plans to provide a clear and realistic vision of how places should change and what they will be like in future. The plan will support that vision by indicating clearly where development, including regeneration, should take place and what form it should take. In addition, the opportunity to develop appropriate linkages with the proposed community planning responsibilities should not be missed. Councils will also be responsible for determining planning applications. Councillors will be the decision-makers. They will have the recommendations of their professional planners, but they will make decisions and live with the consequences.

There is a sea change for councils and councillors, for those who work in the planning system and for developers, agents and the public who use the system. I will do everything in my power to prepare the way for that change. I will take practical steps to help councils, planners and the public to prepare.

I mentioned my intention to bring forward other initiatives to build on my legislative proposals for reform and modernisation. I have still not received clarity from the Executive on the local government reform delivery timetable, and I will continue to pursue that matter vigorously in the Executive. Nevertheless, a modernised local government, strengthened by the devolution of planning powers, is a worthwhile goal. Since I am determined to drive that work forward, I have decided to take practical steps to reinvigorate the local government and planning reform changes. None of them requires legislative change.

My Department has already brought together responsibility for all local government and planning functions, which means that we have a single coherent programme of policy, legislation and delivery of local government and planning reform with one team at the helm.

By 1 April 2011, I will have transformed the Planning Service to anticipate as closely as possible the proposed arrangements. The Planning Service's status as an agency will end on 31 March 2011. Agency status is a legacy of direct rule, involving the duplication of structures and functions; it is not needed under devolution. It is costly, and it gets in the way of decision-making. On 1 April 2011, the functions of the Planning Service and the people who deliver them will have been absorbed into the core of my Department. By the same date, planning functions will also have been reorganised to anticipate the transfer of development plans and development management to councils. That will mean a local planning operations division taking operational responsibility for the development plan and development management functions that will, in due course, transfer from my Department to councils.

A strategic planning operations division will take forward the responsibilities that will remain in the Department following local government reform. That will clarify the functions, people and other resources that are to transfer to local government — issues on which the local government sector has long called for clarity. We need a local office structure capable of providing an excellent service to the 26 councils and, in due course, to the 11 councils.

Rationalising the six existing divisional planning offices into five area planning offices designed around the 11 council clusters will provide for an affordable, effective and consistently robust service across Northern Ireland, and that is what I have decided to do. By 1 April 2011, we will reorganise to have a northern, a south Antrim, a western and a southern area planning office, each of which will cover two of the 11 council groups. The Belfast office will cover the remaining three. That is illustrated on the map that accompanies written copies of the statement.

The strategic planning operations division will take responsibility for the functions that my Department will retain on the transfer of development management responsibilities to

local government. It will also advise the local planning operations division on development plans, development management and design and landscape. It will also be responsible for processing applications for strategic projects and for developing the Northern Ireland marine plan, which will be prepared by May 2014.

10.45 am

To increase clarity, I will put in place a formal written scheme by which my successors and I will delegate decision-making authority to the Department and to identify the situations in which that authority may be withdrawn. I will publish the scheme for everyone to see. The scheme will serve as a model for council schemes of delegation when planning functions transfer and will build on the existing streamlined arrangements. I am also examining the financing of my Department's planning functions; to be sustainable we must live within our means. That means matching our resources to our workload. We are not charging the right fee for the job. Smaller, simpler applications, such as single houses or modest industrial units, are subsidising the largest and most complex proposals that are worth many millions of pounds to developers. Planning Service income does not cover its costs. This year, with the agreement of the Environment Committee, I increased fees in line with inflation, and I anticipate that, in future, fees will be kept in line with inflation.

I have completed the first phase of my fees review, and I am now consulting on proposals for making the fee structure fairer and more realistic. Applying my proposals to the current level of applications would bring in £3 million to £3.5 million extra income for the Planning Service. At the same time, we are working to resize and reshape so that we have the right staff in the right place to provide an excellent service. The changes that I announce today give us an opportunity to restructure senior management and strengthen front line delivery.

I want to broaden and deepen the debate about the future of planning and to hear what experts in planning and users of the planning system think. I will set up and chair a planning forum to involve key stakeholders in the planning field, the development industry and local and central government. I expect to convene that group in the new year. I will also re-emphasise and push forward the non-statutory elements of the

existing planning reform programme, including the delivery of streamlining, e-PIC (Electronic Planning Information for Citizens) and a new approach to the development and delivery of a suite of more succinct and focused planning policies.

I intend to develop and deliver a pilot programme to test the proposed consultative and practical working arrangements between the new local operations directorate and the 11 council groups. We will also use the pilot programme to test the proposed governance arrangements and the provisions for community planning. The pilot programme will be of particular interest to the Department for Social Development, whose urban regeneration responsibilities have been earmarked for transfer to local government. I have, therefore, written to the Minister for Social Development to ask whether his Department wishes to be involved in individual pilots. I intend to begin with a small number of pilots in April 2011, with a view to their being progressively rolled out across all 11 council groups by April 2012. I hope that, by engaging council and departmental staff, the pilots will enable us to test new arrangements to ensure that they are robust. I also hope that they will build capacity in the run-up to the creation of the 11 new councils.

Before I close, I record my appreciation of the work of Planning Service staff in making improvements over the past two years. Over that period, the Planning Service has introduced reforms to improve the planning system, including promoting the predictability of the planning system, the speeding up of planning decisions and improving customer experience. The introduction of two special project teams with a focus on processing applications of social or economic significance to Northern Ireland and employing pre-application discussions has resulted in some 90 strategic applications being processed. That has amounted to planning approvals representing investment well in excess of £2 billion, bringing with it associated construction jobs and post-development job creation. Since April 2009, a further 34 economically significant applications have also been processed, the majority within six months. They include Bombardier Shorts, Radox Laboratories and the Titanic Quarter to name but a few. Moreover, since devolution, Ministers have used planning policy as an effective way of responding to real issues that affect communities. Planning staff in my Department

have facilitated that process, producing a number of planning policy statements, including PPS 21, 'Sustainable Development in the Countryside'. I have deliberately adopted a new style for those PPSs, which are now shorter, sharper and more accessible to developers, the public and planners.

The development and implementation of the new streamlined consultation scheme, in partnership with local government colleagues, has been an outstanding success in speeding up the process of non-contentious applications. All 26 council areas have adopted the scheme, which has dramatically reduced the average time required to process and issue approvals, the impact being that 50% of applications are now processed and approved in, on average, 40 working days, or 8 weeks. Furthermore, work is continuing in order to raise the bar to 60% of applications by the end of the business year. Those short-term reforms have not only speeded up the progress of applications through the statutory planning process but improved the transparency and predictability of the planning system, which is of benefit to investors and the public at large. Furthermore, it is good to note that the majority of Planning Service customers rated their experience positively. Two years ago, only 32% of customers rated the overall service provided by the Planning Service as satisfactory. Today, some 63% of customers express satisfaction with the overall service provided. That significant turnaround in speed, predictability and customer experience stands testament to the dedication and professionalism of all those who work in the Planning Service, and their continued commitment and professionalism will be instrumental in taking forward the changes to come.

Mr Speaker, it will be evident to you and to Members that I am still committed to reforming local government. It is clear that the Executive as a whole are still committed to reforming local government, and I think that you will agree that the legislative and non-legislative measures that I have outlined are significant steps forward in achieving that goal. I look forward to working with Members and local government representatives to reinvigorate the local government and planning reform programmes, which will ultimately deliver a new model for local democracy and a vastly improved planning system. I shall end with a quotation from King Whitney Jnr:

“Change has a considerable psychological impact on the human mind. To the fearful it is threatening because it means that things may get worse. To the hopeful it is encouraging because things may get better. To the confident it is inspiring because the challenge exists to make things better.”

Let us, together, demonstrate that we are confident and that we will make things better. That is what I have set out to demonstrate today, and that is what I will strive to deliver. I commend the proposals to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. That was a long statement that has huge implications for planning in the North. My question will be in three parts. First, the Minister indicated that he will take forward reform through a mixture of legislation and other means. Are his proposals based on the planning reform Bill, or does he need other legislation to implement them? Secondly, he knows that the Committee is interested in the redeployment of planning staff and the restructuring of the Planning Service. What further implications will his proposals have for planning staff, the location of staff and divisional offices? Thirdly, the Minister said that he would initiate pilot programmes. Where will they take place, and will he clarify what they will involve?

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Chairperson for his succinct questioning. First, the planning reform Bill will be the key driver for all planning issues, and it will allow planning to be delivered by local government and for local government to be the decision-makers. However, the proposals are inextricably linked to the reorganisation Bill, without which it is unlikely, to say the least, that the Executive will allow planning to be passed to local government. The reorganisation Bill will deal with the code of conduct and ethical standards, giving us absolute confidence that we can transfer the process into a system that is robust and will stand up to tests. Therefore, both Bills must be enacted before the handover can take place.

The staffing arrangements at most offices will remain unchanged as a consequence of the process. There will be some changes in the southern area offices in Downpatrick and Craigavon. We will maintain the Craigavon site as the main office, while Downpatrick will be a sub-office. Some staff in the Downpatrick office may transfer to Craigavon, while others may transfer to Belfast because certain councils

will be affected under the new Belfast office proposals. The proposal to remove agency status from the Department and reorganise the offices will save £677,000. That is another significant step towards helping the Planning Service to live within its means.

The establishment of the pilot programmes will require consultation with local councils to identify which wants to be first to deliver a pilot programme. Undoubtedly, there will be competition among councils to be the first. That is good, because it will be a vigorous process that will be successful and will lead the way in delivering community planning in local council areas.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the proposals that he has put forward. I am tempted to ask the question that is on everyone’s lips: who is King Whitney Jnr? However, I will restrict my question to the part of the Minister’s statement that deals with local government reform. He mentioned new governance arrangements. When will those new governance arrangements for local councils come into effect?

The Minister of the Environment: On the question of King Whitney Jnr, what a philistine Peter Weir has demonstrated himself to be.

The timing of the establishment of the new arrangements will be subject to the consultation process. They will certainly be in place for the 11-council model. Should they be introduced into the 26-council model? I am quite satisfied to do that, and, were we to transfer planning powers to the 26 councils ahead of the establishment of the 11-council model, it would be absolutely essential. My preference is that the code of conduct, governance standards and so forth would be applied to the 26-council model on the enactment of the reorganisation Bill.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement. I understand that the new Planning Bill contains hundreds of clauses and will bring about radical change to the planning system. Why has it taken three and a half years to get here? Given the significance of the changes, can the Minister assure me that there is sufficient time remaining for full consultation with the public and at the crucial Committee scrutiny stage, so that we get things right and avoid costly mistakes that would affect the community and, potentially, the economy?

The Minister of the Environment: There have already been two public consultations on the Planning Bill. When it goes to the Committee, it will be up to the Committee to decide whether that Bill will go out for a third consultation with the community. That will be a big ask of the Assembly. It is the largest Bill that will come before the Assembly, as it contains approximately 240 clauses. I accept that the timetable is tight. It will probably involve additional work for the members of the Environment Committee.

I appreciate the work that the Committee has done thus far. It has had a heavier legislative programme than any other Committee. It has nine pieces of legislation to complete by April 2010. I recognise the heavy workload that has been put on the Environment Committee, but there is a public expectation that the Assembly and the Executive should deliver. I have sought to introduce legislation at the behest of the House, such as the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill and the High Hedges Bill, and I have increased the workload, but that is what the public want. It is important that Members come together to deliver for the public and demonstrate that the Assembly is working for the benefit of the community and is not like the direct rule administration, in which civil servants called the shots. We, the elected representatives, are calling the shots on behalf of the public and are delivering for the public.

11.00 am

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Some of us have had rather different experiences of the implementation of equality practices at local government level. Will the Minister explain and give us an overview and some detail on what practices and mechanisms will be put in place through the new governance arrangements to ensure that equality is put at the heart of local government? What oversight mechanisms will operate at departmental level to ensure that that happens?

The Minister of the Environment: The local government (reorganisation) Bill has been a long time in waiting. I have always been keen to introduce that. It comes about as a result of the work of the strategic leadership board and the policy development panels, on which the five main parties have all worked to reach agreement. My colleague Mr Weir could,

perhaps, answer the question better than me, because he did a lot of work on the board.

Essentially, we are looking at a call-in system for situations in which 15% of council members are unhappy with a proposal. For controversial decisions, 80% support is required in councils. When councils cannot agree a formula for power sharing, the d'Hondt mechanism will be used. Therefore, equality and fairness are at the centre of the reorganisation Bill, which will seek to ensure that minorities, whether in the west or south of the Province where there are unionist minorities or, indeed, in the north or east of the Province where there are nationalist minorities, are protected and that the views of people in minority communities are heard and respected.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the Minister's statement. He said that he has set a challenging timetable for the Environment Committee. Some would argue that the delay in the legislation has set an impossible timetable. Thankfully, I am not on that Committee to contend with that.

Given the ongoing lack of clarity and the non-delivery of savings from the review of public administration (RPA) to date, will the Minister commit his full financial support to the Northern Ireland Local Government Association's (NILGA) improvement, collaboration and efficiency (ICE) programme and give his assessment of any potential savings that could be made from joint management teams for local councils?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member said that the timetable is "impossible". It is impossible only if we do not set ourselves targets that we aim to achieve. I do not believe for one instant that anything here is impossible. If people have the will to do it, it will be done. If that involves Committee meetings late into the evenings, that is what will happen. At ministerial level, we have many late evenings. If we want to deliver for the public, we will do it. If we want to lie back, we will fail. I do not believe that the Assembly is in the mood for lying back; I think that it is in the mood for delivering.

The Member asked about my commitment to supporting local government and about the financial arrangements. We have been working closely with NILGA on its ICE programme, and we are looking to use the collaboration process to improve efficiencies. NILGA has indicated that, over the four-year period, it can deliver around 7.5% efficiency savings in local government. That is not a challenging ask,

because we, in government, have had to deliver a 3% saving year on year. In fact, in the past year, my Department had to find 12% savings in one year through in-year savings. Therefore, a target of 7.5% over the four years will be a significant benefit. It will help us to deliver local government reform, and it will help to smooth the way for amalgamation by demonstrating savings up front and allowing those savings to be applied to the costs that are associated with the amalgamation process. We are able to do that in a much more structured way than by rushing ahead in 2011. We can make those achievements in a way that does not add additional bane and burdens on taxpayers or ratepayers.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. The Environment Committee, of which I am a member, has a heavy workload, but we will meet the time frame. How will the Minister ensure consistency of approach in applying the allocation method across councils?

The Minister of the Environment: I propose that, as in section 18 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which sets out the application of the d'Hondt system for the allocation of ministerial portfolios, the legislation will set out the detailed process for that application and for the other available methods. A council could consider the Sainte-Laguë method and other means of power sharing, but, if it were not to agree to those means, d'Hondt would be the fallback method. It is up to councils. They are masters of their own destiny in that respect, and they can identify their means of ensuring that people will have their voices heard. However, if they cannot agree, d'Hondt will be used, and that might be the preferred option for many councils.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. During the previous consultation on reorganisation, the Minister indicated that he was keen to pursue savings through the introduction of a single waste management authority as well as delivery of back-office services for local authorities through one business services organisation. Will those proposals be included in the local government reform consultation?

The Minister of the Environment: Those proposals were not accepted by local government or by parties in the House. If people want them to be included, I am quite happy with

that. The reform of local government will be predicated on achieving efficiency, and I do not mind how that efficiency is achieved. If councils do not want to do it through a business services organisation and they can demonstrate that they can achieve the same efficiencies by other means, I am quite happy to go down that other route.

Ultimately, we want to achieve efficiencies. In a region the size of Northern Ireland, a single waste authority makes sense because it gives greater capacity in the procurement and selling of what are now highly valuable products from the waste stream. With the House's agreement, we could move forward quite quickly. However, if the House does not wish to go there, I cannot and will not do so, even though there are benefits and advantages to it.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for his statement. He will be aware that the Planning Reform Bill deals with development plans. My constituency is part of the Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP), which has been delayed for years and has cost more than £8 million. Under the new proposals, will the council areas that make up the BMAP area be able to develop their own plans?

The Minister of the Environment: Yes, each new council cluster will be responsible for the development of its area plans; therefore although they will remain in a larger office, a development plan team can be put in to develop an area plan. Under the new proposals in the Planning Reform Bill, which we will probably debate in a number of weeks, we should be able to reduce the time for delivering a development plan from the current six and a half years to about three years.

That is a major boost for everyone, including business and the public, because people will be able to see what is likely to be developed in their area over the next number of years. Those processes will be able to be turned around quickly, less speculation will take place and there will be more clarity. Someone may choose not to buy a home if they realise that there could be intensive development close to it. Equally, someone might wish to buy a home beside which moderate development is to take place, and that could affect their decision.

All that is hugely to the benefit of the public in allowing development plan processes to take place, first by a local government team that will know the needs of its area; and, secondly, in changing the means of carrying out the

development plan process, putting public issues up front so that they can be dealt with early and allowing people a greater say in the development plan process.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for today's statement. There is an enormous amount in it that we welcome. I hesitate to say that the Environment Committee will relish the challenge posed. However, we will do our best. Given that there will be significant new powers and ethical standards for councillors, has the DUP finally agreed to end the conflict of interest caused by dual mandates?

The Minister of the Environment: I spoke recently to a senior council official in the west of the Province who thought that it was daft to do away with dual mandates, because he found that it is particularly effective to have Members who are lobbying on local government issues and who understand those issues. It would be a huge loss and a damaging blow if MLAs who happen to be serving on councils were removed from them, because the skills, abilities and knowledge that they have garnered would be lost. MLAs give up their time to serve on councils, and they work extremely hard to deliver for people locally.

I am not into this political correctness nonsense of going down a particular route to appease a few people. We should be concentrating on delivering good local government. The MLAs who serve on local government are doing a very good job.

My attendance record and work rate in local government were considerably better than those of many other members, some of whom were apparently full-time councillors and many of whom were either retired or working part-time. As an MLA, and even as a Minister, I was able to attend more meetings and get involved in more local government issues, because I was committed. It is important that people are committed to their job, and many MLAs are totally committed to serving on councils, because they want to serve the public.

Mrs D Kelly: I note with interest the Minister's comments during exchanges with other Members about the legislative time frame and the role of the Environment Committee. The Minister stated that he has not yet received clarity from the Executive, who appear to operate the legislative programme on a lastminute.com basis. However, will the Minister

assure the House that his Department has the capacity to meet the legislative timetable? Will he indicate what the budget is, given the shortfall of over £7 million in the Planning Service budget?

Mr Speaker: Let us deal with what is in the statement rather than straying from it to the Budget.

The Minister of the Environment: All that I can say to the Member is that her party is part of the Executive. Therefore, if there is gridlock or a problem, perhaps her party representatives should ensure that that is not the case.

Lord Morrow: I, too, welcome this morning's statement. As one who has served in local government for 35 years, I feel that the statement is timely. Will the Minister comment on the transition committees that were established? Some of them worked much better than others, because the people concerned were of a mind to ensure that they worked. Therefore, does the Minister plan to ensure that the people engaged in the pilot schemes, when they are established, take them seriously so that we can start to move forward? What will the consequences be if they do not do so, as has happened in the past?

The Minister of the Environment: As regards the pilot schemes, ultimately, this is about delivering better local government and preparing the way. This will happen; therefore, the people who dilly-dally, do not perform correctly, procrastinate, and delay for ever and a day are not helping their case. It is important that people contribute, apply considerable effort, and get real about doing the job in order to prepare their areas. That is so in many councils in Northern Ireland, and it has been the case in the preparations for councils' coming together. Many transition committees are still working on delivering efficiency programmes despite that fact that their members are not being paid. Therefore, let us give credit where credit is due.

Councils that have been less inclined to change will miss out, but those that move ahead will benefit in the long term. If people are real about delivering at local level, they will get involved; and they will be efficient and effective, because their work will deliver for local communities.

11.15 am

Mr Craig: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement and the proposed powers that will go to councils. Does the Minister plan to devolve some of those powers to councils prior to RPA occurring?

The Minister of the Environment: That will be for the Executive to decide. Once the draft local government (reorganisation) Bill is passed, and the code of conduct and ethical standards regime are in place, I think that they will be quite willing to transfer those powers.

If the political will exists, the Department of the Environment will create the means whereby the Planning Service can be transferred to local government. There is no reason, other than a political reason, why that could not or should not happen. We believe that the 26-council model can more easily get the community planning process up and running, because there is a stronger local base in the 26-council model than in an 11-council model. However, it is up to the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Social Development to decide whether the responsibilities of their Departments should be transferred to local government before the 11-council model comes into place.

The Planning Service should be transferred before the 11-council model is established. It should go to the 26-council model on the basis that we have a code of conduct, an ethical standards regime, and that proper training will be put in place for councillors to prepare the way for the 11-council model thereafter.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement and I welcome most of the proposals that have been put forward. The statement alludes to the Department of the Environment having corresponded with the Department for Social Development on urban regeneration. Has there been any feedback from that Department on its willingness to engage in a similar process as the Department of the Environment? It would be welcome if we could work together and see proper joined-up government in the full functions that can be delivered through a reorganisation of local government.

The Minister of the Environment: Under its previous and current Ministers, the Department for Social Development has been a willing partner in the process. It supports the

11-council model and the transfer of powers, particularly those on urban regeneration, to local government. Should the draft local government (reorganisation) Bill become law, it will be a matter for that Department whether it supports the transfer of powers to local government prior to 2011.

The Department for Regional Development also has powers that could be transferred to local government, and I encourage it to consider transferring those powers in advance of the 11-council model. For example, car parking is hugely problematic for local communities. Some of the biggest issues that local shopkeepers have is about how car parking is handled and how people can be put off from coming to particular towns because of the effective rule that the "red coats" apply. It would be much better if such issues were dealt with by local government, which could be more sympathetic to local community needs and ensure that car parking is still carried out efficiently.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the statement, and, as a member of the Environment Committee, I look forward to considering the legislation. However, the statement is based largely on the 11-council model. Does the Minister not agree that it does not make economic sense to proceed with the 11-council model at the present time? The £150 million costs are front-loaded and will have to be found from departmental budgets, which are being slashed. If there are any proposed savings, they will only be achieved over 25 years.

The Minister of the Environment: The Member makes a valid point. That is one of the reasons why we did not proceed in 2011. We could have rushed in and had to pick up a large bill during an economic recession, when it was evident that public sector cuts were coming our way. Those cuts have now come, and we are not in a position to do this without causing real pain to other front line services. Therefore, we propose to identify where we can achieve efficiencies up front. We will start to deliver those efficiencies up front and, subsequently, reduce the pain involved with local government.

Local government will already have achieved savings and identified a mode of achieving even greater savings through the amalgamation process. There is a cost and a benefit to amalgamation. We want to create an element of those benefits up front before the cost is

applied. That will reduce the pain that results from the amalgamation process.

Ms Lo: It is a pity that there is such slow movement in the development of local councils. Nevertheless, I welcome the Minister's statement. The Alliance Party is very supportive of the community planning process. Can the Minister assure the House that his new model of community planning will take into account the Minister of Justice's new proposals on policing and community safety partnerships and the community relations duties under the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy?

The Minister of the Environment: I am committed to working with all the Ministers who have a role to play to ensure that we do this as well as possible. The power of well-being is very important. At this moment in time, there are areas that fall down because no Department or council has a statutory responsibility. There are issues of importance to the public that we fail to deal with. Through the community planning process, the power of well-being will enable local government to work in conjunction with Departments to deal with those issues and make communities better places.

The Department of Justice has a key role to play in working with the Department of the Environment and, indeed, local government to ensure that our communities are safer and better places that families, younger people and older people can all enjoy — a safe community which they are proud of and will work to make better. I am more than happy to work with the Department of Justice on these issues.

Dr Farry: I declare an interest as an outgoing member of North Down Borough Council. I, too, welcome the statement, but it is very much a soft landing for the RPA. It is disappointing that there are clearly still divisions in the Executive over the longer-term direction of local government in Northern Ireland.

I want to ask the Minister about governance and his reference to d'Hondt as the backstop of arrangements if local agreement cannot be found. How wedded is the Minister to that method, bearing in mind that it can produce strange anomalies in different parts of Northern Ireland? If it were introduced, it would effectively remove the prospect of any independent holding civic office in Northern Ireland. Based on current voting patterns, it would also remove the prospect of a nationalist ever holding civic office

in places such as Castlereagh and Lisburn or a unionist ever holding civic office in places such as Derry or Newry.

The Minister of the Environment: First, I do not agree that the statement is a soft landing for the reform of public administration. The content of the statement demonstrates that the reform of public administration has gone through a thought process and consideration of how it can achieve the desired outcome in a structured way that is based on solid foundations, can deliver for many decades to come, has not been rushed into and will not leave people with a host of complaints because we did not get it right. The proposals create the opportunity for us to get it right over the next number of years and ensure that we have local government that people will benefit from.

I am no more in love with the d'Hondt mechanism than anyone else. The d'Hondt arrangement does not have to be in place. Councils can agree other processes whereby even members of the Alliance Party could become chairs of committees, mayors or deputy mayors. I appreciate the Member's concerns, and he did declare an interest. However, we will create a system that ensures that minority voices are heard in councils and are not overruled. Councils are masters of their own destinies, and if they want to identify and go with a system other than d'Hondt, I am more than willing to allow them to do that. I will welcome those councils' decisions on what is best for their future.

Executive Committee Business

Student Loans (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call on the Minister for Employment and Learning to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Student Loans (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister for Employment and Learning (Mr Kennedy).]

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been selected, there is no opportunity to discuss the Student Loans (Amendment) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010

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

That the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 be affirmed.

The statutory rule has been made under powers contained in article 8 of the Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, which provides that the 2010 Order must be laid for approval by affirmative resolution of the Assembly.

The 2010 Order will transfer certain functions of the Department of the Environment, under section 25 of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006, to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The functions that are being transferred relate to the provision of guidance and strategies in support of the implementation by public authorities of the statutory duty to promote the achievement of sustainable development.

The transfer reconciles the legislative position in respect of sustainable development functions to the current administrative dispensation and is necessary at this time to support and underpin the delivery of the Executive's commitments in its sustainable development strategy, which was published earlier this year.

I commend the Order to the House and look forward to further positive progress on sustainable development.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Elliott):

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister considered the proposal for the statutory rule on 23 June 2010 and indicated that it was content with the policy merits of the proposal. The Committee further considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 17 November 2010 and resolved that it should be affirmed by the Assembly.

The Order seeks to transfer certain functions regarding the sustainable development policy from the Department of the Environment to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is required as OFMDFM has published a sustainable development strategy. Therefore, it is necessary to amend

the provision so that it refers instead to a strategy that has been published by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

The Committee resolved that the statutory rule should be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Would the junior Minister like to say anything to conclude?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): No, thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order 2010 be affirmed.

11.30 am

Committee Business

Freedom from Fear Campaign

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mrs D Kelly): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the high incidence of abuse, threats and physical violence against shopworkers, which is likely to increase in the run up to Christmas; pledges its support for the Freedom from Fear campaign organised by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to pursue the issues raised by the campaign with his Executive colleagues.

Once again, I rise as the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning to move an extremely relevant and important motion that affects a great number of people in the constituencies of every Member. The Committee is becoming increasingly well known for bringing to the Chamber real issues that affect the lives of ordinary people. The Committee has a clear view that that is a key role for Committees: connecting people with the Assembly and bringing their issues to the attention of Members.

I thank the Minister for Employment and Learning for being present to hear and to respond to the debate. I know that the Minister shares the Committee's concerns about the intimidation and abuse that shopworkers face, and the Committee greatly appreciates his help in highlighting that issue to the other Executive Ministers.

The Committee decided to bring this issue to the Chamber after receiving a briefing from the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW). The Committee was horrified to hear from shopworkers some of the terrible abuse that they and their colleagues suffer at the hands of the public. Statistics show that a

shopworker is verbally abused, threatened with violence or physically attacked every minute of every working day. Members were greatly moved to hear of a young woman who worked in a shop and was beaten up by a violent customer. That young woman did not know that she was pregnant at the time, and she subsequently lost her baby. The Committee heard of other incidents in which shopworkers were abused verbally, spat on or beaten up because they were not able to serve customers, often because the customer was not old enough to buy alcohol and was refused service.

Just this weekend past, we heard about the kidnapping of a west Belfast shopworker, whose family was held captive while she was forced to take money from her employer's premises. That is not a one-off example. That sort of crime is becoming more prevalent, and shopworkers feel that they have nowhere to turn.

That is the sort of situation that many shopworkers deal with day in and day out. We have all found ourselves stressed out when shopping, especially in the run-up to Christmas, and have been short-tempered with a shop assistant who could not satisfy our demands. I am not suggesting that any Members would resort to violence in such a situation — at least, I hope not — but I think that we have all acted in a way that we are not proud of as shoppers.

Every year since 2002, USDAW has run its Freedom from Fear campaign in the run-up to Christmas to remind people that shopworkers have rights and deserve respect. Those workers are often seen as being beneath people's contempt, because they may work for the minimum wage, and they find it difficult to talk back because they might get into trouble with their employer. People set too much store on the saying, "The customer is always right."

Unfortunately, a culture of silence has grown up around this issue because many employers do not want to draw attention to staff complaints. All employers keep accident books in which staff accidents are logged. Why can employers not also keep books in which incidents of staff abuse can be logged? Too many employers are not taking the problem seriously, and their staff are expected just to get over it. Let me remind you of the young shopworker who lost her baby. Just get over it? I don't think so.

Quite naturally, shopworkers are looking to the Assembly and their elected representatives to

do something for them. One reason why the Committee tabled the motion is to highlight to Members and to the Executive the intimidation and abuse suffered by shopworkers. However, specific issues have to be dealt with.

A key issue that was highlighted to the Committee was proof of age in refusing a sale. Shopworkers are advised that if someone looks under 25, they should be asked to show ID when seeking to buy alcohol. This aspect of shopworkers' jobs provokes the greatest level of abuse. People working in local shops are often the worst affected, with their homes being targeted by people who they have refused to sell alcohol to as they are under age. Sometimes stones are thrown and windows in their homes are broken.

The purpose of the Freedom from Fear campaign, as well as to highlight issues around the abuse that I described, is to encourage employers to improve safety and security for workers in retail outlets, to encourage the public to stop to think about what they are doing, and to give shopworkers a platform from which to speak out and to reject that abuse.

Just yesterday, we debated a motion about driving under the influence of drink and drugs. We must stem the tide of violence in our society, which is fuelled by cheap alcohol. What does all-day drinking do to our society? The evidence is all around us. The Committee has been asked to advocate the introduction of a more robust proof-of-age scheme. Members are keen to see the courts setting an example and dealing more harshly with people who abuse shopworkers. Publicity is also required to ensure that people realise that it is a criminal offence for people who are under the age of 18 to attempt to buy alcohol.

The Committee strongly supports the promotion of Think 25 schemes. I ask Members to reflect on the fact that the retail sector is one of the few areas where jobs are still being advertised. Many people work at a second job in retail to make ends meet. The next shopworker to suffer abuse could be your daughter, your son, your brother, your mother, your sister or your father. The Committee would like people to stop to think about how they would react if one of their friends or loved ones was attacked just doing their job. Think how we all react when NHS workers or Fire and Rescue Service workers are

attacked. Why should shopworkers not receive our support in the same way?

If Members take no other message away from today's debate, they should simply remember that there are thousands of shopworkers in Northern Ireland, and they are looking to us to protect them. Are we going to let them down? What will you say to them on the doorsteps when you are canvassing? I thank the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers for bringing the issue to the Committee's attention through my party colleague Pat Ramsey. I also thank the Minister again for raising it with his Executive colleagues.

Mr Weir: I support this very worthy motion. As the Chairperson indicated, the issue was brought to the Committee by USDAW, which is the trade union that looks after shopworkers. It is to be commended not simply for its actions this year, but for its campaign over a number of years to highlight the issue.

It is particularly pertinent that the motion is brought before the House shortly before Christmas, because the tensions in shops during the Christmas rush can tend to exacerbate a pre-existing problem. It is important that the Assembly speaks with one voice today and sends out a clear message that no form of abuse, violence or threats against any shopworkers can be acceptable in any circumstances and must be utterly condemned. Therefore, there should be strong support for the motion.

The figures from the USDAW survey are shocking. The survey indicated that, in 2009, one in 10 shopworkers had been physically assaulted, and 29% of shopworkers had been verbally abused. Over the previous year, 32% of shopworkers, which is one in three, had been threatened. Whatever tensions there are, that is simply unacceptable. Therefore, we need to send out a clear message.

As was indicated, it is about showing respect to shopworkers. It is also about customers showing self-control. The proposer of the motion indicated that, at some stage, we have all done something in shops that we should not have done. However, I would like to think that I have not been abusive in any way. I certainly fall into the category of someone who has made the odd wrong purchase now and again, but it has to be said, in respect of people — [Interruption.]

I know that the Minister bought some dodgy goods back in 1998.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Mr Kennedy): That you helped to write.

Mr Weir: No, I did not — but, anyway.

There can be no excuse for such behaviour. Everyone should be able to exercise self-control. Also, the message must be sent to shop owners. Most shop owners are good but, in some cases, as has been indicated, there is underlying pressure to minimise staff complaints, perhaps to maintain a shop's reputation. Sometimes, that is by way of not recording incidents properly. It is important that support is given.

The issue of underage sales has been raised. It is important that the system is proper and robust. Too often, young people, in particular, who try to purchase alcohol or cigarettes, take the view that a shopworker is being officious. That worker is simply enforcing the law, and we need to have a robust system to ensure that that is done properly. I suspect that if the Chairperson and I went into a shop and had to prove that we were over 25, it would not be the most difficult thing in the world to do. However, in many cases, it is difficult to tell someone's age. A robust system is needed to ensure that workers can do that.

As has been said, we need to look at the current legal provision. Some time ago, greater sanctions were put in place to ensure that a range of public sector workers, particularly those in the emergency services, were protected. Indeed, sanctions were added. As USDAW made clear, we need to look at widening that to include all public-facing workers, so as to ensure that, irrespective of whether people work in the public sector or the private sector, if they interact with customers or members of the public, they get the protection that they deserve.

All of us, irrespective of our involvement with shops, are aware of the issue from personal experience. I suspect that either we or our staff have had to endure abuse from people who have come through the door of our constituency offices. Quite often, they have been under the influence of drink. The issue is widespread in society. The motion is timely, and I urge the House to support it unanimously.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In common with the two Members who have already spoken, I support this important motion. As a Committee member, I am delighted and proud to be associated with it, as was the previous Member.

During the past number of years, the Assembly has been no stranger to presentations from various groups, including the trade union movement. They have brought the real-life issues that affect our constituents to our door. I take the opportunity to commend the presentation that the trade union gave to the Committee. During our conversation on real-life issues, I was moved enough to suggest that the Committee brought such a motion to the House. In fairness, it was supported unanimously by Committee members. I believe that we were all thinking the same thing at that time. It is now a matter of how the Assembly plays its part to take that step further.

I also take the opportunity to welcome the Minister to the debate. I look forward to his contribution and to see whether the Committee and the Department can deal with the issue collectively. I also thank the Research and Library Service for the information that it has provided.

As the Chairperson said earlier, the Committee was horrified to hear about the abuse that has taken place. Some of it could, in the scheme of things, be described as minor, and some as major. However, I do not believe that abuse should be described as one or the other: any form of abuse towards any shopworker is a major incident and should be treated as such.

Peter Weir highlighted statistics that we received on the incidence of violent attacks, threats and verbal abuse. There is a stark reminder that, every year, thousands of shopworkers — our people, families, neighbours and friends — are abused, physically and verbally, and intimidated while they try to earn a living and provide a public service, and try to keep the wolves from the door. The Assembly is saying with one voice that such abuse is wrong.

11.45 am

Under its 'Freedom from Fear' charter, the union produced a 10-point plan to a safer workplace. The plan is not rocket science, and that is not a criticism of the union. We want the Department to embrace those points and to develop a campaign similar to the positive and proactive

campaign on attacks on emergency and blue-light services. Although such attacks are still happening, it has become socially unacceptable to attack the Fire Service, the Ambulance Service and the PSNI. We need to make attacks on shopworkers socially unacceptable.

Each of us has a part to play. The Chairperson did not imply that any Member had been involved in direct confrontations with shopworkers, but I am sure that if each of us looked into his or her conscience, we would recollect incidents that we walked away from when we might have challenged offensive behaviour or have played our part in resolving a situation.

Shop owners, big businesses and others have a part to play. The Chairperson mentioned the recent tiger kidnapping. Similar issues arise in mine and in other constituencies. They are happening across the board. Are we making our shopworkers vulnerable? We will not look at other ways of protecting them when money is being lifted from shops, for instance. I ask that we send the 10-point plan to businesspeople and to the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) to try to get them to take forward those points.

Proof of age is a crucial issue. I checked it out the other night. In fact, I was raging that I was not asked for ID. I asked a shopkeeper, who was a young girl, whether she feels intimidated, and she said that she does. Common sense should be used. We all know that alcohol cannot be bought at all tills. Why are older people not put on the tills at which alcohol can be sold rather than younger people who feel intimidated and under pressure in those positions? Members will have seen mile-long queues for tills while other tills lie empty. We need to put pressure on businesspeople.

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

Ms S Ramsey: We all have our part to play, especially during the festive season. We cannot have a murder picture in our shops. I appeal to people to be patient.

Mr McClarty: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. As a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I warmly support the campaign that we are discussing. It has generated considerable interest in the media.

The campaign, which has been successfully spearheaded by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers since 2002, seeks to prevent violence, threats of violence and abuse against staff. That is a message that, I am sure, all Members will support this morning.

When one thinks about a local convenience store, for example, and the number of people who go through its doors daily, it soon becomes clear that few jobs entail as much customer interaction as that of shopworker. The employees in those shops are there to help customers and to provide a service, and the least that they should expect is to be treated with respect and decency. It is absolutely out of order for shop staff to have to face any sort of abuse, verbal or physical. Such verbal abuse has been directed at people who work in call centres as well.

Worryingly, in their presentation to the Committee, USDAW officials revealed that abuse in Northern Ireland tended to be more physical, whereas verbal abuse against shopworkers is more common in GB. Regardless of how stressed or frustrated customers may be, it never gives them the right to mistreat staff. If they break the trust between them, they deserve to face the full force of the law. I ask the PSNI to take such abuse more seriously than it may, perhaps, at present.

Staff are most at risk at night. I am sure that all Members know of a local store that is open through the night, through its operation of a 24-hour, open-door policy or through providing services through an opening in the side of its building.

Of course, when people are on their way home from a night out and call into one of those stores, it is all too easy for the drink to kick in and to give them a false sense of authority and, consequently, they abuse the — often young, part-time — workers behind the till. Customers can also become particularly agitated when asked for ID.

The aims of the USDAW Freedom from Fear campaign are important for shopworkers, shopkeepers and shop customers. Take, for example, one of the campaign's central aims. It promotes negotiations with employers to improve the security of their stores. Apart from preventing crime, extra security means extra protection for staff and customers.

I welcome the fact that the Minister for Employment and Learning is going to respond

to the debate, as it was his Committee that moved the motion in the first place. However, abuse against staff is not only a Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) responsibility, if it is even in that Department at all. It is much broader than that. It is an issue for the Department of Justice (DJ) to make sure that there are enforceable penalties for these sorts of crimes. It is also an issue for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). Therefore, I trust that all those Departments will consider the Freedom from Fear campaign.

I will bring my remarks to a close by noting that violence, threats and intimidation of any kind against shopworkers are absolutely unacceptable. I commend USDAW for its campaign, and hope that the entire House will be able to fully support the motion.

Mr Lyttle: I support the motion and commend my colleagues on the Employment and Learning Committee for bringing the issue to the Assembly. As my colleagues have said, it is one of the more important motions that we have debated in the House in recent days. Law and order is a foundation for any democratic society and a prerequisite for economic development and investment.

At the recent briefing by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers to the Employment and Learning Committee, I, too, was concerned to learn about the extent of abuse faced by shopworkers. As a former shopworker, I am proud to advocate on behalf of the sector and to call on the Assembly to send out a clear message that such harassment will not be tolerated in our society.

Shopworkers are the bedrock of our local economy, providing access to a wide variety of goods and services on an almost 24/7 basis, with adherence to the ethos that the customer is always right. I am glad to put my party's recognition of the vital contribution that shopworkers play in our community on the record today, and to call on the Executive to jointly consider action to tackle shopworker abuse.

My colleagues have noted the USDAW survey which found that, of 1,000 shopworkers, 10% were victims of violent attack and 70% suffered verbal abuse. Those are simply unacceptable statistics. It is also unacceptable to receive reports of young pregnant women being attacked in their place of work, workers being kicked and spat on, and staff being kidnapped from

the sanctity of their own home simply because their employment is in the retail sector. In my constituency, unfortunately, staff in a particular newsagent's shop have been subjected to two attempted robberies in recent weeks. That type of abuse leaves staff in fear and can have a serious impact on their health.

Today, we give voice to those hardworking members of our community — young people starting out, mothers, fathers, older people, foreign nationals and people working second jobs to make ends meet. We recognise the service that they provide to our community and we support them in their calls for the basic right of safety in the workplace. We give the support of the Assembly to the Freedom from Fear campaign, which, since 2002, USDAW has taken forward in the run-up to Christmas — which, as has been stated, is one of the busiest and most challenging times of the year for our retail sector — to raise awareness of the issue with members of the public and to clearly state that shopworkers must be treated with dignity and respect.

As we have heard, of all the harassment that shopworkers face, it is for refusing the sale of alcohol that the greatest abuse is experienced. That ranges from verbal disrespect to physical violence and even to workers' homes being targeted for attack. There are not too many of us in the House who need be too concerned about not looking older than 25, but I have friends and acquaintances who, although aged over 18, have not, in the absence of proof of age, been served alcohol. That is, at worst, inconvenient, and we must note that shopworkers merely follow legal and employer obligation.

In district policing partnerships and community safety fora all over Northern Ireland, we call on shopworkers to be the front line in the effort to prevent alcohol-fuelled crime and antisocial behaviour. The Assembly and Executive must, therefore, back up that request with support and action. We must work with employers to deliver improved safety and security for shopworkers. We must also consider more robust proof-of-age schemes, harsher penalties for those who abuse staff and publicity to remind people that attempting to purchase alcohol when under the age of 18 is a criminal offence.

Perhaps most important, however, is the need to support an attitudinal change in how shopworkers are viewed by the public. The vast

majority of people in the community value and respect the service provided by shopworkers. Indeed, we are famous for our marketplace interaction with one another. The motion, however, in highlighting the seriousness of the harassment and abuse that many shopworkers face, supports the Freedom from Fear campaign.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Lyttle: The motion calls on the Executive to take action against that abuse. I trust that the Minister will convey the Assembly's united support for shopworkers —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Lyttle: I ask the Minister to consider what measures can be taken on this important matter. I, too, support the motion.

Mr S Anderson: I was pleased when the Committee for Employment and Learning unanimously adopted the Freedom from Fear campaign. As a member of that Committee, I am happy to support it. I applaud the efforts of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers to highlight the issue. I was shocked to learn of the high level of threat to vulnerable shopworkers. Violence in the workplace is without excuse and can never be acceptable. That sort of abuse is far too common. My colleague Peter Weir gave us some facts on it this morning. The most recent survey shows that one in four USDAW members is physically assaulted in his or her place of work. It happens to civil servants who have regular contact with the general public, and it happens to doctors and nurses when they are confronted by violent patients in GP surgeries and in A&E departments.

The motion reminds us of other workers who deal with the public day in and day out. It is clear that shopworkers suffer worryingly high levels of assault. Shopworkers are employed in large department stores, supermarkets, service stations and small corner shops. As has been said, such jobs are often low paid, insecure and stressful. Employees often work long hours, especially in the run-up to Christmas. I feel genuinely sorry for them. As Christmas gets earlier and earlier, they have to endure that dreadful, canned Christmas music that blares out in the shops and towns, probably from the end of September. I would argue that that is an assault in itself. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Weir: Is there any truth in the rumour that the Member is auditioning for the part of Scrooge in this year's pantomime?

Mr S Anderson: Definitely not. I will leave that for the Member to attempt. My singing would clear the Chamber.

Often, Christmas shopping is a stressful experience. Stressed-out shopworkers deal with stressed-out shoppers, and that, in itself, is a recipe for confrontation and conflict. Although we as consumers wish to ensure that our rights are protected when we buy something, the fact is that the customer is not always right.

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

Very often, the abuse or even violence is about age-limited products, such as DVDs, computer games, flammable materials, alcohol, cigarettes or lottery tickets. Retail staff are obliged to check identification if there is any doubt about the buyer's age. Such checks are not about embarrassing the customer — retail workers will be disciplined if they fail to carry them out — yet people get angry when asked for evidence of age or some other form of ID. It has the potential to go from verbal abuse to violent assault. Some members of the public go beyond verbal abuse. They can be physically violent towards staff, and staff can face drunken shoppers, aggressive shoplifters, gangs of youths on drugs and so on.

12.00 noon

If the problem is bad enough in big stores, it can be even worse in service stations and corner shops. Such shops, which serve local communities, can be easy prey for violent thieves. In recent times, shopkeepers and their staff have been assaulted and killed in different parts of the United Kingdom. Just a few weeks ago, a man died in an attempted robbery in a newsagent's in Cavendish Street in west Belfast, and the shop assistant was sprayed in the face.

I trust that the Minister will take note of the debate and do all that he can to raise the profile of the issue and to pursue it with the Executive. As David McClarty said, other Ministers, such as the Minister of Justice, also have key roles to play. I appeal to the PSNI to ensure that there is a strong police presence in town centres to control antisocial behaviour, especially in the run-up to Christmas. Finally, I appeal to shop owners and managers, who have a duty of care

to their employees. Their staff have a right to work in a safe and friendly environment and to be free from fear of intimidation and violence. They must do all in their power to achieve that. I support the motion.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, and I support the motion.

I might be coming at the issue from a slightly different perspective from other contributors in this respect: when union representatives came to brief the Committee, I was not as aware of the statistics and the scale and frequency of incidents as I perhaps should have been. The briefing from the union was a very good exercise in raising awareness, certainly for someone like me.

I was listening to the media this morning; I happened to catch it early. Mark Carruthers was interviewing, if I remember correctly, Michala Lafferty on the BBC. Michala illustrated a particular scenario. She was saying to the interviewer that, "If this happens, well then —". I think that she was about to say that the shopworker suffers as a result of the incident by losing their job, when Mr Carruthers intervened to say that the shop, the managers or whoever the employers are would suffer. It was certainly insightful. We are not aware that it is the shop assistant who will suffer and who could lose their job, and that example illustrated the point for me.

I do not see enough coming from employers in all of this, and my party colleague Sue Ramsey referred to that. Employers are not proactive enough. When the Committee was briefed, an example from 20 years ago was given. The Committee Chairperson referred to a graphic example of a shopworker who lost her baby as a result of violence and who was more or less told to get over it. Therefore, examples from 20 years ago may be cited, and we have very profitable multiples here now. I am not saying that some of the examples cited to the Committee from 20 years ago arose directly from situations in big profitable multiples. However, there is something wrong with the systems that are in place to protect workers. Examples were cited around the Chamber today. A worker goes to work and provides a service for the public. When people are queuing in a shop, they have no idea that a shop attendant may

feel under threat. I am not saying that a worker would feel threatened by me; that would not be the case. However, he or she may be under threat from people who are unhappy with their place in the queue or with being asked for ID.

Many agencies are involved in the issue, but it is important that the message goes out from this debate that employers have work to do. One recommendation in the Committee's documentation is that signs should be put up around shops reminding shoppers that shop owners do not suffer if workers are abused or threatened; only the shopworkers suffer. The Chairperson said earlier that a culture of silence had grown and that many employers do not want to draw attention to staff complaints. I repeat: that is unacceptable.

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

Mrs McGill: One union representative said that this all comes at great personal cost. I support the motion.

Mr P Ramsey: I support the motion. The Freedom from Fear campaign has been running for a number of years across Britain and in Northern Ireland. USDAW is delighted at the approach taken by a united Assembly team in the Committee for Employment and Learning. As I understand it, it is the first time that that union has been represented in a more formal setting and received by the Committee for Employment and Learning. As all Members who have spoken said, the importance of the campaign, leading up to Christmas, is that it strives to ensure that workers on whom we depend in all constituencies have freedom from fear.

One of the biggest problems facing the trade union movement and membership is getting in place assurance, proper protocols and conducts that the employers' body will take note of. One in four retail staff across Northern Ireland has been a victim of some sort of abuse. It is a sad state of affairs for us all that society does not treat those workers with the diligence, respect and care that it is our duty to show.

Every year, thousands of retail workers are physically assaulted, and hundreds of thousands are subjected to daily verbal abuse and intimidation. Over half of the physical assaults are linked directly to attempted shoplifting, and it is important that employers make staff fully aware of what they should do

regarding a suspected shoplifter. A policy should make it clear that staff should not approach a suspected shoplifter or stop or prevent shoplifting. I do not think that such guidelines are in place to protect staff. In my constituency, we had a spate of armed robberies, and I knew some of the shop staff who witnessed them. They took place in small corner shops, perhaps with only one member of staff present. Other Members made that point. Staff involved in such incidents are left traumatised. The distress and anxiety caused will remain with them for a long time. Sue Ramsey raised the point that a young woman working alone in a shop is vulnerable. It is very difficult, particularly at night — we now have 24-hour shopping — to ensure safety. The point was made in Committee by the Chairperson, I think, that it must be ensured that all staff have an incident report book — not an accident book or an injury book — so that employers know exactly where the risks and hotspots are and can put staff in place appropriately and not leave them exposed to difficulties in certain circumstances.

Other Members have raised this point, and the Minister has taken the time to come along this morning, but this matter is not solely his responsibility. One of the main and fundamental concerns that we have in the Committee is police response times. Staff, who are vulnerable enough, are being left, perhaps with someone fuelled with alcohol or drugs in the shop. They need response times to be much more effective. The Health and Safety Executive also needs to work not just with shop owners but with shoppers in order to protect them. There must be an ongoing review of procedures in those shops.

Another point that I wished to raise is about age-restricted sales. One of the surveys carried out makes the dilemma facing shop staff clear: more than 75% of staff have experienced problems related to ID. In some cases, people refuse to give ID and become badly behaved and insulting to staff. A total of 65% of staff have been subjected to verbal abuse; nobody should be subjected to that. A certain decency should prevail, and shop staff should be treated with respect. Some 16% have experienced threats of violence. There should be zero tolerance towards violence. Some 2% of staff have been physically assaulted at work, and 60% of those staff are worried that they may be disciplined over actions they have taken as a result. Some

70% of those staff are worried that they may face prosecution.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr P Ramsey: This has been a good debate. I am delighted that the Minister will respond, but joined-up government needs to be in place to ensure that we are giving protection to staff.

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I welcome the opportunity to respond to this important motion. I thank the Member who brought it before the House, the members of the Employment and Learning Committee and those who have made contributions to the debate. As has been acknowledged, the Department for Employment and Learning does not have an official remit with regard to abuse against shopworkers, although I am happy to respond to the issues that have been raised.

USDAW's Freedom from Fear campaign is important and considerable. Since it started in 2002, it has raised awareness of abuse of shopworkers in any form. It is a particularly influential campaign that has succeeded in getting major retailers to speak out and act against shopworker abuse, and it has successfully lobbied politicians in Parliament and the devolved legislatures to raise the problems with the relevant Departments. I therefore pay tribute to the union on its campaign and support the motion because I am very concerned about the high levels of abuse, threats and violence of all kinds against shopworkers.

I note the statistics used by Pat Ramsey in his press release after the union's presentation to the Employment and Learning Committee. It is entirely unacceptable that around 10% of workers represented by that union have been the victim of violence, that almost 37% have been threatened and that approximately 70% have been verbally abused. The British Retail Consortium's crime survey of 2008 states that the overall level of recorded incidents was calculated at 20 per 1,000 staff. Of course, behind the statistics, there are always the individual cases. I want to refer to the despicable attack on a shopworker on Sunday in my constituency in the area around Tandragee, where a young lady was attacked and threatened. Such attacks are disgraceful and despicable. Anyone who has any information should bring it immediately to the PSNI to help ensure that those responsible are apprehended.

12.15 pm

A 2003 survey of Northern Ireland shopworkers revealed the following very disturbing experiences:

"One member was punched in the face for not taking back an item that could not be proved was bought in the store as per company policy. Two other colleagues were pushed and shoved for the same reasons."

In another example, the person involved said:

"The off licence was closed. Two drunk men wanted alcohol. While I was trying to explain, one of the men pulled out a hammer and kept threatening me with it ... he told me he was going to kill me with it."

A third example occurred when:

"Angry, aggressive customers tackled a colleague after being over charged. There was shouting and name-calling and abuse. Angry customers will vent their anger at the nearest available colleague."

When all those cases are heard in such detail, they are, frankly, unacceptable.

The abuse can take many forms, and shopworkers fear that it can and will happen. If it does happen, it can, as we heard in the debate, cause considerable health and emotional problems. According to the USDAW 'Voices from the Frontline' survey, almost 65% of Northern Ireland's members, compared with less than 50% in the rest of the United Kingdom, have taken sick leave because of cases of abuse. Clearly, there is a problem to be tackled. No one should have to face abuse at work. It is important, therefore, that Members consider the policy responses to this issue carefully.

Given the union's presentation to the Committee for Employment and Learning, it is clear that consideration needs to be given to the criminal justice implications. We have to ask whether the sentences for the abuse of shopworkers are sufficient and whether there is an appropriate response from the relevant statutory agencies. Those issues are worthy of consideration. There is also clearly a role for the PSNI to take attacks of this nature seriously, and it may be an issue to raise with the PSNI to see what guidelines it has in place for dealing with those crimes. In that context, I pay tribute to members of the PSNI. If Members are serious about ending the abuse of shopworkers, they will give continuing

and unstinting support to the PSNI and encourage full community support for the police.

Employers also have a major role to play. They are responsible for the health and safety of their workers while they are on their premises. The vast majority of retailers comply with their statutory duty of care, but it may be that retailers can take other measures to enhance the safety of their staff. Indeed, those issues were raised in the debate. There is much to consider. I understand that many major retailers have endorsed the Freedom from Fear campaign and have created a charter of respect for shopworkers. Some of the major supermarkets display signs that ask customers to respect staff. Perhaps that could be introduced in all shops. Therefore, there are some non-statutory ways of raising awareness and helping to prevent abuse.

Shopworkers, at all times, play an important part in our daily lives. They help to meet our basic needs by ensuring that food and clothing are readily available. In the next few weeks, they will be even busier as they deal with Christmas shoppers and, indeed, listen to piped Christmas music. Nevertheless, the vast majority of customers are considerate and respectful to shopworkers, and I strongly urge everyone to adopt that attitude. I reiterate that any form of abuse of shopworkers is unacceptable. Suffering abuse should never be part of that job.

I turn to Members' contributions. Mrs Kelly made the opening statement on behalf of the Committee, for which I thank her, and, indeed, I thank the Committee for Employment and Learning for bringing forward this important matter. Mr Weir, having confessed to the House that he had bought dodgy goods in the past, sought to allege that I and, as I remember, more than 70% of the people of Northern Ireland had also bought something dodgy, namely the Belfast Agreement. It occurred to me that Mr Weir can, in part, claim credit for having had a role in drafting and shaping the Belfast Agreement, given that, at the time, he was one of the team known optimistically as the baby barristers, who were under the guidance of the then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. It would appear that Mr Weir has enthusiastically embraced the Belfast Agreement and, perhaps, helped to sell other dodgy agreements, such as the St Andrews Agreement and the Hillsborough agreement. However, we will leave it at that.

I thank Sue Ramsey, who realises that the issue is not the sole responsibility of my Department. Although other Departments have a role to play, I assure her that I will bring these issues to the attention of Executive colleagues in the hope that we can make progress. Mr McClarty highlighted the importance of the PSNI's direct involvement. Chris Lyttle rightly said that dignity and respect should be afforded to all shopworkers. Sydney Anderson is clearly looking forward to Christmas, particularly to piped music in retail shops. However, for all that, he made the important point that all shops, large and small, are affected by the issues that we heard about, and, therefore, all staff should be protected. Claire McGill also sought more protection for workers, as did Pat Ramsey.

Although my Department has no official remit for the issues raised in the motion, given that it was moved by the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I am happy to respond. I support the motion, and I am happy to continue to provide support to this important cause. I will, therefore, arrange for copies of the transcript of the debate to be sent to the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. In addition, I will, of course, be happy to try to assist the campaign in any way that I can in conjunction with Assembly and Executive colleagues.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Bell): Today, a clear message goes out from across the House. I know that we have had fun by referring to other debates. However, the core message is that we will not allow shop and retail staff to be treated as second-class citizens and that any form of physical abuse, threatening behaviour or verbal abuse directed against them, whether in a call centre or face to face, is unacceptable and will be treated properly. In addition, we will insist that cases are dealt with by the appropriate forces of law.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning outlined the need for a respect agenda, and she comprehensively and intelligently put the case for why we should protect and support retail staff. In her own fragrant style, Mrs Kelly also highlighted the need to produce proof of identity when buying alcohol to be more properly considered in the debate. How apt that message is, coming up to Christmas. Mr Weir told us that, at times, Christmas can exacerbate the pressures on

retail staff. I am convinced that everyone, with one voice, whether they are from the east, west, north or south or are republican, nationalist or unionist, will stand against those who feel that it is acceptable to physically abuse one in 10 of our shop staff.

Sue Ramsey commended USDAW's 10-point plan, and I underline the work to which she referred. This is not rocket science; it is something that we should be doing every day. However, it is not being done, and Sue Ramsey was right to highlight the need for the abuse of shopworkers to be deemed socially unacceptable.

David McClarty widened the debate to include call centre staff and said that abuse of those workers is unacceptable. He made a critical point about the need for joined-up government. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment should be involved along with the Department of Justice and, potentially, the Department for Social Development because of the issues surrounding the sale and consumption of alcohol. We, as a society, have strong questions to ask ourselves when alcohol sold in supermarkets is cheaper than bottled water. Are we not building up problems for our Health Service and our families? People can buy mass-produced alcohol that is cheaper than water and drink it at home, where there are no checks and balances by responsible publicans. Is it any wonder that the police deal with a domestic violence incident every 21 minutes?

As a fellow shopworker, I sympathise with Chris Lyttle. I have many happy memories of stacking shelves in Tesco in Connswater. On one occasion when I was in the warehouse, the fork lift truck malfunctioned, and a pallet of Del Monte orange juice cartons fell on top of a poor colleague of mine who was standing next to me.

Mr Weir: Is the Member sure that it was not a case of mistaken identity and that he was not the intended target?

Mr Bell: As shopworkers, we could have a laugh together. I laughed so hard that day that the tears almost ran down my legs.

Shopworkers stuck together, and I remember that, if someone was sick, hurt or injured, we covered for them. We looked after one another. There is a retail family that deserves protection. Shopworkers provide a valuable service, and they need to know, as Sydney Anderson said,

that they will not be disciplined if they complain about being threatened or subjected to verbal abuse and will not be told that such abuse is part of the job. They need to know that a robust policy is in place to deal with such incidents.

Like Claire McGill, we have all heard about attacks. I share with her the Committee's shock at the frequency of such attacks. USDAW is to be congratulated on carrying out a survey of 1,000 staff, not in London but in Northern Ireland. That survey tells us that 30% of those surveyed have experienced verbal abuse and 10% have been physically assaulted for simply doing their job. I share with Claire the understanding that some staff fear that they may lose their job. Where would we be without those people? We need to highlight that, because they provide a service. We have all run short of milk late at night and have run to the garage. We have all gone to get loaves of bread for the children's lunches the next day. Where would we be without people who work late at night, often on their own?

12.30 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

What a parent.

Mr Bell: My wife tells me that it is difficult.

Pat Ramsey outlined strongly the need for robust guidelines, and I congratulate him on originally bringing the matter to the attention of the Committee. He also highlighted the fact that staff can be traumatised. It is not a victimless crime. A matter of weeks ago, I visited a filling station in Ballygowan, where an incident had occurred when female staff were closing up their tills. It looks as though they had been under observation for a considerable period, and, as they closed the last till, somebody came along, stuck a revolver into one girl's face and told her to clear her till. It took only a matter of minutes, but — Mr Ramsey was absolutely correct — the trauma that that girl suffered in Ballygowan will be with her for a lifetime. She will always remember having a gun shoved into her face.

One thing impressed me. I had heard about the incident on the news, and, when I was doing a constituency call in Ballygowan, I called into the shop and asked the staff whether they were involved in the incident. They said that they were. They were back at work the next morning. They had had a gun in the face the previous night, but they had to open up to provide

business the next day. We salute all our shop staff who have suffered physical violence and have been traumatised in the course of their work but get up the next day and provide us all with a service. The House will unanimously back the dedication and courage of those staff.

Mr Ramsey was also absolutely correct to record the need for those incidents not to be put down on the back of an envelope somewhere but to be properly categorised and reported in a proper incident form so that we can quantify and qualify the need for a response in those circumstances. The Committee for Employment and Learning asked me, as a member of the Policing Board, to raise with the police the need for them to treat robberies in shops as priority incidents with other calls, to respond fully and to adequately investigate such incidents at the earliest possible opportunity.

I thank the Minister for spending the entire debate listening to and, clearly, hearing what has been said. The most frequent complaint that I hear from constituents about Departments is that they say that an issue is not their responsibility or that they can only deal with one wee bit and the person has to take the rest of the matter elsewhere. This is one issue that allows a genuine attempt at joined-up government, and I appreciate that the Minister is taking it seriously and looking at what DEL and the other Departments can do.

In conclusion, I fully endorse the Minister's call for the police to be given full co-operation, which they get almost universally now. He pointed out that recorded incidents affect 20 out of every 1000 staff. The whole House will unite behind our shop staff, and some of us will go now to stand with the shop staff. I congratulate the Committee, the Chairperson and the House on their unanimous support for the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the high incidence of abuse, threats and physical violence against shopworkers, which is likely to increase in the run up to Christmas; pledges its support for the Freedom from Fear campaign organised by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to pursue the issues raised by the campaign with his Executive colleagues.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business on the Order Paper is Question Time. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The sitting will resume with Question Time at the new time of 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.34 pm.

On resuming (*Mr Speaker in the Chair*) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Mr Speaker: I remind the House of the changes to Standing Orders. Ministers have a time limit, and I am conscious that Ministers had already prepared their briefs before the House decided to change the Standing Orders, so I will allow some latitude to Ministers. I will also allow some latitude to Members, provided that they do not abuse it. I am conscious that those changes will kick in from next week in a more serious way, but I hope that Members will be brief. Questions 7 and 8 have been withdrawn. One of the Members concerned has come to the Business Committee and given the reason why they will not be in the House, and the other Member has explained their reason to the Speaker's Office. That is the way that business should be done.

Flagpoles

1. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications for flagpoles on ground owned by councils, the Housing Executive or the Department for Regional Development, have been received and approved in the last two years. (AQO 631/11)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): My Department has not received any planning applications for flagpoles on council, Housing Executive or Department for Regional Development (DRD) land in the past two years.

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Minister for his response. Given the significant number of flagpoles that are erected around the place, particularly on many arterial routes, including some that are close to here, what does the Department intend to do to have a number of those flagpoles, and, indeed, the flags that are on them illegally, removed?

The Minister of the Environment: For the purposes of planning legislation, a flag falls within the definition of an advert. The display of certain adverts requires express consent from the Department. However, the national

flag can be displayed without the need to obtain consent, and, where such is displayed in accordance with the advertising regulations, the flagpole is deemed to have planning permission and no application is required.

Mr McDevitt: Has the Minister had any contact from the Minister for Regional Development about the work of the flags working group, which was meant to have been established last year on an interdepartmental basis to deal with the issue of illegal flag flying?

The Minister of the Environment: None that I am aware of.

Mr Speaker: Next on the list for a question is Mr Cathal Boylan.

Mr Boylan: Ceist uimhir a dó.

Mr Speaker: I am looking at the wrong Minister's questions. It is Mickey Brady next.

Heritage Sites: Safety

2. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of the Environment how much the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has spent over the last three years on safety measures at heritage sites under its control. (AQO 632/11)

Mr Brady: I am not sure how the Speaker could make that mistake. I will forgive you this time. I got my hair cut recently.

The Minister of the Environment: In the past three financial years, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has spent a total of £1,208,446 on safety measures at heritage sites under its control. In 2007-08, £345,204 was spent; in 2008-09, £443,644 was spent; and, in 2009-2010, £419,598 was spent. In the current financial year, 2010-11, the NIEA has spent a further £293,308 to date on safety measures.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he seek to ensure that the NIEA takes appropriate action to provide adequate safety measures concerning access to the adjacent quarry at the Navan Fort site in Armagh?

The Minister of the Environment: I ask the Member to write to me on that issue, and I will have the matter investigated. If there are any safety issues, we will address them.

Mr O'Loan: I note the importance of the health and safety issue. Have there been compensation claims, and, if so, how much has been paid out in recent times in compensation and legal costs?

The Minister of the Environment: In 2007-08, £19,375 was paid out; in 2008-09, nothing was paid out; and, in 2009-2010, £7,326 was paid out.

Local Government: Recycling

3. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline what action his Department will take against councils that do not meet their recycling targets. (AQO 633/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The primary mechanism for ensuring performance in waste management is the Northern Ireland Landfill Allowance Scheme (NILAS). Although it focuses on reducing landfill with biodegradable waste, it also has the effect of encouraging higher recycling rates. Recycling targets apply to Northern Ireland as a whole but do not apply at council level. With the household recycling rate in 2008-09 standing at 34.4%, Northern Ireland is on track to meet the waste management strategy recycling target of 35% by 2010.

I am committed to assisting local councils in their efforts to boost recycling rates, and I am pleased to advise that my Department is implementing a range of interventions to meet the targets. That includes over £5 million capital funding for local councils in this financial year through the Rethink Waste capital fund; £1 million of annual funding for the waste and resources action programme; £240,000 for the Rethink Waste revenue fund; and the provision of guidance and advice to local councils on their responsibilities under NILAS.

Those initiatives, together with delivery of the strategic waste infrastructure programme, will clearly help councils and others to meet forthcoming EU recycling targets and EU obligations on landfill diversion. Although it is likely that all those measures will encourage further increases in recycling rates, I will continue to consider all options to ensure that those improvements continue.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer. He highlighted that, although Northern Ireland is on target to meet the 35% household recycling target, there is an obvious issue with councils' varying success in achieving that target. Will

the Minister indicate why there has been such a variation? Will he ensure that small councils such as Ballymoney Borough Council, which I represent and which is the second smallest council, and Moyle District Council, which is the smallest council, are given all the support that they need, given the current issue with the capital grant?

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for his question. I believe that, regardless of whether councils meet that target, a lot of it comes down to the council leadership. Banbridge District Council and Antrim Borough Council are achieving rates of 48.3% and 47.9% respectively. Magherafelt District Council, which I visited last week, will have achieved a rate of 50% this year and is looking to achieve a rate of 80% within the next two years. Therefore, if the target can be met in small councils, there is no reason why other councils cannot meet it.

The councils that are not performing as well as others and that are well below the 35% target include Strabane District Council, with a rate of 25.7%; Belfast City Council, with a rate of 26.3%; and Fermanagh District Council, with a rate of 26.7%. Those councils need to reflect on where they are, on their contribution to recycling and on the impact that it will have on Northern Ireland as a whole if they do not step up to the mark and meet future targets. Other councils will carry them over the line for the 2013 model. However, if they continue to lag behind for the 2020 model, they could cost Northern Ireland a considerable amount of money.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister give his assessment of the number of councils across Northern Ireland that, first, have the capacity to provide services for recycling food waste, and secondly, are currently providing that service?

The Minister of the Environment: I know that a considerable number of councils are providing that service, but I am not sure whether they are all doing it at this moment in time. However, there is no particular reason why they cannot do it. A considerable number of facilities that recycle food waste are now in place. Such waste is one of the largest generators of methane, which is a particularly damaging gas. Therefore, if councils are not providing that service, I implore them to get on with it and to sign the necessary deals and partnerships with the private sector to ensure that the public sector does not lose out as a result of procrastination.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the incentives that are available to encourage councils to meet the recycling target. Will the Minister tell us what plans he has to monitor the various councils' targets so that we do not end up in the embarrassing position where ratepayers may be penalised for the failure of some councils to meet those targets?

The Minister of the Environment: As regards the potential for councils to face fines, under the NILAS regulations, an essential element of my Department's strategy is to meet the obligations of the EU landfill directive. If there were substantial slippage in that infrastructure programme, any fine accruing to the United Kingdom as a whole because of Northern Ireland's non-compliance would be deducted from the Northern Ireland block. That fine would then be passed on to the councils in the defaulting waste management groups. Obviously, if particular councils in a group are not performing as part of the waste management group system, all the councils in that group could be hit with a fine. It is, therefore, important that those waste management groups are the driving force in ensuring that those targets are met, otherwise a taxation burden, from which no benefits can be derived, will be placed on the public.

Planning: Replacement Dwellings

4. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the number of planning applications granted for replacement dwellings since the introduction of PPS 21.

(AQO 634/11)

The Minister of the Environment: Since the introduction of the finalised version of Planning Policy Statement 21 (PPS 21) on 1 June 2010, my Department has granted 97 applications for replacement dwellings in rural areas. Those figures are extracted from my Department's first quarterly statistical bulletin for development management, which only provides data up to 30 June. Due to the new statistical code of practice, it is not possible to provide information on any applications that have not been through the quality assurance process prior to publication of official statistics. The next development management quarterly statistics are due for publication on 9 December.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is the Minister satisfied with the

controls that ensure that, when an application for a replacement dwelling is granted, the style of the building and the materials used reflect the vernacular style of the district in a sympathetic way, rather than allowing haciendas to appear all over the place?

The Minister of the Environment: There are two elements to that. First, there is eligibility for replacement. If a dwelling is eligible for replacement, it should happen. Secondly, there are design issues, and planning officers should ensure that the design of a dwelling does not run contrary to what should be in the countryside. We are in the process of developing a design guide, which will assist architects and the Planning Service when arriving at those decisions. In the interim, if there are issues that the Member or members of the public feel to be incongruous to development in the countryside, those concerns should be raised through the local government sector and the councils. That will ensure that those voices are heard, and that site or office meetings are called in those instances.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. I am glad that you clarified the distinction between Mickey Brady and me; he looks a bit different with his long hair. Will the Minister give a commitment to the House that PPS 21 will be properly and consistently rolled out across all divisions? It is being interpreted differently in different parts of the North, and I want an assurance from the Minister today that it will be properly interpreted across the North.

The Minister of the Environment: On the back of the meeting that we had with the Environment Committee, the chief executive of the Planning Service will meet the divisional planning managers to discuss those issues. To be quite honest, there are far too many issues being raised with me on the interpretation of PPS 21 due to the lack of consistency across the offices. The chief executive of the Planning Service will meet the divisional planning managers to ensure that there is a greater consistency of approach to those applications.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. He will be aware that, like the Member who asked the last question, I have raised the issue of inconsistency across divisions in the past. Will the Minister inform the House and the people of Northern Ireland

what he believes “substantially intact” means in respect of replacement dwellings?

The Minister of the Environment: “Substantial” means “a significant amount”. It should not be a collection of stones that once formed a dwelling but have been allowed to tumble down. We are looking for the exterior walls to be “substantially intact,” which may involve peaks of gable walls being lost or someone widening the access to the building to allow a vehicle to be parked in it. Those things would not necessarily affect the integrity of its replacement value. However, we do not want disused buildings dotted across the countryside; it would be better to have appropriately designed buildings to replace them. That is the context in which the Planning Service should address the issue: can we improve our countryside and offer people the opportunity to live in a rural community without causing further detriment to that community? That is where we wish to go as an elected body, that is where I wish the Planning Service to go, and that is the message that it will be getting from its chief executive.

2.15 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he advise what measures the Department and the Planning Service have taken to ensure consistent application of planning policy statement 21 across the North?

The Minister of the Environment: We have talked about consistency throughout. I recognise that it is a new policy and that not every planning officer may interpret it in exactly the same way. We proposed the meeting to ensure a more consistent interpretation of planning policy.

Coastal Planning

5. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment when he intends to address issues relating to coastal planning. (AQO 635/11)

The Minister of the Environment: Development plans extend to the low watermark taking in the coastal area. In addition, my Department is committed to having an integrated marine plan for Northern Ireland in place by 2014, which will also address issues relating to the coast.

Mr Speaker: I call David McClarty — sorry, Dominic Bradley.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Shíl mé go raibh tú ag gabháil tharam ansin ar feadh bomaite. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sé. Does the Minister agree that PPS 16 missed the opportunity to address the issue, introduce proposals to create balanced communities and prevent the erosion of indigenous populations in coastal areas? How does he intend to deal with the issue?

The Minister of the Environment: PPS 16 is a policy document that is out for consultation. If the Member thinks that opportunities have been missed, he can put his responses in, and they will be given due consideration.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will be aware of the problem of unwanted apartment developments, particularly second-home developments, along the north coast. Will he outline the protection that the various pieces of legislation will provide on that issue, which is prevalent not only on the north coast but on other coastal areas around Northern Ireland?

The Minister of the Environment: Much of that is dealt with through the development plan process. The northern area plan, which covers an area for which the Member is a representative, will go to the Planning Appeals Commission for its consideration. The Planning Service will make its decisions thereafter. A consultation process of public inquiry will go through the Planning Appeals Commission, and the public will have their say. Influential members of the community, such as the Member of Parliament for East Londonderry, will be able to make the sort of case that he spoke of today.

Mr McClarty: I have an intense feeling of déjà vu, having been on my feet before. Will the Minister advise whether there are any live applications for offshore wind farms on the north coast?

The Minister of the Environment: There have been enquiries about offshore wind farms, although I am not sure whether there are any live applications. I take it that the Member refers to a proposal that was made some time ago for an offshore wind farm just across from Portstewart. All those things will be read against prevailing planning policy. Wind farms sometimes come into conflict with natural heritage; at the same time, we are trying to drive forward renewable energy in Northern Ireland.

The Executive have set us a target of 40% by 2020. There are tremendous opportunities to produce considerable amounts of renewable energy, not just offshore wind energy but tidal energy. It will all be viewed against prevailing policies.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will know that I am passionate about saving our coastline. The last two questions related to the north coast. Will the Minister advise the House whether he will also do his bit to preserve, as far as possible, the Irish Sea coast and, in particular, Strangford Lough, which is an area of outstanding natural beauty in every sense?

The Minister of the Environment: The planning policies that are established apply to all of Northern Ireland rather than any one particular area. The development plans get into the details of particular areas and seek to identify the needs of the people in those areas and to provide for those needs without causing fundamental damage to other key elements of our built-in natural heritage.

We have the new 'Ards Down Area Plan 2015', which was brought about over the past few years. That is the main document for assessing planning applications in conjunction with the planning policy statements in the area.

Mr Speaker: Raymond McCartney is not in his place for question 6. As I have already indicated, questions 7 and 8 have been withdrawn.

Goods Vehicle Licensing

9. **Mr Callaghan** asked the Minister of the Environment when the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 will be implemented. (AQO 639/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 became law on 22 January 2010. A programme plan was developed on the basis of a two-year implementation period. An implementation team has been in place since April 2010, and there is no delay in the programme. It is expected that the Act will be operational by early 2012.

Mr Callaghan: What assurances can the Minister give us that the processing of licence applications will remain in Northern Ireland and will not be centralised in Wales or elsewhere?

The Minister of the Environment: That is one of the challenging issues when it comes to financial arrangements. We probably have to identify a considerable new computer system. If that system is adopted, it will be at very significant cost. There may be opportunities to do that in conjunction with the private sector to keep the processing of licence applications in Northern Ireland. That could be done at a lower cost in Wales, because the system is already in place there. However, the consequence of doing that would be jobs lost to Northern Ireland.

None of those issues will be dealt with lightly, nor will they be dealt with without proper and adequate consultation. At this moment, there is no proposal to transfer any of those jobs out of Northern Ireland.

Planning Policy Statement 4

10. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the benefits that the revised PPS 4 will have for the business community. (AQO 640/11)

The Minister of the Environment: Revised PPS 4 will help to achieve a modern vibrant economy, provide certainty and give clarity to businesses, and that should result in faster and better planning decisions. PPS 4 provides up-to-date policy to meet the needs of a modern economy, including IT and research and development. It also includes regional policy for offices, storage and distribution and provides flexibility for economic development in rural areas.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he indicate what the policy's impact will be for rural areas?

The Minister of the Environment: Revised PPS 4 has a positive approach to development in the countryside and complements PPS 21 by introducing a degree of flexibility for businesses in rural areas. It contains policies on expansion and redevelopment of established economic development uses, major industrial development and small rural projects. Planning Service has approximately 200 applications that are related to commercial and industrial uses. The final publication of PPS 4 may have an impact and allow a number of those applications in rural constituencies to move towards approval.

Road Safety: Christmas

11. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of the Environment what additional measures his Department intends to implement over the Christmas and new year period to ensure maximum safety for road users. (AQO 641/11)

The Minister of the Environment: I apologise, Mr Speaker; this is a long answer. The launch of the PSNI Christmas anti-drink-driving operation took place on Friday 26 November 2010 and will be supported by the Department. The Christmas and new year anti-drink-driving television campaign, Hit Home, will commence on 1 December 2010 and will continue throughout the Christmas and new year period and will end early in January 2011. The campaign will consist of a 30-second TV advertisement; washroom posters; glowboxes displayed in pubs, clubs and restaurants throughout Northern Ireland; and online activity carrying the "Never Ever Drink and Drive" strapline.

Several special buys of the hard-hitting Shame campaign, originally launched in 2000, will air throughout December. The campaign will consist of a 60-second TV advertisement and will carry the strapline:

"Could You Live With The Shame?"

The Department's anti-drug-driving campaign, Steps, will be on air during the traditional Christmas party calendar from mid-November to the new year. That campaign seeks to raise awareness of the drug-driving problem and to highlight the ultimate consequences of driving under the influence of drugs and carries the strapline:

"What steps will you take to stop a drug driver from wrecking your life?"

This will be the third year of the 'Gift' radio campaign, consisting of a portfolio of five radio edits. The campaign will run throughout December, targeting all road users with a mix of key road safety messages that focus on the Christmas period. Department of the Environment (DOE) road safety interventions will appear on many Internet sites over the Christmas and new year period. Digital warnings from our extensive online portfolio will address many problem road-user behaviours using display and search engine marketing techniques where the audience least expects it.

This is the fourth year of the Coca-Cola designated driver initiative, launching on 30 November. Once again, the Department and the PSNI will be supporting the initiative. The scheme, which will be operational in many venues across Northern Ireland, offers three free soft drinks to designated drivers during the festive season.

My Department and the Road Safety Authority in the Republic of Ireland intend to issue a joint appeal on road safety, with particular focus on the border areas in the run-up to Christmas. Mutual support can be particularly effective in the North/South context because of similarities in the road safety record and the common cause of fatalities and serious injuries.

This year, the Ulster GAA and Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster will support the DOE and help to deliver the road safety message to the most vulnerable on our roads: young people in rural areas, particularly young males, around the Christmas and new year period.

During road safety week, 22 to 28 November, a series of events supporting the DOE as well as the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, Brake UK and others, raised awareness of how dangerous our roads are. That is timely, as many of us are preparing for the Christmas period, and we are taking the opportunity to urge caution on all road users at this busy time.

Mr Boylan: I was going to get Mickey Brady to ask the supplementary question for me. That was a very detailed answer but the Minister highlighted the issue along the border, and more co-operation between the PSNI and the Garda. Does he intend to put more resources into that area because, as he is aware, most of the fatalities and accidents occur in and around rural border roads?

The Minister of the Environment: I met the police and strongly encouraged them to pay more attention to the south and west of the Province, because that was where the most road deaths were taking place. Therefore, it is imperative for us to seek to ensure that people's lives are protected, because very often those who are killed on the roads are innocent parties, not the people who are breaking the law. We really need to ensure that people can travel safely on our roads.

Mr Bell: Does the Minister agree that the major area of loss of life and serious injury is on rural

roads? Will he join me in encouraging the police to target not necessarily only areas where they can easily catch speeders, but to set specific targets for the rural roads on which deaths and serious injuries are occurring?

The Minister of the Environment: Sophisticated targeting of areas where deaths and injuries are taking place is key to moving things forward. It is not always best policy to engage in areas where it is easy to catch someone speeding but where it does not have a particularly significant consequence, or where a road does not have a significant traffic accident history. That is a matter for the PSNI, but we should concentrate on areas with the highest number of road deaths.

Planning Applications

12. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to clear the current backlog of planning applications. (AQO 642/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The Member may be aware of the action plan that is in place to deal with the PPS 14/21 applications that were at deferral stage prior to the publication of the final version of PPS 21 on 1 June 2010.

A time frame of six months for the reassessment of those backlog applications was agreed, which expires on 1 December. As agreed, divisional planning offices are continuing to reassess those applications in accordance with the time frame outlined. Of the other backlog applications, I agreed with my officials that we shall initially concentrate on determining the major category of planning applications that have been in the system for more than 12 months. As a result, my Department agreed divisional action plans for the 2010-11 business year, with a view to reducing the backlog of major applications that exceed 12 months in the system.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his response. How have staff reduction and relocation in the Planning Service impacted on the backlog?

The Minister of the Environment: Staff reduction and relocation were done out of necessity, not desire. That will not have had a positive impact on dealing with the backlog of planning applications. However, we are, or have been, dealing with more planning applications. Therefore, the backlog has been reduced.

2.30 pm

Lord Morrow: Is the Minister prepared to consider extending the time for businesses that have submitted a planning application but, because of the economic downturn, are unable to proceed with their development at this time?

The Minister of the Environment: That matter was part of the consultation on the planning Bill, and I am sure that the Committee will also consider it. People whose background is in the community or in residents' groups would prefer that time to be shortened, but people from a business background would prefer it to be lengthened. The identification of the best way to proceed is the conundrum that we will always face. Therefore, we do not propose to extend or to reduce the length of time. That can be done through the planning reform Bill, which I hope to bring to the Assembly in the near future.

Finance and Personnel

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that question 11 has been withdrawn.

Government: Revenue

1. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether any steps have been taken by his Department to identify ways to raise revenue through renting or selling properties within the Civil Service estate. (AQO 645/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): I can speak only of the property that is owned and leased by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), namely the government office estate. That comprises approximately 200 buildings, with a total asset value of £300 million. Properties division has a three-year accommodation plan, which is focused on generating savings through either improving the utilisation of the space within the estate or generating capital receipts from the sale of surplus assets. So far, through reducing the amount of space that we lease, we have generated annual savings of £1.68 million over the past two years. Over the next three years, savings of £2.85 million are anticipated through the vacation of further buildings. In addition, when sites were declared surplus to requirements, our sale of buildings released

capital of £2.2 million, and we look forward to selling two further sites.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. If the Minister's figures related only to DFP, it would be a serious indicator of the overall amount of money involved in rent and rates for government buildings. Nevertheless, and perhaps even because of that, has the Minister requested or received any update on the costs that might be saved through the decentralisation of Departments or their associated offices and agencies?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The cost of decentralisation was not an issue of savings. The cost of decentralisation was estimated at £40 million, which is one reason why it has not proceeded. The real savings are to be found in looking at the office space that is required and trying to use it more intensively, looking at where we overuse space, terminating or not renewing leases that are coming to an end, and bringing people together in fewer offices. That kind of approach will bring savings in the future. As I said, over the next three years, we intend to make savings of about £2.87 million on the Northern Ireland Civil Service office estate.

Mr McNarry: I heard the Minister say that the current value of the estate is £300 million. Does the estate have an income-generating potential for us?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Indeed it does. One way that we could release some money is through the sale and leaseback of part of our estate. That has added benefits. If we needed to improve buildings, they could be sold, improved and leased back. That would immediately release capital, because we would get the capital value of the buildings.

However, the longer-run impact of that would, of course, be the cost stream from paying rent over the years. At present, the problem, which we are looking at actively with regard to certain projects, is that, because of the state of the market and the rate of return that people would require, we would probably either get a lower price for the offices that we sell or have to pay a higher rent. There would be consequences for the future.

Mr O'Loan: My question is in a similar vein. Rather than asking the Minister what he might

or will do, I want to know what has been done since the collapse of Workplace 2010 to realise the two aims of that project: to raise revenue and to improve the quality of the estate as a workspace for staff.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As the Member knows, Workplace 2010 envisaged putting about 70% of the estate up for sale, leasing it back and releasing capital assets from that. Due to market conditions, that did not progress. We are working with the Strategic Investment Board and with the central assets realisation team to compile a list of all the properties and land under each Department's control in order to finalise the assets that we hold, determine their potential and realise sale or lease-back opportunities, or, indeed, sale of assets. I was surprised to find that no such list existed.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I refer to the Minister's last point. It is a bad time to sell part of the estate. However, the running costs of places such as Loughery College and Greenmount College and the upkeep of vast swathes of land must greatly affect revenue. The same could be said of any other property. It is a bad time to sell. Nevertheless, sale should be considered.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is easy for Members to stand up in the Assembly to say that although it is a bad time to sell, selling should be considered. Although it might seem a sensible approach to release money for some capital pet projects that people want to be dealt with, it might look different in three or four years' time, when the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Office ask why a valuable asset was given away.

I have said time and time again that it is important that Ministers and Departments be held to account for their decisions. However, sometimes, with the best will in the world, a decision is made that, with hindsight, might not look like a great decision. Of course, the louder the demand for scalps for decisions that were made for the best reasons in the past, the more cautious people become when making the kind of bold decisions that the Member suggested.

Comprehensive Spending Review 2010

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he expects to be

updated by HM Treasury on the impact of the comprehensive spending review on our economy. (AQO 646/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not expect Her Majesty's Treasury to undertake any analysis of the impact of the spending review on Northern Ireland. The spending review was announced on 20 October 2010. The amount of money that came to Northern Ireland was the amount that the Treasury believed that it was entitled to under the Barnett formula. It is now up to the Northern Ireland Executive to decide how they apportion that Budget among Departments. Hopefully, we will do so soon. I expect Her Majesty's Treasury to issue the paper on rebalancing the economy, which it has promised. I intend to continue to press it for delivery of that paper as soon as possible.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When will the Assembly see that paper? Members need all the relevant information before we can discuss the Budget and address it properly.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Let me disabuse Members of any idea that we can delay the Budget until we receive the Treasury paper. If that were the case, and since we anticipate that we will not have the paper until late December or early in the new year, we simply would not have a Budget for Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the initial paper is likely to be a discussion paper. It is important for us to decide our Budget on the basis of the revenue and the money that we know is available to us.

Mr Givan: Should the Executive fail to reach agreement on the Budget, will the Minister elaborate on the impact of that on our economy?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I think that I have indicated the impact, time and time again. The current uncertainty is causing great distress among those who rely on budget allocations from the Executive. Only this morning, I heard someone from the Children's Hospice talking about the impact that the lack of knowledge about what is happening next year and the following years is having on the work of the hospice. Many voluntary and community groups are wondering whether they should put people on protective notice, because they do not know what their budget will be for next year. A number of Ministers have told me that they need certainty so that they can discuss what

spending will be available with trusts, boards and units in their Departments. Those are the practical difficulties.

There is also the political reality. If we do not get the Budget sorted out, people will take a view on the Assembly's effectiveness on the issue. I do not want to play up negative aspects. I hope that all members of the Executive and all parties of the Assembly will adopt a responsible attitude so that we can establish a Budget quickly.

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What steps does the Minister think should be taken in the new Budget to deliver better on the priority to grow the regional economy?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am glad that the Member asked that question. That involves a number of issues, which is why discussion on, and quick establishment of, the Budget is so important. The Budget must not be a last-minute, knee-jerk reaction to a crisis that we have allowed to develop. It has to be strategic, and we must take a strategic view on it.

First, although our capital allocation has been greatly reduced, we must look at the infrastructure projects that most effectively make Northern Ireland a better place for businesses. Those projects might be on the road network, the telecommunications networks or the ports. They are the types of project that will help us to deliver goods and services not only in Northern Ireland but in the export market to the wider world.

Secondly, we must ensure that sufficient money is set aside to capitalise on the good work that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is doing in seeking opportunities for inward investment. On the basis of the information that she has given to me, the pipeline of enquiries has never been fuller. Over the past year, per head of population in Northern Ireland, we delivered as many jobs as were delivered in the Republic, even without the reduced rate of corporation tax. We must ensure that enough money is put into the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment budget to maintain that momentum.

Thirdly, given that our skilled workforce is one of our big selling points, the Department for Employment and Learning budget is important for maintaining training and the proper skills

base, anticipating the skills that will be needed and preparing people for those jobs.

Another factor has been mentioned, which is that we must try to get the Government at Westminster to deliver some additional levers to us that will help to attract inward investment.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Minister advised his ministerial colleagues, when they make their cuts, to consider the net impact of those cuts? For instance, will the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure's cut to the North West 200 funding lead to an even greater loss of tourism revenue to the Northern Ireland economy?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

The savings plans of Departments are up to individual Ministers. One reason why I gave early warning of the likely Budget pressures in June was to give Ministers time to consider what savings plans they might put in place, how those savings might impact and how they might affect some important areas such as tourism and industrial promotion, which have to be addressed.

I am very disappointed that many Ministers have not even produced savings plans. Some have actually taken their savings plans to their Committees already, whereas others have not even produced them or I have not seen them, which is disappointing.

2.45 pm

I hope that all Ministers, when considering what savings to implement, will consider their impact. I have said to them time and time again that if they are going to reduce, they should reduce the level of bureaucracy in their Departments, make sure that they are delivering services in the most efficient way and cutting down on administration. They should look to see whether there are ways of carrying out the same delivery more effectively, perhaps by using the social sector. Ministers should always be aware that some savings will have greater impact than others, and the Member has given an example for the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister assure the House that he will advise all the other Ministers not to see the voluntary sector as an easy target for cutting the budget for front line services?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am glad that the Member asked that question, because I have had many meetings with the

voluntary and social sector. Rather than seeing it as a burden on the Executive's Budget, much of the sector's work should be seen as an opportunity for more effective and innovative delivery of services. I am sure there will always be the tendency for Ministers to keep things in their Departments; they are the things closest to Ministers, and of which those who advise Ministers have most knowledge. However, I hope that Ministers will look seriously at the services and opportunities in the voluntary sector, especially preventative areas. They should make sure that they make full use of the sector's expertise and efficiencies.

I have been impressed by the voluntary and social sector, which is well ahead of the game in making its services more cost-effective by looking at mergers and changes. In doing so, organisations in that sector place themselves well to make bids for parts of the Budget.

Government: Revenue

3. **Mr Leonard** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline any engagements his Department has had with independent economic advisers regarding new ways in which the Executive could raise revenue. (AQO 647/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: My Department has not met any independent economic advisers to discuss how the Executive could raise new revenue. However, we have done two things. As part of the Budget review group, we have asked all Departments to come up with suggestions as to how revenue might be raised in their Departments. Somebody very courteously leaked that paper to one of the local newspapers, so there is a whole list of those things in the public domain already. I am not sure who did it, but someone felt that the public should have full sight of it. I have also met the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, and the Chamber of Commerce, among others, to discuss where they see the potential for raising revenue.

Mr Leonard: I thank the Minister for that answer, although it was slightly disappointing. However, will the Minister further assure us that if there are genuine ideas for raising money here, he will seek assurances that that money will not be lost in Westminster's coffers and that the region will be better off in net terms?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member makes a very good point. We could do things to raise money, but, because of Treasury rules, the money raised would simply come off the block grant. We have to be inventive by looking at ways in which we can raise money so that it stays in Northern Ireland. There is no point in imposing the pain of raising revenue simply to find that it comes off the block grant. I hope that Ministers and Departments will be inventive on that. However, when we try to raise money by charging more for services, there will be some pullback from those affected and there will be complaints that they do not want to pay more for services.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister indicate whether he believes that raising additional tax, in whatever form it might take, could take more money out of the economy and out of circulation, delay recovery and, perhaps, even cause more job losses? Could it potentially cause the tax revenue possibilities to be lost?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member makes a very good point. It is for that very reason that I would prefer us to address budget pressures by looking for efficiencies, and that we should be dipping our hands into other people's pockets only when we have exhausted other possibilities or are satisfied that we have achieved as much efficiency as possible. I prefer that people spend their own money rather than us taking it and spending it for them. However, there are certain services that people want, value and continually indicate that they want the Executive to provide. It would be irresponsible of us to say that those services can be provided for nothing. If they are valued by the community, they have to be paid for in some way. However, raising revenue should not be the option of first resort. It should be the option of last resort.

Dr Farry: Such is the scale of the challenge that we have to look at savings and at revenue raising. Will the Minister explain to the House why the Executive seem determined to look at almost every conceivable revenue-raising option apart from the most obvious one, which is water charging. That is the biggest distortion when one looks at household expenditure here compared with that in the rest of the UK. It has been supported by a large number of economists and business leaders, and it can be progressive.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I admire the Member's persistence on this issue. Even though his party appears to be wandering away from him on it, at least he is consistent. I think that he knows the answer to the question, which is that a number of parties in the Executive feel that they have made a commitment not to introduce water charges. Therefore, it has not been an option. I do not even think that the Member would suggest that water charges should be introduced all in one go, so the revenue that would be raised in the first number of years would probably be quite low, as the charges would be phased in. However, I am sure that the Member will persist in this battle, even though his colleagues desert him, and he will make the point time and again.

Banks

4. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of how open and transparent local banks have been in relation to queries and requests for information from his Department. (AQO 648/11)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: When I read that question, the phrase that sprang to mind was:

"Great minds think alike; fools seldom differ."

Since I have already answered that question for one of the Member's colleagues, I do not know whether it is a case of great minds or fools, but I will leave people to judge that.

As I said before, the availability of finance is vital to our economic recovery. It remains strategically very important, particularly in light of events in the Irish Republic. In that context, my Department liaises with local banks, especially on information about lending to small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland. The cross-sector advisory forum made a number of recommendations. In fact, just before I came here I had a meeting with members of the Institute of Directors to talk about a dinner that I am going to have with representatives of the banks next week to talk about the implementation of the 17 recommendations that came from the cross-sector advisory forum. That forum places great emphasis on banks increasing their lending and being more transparent about what they do in lending to small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer. Some small and medium-sized businesses are having difficulties getting loans from banks. Has the Minister made any representation to the British Government about the relevant powers being devolved to this Assembly to ensure greater accountability from the banks and the financial sector?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: First, I do not believe that devolving banking powers to the Assembly would remedy the situation at all. One has only to look at how ineffective the Government at Westminster or, indeed, the Government in the Republic have been. Both poured billions of pounds into banks yet have not been all that effective in determining how that money has been used. In fact, to the anger of the community, that money appears to be more readily used for fat bonuses for people who are involved in banks rather than for distribution and lending to some of the smaller industries. However, through the bank lending panel, the banking review and the work that we have done in the cross-sector advisory forum on local banks, we have sought to try to hold their feet to the fire to provide information and to raise questions where there has been an inadequate response from the banks to the borrowing requirement of businesses in Northern Ireland.

Mr Bell: Does the Minister share the public anger, not just in Strangford but elsewhere, about banks calling in successful small and medium-sized enterprises and changing the terms of their overdrafts and loans without any consultation, thereby putting small and medium-sized enterprises that have never before defaulted in a position where they are now likely to go bust?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: First, the description that the Member gave is not unique to Strangford. I am sure that representatives around the Chamber could cite examples of businesses that have made representations to them. I have had the same response from businesses in my constituency. Indeed, I met bankers to discuss some of the problems that constituents have drawn to my attention.

Of course I am concerned about it. That is one reason why, along with the Bankers' Association and the various industry representatives on the cross-sector advisory forum, I am going next week to meet the decision-makers at the

banks to see what can be done and, in fact, to hold them to the timetable that has now been laid down for implementing a lot of the recommendations for improving the banking system, which came from representatives of the industry themselves. Without that, we will not get out of the current problem. It is not just what the Executive do with their Budget that is important, but the oil for the wheels of the economy, which comes from the banks. That is important, too, if we are aiming for economic recovery.

Mr A Maginness: Given the bail out of the banking system in the South and the recapitalisation of the Bank of Ireland and Allied Irish Banks in particular, what are the implications for the banking sector in Northern Ireland? Does that provide greater certainty and confidence and recapitalisation here?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Any additional liquidity that goes into the banking system is important, because that liquidity gives the banks the ability to lend. However, the counter to that has been all the speculation about how weak the banking system is and the lack of confidence. We could find that more and more people will withdraw funds when they get the opportunity to do so and that liquidity will, therefore, not be improved at all. In fact, it could be made worse.

Last week, Arlene Foster and I met one of the Treasury Ministers to emphasise that, if the UK is putting £7 billion into the Irish coffers for either sovereign debt or the banks in the Irish Republic, certain conditions should at least be attached. Two of those conditions are that, first, some of the liquidity that is made available should come to banks in Northern Ireland and should not simply be confined to banks that are operating in the Irish Republic, and, secondly, when it comes to restructuring the banks, the jobs of people who work in banks in Northern Ireland should be considered as well. Northern Ireland should not be seen to be closing down branches just to save money.

Budget 2011-12

5. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the legal consequences if the Executive fail to agree a Budget by March 2011. (AQO 649/11)

7. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the consequences for public services of failing to provide a draft Budget to the Assembly within the time frame previously outlined by the Minister.

(AQO 651/11)

3.00 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 7 together.

The consequences of not having a draft Budget released to the public are very serious. First, as I have outlined, the lack of certainty will cause great distress and trauma in the economy. Secondly, the later we leave it, the more difficult it will be to meet our legal obligations to have proper consultation and discussion on the Budget. Thirdly, if we fail to meet the deadline of the end of the year, it will fall to my Department to issue an emergency Budget which, I assure you, because of the percentage of money we will be allowed to issue, will be much more severe than what we are considering at present.

Mr Speaker: That ends Question Time.

Mr W Clarke: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, a Cheann Comhairle, you referred to my non-attendance at OFMDFM Question Time. I was not in attendance because of extreme weather conditions in South Down. Indeed, members of your own staff could not make it in to work from Newcastle. I think that it is unfair to be lambasted for something beyond my control. I recognise that I should have withdrawn the question, and I apologise for that.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member very much for his point of order. That is what it is all about: informing my office or the Business Office of the absence of a Member. That is all we are asking. That is the way forward.

The next item on the Order Paper is —

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The House welcomes Mr Willie Clarke's explanation for yesterday, and it clarifies the situation. As you know, there was much concern in the Procedures Committee about Question Time. I congratulate Members and Ministers on being so prompt and efficient in their responses and your good self, Mr Speaker, on intervening and keeping them going along.

Mr Speaker: This seems to be confession time.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to comment on the point Mr Ken Robinson made. Today's business at Question Time was carried out most efficiently, and the Procedures Committee and you should be commended for the work done in relation to that. Has the Member who was stranded yesterday ever heard of the e-mail or telephone system?

Mr Speaker: A point well made.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, is it in order for the Member for East Antrim to use flattery to try to wheedle his way into your affections in order to be called more often to speak in the Assembly?

Mr Speaker: Let us move on.

Private Members' Business

Neighbourhood Renewal

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

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to bring forward proposals to secure neighbourhood renewal funding beyond March 2011.

As we are all in confession mood, perhaps I should start with a mea culpa before I proceed. The motion is timely because many groups involved in neighbourhood renewal are wondering what their situation will be after March 2011. The uncertainty about funding for neighbourhood renewal seems to have been a continuing and recurring theme over the past number of years. It can be very disheartening to groups but, despite that, they continue to deliver. Communities have demonstrated a clear and energetic response to neighbourhood renewal.

Last night, I attended the annual general meeting of a community group in Newry that is very proactive. It has instigated innovative projects in the area that have led to very positive outcomes. Once again, this is a group trying to deal with future planning but very much in the dark when it comes to future funding for neighbourhood renewal-led projects.

With regard to funding and plans for a neighbourhood renewal strategy, the Department for Social Development has stated:

"It is the Department's intention to continue funding Neighbourhood Renewal after 2011."

The Department's bid for funds for 2011-15, as part of the Budget 2010 exercise, demonstrates a continuing commitment to the programme. The DSD has once again reiterated that neighbourhood renewal is the Executive's flagship programme for tackling

spatial deprivation and that it will seek greater collaboration with other Departments to reduce duplication, prioritise the needs of the disadvantaged and improve the value for money delivered by service providers, including those in the community and voluntary sector.

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

The Department for Social Development went on to say that it is unhelpful that funding for disadvantaged communities is worked out over the head of those communities without reference to other Departments in a way that fails to draw on those people's best experience and may ultimately fail to deliver necessary outcomes. I am not absolutely sure what that is intended to explain.

Considering the number of debates and questions over the past three and a half years on neighbourhood renewal, it seems that DSD has already made some efforts to deal with most if not all of the issues. In an answer to a question posed by my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín on whether neighbourhood renewal funding will continue after March 2011, the Minister stated:

"It is my intention to continue funding the NR programme after 2011 and my Budget 2011-15 bid demonstrates a continuing increased commitment."

However, we do not know what the bid is or whether the level of commitment depends on the amount of the bid. Perhaps we could get an explanation of that.

As a flagship programme of the Executive in tackling disadvantage, the neighbourhood renewal programme is essential at a time of recession, with potentially fewer public sector jobs, and in order to maintain stability in addressing poverty and disadvantage. Executive colleagues should work collaboratively with the Government and with the community. The absence of that collaboration carries a risk of a fragmented, partial and unsuccessful approach.

In light of all the rhetoric, I ask the Minister for some detail of what papers etc, he has brought to the Executive. Has he spoken to other Ministers regarding their support, particularly in relation to funding for neighbourhood renewal? The Minister appears to have left questions unanswered, and that has created huge uncertainty in the groups that are tasked with the delivery of neighbourhood renewal. I have witnessed in my constituency the tremendous

and essential work carried out by those groups and indeed groups throughout the Six Counties. Their contribution in helping to develop our communities is immeasurable. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move the following amendment: After "renewal" insert

"and small pockets of deprivation".

Small pockets of deprivation (SPOD) are an important part of the neighbourhood renewal programme, particularly in disadvantaged communities in my constituency. I will pick up on a comment from the proposer of the motion, who wanted urgent action so that future funding for neighbourhood renewal would be finalised. I agree that that needs to be completed quickly. However, it must be pointed out that that applies not only to neighbourhood renewal but to all public funding. Until the Budget is finalised, no community organisation, voluntary organisation, Department or statutory organisation knows what its funding will be. It is important that the Budget is finalised. While there is no Budget, there is uncertainty. I suspect that many people involved in this area may be receiving protective notices, possibly prior to Christmas, because they do not know their future. It is important that responsibility is taken, that a draft Budget is put on the table and that decisions are taken.

Mr Brady: People in the voluntary sector being put on protective notice is nothing new. It is, unfortunately, a recurring and continuing theme, which should have been addressed a long time ago. I also say to the Member that we have no particular problem in supporting the amendment and the inclusion of small pockets of deprivation.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member. Although many are aware of large-scale areas of need, particularly in the conurbations of Belfast and Londonderry, there is an equally large number of pockets of deprivation. I understand that, using the NISRA reports and the Noble indices, 17 areas were identified where small communities were living in areas of need and required support. That has been recognised. Some 36 neighbourhood areas in the most deprived wards across Northern Ireland were identified, as well as those 17 areas with small pockets of deprivation. I was pleased that the January 2005 consultation report into developing new neighbourhood renewal policy addressed the inequality issues of possible exclusion and that

it was agreed to proportionately fund those small pockets. To have done otherwise would have been discriminatory.

Although relatively small amounts of funding for those communities may be involved, nevertheless, it is significant in assisting them to improve their local area. To date, parts of the Sunnylands, Gortalee and Larne Central wards in my constituency have benefited from that fund. It is important that funding has been available. Rather than its being delivered by a formal strategy partnership organisation, which would involve administrative costs, it has been accepted that, given the small amounts of money involved, other and more efficient methods should be used to cut down that administrative burden. That could involve funding that comes directly from the Housing Executive and councils and even from the Department for Social Development-funded community forum.

Groups such as the Dixon Park residents association in Larne and the Riverdale residents association have benefited from the funding. Larne Borough Council was able to improve the local environment considerably by upgrading the riverside walk, which enhanced access to the local community. The funding also gave additional support to Sunnylands Nursery School, Carrickfergus Community Forum, Greenisland Knockagh Youth Club, the library and the community council, which had a rather ageing hall. Relatively small amounts of money made a big difference to those deprived communities. In addition, support was given to the Alphabet Playgroup in Greenisland for, I think, an outdoor soft-play facility, which will benefit young people in the estate. Furthermore, the Greenisland scout hall received additional money. I am illustrating how a lot of small community organisations have benefited from the fund.

I noticed that, in 2009-2010, there were no applications from Larne. It would be helpful to have an understanding of why no funding went to Larne. I understood that it would still have qualified, but I am curious about why no funding was drawn down. At the same time, important funding is continuing to be delivered in the Carrickfergus area through a YMCA project that operates out of the Sunnylands Youth Centre. It works with parents and young children and provides additional educational courses that have enhanced people's confidence. Some have

been encouraged to seek employment or to get on to an educational or employment ladder.

That element of funding has been important in that it has provided additional community support. Part-time development workers have been provided in some of those disadvantaged communities. It is an area in which Peace II funding has ended and full-time community development workers are no longer in place. The provision of support to the local community has been vital, particularly as there is a relatively weak community infrastructure. The support has enabled those communities to come together to apply for some other funding, which they would not otherwise have done. Therefore, there is an important need for that type of funding to continue in that area.

I think particularly of the work of Stevie Harrison, who operates through Carrickfergus Community Forum. He has worked with a group of young people who could easily have become young people not in education, training or employment. He has gathered them together, increased their confidence, given them some life skills and anti-racism training and empowered them so that they could learn about their importance to their local community and contribute to it. I was fortunate to be present a couple of weeks ago when he brought a group of those young people to Carrickfergus town hall. It was clear that their confidence had grown, because they were able to speak to a group of over 100 people in a town hall. They had certainly been empowered. Therefore, neighbourhood renewal is an important element in my community.

3.15 pm

Areas at risk are another important aspect of neighbourhood renewal. I understand that about 20% of funding has gone towards other disadvantaged communities in the 10% to 20% identified areas of need, which has been quite significant for recent work in the Larne area, particularly in the Craig Hill/Antiville area. During the summer, I was fortunate to go along and learn about the progress there, particularly the work of Patricia Brennan and Ledcom, which administers the scheme on behalf of DSD. Opportunities for volunteering in the area have been mapped, and people with time and skills have been drawn together to try to improve their local community. Local churches have also been

drawn in to utilise their skills. So there is a real sense of community and hope there.

At the same time, one of the most positive aspects of change that I have noticed in the programme is that paramilitary murals are coming down. Individuals are gaining confidence in themselves and their community. Peace is being secured with relatively small amounts of money, and it is vital that that continues. Areas that have received funding are also covered by the Horizon Sure Start programme, of which I am a committee member. Other organisations recognise that there is need there, and they are working with different age groups. To ensure that change happens and improvements come about, it is important that a collective operation works with a range of individuals and young people in the area.

Having looked at the new NISRA indices, I recognise that there has been change. Some areas are now identified as being among the 10% most deprived wards, whereas others have moved out of that category. Nevertheless, I note that a considerable number of wards in my constituency, East Antrim, appear to be in the 10% to 20% at-risk category, including Ballyloran, Love Lane, Killycrot, Antiville, Eden, Sunnylands, Gortalee and Blackcave: a host of places. If anything, conditions in my constituency have worsened. I view pockets of deprivation funding as being relatively small amounts of money. It is vital that it continues, in order to strengthen my community.

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

Mr Beggs: I ask Members to support my amendment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I shall begin by outlining some of the views expressed by the Social Development Committee about neighbourhood renewal, before a quick costume change into a DUP MLA.

The House will be well aware that the Social Development Committee considered the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy earlier in this mandate. The Committee produced a report that was debated and approved by the Assembly in March 2009. Among the report's wide-ranging findings, the Committee concluded that a neighbourhood renewal strategy was important for tackling

deprivation in some of the poorest wards in Northern Ireland. As Members are aware, the idea behind neighbourhood renewal was to replace short-term, project-led interventions with a longer-term strategy. The strategy was supposed to tackle the multiplicity of factors that affect deprivation and the so-called quality of life gap between neighbourhood renewal areas and the rest of Northern Ireland. Those factors cover familiar social development territory, such as vacant housing, derelict industrial sites, income deprivation and low community participation. However, neighbourhood renewal was also designed to tackle related matters, such as high crime rates, low educational attainment and low life expectancy.

The motion refers to funding for the strategy. In its response to the Committee's report, the Department gave a budget commitment up to March 2011 for projects meeting priority need. The Department also identified a list of capital projects designed to improve the physical appearance of deprived areas. In September 2010, the Committee was pleased to note a number of departmental capital bids relating to the neighbourhood renewal strategy for the next Budget period. The Committee also noted the Department's continued commitment to funding the strategy, as set out in correspondence in October. I hope that, in his response, the Minister will give further information on how, in delivering neighbourhood renewal, he will prioritise the needs of the disadvantaged and improve the value for money delivered by service providers, including the community and voluntary sector.

In my remaining time, I shall make some comments in a personal and party capacity. My earlier point about replacing short-term, project-led interventions leads me to highlight the lack of success that that approach has had in tackling deep-rooted disadvantage in some of the most deprived communities in Northern Ireland. Therefore, we should all welcome the replacement of that with a longer-term strategy. Even though I have no particular direct experience of neighbourhood renewal in my constituency, I have experience of the small pockets of deprivation programme, which I will address in a minute or two.

I have met representatives from neighbourhood renewal areas, and, although they have the odd complaint — we hear regular complaints from

them — they are as one in welcoming the fact that long-term commitments have been made to their areas. That gives them some certainty. The motion highlights the perpetual lack of certainty in that area of work, which is that there is no specific funding guarantee beyond March 2011.

I take Mr Beggs's point that this is, at its core, a Budget issue. As we speak, there is no agreed Budget. Even if I wanted to, I do not have enough time to open up that issue. However, it underlines the importance for us all of agreeing a Budget as quickly as we can. We are all aware of the uncertainty not just in tackling deprivation and disadvantage across Northern Ireland but in maintaining good projects that have delivered and instigating new projects that will deliver in the upcoming financial period. We know that there are issues. We heard the First Minister yesterday, in response to Mr O'Loan, talk about the uncertainty caused by the issuing of protective notices. There is an onus on all Members to deal with the issue as quickly as possible. I am sure that the Minister for Social Development would, if he could, come forward today to give some certainty to people who are living with uncertainty at present.

I thank my friends in the Ulster Unionist Party for tabling their amendment. I have direct experience of SPOD in areas such as the Glen, Scrabo and West Winds in Newtownards, which the Minister visited recently. I have witnessed the transformation of those areas, which has been achieved principally through the drive and determination of the community but also through the assistance of programmes such as SPOD.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: There is no certainty about the future funding of SPOD. I ask the Minister, even if he cannot outline funding, to say what his plans are for the continuation of that programme.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs M Bradley: I support the motion and the amendment. Neighbourhood renewal is the Executive's flagship programme to address disadvantage. It is an essential strategy, and it is working. As we have heard, well over 600 individuals are engaged in delivering the services through more than 300 projects,

and 280,000 people rely on the additional services that neighbourhood renewal funding supports. The public groundswell of support for the programme was made clear at the rally of neighbourhood renewal groups at Stormont only last week. At that rally, Minister Attwood told the groups that they should keep up their campaign and widen it to cover other areas of disadvantage, including social housing, child maintenance and welfare.

At a time of growing need, tackling disadvantage is non-negotiable. That is why the more voices that are raised in support and the more the groundswell grows, the better. At every level and primarily through Minister Alex Attwood and Margaret Ritchie before him, the SDLP is committed to the neighbourhood renewal programme and to ensuring that funding is continued well beyond 2011. Indeed, Alex Attwood has made it absolutely clear that he will continue to advance the programme at the Executive in order to secure the £20 million a year in revenue that goes into the relevant communities that are in need.

The SDLP believes that those in need must not carry the burden of Budget reductions. Any loss in neighbourhood renewal funding could result in that outcome. We will continue to work to convince everyone that money should go into areas of need, and, as recent community support demonstrates, neighbourhood renewal should be the strategy for doing so.

That brings me to my next point, which is about the plans of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a so-called community renewal fund. In other words, it is a proposal that was developed by Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness to fund certain groups in republican and loyalist areas. The SDLP believes that such a fund would be exclusive and elitist in design and would be a backward step. It seems that the proposal was developed over the head of Departments and, indeed, over the head of the community. That is the wrong approach. A joined-up approach is needed, and neighbourhood renewal is now the established mechanism for the delivery of programmes to combat disadvantage. That is why I support continued neighbourhood renewal funding through 2011 and beyond.

I will address the need for a joined-up approach in a little more detail. Although the Department for Social Development has a key role in

implementing the neighbourhood renewal programme, it is not the sole responsibility of DSD to address the needs of the disadvantaged here. Other Departments and, indeed, their agencies must work with DSD to address the needs that are outlined in the action plans for each of the 36 neighbourhood renewal areas. Therefore, I welcome the fact that other parties have shown their support on the Floor for the continuation of the renewal programme. My party and I hope that, in turn, all parties will make the case for the continuation of neighbourhood renewal funding to all Ministers in the Executive.

Ms Lo: I support the motion and the amendment. I was heartened by the Minister's recent statement that the family of responsibilities in the Department, including neighbourhood renewal, was all about the people, families and communities who are in need and living in disadvantage. He also said:

"If one essential value of the Budget is not to protect them, it will not be much of a Budget, and we will not be much of a Government." — [Official Report, Vol 58, No 2, p63, col 1]

I hope that the Minister's response this afternoon will contain similar sentiments. The lack of Executive agreement on the Budget is causing a lot of uncertainty and concern for everyone, particularly for projects that await decisions on funding. If the Budget is not sorted out soon, staff will, come January, have to be given protective notices in case funding is not forthcoming.

The past few years have been difficult for neighbourhood renewal partnerships, which have received funding on a year-by-year basis. The lack of certainty about funding each year has meant that many neighbourhood renewal partnership projects have remained short-term. They have kept ticking over rather than driving forward strategic and longer-term actions. Those short-term actions, by their nature, may not have any substantial impact on their communities. The short-term funding has also resulted in the quick turnover of staff, as I have seen. Uncertainty about job security results in a lack of continuity not only in work programmes but in their relationships with project users in their community. It is important that funding continues beyond March 2011 and that the Minister makes a commitment that neighbourhood renewal will be given long-term stability through its funding for the next four years.

Neighbourhood renewal partnerships target communities in the 10% most disadvantaged urban wards. Those communities will be disproportionately affected by public expenditure cuts because they are more likely to use statutory services. They will also be hardest hit by the proposed welfare reforms, namely the benefit reductions. They will be pushed out to work when there is none. At a time of deepening hardship, neighbourhood renewal should be strengthened rather than diminished to support those communities in need.

Despite some criticism, neighbourhood renewal partnerships have made positive inroads into lifting many people's quality of life. In my South Belfast constituency, numerous projects in education, training, community development and health and well-being have been highly effective and have benefited many people. We perhaps need to put new impetus into neighbourhood renewal partnerships to empower those communities to address the issues of deprivation that they have worked so hard to identify.

3.30 pm

We also need commitments from other Departments, such the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, to stop paying lip service and to put more resources into realising the targets that are deemed necessary by partnership action plans. Departments need to send senior staff to the partnerships rather than personnel who are unable to make decisions on behalf of their Departments.

The South West Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership in south Belfast is proactive in assessing the action plans that identified what has been achieved to develop a revised action plan and to ensure that priorities are achievable and realistic. Perhaps there is a need for more collaboration between partnerships and projects to focus on issues across the whole area, such as health and education, to cut down on duplication and to focus resources. That may save statutory bodies from stretching their manpower and perhaps improve their attendance and participation.

Mr Easton: I support the motion and the amendment. Since the neighbourhood renewal scheme was launched in June 2003, it has helped many areas in Northern Ireland to tackle disadvantage in their communities. Deprivation

exists in every country, but Northern Ireland is a special case after 30 years of community division, violence and sectarianism. That has had a profound effect on the social and economic opportunities that are open to people who live in areas of disadvantage.

My area is often referred to as the "gold coast", but that is far from the case, and, since my election to the House in 2003 and re-election in 2007, I have worked hard for many communities in north Down, including Kilcooley, Rathgill, Bloomfield, Whitehill and Breezemount in Bangor, Beechfield in Donaghadee and Loughview in Holywood to name but a few. Many of those areas have never been included as part of the neighbourhood renewal scheme, despite having the same problems as Kilcooley.

Kilcooley has benefited greatly from neighbourhood renewal schemes, and those benefits are visible. However, it is still not finished, and much work remains to be done. There is now a strong and vibrant community there working for the betterment of its areas and the benefit of its people. That is down to the local community association, various groups and Kilcooley's neighbourhood renewal community worker, Mark Gordon, who is doing a fantastic job. The Minister for Social Development has visited the area on numerous occasions and seen the benefits of the scheme for himself.

The scheme should be renewed. It is vital for the many areas of disadvantage across Northern Ireland, never mind north Down. The scheme aims to tackle the complex nature of social deprivation and has four main objectives. The first of those is community renewal to develop confident communities that are able and committed to improving the quality of life in the most deprived neighbourhoods. A second aim is economic renewal to develop economic activity in the most deprived neighbourhoods and to connect them to the wider urban community. A third aim is social renewal to improve social conditions for people who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods through better co-ordination, public services and the creation of safer environments. A fourth aim is physical renewal to help to create attractive, safe and sustainable environments in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

OFMDFM's programme for cohesion, sharing and integration is evidence of the fact that much

work needs to be done and that deprivation is a factor in sectarianism and violence. We must not lose focus but enhance the work that has gone on in the past so that it continues after March 2011.

The report by the Committee for Social Development on the neighbourhood renewal strategy, which was completed in February 2009, came up with many recommendations. Much of those focused on setting targets and adhering to them. It was found that this had been lacking in previous years and that setting of targets would also contribute to measuring success. It was also noted that a significant amount of money had been set aside for the scheme and that it was important to keep track of spending. Implementation and better use of funding was considered to be down to good organisation reflected in governance, which has been lacking. There was also believed to be a severe lack of communication and support for groups from the top down.

As we move forward, all those recommendations need to be adhered to. That will be to the benefit of the local community in receipt of the scheme. I am not immune to criticism, as highlighted in the Committee report, but I am a firm believer that the scheme has benefited many communities across Northern Ireland since 2003.

I am glad that we are also talking about SPOD. It would be remiss of me not to mention the great work that Karen Worrall does on that front with the community in Rathgill, Bangor. It would also be remiss of me not to mention the new areas at risk initiative in Beechfield, Donaghadee, which the previous Social Development Minister Margaret Ritchie launched almost two years ago. That also needs to be protected, and I hope that the Minister takes that on board.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion and the amendment. It is worthwhile reminding ourselves of the motion. It states:

"That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to bring forward proposals to secure neighbourhood renewal funding beyond March 2011."

The tone of the debate thus far has been positive, and I would like it to continue that

way. The motion will assist the Minister in his dealings and discussions with Executive colleagues and in securing funding for areas of social deprivation and for targeting social need.

Many examples of neighbourhood renewal have been given thus far, and, as I proceed through my contribution, I will give examples of areas in my constituency that have benefited from such renewal. If used wisely by any Minister, the motion and the Hansard report of this debate could be tools of persuasion in the Budget debate with other Ministers.

Neighbourhood renewal has brought great benefits to parts of the Upper Bann constituency, including Lurgan, Brownlow and Portadown. There are significant pockets of deprivation in each of those areas, and neighbourhood renewal has been used successfully by local community groups to provide funding. It is worth noting that the work done by those groups in Upper Bann is not paid. Rather, all the money received is directed either to capital infrastructure or to programmes on the ground.

Despite some ill-advised criticism from one of my Upper Bann colleagues in an earlier debate, it is worth noting exactly what voluntary community workers in Upper Bann have achieved with that funding. The Southern Regional College received £464,000 for a learning to employment programme, in which the community works with the local college. The college must be congratulated for its contribution to neighbourhood renewal projects in Upper Bann. It has been to the forefront of helping and advising the community and listening to its needs.

Multi-use games areas in the community have made small but significant infrastructural contributions to by providing sports facilities for young and old people. The total amount spent on such projects is almost £80,000.

Brownlow Ltd provides an economic regeneration programme in the heart of Brownlow. That area often receives a bad press, sometimes because of the acts of a small group of individuals and sometimes because of media prejudice. However, neighbourhood renewal has contributed £900,000 to Brownlow Ltd's economic redevelopment unit, thereby helping to create jobs in the area.

In addition, £769,000 has been provided to the Southern Education and Library Board for literacy support. That came about after consultation and discussions with local schools on how neighbourhood renewal could best help them. There have been similar infrastructural projects in Portadown. One such example is Roads Service's collaboration with the neighbourhood renewal programme to make improvements in the area.

Therefore, despite the initial ill-advised criticism, neighbourhood renewal has made a significant change to the lives of the communities in Upper Bann's areas of deprivation. It has shown that local communities can work and provide for themselves when given the resources to do so. Neighbourhood renewal has not only made a physical contribution to those areas, it has given the communities a sense of self-worth. People in those communities have seen what is possible. They know that the way things were was not acceptable, and they now intend to move forward and to make improvements.

Mr Easton: Does the Member agree that if we did away with neighbourhood renewal, SPOD and areas at risk, it would lead to a gulf between the community and statutory bodies and between the community and the Government? Does he agree that that would be disastrous?

Mr O'Dowd: I agree with the Member. What we have seen with neighbourhood renewal is democracy at work. Through that scheme, local communities have made the statutory agencies answerable to them, and both sectors now work together in a co-ordinated way. As elected representatives, our role is to open doors and to ensure that agencies listen to communities. Through neighbourhood renewal, there is a constant flow of information and dialogue between those two sides.

I am concerned when I hear commentators, especially politicians, saying that we need to agree a Budget quickly, because that is code for saying that we need to agree their vision of a Budget quickly. I have no doubt that a Budget will be agreed, but a process must be gone through, and in these dire financial circumstances, that process must be more detailed and intense. A Budget will be agreed quickly if that Budget is designed to look after areas of need by providing for neighbourhood renewal and protecting the vulnerable, including

those who come from socially and economically deprived areas and those on low wages.

I have heard comments from all sections of the Chamber over the past number of weeks.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr O'Dowd: Those comments give me confidence that, at long last, we have a focus on and a vision of that type of Budget.

Mr Craig: I, too, support the motion and the amendment. Neighbourhood renewal has a vital role in assisting disadvantaged areas across the Province, and it reflects Northern Ireland's special circumstances after 30 years of violence. Deprivation in areas of disadvantage has long been linked to segregation, violence and sectarianism. Therefore, Northern Ireland is unique and a special case, and it is vital that the funding for neighbourhood renewal continues after March 2011. It is through that scheme that we promote social inclusion and seek to reduce the inequalities in our society.

Neighbourhood renewal ties in closely with the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, which was published by OFMDFM. Some of the goals of neighbourhood renewal are to promote equality of opportunity and to tackle disadvantage, and it is vital that we continue with that programme. It is also vital that we continue with the small pockets of deprivation scheme and with areas at risk, which was the scheme that I was most involved in with the previous Minister for Social Development. All those Members who have contributed to the debate have mentioned the special areas in their constituencies. My special areas are Seymour Hill and Derrriagh, and I pay tribute to the previous Minister who visited those areas, saw their needs and dealt with the situation. I was delighted to see that.

However, neighbourhood renewal needs some work on its delivery. In February 2009, the Committee for Social Development looked at the overall scheme, which was launched in March 2003. It found that, although much work had been done, there was little measurable improvement since the scheme's implementation. I remember thinking at the time that the scheme was very much like a duck that paddles like mad underneath the surface but does not get very far.

There is an issue about how we see deliverable targets. At the time, there was a great deal of criticism of the statutory bodies for not working well enough with the community organisations. However, I am sure that the Minister will address those issues and will help people to move their communities forward so that they can get out of the deprivation that, unfortunately, they have found themselves in.

The Committee recognised that the scheme crosses Departments and involves the Department for Employment and Learning. It recommended that all budgets for the scheme be ring-fenced. However, in the current climate, budgets need to be adhered to and well-defined goals need to be set. If we are to look after the budgets and continue neighbourhood renewal projects, there must be well-defined and deliverable targets.

3.45 pm

I agree with the point made by the Member who spoke before me that neighbourhood renewal projects are critical to the communities that they serve. My colleague Mr Easton rightly pointed out that a gulf will open between communities, government and all the statutory bodies if the projects are not continued. In most cases, that would put communities back not only years but decades. As elected Members, we have all witnessed huge change in our areas. My constituency is unrecognisable today from the place that it was 10 years ago.

At the time, the Committee believed that governance arrangements for neighbourhood renewal were ineffective. If we are to continue to fund neighbourhood renewal, those arrangements need to be tightened up. The Committee for Social Development made 16 recommendations with regard to the neighbourhood renewal strategy. Those centred on targets, measuring results —

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

Mr Craig: — governance and better support. I firmly believe that the motion and the amendment are worth supporting.

Mr McCallister: It is encouraging that the Assembly is speaking about neighbourhood renewal in a united way. Despite differences as regards policy objectives, evaluation and welfare reform, we have spoken with a united

voice today about our commitment to tackle disadvantage and to say that neighbourhood renewal funding should be fought for in the Budget. It is absolutely vital if we are to improve the communities that many Members have mentioned. It is vital that work continues both in neighbourhood renewal and in the small pockets of deprivation scheme, which my colleague mentioned.

I am not sure whether the Minister wants to be linked too closely with the CSI strategy. However, I take Mr Craig's point about the link between CSI and neighbourhood renewal. We will leave CSI for another occasion.

Many Members have spoken about the need to tackle neighbourhood renewal. Policies need to be continued right across the board. Those policies work, and it is right that they continue. Communities need help to get out of poverty. They need help with schooling, disadvantage and employment and to tackle not only need but needs. There are lists of indicators of poverty that show that those communities need and deserve help to get out of poverty.

Neighbourhood renewal has been an excellent example of government and the community and voluntary sector working together to deliver a common aim. Government setting out a strategy and using the community and voluntary sector as the delivery mechanism for much of it is a good model that should continue. I am sure that the Minister is fighting hard for neighbourhood renewal in the Budget review. However, I take issue with Mr O'Dowd's point. We need to agree a Budget. These issues have not arisen suddenly. The budgetary and financial difficulties have been with us for several years now. There have been excessive problems in the Republic —

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that Mr O'Dowd's comments were telling of Sinn Féin's anti-cut agenda in the South in preparation for elections there and did not deal with the failure to deliver a Budget in the North?

Mr O'Dowd: We have won an election.

Mr McCallister: I agree with Mrs Kelly. His comments were more about fighting that election. I heard Mr O'Dowd say from a sedentary position that his party has won an election, but it has not won the general election that is coming down there. For all the citizens who live in the Republic, I hope that they do not win it, or else the country really will be up for sale.

It will be like the old saying, "Would the last one leaving Ireland please turn out the lights?"

I have confidence that the Minister will fight to get and to maintain neighbourhood renewal schemes and will work to build on the successes that we have had, while taking on board the useful comments and recommendations from the Committee, although I was not a member of the Committee at the time. Committees play a very useful role by looking at policy objectives and how they play out on the ground. It is vital that the Minister and his Department take those recommendations on board to see how we can improve this, how we can deliver and how we can help more people out of poverty and disadvantage. That is the united cry going out from the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the election is not until next May.

Mrs D Kelly: I support the motion and the amendment. It is quite clear that neighbourhood renewal is targeted at areas of disadvantage, and it is right that areas of deprivation are included. It is also an issue in rural areas. Some rural areas have a number of commuters living in them who are not part of the indigenous community and do not often get involved in the local community. It is, therefore, important that all areas of disadvantage are tackled.

Does the Minister share my disappointment that OFMDFM is very much behind in its schedule to meet its legislative requirement on the child poverty strategy, which will have to have a quicker Committee consultation period than ought to be the case?

Other Members have said that neighbourhood renewal is not the sole responsibility of DSD. It is not substitution for other Departments, it is about additionality and about other Departments being able to bring to the table projects that they can deliver in a much more timely manner than would otherwise be the case, because they should all be bringing their resources to the table.

Mr McCallister: The Member talked about other Departments bringing projects. The Department of Education's recent nought-to-six strategy has been one of the most disappointing strategies because it looks more like a three-to-six strategy and has missed the mark dramatically in delivering some of what the Member is talking about.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Member makes a valid point about education, because Mr O'Dowd highlighted the sterling work of the partnership, the Southern Regional College and the local schools in trying to tackle the literacy problem. It is obviously a failure of education that neighbourhood renewal money is having to be spent in that way. Had we got a timely early-years strategy, the money could have been put to other uses through the building of real and sustainable jobs in the local community.

Mr O'Dowd: I am glad that the Member has stepped into the field of education. I will educate her slightly.

Numeracy and literacy factors is as much to do with education in the classroom as it is to do with your environment on the outside. If a child is coming from an area where there is not high educational attainment, the likelihood is that that child will not reach educational attainment itself. If you want to have a wee lesson on education, give me a shout some day and we will have a chat about it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that we are talking about neighbourhood renewal.

Mrs D Kelly: In deference to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will not point out the obvious grammar mistakes that Mr O'Dowd made.

The fact is that neighbourhood renewal ought to be about not only improving the environment and the learning experience, but leaving a legacy. Mr O'Dowd was right about one thing: no jobs have been created in the Craigavon area. That is a feature that the Minister must look at throughout the neighbourhood renewal areas.

The whole point of community development is to enable and to empower local communities and to leave a legacy. When community development workers can leave the stage, they have succeeded. I pay tribute to many of the development workers, who often work long hours for no remuneration or for remuneration that is not sufficient and does not meet their needs.

Nonetheless, there is a real requirement, particularly in the Lurgan area. We have a town centre suffering the decline that is evident in many market towns across the North. There is

a need for the neighbourhood renewal money to be spent on economic regeneration, and I want to see that happening.

Mr O'Dowd's other point was about how other Ministers will be all-singing and all-dancing in favour of neighbourhood renewal. He eloquently said that neighbourhood renewal is significant, opens the doors to democracy, and is very much a grass-roots, bottom-up approach to development. I hope that other Ministers will take note of those remarks, and that he will convey those remarks to his own Ministers in the Executive, because it is very important that other Ministers recognise the role, function and importance of neighbourhood renewal and support Minister Attwood in his bid for funding to be secured.

Other Members were right to say that there is a necessity for some certainty about the security of funding, because there are those who depend on neighbourhood renewal for their employment. They will be at risk if a Budget is not agreed sooner rather than later. Even if redundancy notes are issued only as a protective measure by employment organisations, they are nonetheless letters that people do not want falling on their mats at the mouth of Christmas. People need to have certainty around their employment, and I hope that the Executive will get over their current difficulties in trying to reach agreement on the matter.

One other feature of neighbourhood renewal is that it supports areas that suffered at the hands of paramilitaries. Let us not forget that point. It is not about just poverty but about the fact that paramilitary organisations did not allow good work to be done in many of their areas. I hope that, now that peace is secured, everyone's voice across the neighbourhood renewal partnerships will be heard, and not just those of a select few.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mrs D Kelly: I very much support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members please not to shout from a sedentary position.

Mr S Anderson: I support the motion and also the amendment, which was tabled by John McCallister and Roy Beggs. The question of neighbourhood renewal is one that

every Member could say much about. Many communities across Northern Ireland stand in need. There are a number of reasons why many communities are in that position.

Neighbourhood renewal is not about just targets and budgets. It is really about people from all sections of the community who live in some of the poorest areas of Northern Ireland. Many of those areas are often characterised by poor educational attainment, poor health and shorter life expectancy. Very often, they are accompanied by higher unemployment, lower economic activity, higher crime rates and infrastructure problems.

In 2003, Government, through the Department for Social Development, launched a strategy for neighbourhood renewal in the Province. Three of the areas targeted for neighbourhood renewal — Brownlow, Lurgan and north-west Portadown — are in my constituency around Craigavon. Three neighbourhood renewal partnerships were established across Craigavon and approximately £8 million was spent in those areas.

I should declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council.

In Craigavon, funding was provided for a health and well-being programme, a social renewal education programme, multi-use games areas, environmental improvement schemes, training and employability courses, and economic and community development. That is to be welcomed, but, as with Upper Bann, so right across Northern Ireland, serious issues remain and serious problems still need to be addressed.

I note that, in response to a question for written answer, the Minister said that he intends to fund the neighbourhood renewal programme after 2011 and that he is making bids to enable him to do so.

Only last week, the Minister indicated his intention to explore the issue of parity with respect to the welfare budget. I am concerned, and I am led to ask the question: if he were to gain breach of parity on the welfare budget, and if the consequence of that breach were that some, or all, of that budget were removed by the Treasury, with the Executive left to pick up the tab, how would the Minister finance not only this programme but a number of other programmes? Since the debate is about the continued funding of the programme —

4.00 pm

Mr F McCann: I am confused. Are you asking the Minister to breach parity, or are you saying that he should not breach it?

Mr S Anderson: I am not asking the Minister to breach parity.

The debate is about the continued funding of the programme. We cannot unhitch that funding from the Minister's intention to chisel away at parity. If that is his intention, maybe he can give us some clarity on the issue.

I will turn now to the amendment tabled by John McCallister and Roy Beggs. It addresses what is a widespread issue across multiple constituencies in the Province. By that, I mean that it addresses those pockets of deprivation that are often overlooked, through no fault of their own, but solely because of the areas or housing developments that are along their boundaries.

Although I welcome the investment already made in my constituency, I have to point out that, in Upper Bann, there are numerous pockets of deprivation, where the levels of poverty, educational underachievement and poorer health are comparable to elsewhere, yet they fall through the net because they are bordered by what are seen as more affluent areas. Clearly, that should not continue. Where there are pockets of deprivation, that deprivation is as real and as punishing as in any other area. My colleagues have already referred to areas at risk.

I believe that there is still a long way to go to address the issue adequately, and I call on the Minister to set about that task.

The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. In his opening remarks, Mr Brady read into the record a recent press release that I issued as Minister. That must be the first time that a Member from a one party has read into the record a statement from a Minister of a different party, but I thank him for so doing, because it captured a lot of the issues around the debate. However, I differ with him in one regard. He said that people in neighbourhood renewal areas, organisations and employees were being kept in the dark. That is not a consequence of anything that I have done. As Mr Beggs and other Members made clear, if people are being kept in the dark, it is a consequence of the fact that the Budget

negotiations are in the dark and are still not concluded. To go back to what Mr O'Dowd said, that is not a passing point or a political point. It is a very real and genuine point.

Four months from today, 695 people who are funded through neighbourhood renewal could potentially lose their jobs. As Mrs Kelly indicated, on Christmas Eve or on New Year's Eve, up to 695 people — 683 in neighbourhood renewal areas and 12 in small pockets of deprivation areas — may be carrying protective notices in their back pockets or in their purses. That is the reality of people being in the dark about where the Budget is today.

Let us maximise our Budget negotiation with London. That is what I was doing yesterday in respect of the welfare aspect of our Budget, and I will comment on that later. If anything should bring reality and good sense to the Budget negotiations, it is the fact that 695 people in DSD-funded neighbourhood renewal schemes and hundreds, if not thousands, of people in other Departments, including Health, could fall victim to the same circumstance. Therefore, in dealing with neighbourhood renewal and DSD budgets, let us create certainty around all budgets, so that everybody can go forward on the basis of confidence rather than doubt. As Ms Lo said, if we do not agree a four-year Budget, and a one-year Budget is imposed, it will not be much of a Budget, and we will not be much of a Government.

I thank everyone who acknowledged that strategies for neighbourhood renewal, SPOD and areas at risk are working. The fact that it was said with such clarity by Members from all parties is a watershed moment. Historically, going back five, six or seven years, neighbourhood renewal has been caught up in community politics. The consensus on neighbourhood renewal, SPOD and areas at risk is a watershed moment because it breaks free from the notion that one community suffers more need and disadvantage than another. The consensus, which is that funding and strategies must be taken forward together to deal with the particular issues in areas of need and disadvantage, creates common ground.

What happened in the Chamber today and on the steps of Parliament Buildings last Monday represents a groundswell of support for neighbourhood renewal. In that context, I repeat what I said, which has been referred to in the

Chamber. I encourage Members that, if there is a groundswell of support for neighbourhood renewal, it follows that there should be a groundswell of support for all those front line services, wherever they might be located in government, including in DSD.

As Ms Lo said, neighbourhood renewal cannot be divorced from housing. Neither of those issues can be divorced from child maintenance, and none of the three can be divorced from social security and benefit take-up. There is a family of need and a family of government responses to that need, be that through DSD, nurses, teachers or all other front line services. When I send a copy of today's Hansard report to the First Minister and deputy First Minister and to the Minister of Finance, I will implore them to recognise that family of need in any decisions that they might take on a budgetary or departmental level. Let us also ensure that the groundswell of support extends throughout the family of services that DSD provides, because, as much as any Department, and more so than most, it is a front line service provider in tackling need and disadvantage.

Recently, there has been some mischief-making about the Department and my personal commitment to neighbourhood renewal. The fact that it has not raised its head during the debate means that that particular issue has been laid to rest. Let me repeat that the Budget bid that I submitted in July 2010 included a full bid, for capital and revenue, for neighbourhood renewal going forward in the 2011-15 period.

In August 2010, arising from the circumstances of the summer, I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister and suggested that, in view of the budgetary situation, and rather than duplicating or further dissipating scarce resources, we should work to improve and to refocus our existing initiatives to create the best opportunity for success in areas of need and disadvantage.

Therefore, in my Budget bid, the information that I provided in summary and then in substance to the Committee for Social Development, my letter to OFMDFM, and in every opportunity that I have had, publically and privately, to commit myself and the Department to neighbourhood renewal going forward, I have been unambiguous. Any suggestion otherwise is, as I said last week, party political, partial and self-serving. I am glad

that that issue did not raise its head during the debate.

A number of Members, including Mr Brady, Mr Beggs, and the Committee Chairperson, Mr Hamilton, asked how neighbourhood renewal should be taken forward. I am not prepared just to sit back and to say, "Steady as you go". If there are ways in which the Government in Northern Ireland, throughout their Departments, can do their work and business better, we should embrace that.

That is why I have invited organisations from across the range of DSD's responsibility to look at how they do their work. There are 7,000 charities, 4,500 voluntary and community works, 33 housing associations and three advice networks. That is the scale of much of what DSD is involved in and funds. I have asked organisations across the range of those sectors whether there are ways that we could do things differently. At times, I have encouraged organisations to look at doing things differently, and, on one or two occasions, I have bluntly told them that they should do things differently. If there is a way of doing things going forward that protects budget lines, secures jobs, improves services and delivers better outcomes, we, as MLAs and Ministers, would be neglectful if we did not take those opportunities.

I am committed to the concept and practice of neighbourhood renewal, and I have demonstrated that through what I have done in Budget bids and thereafter. However, in some neighbourhood renewal areas, there are some matters that people need to begin to look at. Without being exhaustive or, at this stage, prescriptive, some questions need to be asked. First, is there an opportunity for more collaboration? Secondly, is there an opportunity for more shared services? Thirdly, are there opportunities to deepen interdepartmental working? Finally, are there opportunities to merge organisations? Where neighbourhood renewal is concerned, as well as in general, those are the sorts of concepts that we as a Government and I as a Minister have to grapple with and deal with if we are going to maximise the benefit to the community.

In translating that into the particular work of neighbourhood renewal, I want to lay down some further principles. When I came into office, I said, and I am saying again now, that it was my commitment that the areas of

neighbourhood renewal that are working best and delivering the best outcomes will get funding for a four-year cycle. I concur with the views that hand-to-mouth, year-to-year funding is not the best way to create certainty about employment, never mind create success with delivery. Subject to the Budget being a four-year Budget and one that, I think, and everyone else in the Chamber clearly thinks, is necessary for neighbourhood renewal, my commitment is that the neighbourhood renewal projects that are working best and that deliver the best outcomes will get a certainty of funding going forward. That includes areas at risk and small pockets of deprivation, which are not being excluded from the neighbourhood renewal funding stream.

Other organisations could develop further, improve their capacity and secure better outcomes. My commitment is that the Department will work with those organisations over the short term, and potentially over a shorter-term funding cycle, to bring them to the place where longer-term funding will be available. That is a responsible position that will help organisations to mature and to fulfil their potential. By working with the Department, organisations will get to a point where they, too, are in a position to have longer-term funding.

Last week, people in the Suffolk/Lenadoon Interface Group said to me that, if one or two or a small number of organisations are not delivering the services or outcomes or are not doing all the work that DSD, neighbourhood renewal and the community expect them to do, it would be irresponsible for a community leader, a political leader or a Minister not to begin to address why that was the case. Those are parts of the principles that, going forward, should inform all our discussions and our contributions.

On such occasions as this, there is an elephant in the Chamber. The elephant in the Chamber is what appears to be a continuing effort to develop an alternative to neighbourhood renewal. It is known as the community renewal fund or some variation of that. What I do not understand is this: Mr O'Dowd said in his contribution that neighbourhood renewal had resulted in a:

"significant change to the lives of communities".

He said that it created "a sense of self-worth"; it had "seen what is possible"; it was "democracy at work", and it is able to:

"open doors and ensure that agencies listen to communities."

If that is the view of Mr O'Dowd on how neighbourhood renewal is bearing down on the conditions that exist in areas of need in Northern Ireland, the outcome of that should be to build upon neighbourhood renewal, to deepen neighbourhood renewal and to create further resources for it. That is the conclusion from Mr O'Dowd's experience in his constituency and the narrative outlined in the Chamber this afternoon.

If that is what is working and beginning to work in the lives of people in need, that is why, strategically, we cannot create a situation where that effort is fragmented, a new funding mechanism and new architecture are created, and all that architecture and the funding mechanism are developed over the heads of government — because that is what has happened — and over the heads of vast numbers of the community, who tell me day and daily of their frustration and growing anger at the fact that they are now feeling marginalised in communities that were historically marginalised for too long in this part of Ireland.

The consequence of those observations is inevitable and certain. It is that there should be more funding for neighbourhood renewal and that, if there is an alternative funding source, which OFMDFM appears to be developing over the heads of government and over the heads of the community, that money should go to neighbourhood renewal. I am putting down the challenge.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

The Minister for Social Development: The challenge is this: join me in writing to Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson to say that, if there are other sources of funding that they are aware of —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

The Minister for Social Development: Those sources must be redirected to neighbourhood renewal. Let us build on the work on which Mr O'Dowd commented.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the widespread support that has been expressed for the small pockets of deprivation and for neighbourhood renewal funding generally. Several Members have

spoken of the need to have the budgets finalised. We all have to recognise that, in many cases, those who are at the coalface in disadvantaged communities are making a considerable difference. We have to value them, and part of that is to enable them to have a degree of certainty about their employment, so it is important that budgets are finalised and that decisions are taken well in advance of the end-point dates. I think of funding for community forums, etc, where frequently people do not know that there is funding for the following year until within a month of the end of the financial year. We need to plan better, and I welcome those comments from Members.

I mentioned that neighbourhood renewal has an effect on peace, and others have mentioned that it is important in certain republican and loyalist areas. Others have mentioned the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. Neighbourhood renewal can give hope to disadvantaged individuals and communities, and it is important that that funding continues to be available so that some do not fall prey to those who advocate violence as some means of creating a cause for those who may have become disenchanted with society.

I welcome some of the ideas from the Minister in his response. There needs to be joint working between Departments, because smaller groups need certainty and longer-term funding, not piecemeal funding that constantly changes so that they are constantly engaged in working out how to stitch together a programme based on two or three different issues. I fully support that idea, as well as the Minister's latter point that there are huge dangers if an independent funding source is suddenly created, possibly duplicating some of the work, specifically in republican and loyalist areas.

We ought to fund disadvantaged communities through our neighbourhood renewal strategy not through a sectarian carve-up, saying, "You get so much for your community, Martin, and you get so much for yours, Peter." We ought to use the NISRA statistics to distribute funds equitably, based on recognised outcomes and outputs from operating groups. If groups are not operating, I can understand what the Minister is saying: change has to occur and there may need to be shorter-term funding until change can be shown. However, let us have longer-term funding, projects that are seen to be working

and greater certainty so that that good work can continue on improving those communities.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank everyone who spoke in what has been an interesting debate. Parts were predictable, but there were some pleasant surprises. I thank the Assembly's Research and Library Service for its information pack, which brought into focus the Committee's work on neighbourhood renewal. It is a timely reminder for us all. Everybody would probably admit that when we are working on issues, they are very relevant and we know what they are. Nevertheless, it is good to see them outlined in the information pack. We will be using it as a reference point.

Mickey Brady outlined our party's support for the amendment. Neighbourhood renewal is about dealing with the small pockets of deprivation and the areas at risk. It is about making sure that, as much as possible, those who experience poverty and deprivation are not left behind. That is where many of us will probably part company, because of the variations in some of the comments.

In proposing the motion, Mickey Brady talked about the evidence of need, and other Members mentioned that. As Mickey said, it is vital that we look specifically at measures, initiatives and funding that overtly — not behind the door, not shyly or discreetly, but overtly — address poverty and deprivation.

Roy Beggs spoke about the uncertainty around the Budget and about the need to look at the 17 SPOD areas, in conjunction with the 36 neighbourhood renewal partnerships and the areas at risk. He gave some very good examples from his constituency, as did other Members.

Simon — I actually wrote Simon Cowell; it is not Simon Cowell, although I am sure that he wishes that he was Simon Cowell and had his lifestyle. I actually do not watch 'The X Factor'. I meant Simon Hamilton. Embarrassed or what? *[Laughter.]*

In his capacity as Chairperson and as an MLA, Simon Hamilton spoke about neighbourhood renewal, health, environment and community safety. Indeed, he mentioned that capital bids went forward in the September monitoring round for 2011-15. He also spoke about the importance of looking beyond short-term funding. That is where the credit has been laid

down squarely at the feet of the neighbourhood renewal work. If funded and brought forward through DSD and the Executive, it will be one of the projects that people can identify for long-term funding, despite some of the difficulties with it. The motion is about protecting investment in that.

I know that the Minister met some of the groups involved last week. The groups say that some of the ways in which neighbourhood renewal operated were problematic. There was a great deal of focus on outputs rather than on outcomes and, without getting into the jargon of funding initiatives or their categories, workers may have felt that some of the work was merely box-ticking. Although there is a need to report, be accountable and to work according to baselines, I know, from having talked to them recently, that they felt that some of the — there is Simon Hamilton. Sorry, Simon. *[Interruption.]* I am sure that you wish that you had his lifestyle and his money.

They spoke about delivering on the needs that were identified on the ground. Sometimes, in the time that elapses between setting funding streams and reviewing them, other needs creep in and take prominence.

Mary Bradley welcomed the motion and the amendment and spoke about the need for neighbourhood renewal. Mary lives in a deprived area of the North, and she should know how successful the scheme has been in her constituency of Derry. I am sure that she will also know what has not worked. Anna spoke about the need to strengthen the impact of neighbourhood renewal on the ground and the need for additional long-term funding.

Alex Easton is like Fra McCann in many respects. There are two old friends whom Alex Easton introduces in Committee. Fra McCann's two old friends are the words "may" and "shall", and one of Alex Easton's old friends is Kilcooley — I am not even going to name the other one. I feel as if I know Kilcooley very well because of the way in which he brings up the topic. That is exactly what Members should do. If Members do not bring the needs and experiences of their constituencies into the Chamber and into debates, realistically, what is it all about?

One issue that Alex and many others raised is the need for targets to be set, with tracking and accountability and taking on board what works on the ground. John O'Dowd also picked up

on that theme when he spoke about his local college, literacy programmes in schools and infrastructural development in his constituency. More importantly — I know that the Minister also touched on this — he spoke about the avenue and outlet that neighbourhood renewal has provided for what has become known as participative democracy. We call it inclusion — people coming on board.

In many respects, when we read the report and listen to some of our experiences, it seems that we are almost ignoring some of the criticisms that partnerships made. Those include the criticism that Departments and statutory bodies come to the table with nothing. Some, but not all, departmental representatives come to the table and do not bring their contribution. Neighbourhood renewal is led by DSD and is an interdepartmental fund. Given the very nature of the scheme, other Departments have to contribute. For that reason, I wrote to all Ministers to ask what contribution they would make to neighbourhood renewal and whether they will support it in the future. I have consistently done that. If Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson were responsible for neighbourhood renewal, I would be torturing them. As our party spokesperson on social development, I have absolutely no shame and no difficulty whatsoever in leading or organising campaigns. That is my job. We all have different spokesperson roles, and we chase and torture different Ministers. Rather than stamping their feet, people have to be honest about that.

I heard what the Minister said, and I am concerned. I am prepared to give way. Is the Minister saying that OFMDFM or any other Department has no right, and should not try, to develop initiatives that are anti-poverty in nature and that will be complementary and additional to neighbourhood renewal? If they were about displacement, I would not support them. Any initiative from whatever Department will be scrutinised in the same way as this one. Hence, it is about additionality and making sure that there is no duplication and that every initiative meets objective need, regardless of what it may be or what it may look like.

In the same vein, community safety is cited as one example in the neighbourhood renewal programme. Is the Minister saying that, in the new Justice Bill, we should not make provision for community safety or funding for groups and communities that are trying to establish and

initiate community safety programmes? Indeed, the Health Minister is here as well. When it comes to the health aspects of neighbourhood renewal, should the Health Minister not have any responsibility or bring forward programmes that are, by their very nature and orientation, about community development in case it offends the Minister for Social Development and what he is trying to do with neighbourhood renewal? If that is the case, the Minister for Social Development has just undersold, unpicked and unravelled his own argument for additionality.

At the last minute, I am prepared to give way, but only on the basis that it is a genuine offer of a genuine response.

The Minister for Social Development: I refer the Member to my previous comments. The essence of the argument is that neighbourhood renewal and tackling disadvantage require partnership at community, governmental and statutory levels.

That is what has been proven to work, and that is the model that we need to deepen and develop as we go forward. The issue is that what is being developed, in the view of many people, is exclusive and elitist. It involves one Government Department, one party, and a hand-picked number of groups. That is not inclusion, equality or partnership. In those circumstances, for all the good intentions that the Member and others have, the question is whether it is likely to work.

4.30 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: I allowed the Minister to intervene, but he accuses people of being exclusive and elitist. I refute that allegation. It is on record that I refute it. I bear no shame, and the Committee bears no shame, in asking for additionality.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have absolutely no difficulty in proposing that there should be additionality. The Minister's party, which introduced political vetting, has a brass neck to accuse anyone of being elitist.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister, Dolores and the rest have a brass neck.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Unlike Simon Cowell's 'The X Factor', this is not a phone-in vote.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to bring forward proposals to secure neighbourhood renewal and small pockets of deprivation funding beyond March 2011.

Health and Social Care Services for Vulnerable People

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

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the ongoing reduction in essential health and social care services for vulnerable people; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to tackle wastage within his Department and its agencies; and further calls on the Minister to undertake a review of (i) spending on senior salaries, (ii) spending on travel and accommodation for senior management and administrators, and (iii) procurement practices within health and social care trusts.

As Members know, times are tough all round with departmental spending. In this type of situation, particularly in health, where things are tough, the public are right to ask questions about how the health budget is allocated. That is why the SDLP tabled the motion. Everyone here knows that, in every constituency, cuts to services for the vulnerable are increasing week by week. Home help budgets are shrinking; domiciliary care is being cut; and many residential homes — for those with learning difficulties, the disabled or the elderly — are faced with closure.

The cuts affecting the weak and vulnerable are gathering pace while the Health Service continues to award pay increases and bonuses to senior clinicians and some managers. The SDLP is not prepared to vote for ring-fencing of the health budget until it is clear that the Minister and his Department have taken steps to rein in that wastage in the system. It is in the interests of fairness and justice at a time like this when the budget is under so much pressure that the cuts are shared across the Health Service. There is justification for the perception that unfairness exists in the system, not least because of the reports of the level of spending on trips and accommodation by those in senior management.

As a member of the Health Committee, I am well aware of the excellent work of many senior personnel in the Department and across all

the health authorities. I am also aware of the need to improve their experiences, skills and knowledge of best practice elsewhere. Training opportunities are, of course, part of that.

I am not singling out any individuals for blame, but the public are rightly asking questions about the extent of foreign trips and travel for Health Service staff in recent years, and whether they are all really necessary. We can gauge the strength of feeling about that from the 12 senior nurses who expressed their views through one of our regional newspapers. They expressed strong concerns about the extent of overseas training and pleaded instead for more money to be spent on employing nurses to improve patient safety and reduce preventable deaths. Those concerns are widely shared.

I want to talk about the way in which they had to voice those concerns: anonymously. No names could be given. That, I think, points to a culture and an atmosphere in the Health Service in which many workers are told not to speak out. They are gagged and are afraid to speak. We have direct rule and accountability, and I want the Minister to look at this issue. Everyone should be assured, when it comes to serious issues, that people working in the Health Service should be free to express their views at all times in the organisation. I understand that the Minister issued a directive about these trips earlier in the year. He pointed to the need for some scrutiny, but it is a warning that seems to have made little difference. The trips have continued, and, as we know from recent exposure in the press, the costs have kept mounting.

This news comes at a time when hospital wards are closing and A&E services are being withdrawn: think of the Mid-Ulster Hospital and of Downe Hospital. People are rightly asking questions: they are asking whether all of this is really necessary. Will the Minister tell us whether it is necessary to spend £14,000 on flights and accommodation for three employees in this financial year alone? Indeed, some people are asking why £4,500 was paid in course fees for a conference in Nice that was cancelled due to the flight limitations arising from volcanic ash. I understand that that money has not been recovered, and I would like the Minister to give us his view on the attempts that have been made to recover it.

There are serious constraints on spending in the Health Service as there are on every other Department, but, in the Health Service, those cuts are impacting disproportionately on the weak and the vulnerable. The Minister has individual responsibility for health staff, many of whom work hard and carry a heavy burden of responsibility. I appeal to him to take action so that constraints on spending apply at all levels in the Health Service and not disproportionately on vulnerable people or the lowest paid workers.

I have already said what I think about training. Some of it is essential to keep abreast of developments; I think everyone agrees with that. However, there has to be a more rigorous scrutiny of the associated costs for foreign travel, and accommodation in particular. That is also referenced in the motion. There must also be closer scrutiny of the proposed content and possible outcomes of meetings and conferences, judging from the comments of those senior nurses who I have referred to. They, as Members will understand, are the people at the coal face who know best about the real impact of the cuts. Their view is that the value of some of these courses is very limited, to say the least. We must be sure in the phase that we are in now that all these journeys are really necessary. Can cheaper hotels not be found when it is necessary to travel? There is evidence that NHS staff in England are able to do that when they go abroad for training.

We all know about Northern Ireland's limitations due to the size of our population. We do not have the economies of scale to enable certain courses to be delivered by experts of worldwide repute so that our staff do not have to travel. However, there is no reason why we should not look at other possibilities. For example, the opportunity to combine with our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland to deliver courses here or somewhere on the island deserves consideration. By taking such an approach, surely costs, in some instances, could be shared and money could be saved, which would have the knock-on effect of benefiting the Health Service.

I call, as the motion does, for a review of the Department's spending, particularly on the issues that I have outlined. A thorough review will go some way to help protect those who are most at risk against the reductions that taking place as we speak. The motion should help, in some way, to protect the most vulnerable in relation to reductions in healthcare.

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for proposing the motion. I am fascinated by the way in which the Health Service operates. The Minister's response to a question that I asked revealed that the health and social care trusts employ 2,492 staff who are paid between £50,000 and £100,000. I highlight that figure because it is quite significant. They are not doctors or consultants — because approximately 920 of doctors and consultants earn over £100,000. All of us would admit that consultants are well and truly needed in the Health Service.

The figure must include a huge level of bureaucracy. Breaking it down further, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust employs 798 of those people, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust employs 356, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust employs 287 and the Western Health and Social Care Trust employs 479. It is an interesting ratio, and I have looked at it and thought about it. Why are there approximately three times the number of people on that pay scale as there are on the consultants' pay scale? That is a question for the Minister to ask his Department. Why are so many people in the Health Service on a middle-management pay scale? It far outstrips a lot of the other Departments; in some cases, by miles.

I pay tribute to the Minister because — and I listened to him yesterday as he stated this fact — in a press release of 5 November 2010, he stated that he had implemented the review of public administration (RPA) and had cut the number of admin staff and senior managers by 1,500, or 57%. Those are his words so I pay tribute to them. There is supposed to be a £49 million saving each year from April 2011. However, an Assembly report found that RPA made initial savings of £5.6 million in management and administration cost in the Health Service. It stated that, by 2008-09, the total trust management cost had risen again in excess of £120 million.

That was the situation before the Minister introduced RPA, so something is going wrong in the system. I do not doubt that the Minister made those efforts to implement RPA, and I do not doubt that he meant to cut administration. However, the figures show that something is going wrong in the Health Service. Is it the old problem of empire building? Civil servants are keen on that. Maybe the Minister needs to revisit that aspect of the Health Service.

4.45 pm

I find other areas to be absolutely amazing. Expenditure on luxuries was referred to. How much money do the Department and trusts spend on art, management consultancy fees, negligence claims and travel claims? The one that astonishes me is the amount of money that is spent on taxis. There may be a good reason for some of them, but the Southern Health and Social Care Trust gives more than £1 million a year to taxi firms, and the Western Health and Social Care Trust spends more than £0.5 million a year. Some of the figures are absolutely astonishing. Is it efficient to spend those amounts of money on taxis? There is a joke about the other taxi service in the Health Service that people use a lot. Unfortunately, it is the Ambulance Service.

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

Mr Craig: Having seen how many individuals are paid so much, I plead with the Minister to look once again at the management structure in the Health Service. Maybe he will cut it back to previous levels, like he did with his health reforms?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the motion states: "expresses concern at the ongoing reduction in essential health and social care services for vulnerable people".

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. A number of Health Committee members cannot be here because of an event in the Long Gallery. Their absence is due to competing demands, not a lack interest. Obviously, I speak in favour of the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to debate such a vital issue. Recently, we debated domiciliary care. Yesterday, we debated the removal of neurology beds, and, today, we debated the impact of budget cuts and restrictions on the most vulnerable.

Last week, in my role as Mayor of Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, I hosted an event for disability-sector service users from the area to discuss their experience of accessing health services. They did not paint a very pretty picture. They feel that, when it comes to budget restrictions, they are always impacted upon adversely and disproportionately, and I very much agree with them. As budgets get tighter, the more vulnerable people in society are always

affected. Many Members could quote examples of cases in which they are involved in their constituency that would lead everyone to the same conclusion.

As I said, last week, the House debated domiciliary care packages, and the Minister talked about his Department investing to provide services. Obviously we welcome that investment, but it is simply not enough. The reality is that money is not always spent wisely. In some cases, if the Department were to listen to those who provide a service on the ground, it would find better ways to do things.

The motion calls on the Minister to:

"tackle wastage within his Department and its agencies".

We are all very much aware of wastage in the Department, as we are aware of the high-profile stories that are currently reaching media outlets, especially the recent one about the £5,000 that was spent to put up 17 health chiefs for two night's accommodation in a County Antrim hotel that was only down the road.

Is that value for money? What is the value for money process, and who ensures that value for money is obtained? Who has the final say in making decisions about training courses? We can be sure that the Department's permanent secretary does not have the last call. As we all know, the permanent secretary sent a memo to the Department's agencies instructing them to exercise restraint when considering training courses. That instruction does not appear to have been followed.

Training courses are necessary, and looking to best practice and international expertise is no bad thing. The question is whether there is value for our Health Service. Tommy Gallagher mentioned the nurses' letter that was quoted in a recent article in 'The Irish News'. That was a true reflection of the experiences of front line nursing staff and how they feel such courses benefit them. The nurses said that they were insulted by the ideas that came back from some of those international training courses, such as wearing different-coloured aprons. Such ideas are at the core of basic nursing skills and the nurses did not need anyone to travel halfway around the world to tell them that.

The motion calls for a review of spending on senior salaries, which is absolutely relevant

in the current economic context. The issue of bonuses, or to keep the Minister happy, “clinical excellence awards”, has often been raised in the House. During last week’s debate on domiciliary care, the Minister claimed that my colleague Martina Anderson was confused by the amount of money that was paid out by the Health Department and queried her claim that £57 million had been paid out; but Martina was not confused and neither am I. Fifty-seven million pounds over the past five years is exactly what the Health Department has paid out.

The Minister often refers to the savings that the Health Department has made. He says that he has saved £53 million through RPA, and that the Health Department is the only one that has implemented RPA. However, one hand is saving money while the other is paying it out. I expect that the Minister will say that no new awards are being made this year because there is a review, but that does not mean that the awards that are already in place will not continue to be paid.

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

Mrs O’Neill: Those amounts will continue to be paid because once someone is awarded an amount of money in a bonus it sits for five years without review. Is that value for money?

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

Mr Gardiner: A stark reality faces health and social care in Northern Ireland: by the end of the Budget 2010 period, it will take £5.4 billion a year to provide a safe and fit-for-purpose Health Service. That is £1.1 billion more than in the current Budget before — and I emphasise before — any cuts are made. There must also be a note of realism about the number of efficiencies that can be achieved; listing them is not enough.

It is also unfair to ignore the significant savings that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) has already made. It is a fact, for instance, that that Department has reduced the number of its administrative staff by almost 1,500, while the number of senior executives has been cut by 57%. Those significant staff reductions will ensure that some £49 million in savings will be released each year from April 2011.

I recently asked all Ministers how many staff they employed who earned more than

£100,000. I had the sense to realise that although there were more than 900 people in that category in the Health Department, most were clinicians who were paid at normal national rates and that only a small percentage were administrators. Naturally, I asked the Health Minister to clarify the issue for me, as I realised that the Health Department was unlike others in that respect. The Minister told me that 917 staff were paid more than £100,000 a year, not the 934 quoted by others and that of those just 10 — 1% — were non-clinical.

Clinical staff are, of course, paid at nationally agreed rates. That puts into perspective the earlier scare stories, issued by the DUP, that hundreds of staff are on over £100,000 a year. In the DHSSPS, those are largely not administrative staff. Maybe the DUP could, in future, take the trouble to check its facts before engaging in cheap and easy headlines.

As far as the vulnerable are concerned, there has already been action. The new Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) has been established. It will register those who work with children and vulnerable adults and maintain lists of those who are barred from such work on the basis of harm or the risk of harm. A requirement has been established for paid and unpaid employees who work in specified positions to register with the ISA and pay a registration fee. Therefore, the improvements that the motion calls for are already well in train, and I ask the House to take note of that.

Mr McCarthy: I support the motion. Scarce resources in any Department have to be used wisely, and, in this case, given that we are talking about vulnerable people, every effort must be made to ensure that funds find their way into front line services.

Travelling to work this morning, I was totally disgusted to listen to the pleas of parents whose youngsters live with very serious and life-threatening illnesses. They have been asking for more help from the Children’s Hospice. When one hears those heart-rending real-life stories, resources must surely be directed to where they are urgently needed. I also heard a chief of the hospice talk this morning about how its funding falls far short of what similar bodies across the water receive.

The Health Department must pay attention to what is required, rather than spending money on luxury trips and luxury hotels. Indeed, all we

have heard in recent times from the local media and newspapers is how much cash is used on items away from what will actually deliver a first-class Health Service, particularly, as the motion states, care services for vulnerable people. It is incumbent on those who run the Health Service to be prudent at all times.

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

I watched the Health Committee inquisition of senior civil servants last week. While the officials answered the many questions, I was not convinced that lessons have been learned. However, I appeal to the Minister — I am glad that he is with us today — to ensure that efficiencies are made in every corner or wherever they can be made, and that money is not wasted but put into the care of our most vulnerable people. That is what today's motion is about, and I fully support it.

Mr Girvan: I support the motion as presented. However, in doing so, I appreciate that we are working in a climate of ever-reducing budgets, and I very much understand that we need to get value for money from all areas. Given that health is very important, it is vital that we do that and deliver money to the areas where it is most needed and to people who maybe do not have a voice to shout or lobby for resources themselves.

In saying that, I know that the block grant is probably being used as an opportunity to focus in on waste and on areas where money is not necessarily being used correctly. I put the blame directly where it belongs: with the Tories and the Lib Dems. They are both represented in the Chamber by parties that have spoken in today's debate.

It is vital that we make proper use of that resource, and all Members who have spoken have identified that certain moneys have not necessarily been used effectively.

5.00 pm

I appreciate that civil servants from the Health Department have to attend some training courses because that will benefit their jobs, but, given that £360,000 was spent on overseas trips, a business case needs to be made to assess whether that stacks up. Councils were mentioned earlier, and, at councils, many such trips are classed as junkets. I do not class all of them as junkets; I appreciate that there

is benefit from some conferences, but, in the case of some trips, I question the reports and the benefits that have been brought back to Northern Ireland. We have the opportunity to run training courses in the Province at the same level as they are run elsewhere, and we can bring others here to deliver courses.

We should ensure that people can get an appointment at their GP, and, if they are going for an outpatient appointment or elective surgery, that they will not have to wait for months. Considering the size of the budget, we have to make proper use of the resource available. Irrespective of the size of a Department's budget, there are bound to be areas in which savings can be made. I appreciate that the Minister will say that savings have been made, and I congratulate him for that, but there are areas on which we must put the focus and the searchlight and ensure that we can extract and make the best use of money.

Targeting people who are vulnerable is one of the areas that we need to make use of. Who do we class as the vulnerable? It is the people who do not have the opportunity to speak for themselves. Last week, we had a debate on domiciliary care, which is a forgotten area in that, in many cases, once people are out of the hospital, they are forgotten about. We need to focus on those areas.

I support the motion, and I know — and I hope and pray — that the Minister will take on board that we are still not satisfied with the cuts and the savings that have been made. It was mentioned yesterday that £210,000 will be saved by the cut in the number of neurology beds from 23 to 16. If £210,000 were identified and used correctly, it could make a big difference. I am not necessarily talking about cutting but about making use of the money more effectively.

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

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Seo mo chéad óráid sa Teach ar rún a bhaineann leis an chóras sláinte. Mar a deirtear go minic i bPáirc an Chrócaigh, tá an-áthas orm seasamh anseo mar Chomhalta Tionóil SDLP don Fheabhail in áit Mark Durkan.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to address the House for my maiden speech, particularly on this motion regarding the Health Service. I am honoured to stand here as an SDLP Assembly Member for the Foyle constituency, replacing Mark Durkan.

In this House, we have a duty to improve the lives of the people whom we serve. My predecessor fulfilled that role diligently during his 12 years elected to serve in the House. Given the motion, I am particularly mindful of his efforts to improve the health and social care available to people in Derry and across the region. Not least, I recall his efforts to secure the south wing for Altnagelvin Hospital, the Clinical Translational Research and Innovation Centre (C-TRIC) at Altnagelvin Hospital and the regional cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital, which serves the whole of Northern Ireland.

As Members know, behind the big headlines and major projects lies the important constituency caseload, day in and day out. Nowhere is that more important than in health and social care matters, and I intend to carry on the high standard of constituency service and policy advocacy that my predecessor carried out for the Foyle constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker, tá mé fíorbhródúil seasamh anseo romhat mar Chonallach ag obair ar son mhuintir Dhoire.

As someone from Donegal, I am very proud to work on behalf of the people of Derry, which, of course, was established by an O'Donnell prince, St Colmcille. It is fitting that I speak on St Andrew's Day, given Saint Columba's special role in forming the affinity between Ireland and Scotland. I understand that, on St Andrew's Day, it is traditional in parts of Scotland for comely maidens in pursuit of a husband to throw their shoes at the doors of men. I am happy, however, to assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the laces on my boots will remain firmly tied for today at least.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, as a visitor and a county man, you will need no reminder of the wonderful nature of Derry and its people. Once peripheral, the city has been put at the centre of the digital world by Project Kelvin, and we look forward with excitement to Derry as the City of Culture 2013.

I now turn to the motion, which follows on from extensive coverage in recent weeks of the

amounts spent on overseas trips: post hoc ergo propter hoc. Members may turn to Google for a translation; it is beyond my capacity.

I worked in the Health Service for a time, and I know the vocational dedication and professionalism of the overwhelming number of people who deliver our health and social care services. They deliver compassionate and professional treatment and care to the public. The motion does not target them; rather, it is about ensuring that the system delivers resources to the people who count at the front line and to those who provide essential services to them. The motion seeks better management in trusts, in the board and in the Assembly. That requires partnership between us all where possible and challenge when needed.

The motion calls for a review of senior salaries in the Health Service. We all know that circumstances are not what they were three years ago. People today want a professional of high calibre to lead the Health Service, but they also want to be reassured that pay and conditions are benchmarked against standards that are relevant to today's fiscal climate.

As a new member of the Health Committee, I was concerned to learn that no uniform standard of categorising management cost appears to exist across the trusts. MLAs are guardians of the public purse, but how are we to know how trusts are performing when transparently accountable figures are not available to us? I was also worried that some trusts seem unable to provide specific job titles for band-8 managers. The Assembly must evaluate those matters: how can MLAs in Committee or otherwise drill down into public spending when such information is not available to us? The issue is about confidence and about trusts' ability to demonstrate that resources are being properly directed. I trust that the Minister will take action to address that.

Like other Members, I acknowledge that some training can be secured from overseas only. However, there must be evidence —

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

Mr Callaghan: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thought that I had five minutes in which to speak.

Front line training for essential clinical skills should be given priority. I am reminded of the story of the Fisher Company in the US that invested \$1 million to develop a space pen when the Russians simply used pencils. In today's environment, we need to show that we are spending only what we need to spend.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Callaghan: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I will try to refrain from throwing my shoes at the Minister or at anyone else today.

The core message is that the provision of services for vulnerable people should be of the highest quality and available for those most in need. It is important that those services be promoted and accessible.

The Executive have agreed that procurement policy principles should be guided by a clear definition of public procurement and of the concept of best value for money. Best value for money is defined as the optimum combination of whole-life costs and quality to meet customers' requirements. It is a procurement specification that includes social, economic and environmental policy objectives. Twelve guiding principles govern the administration of public procurement: accountability, competitive supply, consistency, effectiveness, efficiency, fair dealing, integration, integrity, informed decision-making, legality, responsiveness, and transparency. It is important that those principles were adopted and continue to be put into practice in the Health Service.

As a fairly new member of the Health Committee, I found it informative and interesting to hear the permanent secretary of the Department and some of the trusts' chief executives explaining how their salaries were justifiable and provided value for money. Many of their answers were based on the premise that their posts carry a huge degree of responsibility. That is undoubtedly true, but front line staff also have a large degree of responsibility when dealing with their clients, and, like me, they may have some difficulty in reconciling the large gaps in remuneration that are prevalent in the Health Service.

The top administrators also had no problem in justifying the outlays for travel and training. I am sure that those courses can be necessary and valuable and, as was explained, provide savings in the long-term. However, the accommodation costs and the nature of travel need to be looked at and savings put in place. Perhaps it is just that those issues were never really questioned or looked at before, but it is now time to do so.

In any large bureaucracy, there is a degree of waste that can be dealt with. However, perhaps more effort could be employed in the Health Service in looking at areas in which savings can be achieved. The provision of proper care and services for vulnerable people must be paramount. I sincerely hope that the Minister will take all this on board and regard it as constructive criticism. Vulnerable people need and deserve a Health Service that works for them, and that is a view shared by the vast majority of Health Service staff.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Some of my remarks will refer to vulnerable people, who are, after all, at the crux of the motion. Many Members have spoken about everything other than vulnerable people, and they often end up at the bottom of folk's lists.

For most vulnerable people in society, such as elderly people, children and those with learning difficulties or mental-health problems, the crucial principle is the core principle of the Health Service, which is that health and social care is free at the point of delivery. Every year, the Health Service cares for thousands of vulnerable people. For the benefit of Members: the facts speak for themselves. We provide 14 million domiciliary care hours. Those hours have not been reduced; I have seen to that over the past three years, and the Department's spend on elderly people's services and domiciliary care packages continues to rise. The Department has also provided 1.4 million meals to clients' homes; over 650,000 weeks of nursing and residential care; 66,000 day care attendances in learning disability hospitals; and 32,000 day care attendances for mental-health patients. Furthermore, more than 22,500 children have been referred to social services. Those are some of the statistics that show the nature of the need and the demand. The Health Service meets that demand, and the spend on mental health, learning disabilities and other areas is increasing. My budget is being severely

constrained, and I will talk a little bit about that in a moment.

Northern Ireland has the fastest growing elderly population in the UK. Over 250,000 men and women in the population are over the age of 65. By 2030, the ratio will have increased to almost one in four, with almost 83,000 people over the age of 85. The spend on elderly care in Northern Ireland is second only to the spend on acute care, and it runs to approximately £700 million per annum. A rising life expectancy rate brings with it the increasing risk of a number of diseases, such as arthritis, cancer, diabetes, stroke and dementia, that are associated with old age. We should all be thankful that people are living longer because it demonstrates that the Health Service is working. However, it is key that we provide quality extra years for our vulnerable population. As Minister, I have sought to do that over the past number of years, and I have invested in the Cinderella services that care for those with mental-health problems and learning disabilities. I have also worked hard and increased the spend on children at risk and to support families, and I have ensured that care packages are put in place to support those children.

I know that Members like to refer to the spend on domiciliary care and other areas being reduced, but the reality is that the spend in each of the areas that I outlined is rising, as is the number of patients and clients that we support. However, demand is also rising as least as fast.

5.15 pm

Members spent a lot of time talking about various issues, some of which I will address. As far as RPA is concerned, we are reducing administrative staff by 1,700 and saving £53 million per annum. We are doing something that other Departments are not doing and signally failing to do. We are on target to achieve that by the end of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. Management costs for the Health Service in Northern Ireland, as a percentage, are the lowest of all the home countries.

Mr Craig — I am sorry that he has left — quoted a figure for some year in which management costs appeared to rise. However, at that time, we had to deal with Agenda for Change, which back paid our staff to 2004. Therefore, it appears that spend increased in some years when, in fact, the real cost actually decreased.

We have reduced the numbers of trusts from 19 to six, health boards from four to one and senior executives from 188 to 80. That is also reflected in the numbers.

Mrs O'Neill talked about the cost of managers. Mrs O'Neill is an advocate of a united Ireland. Senior executives in the health service in the Irish Republic are paid approximately double what senior executives are paid in Northern Ireland. That is another important point. Mr Craig referred to hundreds of staff on salaries of between £50,000 and £100,000. I can confirm that most of those are clinicians, just as those who earn more than £100,000 per annum are consultants.

Mrs O'Neill also raised her old red herring of the clinical excellence awards. We have national pay deals for our doctors, nurses and, indeed, the overwhelming majority of our Health Service staff. Those pay deals are set by negotiations in London. We deliver those, whatever they are. The clinical excellence awards scheme is part of the pay rate for consultants. I asked for that scheme to be reviewed some time ago, but the previous Labour Government in London did not want to undertake a review.

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No, I am talking. Thank you.

The new Government in London are prepared to review the clinical excellence awards, and that will now happen with the support of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The clinical excellence awards are part and parcel of the pay awards. They are characterised as bonuses, but they are not bonuses. They are rates of pay. Consultants' pay differentials are determined by the so-called clinical excellence that each consultant brings to a particular task. We have some top-quality consultants in Northern Ireland who bring cutting-edge improvements to their care.

Travel is another hoary chestnut. We spend £30 million a year on travel. Most of that goes to doctors, nurses, social services workers and other staff, who get paid as they travel about the community doing their work. In the same way as MLAs — such as Mr Gallagher, who travels from the far side of Fermanagh — are paid per mile, Health Service staff are also entitled to be reimbursed. That is where that money goes. We also use taxis on occasions. Taxis are used not least to transport patients such as vulnerable

children who require protection and are not able to use public transport because of the risk of domestic violence and so on. Members throw out lines that we use taxis and use this and that. However, taxis are cheaper and more appropriate in many cases. There are reasons for all this.

As I said, pay increases and bonuses are set centrally in London; they are national pay awards.

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Perhaps I will let you come in shortly.

I want to talk about Mrs O'Neill's aprons and value for money. The £350,000 that we spent on the Northern Ireland Safety Forum was almost the sole topic of an article in a local newspaper. I am not accountable to a newspaper; I am accountable to the House.

The figures that I will read were reported to the Health Committee, but I will read them again. The savings in on-site infections are estimated to be £1.9 million through a 54% reduction in the number of cases of infection; on central line infections, which are a major cause of injury, one hospital saved more than £900,000 in one year; another saved more than £200,000 in one year by reducing instances of ventilator associated pneumonia.

Integrated medications management concerns nurses who go round wards handing out medicines to patients. Over the course of a shift, one of those nurses will be contacted on 100 occasions as she goes about her work on a ward. The apron sends out the message that the nurse who is wearing it cannot be spoken to. The nurse who has the trolley of medicines is the one who everybody talks to and interrupts. Due to those interruptions, some patients get their medicines twice while others miss theirs; mistakes are made and patients come to harm. One trust in one year saved more than £400,000 by eliminating drugs waste and reducing the amount of time required for a nurse to go round with the medicines through a simple device identifying the medicines nurse.

There have been a number of savings. The £350,000 per annum was spent out of the budget of £30 million because it has provided real safety benefits.

The other issue was senior nurses and whistle-blowers. Health Service policy requires staff to blow a whistle; in other words, to point the finger and highlight and publicise any unsafe practices that they see. That is not just a policy: staff who witness unsafe practices have a duty to report them and are required to come forward.

The 12 senior nurses, out of a total of 16,000 nurses, who put their names on an anonymous letter have been talked of as a good authority. Those nurses are required to report unsafe practice. I only wish that they would write to or contact me, because that would allow me to do something about it. Such anonymous letters are of little help.

I listened to Members' concerns about management. My Department is the only one to implement RPA; I wonder why other Departments have not done so. I have asked my officials to carry out a post-implementation review of the new management structures under RPA. That is important. With the number of reductions and the management that we are using, it is important to ensure that the design of management in the new trust — the new configuration — is appropriate and is working properly. I hope that that will help to address the issue around management.

Procurement practice is another issue that was in the motion but was not actually raised by Members. I have set up a business services organisation to centralise procurement. We also follow strict procurement practices as far as the Health Service is concerned and as far as Government are concerned. I have spoken about travel, but it is also important to refer to training.

We spend about £150 million on training every year, most of which goes on doctors, nurses and dentists. There is a large training budget, and one is tempted to stop the training, but that would only starve the Health Service for the future.

Those are the issues in the motion, and I have tried to address them. Tackling site safety has shown real benefits and reductions in cost. However, now that the issue comes under the remit of the Public Health Agency, a body that I set up a couple of years ago, I am asking that it ensures that it maximises value for money.

The real issue is not waste; in such a huge organisation there will always be areas of waste. However, as we find those areas, we will

eliminate them. The real issue is that of the budget. I think that it was Mr Girvan who said that the proper use of the resources that we have will do. No, they will not; not by a long, long way. I have said that in the House over and over again. Until Members address the key issue that, if the Health Service does not have enough resources, it will not be able to manage the need as it presents itself. Therefore, we will not have the British Health Service as we understand it — cradle-to-the-grave healthcare that is free at the point of delivery — and we will be looking at a radical redesign of services and a large number of redundancies.

I said that in the House in the past, and I will say it again, and I am not talking about a few hundred job losses. As I look into the future, as things stand, I am talking about thousands of potential job losses and the inability of a number of sites to continue to provide services. We face a radical change to services.

By all means, Members should maintain a sharp focus on waste, because that helps me as I seek to make the Health Service as efficient and effective as I possibly can. However, Members must also focus on the need for a resource that pays for, runs and manages our Health Service. Currently, we are £640 million pro rata behind England in our attempt to run a Health Service that is comparable with the rest of the UK.

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

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: That gap is now likely to grow, and, as it grows, there will be further pain and distress. Currently, Members experience problems when their constituents complain about the lack of provision to address their needs — that is only the beginning.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to make a winding-up speech in this important debate. I thank my colleague Tommy Gallagher for proposing the motion and for bringing it before the House.

Tommy mentioned that we live in harsh, tough financial and economic times. He said that the public were right to ask questions about how the health budget was being allocated. He said that cuts affect the weak and vulnerable weekly, and I can attest to that from my experience in

my constituency. Just last week, I received a phone call from a blind person who, until then, had been receiving help with the preparation of meals. That person had been informed that the help was being withdrawn. For the life of me, I cannot see how the withdrawal of that help constitutes a more effective service that addresses a front line need — it is the opposite. There are bean counters somewhere who cannot see the effect of their actions on people on the ground. That is what we need to be concerned about. As the Minister said, the point of delivery is the important point.

Tommy also said that the SDLP will not support the ring-fencing of the health budget until it is assured that the wastage in the system is being kept to a minimum and that, in the end, it will be eradicated. His point on the spending on travel for senior management and administrators was echoed by several speakers. Mr Gallagher also mentioned the questions asked by senior nurses about foreign travel for training and about whether there was any benefit from that.

The Minister said that there is a culture of whistle-blowing in the Health Service. I do not get that impression. I get the impression that there is a culture of gagging and that people who work in the Health Service are, in fact, afraid to come forward and tell the truth about what is really happening. They feel the need to hide behind a cloak of anonymity before they can reveal the truth. That is not a culture of openness and free speech; it is a culture of gagging to ensure that the truth remains hidden.

It is the duty of the Minister and of everyone in the House to ensure that that type of culture ends and that the people who work in public services, be it the Health Service or any other public service, feel confident to come forward and tell what is really happening.

5.30 pm

Quite often, as public representatives, we hear the official line from officials, but it is only when we drill down to the front line that we find out the truth about what is happening. It is valuable to us as public representatives to be made aware of what is happening at, as the Minister said, the point of delivery, because that is where the service matters. It does not matter in a Committee room here; it matters where it is delivered to the people who pay for it — the general public. Therefore, I doubt the Minister's assertion that there is a free

whistle-blowing culture in the Health Service. To me, the opposite seems true. Perhaps the Minister might take the time to think about that and address that to ensure that the culture of openness that we all want to see there is developed, so that people are not afraid to come forward and tell us what is really happening.

Jonathan Craig spoke of the information that he had ascertained from the Department regarding the number of people in receipt of salaries of over £50,000. If my memory serves me right, he said that there were 2,492. That is an astonishing figure. When the Minister conducts his review, perhaps he will look into that. Mr Craig also said that the RPA had saved £5.6 million but costs had risen to £120 million. He asked the Minister to revisit that issue. He said that he was astonished by the amount of money being spent on taxis: £1 million in the Southern Trust area and £500,000 in the Western Trust area. The Minister said that that money was spent on taxis for vulnerable children, but he did not reply to the question of foreign travel. The Minister issued a directive to his staff telling them to carefully scrutinise the money that was being spent on training and travel, including foreign training and travel. The question that arises is whether the Minister's directive is being abided by. It seems to me and to many in the House that the Minister's directive has been ignored. That is something that the Minister must address. If he issues a directive to his staff, surely his staff should abide by it. It seems that that is not the case here.

Mr McCallister: Would the Member put a ban on foreign travel, given his earlier comments that he would support ring-fencing of health only when all the wastage had been removed? What percentage of administration costs would he consider that to be?

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. If he had been listening, he would have heard me say that the Minister issued a directive about training and travel, and I am asking the Minister to ensure that his directive is implemented. Surely the Member will agree with me that that is not too much to ask.

Mr McCallister: Would you put a ban on it?

Mr D Bradley: If you had been here at the beginning, you would have heard Mr Gallagher —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I will not accept references from a sedentary position.

Mr D Bradley: As I was saying, Mr McCallister, if you had had enough interest as a member of the Health Committee to be here at the beginning of the debate, you would have heard Mr Gallagher say that he was not in favour of a ban.

Mr McCallister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was attending a Health Committee event in the Long Gallery. Perhaps if the Member had had enough interest, he would have taken a note of what was on.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, but your point has been made.

Mr D Bradley: It is not a point of order. However, Mrs O'Neill, who is a member of the Health Committee, mentioned that an event was taking place in the Long Gallery, yet she was present to speak in the debate. I do not fault the Member for attending the event. I am just making the point that he was not here and, therefore, did not hear what I said earlier.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is wandering slightly from the subject of the debate. I ask him to return to the subject matter.

Mr D Bradley: I will return to the subject of the debate quite willingly. You will agree with me, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it was, in fact, Mr McCallister who strayed from the subject of the debate, not me.

In any case, to return to the subject of the debate, Michelle O'Neill said that, in her role as Mayor of Dungannon, she had recently attended an event at which people with disabilities were present. They told her that their feeling was that their services were being cut back and they were not valued by the system. That is the response that many MLAs get on this issue. The Minister needs to look more closely at that. Often, he simply hears from his officials. He does not get to the point of delivery in order to be aware of what really happens. That is what he needs to do.

Michelle O'Neill mentioned that £5,000 had been spent on accommodation in a County Antrim hotel. She said that we must ask whether that is value for money. I am sure that we would all join her in asking that question: is that value for money? There is only one answer: no; it is not value for money. The Minister needs to ensure that value for money is achieved. His comments have not convinced me that he is sure of that. I hope that, in

light of what has been said in the debate, he takes the opportunity to look again at the issues mentioned in the motion, to ensure that wastage in the system is kept to a minimum and that money spent on training and travel is absolutely essential and of benefit to the system. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the ongoing reduction in essential health and social care services for vulnerable people; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to tackle wastage within his Department and its agencies; and further calls on the Minister to undertake a review of (i) spending on senior salaries, (ii) spending on travel and accommodation for senior management and administrators, and (iii) procurement practices within health and social care trusts.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Home-Start: Ards Peninsula and Comber

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members will have approximately 10 minutes.

Mr McNarry: More than anything that I could say on the subject, a letter that I have received from Home-Start speaks for itself. Indeed, it speaks volumes for the work that Home-Start does, its volunteers' commitment and its staff's devotion. Above all, it accurately identifies the need that exists in the Ards Peninsula and Comber area to keep Home-Start in business. The letter states:

"I am writing to you on a matter of great urgency to families in your constituency. Home-Start in Northern Ireland provides much-needed support to parents and children. The support is required because too many parents live only one event away from a crisis through coping with illness, isolation, poverty, poor access to the health care and local services, or because of the devastating loss or absence of another parent. Home-Start is a community safety net, providing vital support that can help move these fragile families into strong families, giving children the opportunity to thrive. These valuable services are under threat in your constituent area and we urgently need you to help to protect them."

In recent days, politicians, journalists and others have spoken about the threat to front line services. Those families are at the front line.

Funding provided by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which finishes in March 2011, enabled Home-Start in the Ards Peninsula and Comber area to run a volunteer-led home visit service for families with young children who are under stress. DHSSPS funding for the scheme to support families in the Ards, Comber, Ballygowan and Killinchy areas was £37,000 in 2009-2010 and £39,000 in 2010-11. The current funding runs until March 2011.

The ethos of Home-Start is early intervention and prevention. The letter goes on to state:

“Current research indicates that early intervention is far less costly than trying to deal with more complex issues that can lead to children being placed at risk and taken into care. This can save various Departments a significant amount of money. Home-Start can support 40 families for the cost of placing one child in care. It is believed that every £1 that is spent on early intervention will save the Government £7 in the future. Our services will therefore save the Executive significant money.

A total loss of funding for this scheme of £40,000 approximately means that it could cost the Government £280,000 in the future. Whilst these funds are very small in terms of departmental budgets, every penny counts towards supporting families. It is our belief that this move will mean families will face even greater hardship at this economically challenging time and will, in turn, cost Departments more money in the provision of other more expensive forms of support.

I am sure that you can appreciate that the loss of funding presents us with the difficulties that challenge the whole ethos of our work and are contrary to our belief in early intervention as the best option for children and families. If this funding is lost, and Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula Area is forced to close, with the loss of support to around 110 to 120 families, there will be no support for parents who have multiple problems to do with child protection, mental health, disabilities, drug and alcohol abuse, multiple births, deprivation, hardship and domestic violence.

The funding received from DHSSPS represents around 40 to 60 families being supported for approximately £40,000 in Newtownards, Comber, Ballygowan and Killinchy. There are no other family support organisations supporting young families in the Newtownards areas covering the same need. The remainder of the 40 to 60 families are currently being funded via Sure Start to cover the lower half of the Ards peninsula area only. That is reviewed on a yearly basis, and it is not guaranteed.”

In the letter, Home-Start outlines the potential impact on families in my constituency, and it presents the 2009-2010 statistics for Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula Area. It states:

“The total number of families supported was 114; the total number of parents supported was 196; and the total number of children supported was 256. The total number of children who will be deprived of services, which is 256, will be deprived should the scheme close, and at least 50% will be deprived if there is no further funding for the most important of all, the families that are in the Ards, Comber, Ballygowan and Killinchy areas. They will not have any family support service from us. Sure

Start, whose services are not the same as ours covers only one ward in Newtownards, which is the Scrabo ward.

We hope, Mr McNarry, that this indicates to you the massive impact a small amount of funding can make and how vital it is that our services are not threatened. The London School of Economics reported that the cost to the United Kingdom of failing to look after vulnerable children was in excess of £10 billion. That is money that the United Kingdom Government and the Northern Ireland Executive cannot afford to lose.

We would ask you to lobby Ministers at the Executive table to ensure that these services are not threatened, so that families on the front line can find life slightly easier. This will be crucial in the tough times ahead. At present, volunteering in the community is being widely promoted, especially with the over-50s. This results in huge savings, as well as in promoting mental health and well-being for both volunteers and the beneficiaries.

However, the volunteers cannot support anyone without the backup of training, Access NI checks, travel expenses and ongoing support. This does not come free. What we would really like you to do is put a question in the Assembly about early intervention and the importance of this in order to save money.”

That is what the letter says.

5.45 pm

The letter says that I should put a question:

“about early intervention and the importance of this in order to save money.”

Mr Deputy Speaker, thanks to you and to the system that we operate, that is precisely what I am doing. I am asking the Minister to rescue Home-Start in my constituency of Strangford. I realise that it is a mighty ask, but he, like me, makes judgement calls. Mine in this case is to support that call from Home-Start, because I believe in and am aware of its good work and of the results that it achieves. I appreciate that the Minister's role is to juggle funding. He has the most difficult task of all the Ministers in that juggling act. I know that in his juggling, not everyone can be satisfied. However, my judgement call today is going further, and, even though I cannot reach him, I am using this opportunity to twist his arm to squeeze something extra out of his budget.

We both know that his Department has written to Home-Start advising that its current funding

arrangements would be reviewed as part of the forthcoming spending review, the outcome of which would be known in the autumn, and that, therefore, nothing could be guaranteed to Home-Start about future funding at this stage. The autumn has passed, and I suspect that the winter will pass also. It will then be springtime before the spending review-cum-revised Budget will either be agreed or not agreed. The funding I am anxious to secure at the moment is a minimum small amount of £40,000 for families in the Comber, Ballygowan and Killinchy area.

I know, because I live there. I know the need that exists, and I know the work that goes on there. It really is not the families' fault, and they should not be punished or deprived of funds that are required to help them. I know that the Minister has no intention of punishing anyone; it is not in his character. However, those are the words that must be used in this debate, because that is the impact that is felt. It feels as though it is a punishment of those people for something they are not guilty of. As I indicated, I understand, perhaps more than most, the Minister's situation. However, it is close to Christmas, and it is a special time for all families. My duty is to press the Minister, as I am doing today, and to keep pressing him until he says yes. That is what I am doing.

Mr Hamilton: I want to begin by congratulating my constituency colleague Mr McNarry on securing the time to discuss this important subject. I know that it is close to his heart and that it will resonate far and wide in the Strangford constituency. After Mr McNarry gave such a good rundown of the work of Home-Start, it will be difficult to add anything about the value that I and others and, more importantly, the people of our area place on the services that Home-Start delivers.

In the time allotted to me, I simply want to echo everything that Mr McNarry said and to underscore the importance of the service delivered by Home-Start, principally in the Ards Peninsula and Comber areas. All of us who know the work that it does admire the standard of the service that it delivers, particularly the fact that a lot of it is delivered by volunteers. Sometimes we forget that. We see organisations, and we think that everybody who is delivering a service through that organisation is receiving a wage for doing so. However, that is not the case in so many of our organisations. I think that we would want to put on record our thanks to those in

Home-Start and, indeed, in other community and voluntary organisations in our constituency and further afield in Northern Ireland for the great work that they do day in, day out. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that work often goes without recognition.

For me, the critical point in the argument put forward by Mr McNarry relates to the cost of keeping a child in care. Let us face it: some of the children who are looked after through Home-Start may, if life's events take a different turn, end up in care. The cost of keeping a child in care would run to approximately £2,500 a week. Home-Start is saying that it can provide its services to prevent those children getting caught in that downward spiral, and it can offer its services to around 40 children for the same amount of money. We always want to prevent problems. It is easy to throw money at dealing with the problem at the end; it is much more difficult to prevent the problem developing, but that is where we should be increasingly focusing all our resources. This is a perfect example of where that can be successful.

Among my constituency colleagues who unfortunately cannot be here, Michelle McIlveen, particularly through her role as children and young persons spokesman for the party, has taken a keen interest in the subject and has written to and lobbied the Minister on behalf of our party. The same situation prevails in Ballynahinch, where there is a campaign to preserve the Home-Start service. Jim Shannon, now the MP for that area, has taken an active role in trying to bring to the Minister's attention the importance of the service delivered in that area. The problem exists not just in one part of Strangford; it is in that new bit of Strangford as well.

This is not the first time that the issue has been debated or discussed in the House, and it may not be the last. I hope that it is the last. Like Mr McNarry, I acknowledge that the Minister faces exceptional challenges now and into the future. Indeed, whoever succeeds him as Health Minister will face equally difficult challenges when it comes to administering the budget. The crisis that we face puts additional pressures on all services, particularly on the sort of services delivered by Home-Start. However, the issue is not necessarily how much funding is received by Home-Start in Ards; it is the certainty of that funding. We have been here before. A lack of ongoing funding has caused this problem at

this time of the year, as it does for so many organisations across Northern Ireland, because there is no certainty moving forward. For me, the issue is trying to drive some certainty into the situation, as opposed to establishing exactitude on the amount of funding that will be received.

The budgetary challenges that we face, which are immense, create opportunities to look not only at what services we will continue to deliver but at who will deliver them and how they will be delivered. Models such as that presented by Home-Start give us an opportunity to look at how others outside what might be perceived as the orthodoxy of the public sector can deliver exemplary standards of service, dealing with some of the most vulnerable people in our society and, as is so often the case, as with this example, at a much reduced cost to the public purse.

My real concern, which I know is shared by others, is that, if Home-Start does not deliver the services that it is delivering in our area, I do not know who will. The short-term saving of the tens of thousands of pounds that go to Home-Start every year may create a long-term cost. That may be difficult to measure precisely, but it is a truism that savings in the short term will be more than balanced out by long-term costs, if that early intervention is not there.

I do not want to repeat myself, but I know that the Minister faces difficult challenges. As we know, there is no Budget at this stage. Work is ongoing to deal with that, and, obviously, the Minister is not in a position to give us any certitude today, even if he wanted to. Echoing what Mr McNarry said, all I ask of him is that, when that Budget is finalised and he has a better handle on what his finances will be for the next number of years, he will give careful and, hopefully, preferable consideration to the cause that was so ably put forward by Mr McNarry. I echo what he said, and I know that it will be echoed by colleagues from the constituency. We ask that the service that has been going on there, often unrecognised and unacknowledged, is acknowledged by his Department through continued funding and certitude about that funding in the longer term.

Mr McCarthy: I will not delay the House any longer than is necessary. Much has been said; in fact, it has all been said very precisely by my two Assembly colleagues, and I support David McNarry and Simon Hamilton. I thank David

for raising the plight of Home-Start. As has already been said, Home-Start serves the Ards Peninsula, Comber, Ballynahinch and further afield. I pay tribute to all the staff at Home-Start for the excellent work that they have done. They have been in our community for years, and all the local children and their parents and guardians have benefited enormously from Home-Start.

It is most unfortunate that there is real despondency among the Home-Start workers at present. Indeed, there has been for quite a while. They are working on a shoestring, and, because of the uncertainty about funding, Home-Start, like all others, cannot plan for the future. That unsatisfactory situation is compounded by the fact that there is no agreement on the Budget at Executive level between the parties. Simon Hamilton mentioned that. I appeal to those involved — particularly Sinn Féin, although none of its Members is in the Chamber — to agree a Budget as soon as possible. Although no Sinn Féin Members are in the Chamber, I hope that they hear my appeal and that of others to get the Budget agreed as soon as possible for the benefit of all voluntary agencies. Yesterday and today, we heard the Finance Minister respond to questions about the plight of the voluntary agencies. Sammy Wilson was willing to get the thing going, but he needed help from his Sinn Féin colleagues — well, I presume it is his Sinn Féin colleagues. So, the opportunity is there. Let the Assembly see what they are made of; let them come forward with a Budget as soon as possible. Every Department needs to know what its budget will be for the next number of years, and then everyone can continue to provide a good, modern service to all who require it.

I thank David McNarry for bringing this subject to the Floor of the Assembly, and I will finish by saying that Home-Start has to be supported and supported now. Closure for Home-Start is simply not an option. I appeal to the Minister to listen to what his Assembly colleagues are telling him today.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank David McNarry for creating the opportunity to have this debate and to take on board the points that have been made.

In March 2001, the then Northern Ireland Executive created the children's fund to provide

direct support to children in need and young people at risk, and they asked the Health Department to administer it on their behalf. Voluntary and community groups working with children and young people were invited to make applications for assistance in undertaking work that would further the aims. In all, around 100 organisations were successful in their applications. Those organisations engaged in a wide range of activities, such as early years work, work with children and young people with disabilities, family support programmes, juvenile justice projects and youth service-type schemes.

Of the successful applicants, four were local Home-Start projects, one being Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula Area. During that period, it was provided with grant assistance in the region of £196,000 from the children's fund to support salary costs associated with its efforts. In addition to funding from the children's fund, as part of the Health Department's core grant funding arrangements, we provided and continued to provide funding to Home-Start's regional office to assist with its central running costs. Funding for all those projects continued until 2008, when the centrally funded children's fund came to an end by order of the Executive.

When the children's fund ended, it fell to individual Departments to consider the future of the projects that fell within their scope. For my part, I saw real value in the work being carried out by a range of projects supported by the children's fund, and I felt that it would be a shame to let them go. That is why I set aside resources from my own budget to provide continuing support to over 40 former children's fund projects that were pursuing activity that contributed to improving outcomes for children and their families in line with the aims and objectives of my Department. Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula was one of those projects that, since 2008, received a further £89,000 in grant assistance from my Department. I will make further funding of £29,000 available to the project between now and the end of the financial year. At this stage, unfortunately, I am unable to guarantee any funding beyond that point, for reasons that Members are well able to understand and appreciate.

My Department wrote to the project in 2008 to let it know that I had set aside money from my budget to continue to support its work, but it was advised that we expected it to move,

over the period of the funding extension, to a position of self-sustainability. The project was treated no differently to any of the other 40 projects that were funded in that way. The Department is not the commissioner; that is a matter for the Health and Social Care Board and the trust. I understand that Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula has a contract with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust to provide services to families in that area in line with the policy commitment of my Department.

Evidence shows that appropriate prevention and early intervention services for parents, particularly in the first three years of a child's life, cannot be overestimated, so the provision fits the need and the requirement of the Department. My Department has a particular focus on Families Matter, the family and parenting strategy. Through that strategy, I invested £2.5 million recurrently to support families through family support initiatives such as parenting education, family mediation, child contact services and a regional family support information system. Much of that is provided through the voluntary and community sector. My officials are engaged with the Health and Social Care Board to ensure that any unallocated funding out of the £2.5 million of Families Matter money is used to support early intervention services for hard-to-reach families and provide not only practical assistance but help in building their parenting, resilience and skill. Home-Start Ards, Comber and Peninsula is well positioned, as an existing service provider, to enter into dialogue with the South Eastern Trust about how it can further contribute to delivering that agenda.

Many of the Members present spoke about the benefits and values of the work of Home-Start, and I join Members in recognising the achievement of all the Home-Start projects throughout Northern Ireland and the dedication of its volunteers in making a difference to so many families and children.

Adjourned at 6.03 pm.



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