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Contents

Assembly Business	239
Executive Committee Business	
Additional Statutory Paternity Pay (General) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011	240
Draft Labour Relations Agency (Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures) (Jurisdictions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011	241
Private Members' Business	
Community Transport Scheme	242
Public Sector Pensions	256
Oral Answers to Questions	
Employment and Learning	266
Regional Development	273
Private Members' Business	
Public Sector Pensions (<i>continued</i>)	279

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 5 December 2011

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I raise with you again the issue of the delay — indeed, the neglect — in answering questions for written answer. It is a matter with which you have been helpful in the past, but the problem persists. At this moment, I have 40 questions for written answer that have passed the 10-day requirement for answer. Six of them are questions that were tabled before the summer recess, 12 of them were tabled in September and nine of them were tabled in October.

If Members are to do the work that they are sent here to do, the Standing Order requirement of Ministers attending to answers within 10 days needs to be adhered to. Twenty of the 40 questions relate to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and 11 to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). Those two Departments seem to be particularly remiss at living within the mandatory requirements of Standing Order 20B. I again ask for your guidance and your assistance in the resolution of the matter.

Mr Speaker: I say to the Member and the whole House that I do have great sympathy for Members on this issue. That is why I have continually allowed Members to raise these issues, particularly by making points of order in the House. The House will know that I have no real powers under Standing Order 20B. However, I hope that, by Members raising the matter through points of order, Ministers listen to what is being said in the House, because various Members have raised the same issue. I have great sympathy for Members who raise such issues through points of order. I will continue to allow Members to raise them through points of order until Ministers listen very closely to what Members say.

I have some deep concerns about the way in which this is being handled by Departments, and the Member is certainly right to raise it. As I said, I hope that Ministers in the Departments concerned are listening. Let us now move on, please.

Before we begin today's business, I advise Members that the two statements that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development was to deliver today have been postponed until next Monday. I received a letter from the Minister in which she indicated clearly that she had been called to attend a very urgent meeting in Brussels. I know that all the party Whips have been informed of the situation.

Executive Committee Business

Additional Statutory Paternity Pay (General) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That the Additional Statutory Paternity Pay (General) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 be approved.

I am seeking the Assembly's approval of these amending regulations that were made on 18 July 2011 and that came into operation on 14 August. Members may find it helpful if I outline the background to the regulations. In October 2010, following an extensive consultation process, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) brought into operation a large body of legislation, comprising a total of 12 statutory rules, the purpose of which was to introduce the right to additional paternity leave and additional statutory paternity pay.

The package of new entitlements, collectively referred to as the additional paternity leave and pay regulations, provides greater choice for working parents in how they divide childcare responsibilities. One of the statutory rules, the Additional Statutory Paternity Pay (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010, allows employed earners to be paid additional statutory paternity pay if they are not working during their partner's maternity or adoption pay period. Subsequent to those regulations coming into operation, officials from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills advised my Department that the corresponding regulations in Great Britain contained a minor drafting error, and it was quickly ascertained that the error had been replicated in the Northern Ireland regulations.

The intention has always been that additional statutory paternity pay should not begin earlier than 20 weeks after a child's placement for adoption. That reflects the provisions that apply to births, where additional statutory paternity pay cannot begin earlier than 20 weeks after a child is born. The intended position is reflected in the explanatory note to the original regulations, which states that the provisions on additional statutory paternity pay for adopters correspond to the provisions on additional paternity pay for the husbands and

partners of mothers of newborn children. That is also reflected in the guidance issued after the original regulations were made. However, regulation 14 of the Additional Statutory Paternity Pay (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 appears to allow the impractical scenario of additional paternity pay in adoption cases beginning 20 weeks before a child is placed for adoption.

The proposed technical amendment to regulation 14 will ensure that the intended position is achieved. A similar amendment has already been effected in Great Britain. I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Examiner of Statutory Rules for their scrutiny of the amending statutory rule. I am also grateful to the Committee for its recommendation that the regulations be confirmed by the Assembly. I hope that I have provided the House with sufficient explanation of the purpose of the regulations. I will, of course, respond to any points made by Members in my closing remarks.

Mr Speaker: No Members have indicated that they want to speak on the issue. I think that the Chairman of the Committee, Basil McCrea, intended to speak, but he is not in the Chamber. I, therefore, call on the Minister to conclude.

Dr Farry: I thank all the Members who contributed. If only things could be this easy in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Additional Statutory Paternity Pay (General) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 be approved.

Draft Labour Relations Agency (Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures) (Jurisdictions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That the draft Labour Relations Agency (Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures) (Jurisdictions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 be approved.

Again, it may be helpful if I outline briefly for Members the background to the order. In March 2011, the Assembly passed the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which fundamentally changed the procedures and systems for resolving workplace disputes in Northern Ireland. One of the most significant measures related to the repeal of statutory grievance procedures and their replacement by good practice standards that are set out in the Labour Relations Agency's (LRA) revised code of practice.

In order to encourage observation of best practices, the Act also inserted provisions into the Industrial Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 that allow industrial tribunals to vary awards by up to 50%, up or down, where the tribunal considers that either party has unreasonably failed to apply such standards. Also inserted into the Industrial Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 was a schedule that detailed the employment law jurisdictions to which the revised grievance procedures would apply. Many of those jurisdictions are well known. They include unfair dismissal or forms of unlawful discrimination. Others are less common, but no less important.

It transpires that, due to an oversight in the GB legislation, which has been replicated in the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, one of the least-used jurisdictions was omitted from the schedule. The jurisdiction in question is regulation 51 of the Companies (Cross-Border Mergers) Regulations 2007. That regulation enables certain employees and their representatives to make a complaint to an industrial tribunal where they have been subject to detriment for exercising certain rights and entitlements in the context of a cross-border merger.

The potential ramifications of that omission are that, were such a complaint to be made,

the tribunal would be unable to vary any award to reflect non-compliance with the LRA code. Although, in practice, cross-border merger cases of that type are likely to be extremely rare, it is nevertheless appropriate to correct that omission. I should point out that the amendment is of a purely technical nature. It does not represent any change in policy.

I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Examiner of Statutory Rules for their scrutiny of that particular statutory rule. I hope that I have provided the House with sufficient explanation of the purpose of the order. I will, of course, respond to any points that are made by Members in my closing remarks.

Mr Speaker: Once again, no Members have indicated that they want to speak to the motion. Therefore, I call the Minister to conclude the debate.

Dr Farry: Again, I thank Members for their understanding of the situation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Labour Relations Agency (Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures) (Jurisdictions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Community Transport Scheme

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes 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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McMullan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the dependency that our rural communities have on the community transport scheme for medical visits and hospital appointments; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that this service is sustained to facilitate the most vulnerable people in our society.

I ask the Assembly to support rural dwellers having the same access to community transport as that which urban dwellers enjoy, primarily with regard to hospital appointments.

In 2011, new contracts were made in the community transport scheme, with the obvious exclusion of transport to hospital appointments. This is an issue of equality. I have spoken to many people who have been affected greatly. That is what they tell me. At present, people who live in urban areas can get to hospital appointments with the Door-2-Door service while, in rural areas, community transport can now only drop people to the nearest bus stop or train station and leave them to get on their way. In many cases, in my area of east Antrim and the glens, people have to take three buses.

I spoke to two ladies at the weekend. One of them was virtually in tears when she told me about her situation. At present, she pays anything between £50 and £60 for a taxi to take her to and from hospital. She is 84 years old, yet we expect her to be left at the bus stop on a winter's morning to get buses to Ballymena and then to Belfast, and to wait in between. That is intolerable in this day and age.

12.15 pm

Mr Speaker: I am sorry to interrupt the Member, but could he pull his microphone closer? Thank you.

Mr McMullan: Sorry. Community transport can be used for all sorts of things such as shopping and visits to local GPs, post offices, family members and to those in hospital, and I welcome that. However, the big problem for rural areas is the use of the phrase "local hospitals" in the original agreement in 1996. Today, there are no local hospitals in rural areas; they do not exist and most are now referred to as health centres or clinics.

Access to community transport to visit friends or family in mainstream hospitals is a great advantage for rural dwellers, and the service must be kept up. I fully support that, and I am sure that the House does as well. However, there is no sense in not allowing community transport for hospital appointments when visits to hospital are allowed. All of the Departments need to sit down and find a solution to this problem. It is not just up to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) — the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and all of the other Departments also need to be involved.

We cannot allow this difference between urban dwellers and their rural neighbours. After all, in its booklet, the Community Transport Association suggests that rural community transport exists to assist with the reduction of rural isolation and to target social need.

Community transport was introduced in 1996 — 15 years ago. Health provision has moved on since then, services have been centralised and local or community hospitals have been closed and put to other uses. Practically all major outpatient services are now centralised in urban areas. Those include services for patients with renal problems, cancer and special needs, to name a few. The use of community transport for those patients is not an option. We cannot allow pensioners who are maybe 80 years old, those with disabilities and those with special needs to go out and look for private transport to take them to their appointments. As I said before, some of these people must go to hospital two or three times a week, and we cannot expect them to pay that money or, as happens, to beg lifts from their neighbours. It makes no sense at all.

Public transport has been rationalised time and again in rural areas, and timetables do not suit the majority of rural dwellers. One of the questions that should be asked is that if

the timetables are being made by transport providers, why can hospital appointments not be set at a time to suit the timetables? That is never done. People are given appointments in hospitals at 10.00 am. How can anyone from where I live in Cushendall in the glens of Antrim get to Belfast for 10.00 am or 11.00 am? It is virtually impossible. Two or three people will need to go with some of those patients to look after them on public transport.

There has also been a reduction in non-emergency health transport. In the past, patients like those I mentioned and who had difficulty accessing public transport, could be transported using non-emergency ambulances or minibuses. Those were provided by the Ambulance Service or by local health trusts, but budget cuts and the review of the Ambulance Service have reduced the ability of the health service to provide patient transport.

It would be interesting to see the figures for the number of patients who have not attended their appointments in each health trust. In my area in the glens, which is serviced by North Coast Community Transport Partnership, the figures for trips for the period 1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011 was 1,060, yet between 1 April and 1 September 2011 the figure had reduced by 253. Including other trips, there was a total drop of 600 trips for that community for the current year, including a weekly drop of 12 hospital trips. It is alarming to think about where those people have gone, and how many of them have missed their hospital appointments.

There is a figure that is accepted as a benchmark: a missed hospital appointment costs about £150. When all the missed appointments are added up, a lot of money is being wasted because of this transport debacle.

We need to look at a better strategy. That is why I am asking the Minister for Regional Development to sit down with the Health Minister and anyone else who can be included to find a solution to this serious problem of rural social isolation. Do we really expect 80-year-olds to go out and look for bus services at that time of the morning to get to their appointments?

How much will this cost? I have talked to the transport people in my area and I have been told that it would cost £25,000 to reinstate the North Coast Community Transport scheme to allow patients to travel to hospital appointments. I know that the Ministers have

been very good in the past, and I do not doubt that they will be very good in future. I ask them to look at this issue. I am the parent of a disabled child who goes to regular hospital appointments in Belfast because of her condition. What is she going to do when she is 18 or 19? I could not allow my child to go on the bus, because two people have to go with her.

In the rural areas, as you know, most families have one car. Those cars are used to get to work by those who are lucky enough to have a job. The community transport scheme is a lifeline. There are people who give up their time to volunteer to drive. We are losing out on those volunteers, and they should be brought back in. I ask the Minister to talk to the other Departments and put the service back on. That is my plea on behalf of those who used the service before and cannot use it now. It is a vital service for rural dwellers.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "medical visits" and insert

"and access to other local services; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to work closely with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that this service is sustained to facilitate the most vulnerable people in our society."

I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing the important topic of community transport up for debate today. It is particularly important in rural areas, where, unfortunately, economics dictate that we cannot have as regular a bus service as we would wish for. Therefore, alternative means have to be used to address rural isolation. I believe that North Coast Community Transport in north Antrim, as has been mentioned, and South Antrim Community Transport provide an important service, which has not been highlighted as much as it should have been. There may yet be people who might avail themselves of the service but need to find out more about it and how it can assist them.

My reason for tabling the amendment was to highlight the fact that rural isolation and transport problems are not simply the responsibility of one Department; their effects are much wider. There are many transport issues that are already supported by a range of

Departments, and I hope to highlight that during this discussion.

Over the weekend, I decided to check how I would get to Antrim Area Hospital this morning if I had to do so. Several years ago, I took up a challenge by the Consumer Council to get to that hospital by 10.00 am. I live about three miles from Larne, between Larne and Carrickfergus, and I had to set out on foot at 6.30 am to do that. Not everyone would be able to do that, but that is the sort of thing that can easily happen in a rural community. Translink's journey planner indicated that the best, indeed, the only route this morning, using the nearest bus service, would be the Gleno bus at 8.21 am. Eventually, having travelled via Larne, Belfast and Templepatrick, I would get to Antrim Area Hospital by 10.54 am. That is the public transport alternative. I appreciate that it is not possible to have a bus service that takes everyone where they wish to go, but alternatives have to be found.

There are many individuals who live in my rural constituency in places such as Islandmagee, Carnlough and the glens, which were mentioned earlier, for whom, even if they are just a few miles from the main bus service, it may prove impractical. They may not be able to avail themselves of that service.

It is a big issue, and, as I have said, there is a complex range of funders. The Department for Regional Development is clearly the key funder in supporting the Community Transport Association, and I noted that the draft Budget earlier this year proposed to reduce its funding even though it is carrying out that vital work. I was pleased that it was realised subsequently that that is an important service in the rural community and that money was found for it.

In addition, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety provides transport in the rural setting. There is the patient transport scheme, but to qualify for it, medical practitioners have to indicate that there is a need for it, and a person must have medical needs to justify using it. So, it has great limitations that prevent people qualifying. There is also a hospital travel cost scheme, and I noticed earlier that in answer to oral questions on 8 November, the Minister expressed concern that the transport area in general is causing problems for him. However, the hospital travel cost scheme applies to those on low income and on certain social security

benefits. I am not sure that everyone is as aware of it as they should be, and we need to ensure that that is corrected so that those who qualify utilise that source.

Mr McMullan: Will the Member agree that, on the travel costs to the doctors, the emphasis on the consultant in the hospital to sign the forms to show that a person was there ties up the consultants with paperwork and is not necessary? Does he also agree that the money received is based on public transport costs and, sometimes, when the person takes private transport, the difference has to be paid by that person?

Mr Beggs: I have a concern that consultants may not be as available as they should be to approve the necessary paperwork. However, someone should approve that. We have to create audit trails to avoid fraud, so some method should be found to efficiently enable that to happen. We certainly do not want consultants, given their wealth of experience and the pressures that they are under, to be doing bureaucratic duties.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has widened community transport access to all senior citizen card holders and is providing a subsidy to do that. I am trying to show that a range of Departments come together in a piecemeal way and can contribute to the overall transport in the rural community. Indeed, the briefing from the Research and Information Service — I thank it for that — includes an interesting document that shows that community transport is picking up cocktail funding from DSD, the old LSPs, Europe and perhaps even from a wider range of Departments. So, the purpose of my amendment was to highlight that funding arrangements for transport in rural areas are, to a degree, piecemeal at present and that an overview is needed. The best place for that responsibility is perhaps the Department of Finance and Personnel, which, ultimately, controls the strings and determines how much money goes into particular budget areas, which can dictate the level of service. Hence my amendment tries to widen the range of the debate, because it is a real issue that affects many Departments, and, if we want to get a solution, it is important that we take it all into consideration and bring it all together.

The Community Transport Association's 'State of the Sector' report 2010 indicates that:

"There is no formal action plan for transport within DHSSPS however the Public Health Agency and the Health and Social Care Boards recognise access to health as a concern."

As has been mentioned earlier, we have had a problem with non-attendance at many hospital appointments, where specialised staff who cost considerable amounts of money are in attendance. Those very large numbers of no-shows are very costly.

Again, there is a need to identify whether that is part of the problem, and if it is, we all need to contribute to finding a solution so that the health of some of the more vulnerable people is not put at risk because of an inability to travel to hospital to attend appointments.

12.30 pm

The Community Transport Association provides a worthwhile service. It is largely volunteer-led, with 45p a mile — I think that it is to go up to 50p — paid to volunteers to cover some of their basic overhead costs so that they are not out of pocket. They give their time for free, and it is right that they should not be out of pocket. We may need to go on a recruitment campaign in that area. I understand from discussions that more volunteers are needed in some areas so that the people who provide the service do not travel large distances to get to someone to give them a lift to a health centre or somewhere such as that. As a society, we need to look at what we are doing and try to do it better and more efficiently. We must try to ensure that people in our community who are vulnerable are not put at risk because of an inability to travel to some very basic and essential services, particularly, as has been indicated, in the area of health.

Community and rural transport provides a wider service than that. When my son was younger, his youth football team availed itself of a minibus and provided a driver who was suitably trained, so that youth team was able to travel to its matches at a lower cost. That is quite important in a rural community where there could be isolation, and for that matter, it is also important in an urban situation. Physical activity should be encouraged because it is good for mental health and health generally. It is important that all the pieces of the jigsaw come together so that we provide the best service possible and we avoid gaps that may exist in the present service.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. Over the past months, the Committee for Regional Development has been very vocal on this area, and we will conduct an inquiry into it in the not-too-distant future. It is of benefit, therefore, to have an early indication of the views and opinions of the House, and I will listen to the debate with interest. The Committee has not had the opportunity to discuss the motion or the proposed amendment, but, between them, five members of the Committee for Regional Development have tabled the motion and the amendment. They have expressed their views on a number of occasions, and I will attempt to refer to those during my short address.

There is no doubt that rural communities have particular disadvantages in respect of infrastructure and availability of services and that the frequency and range of travel options is greatly reduced due to the smaller population base and the geographical spread of the population. Therefore, economic viability is at the fore of many decisions on transport in rural areas. However, there is recognition that the people who are most vulnerable in our society, whether they are in an urban or a rural setting, require specific and additional attention. There is an acknowledgement that availability and accessibility of transport options is essential to address exclusion and to provide appropriate access to health services and educational, employment and social opportunities. That was at the core of the previous Programme for Government and is promoted in the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration. It is now central to the proposed regional transport strategy that is being consulted on.

For many years, the Department has funded community transport associations and other programmes, in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and those have been very successful. The 'CTA Northern Ireland State of the Sector Report 2010' states that CTA has worked with the regional transport fund to provide support to rural transport partnerships and that, across Northern Ireland, some 3,500 groups actively use community transport services such as Dial-a-Lift and Door-2-Door.

However, there is also a recognition in these particularly prudent times that all services supported by the public purse need to be

reviewed to ensure that they are operating in the most efficient and effective way. I do not level any criticism at the Department for doing so. The Committee would, however, criticise any attempt by the Department to reduce the extent of those services to our most vulnerable people, rural or urban.

It is appropriate as well to ensure that an integrated approach is taken to ensure that that service is sustained, and I recognise that the proposed amendment seeks to do that. There are, undoubtedly, resources across the likes of health and social services, education and the regional transport and rural development funds that can be exploited and pooled, allowing existing community transport initiatives to be maintained and developed, whilst collectively ensuring that an efficient service with real and positive impacts can be provided for vulnerable communities across Northern Ireland.

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

I will not indicate that the Committee is in support of the motion because, as I stated, we have not discussed the matter.

Mr F McCann: I had to go out to make a call, and I missed a few minutes of the debate, but I have been listening to its tone. I was on the Committee for Regional Development in the last mandate, and there were quite a number of discussions in and around the provision of community transport during that period.

The amendment by the Ulster Unionists deals with a much wider issue in trying to pull all the threads of it together to work out one strategy to deal with community transport. That is probably for the longer term. The motion from my colleagues is specific to hospital appointments and those going to hospitals and is trying to get some immediacy around that whole question. That is the big difference between the amendment and the motion, which is trying to do something now to ensure that people are not falling through the cracks.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Spratt: I understand the point that the Member is making but I have already indicated that I am not speaking in support of the motion or the amendment, simply because the Committee has not debated the issue.

I recognise the points that he makes, and certainly those points have also been well made on a number of occasions by some of his colleagues on the Committee for Regional Development.

Members will, no doubt, make their views known during the debate. However, I remind the House that the Committee for Regional Development will undertake an inquiry into rural transport sometime in the new year.

Mr Byrne: I, too, support the motion. I very much welcome the fact that the motion has been put out at this time and I congratulate its proposer.

It is fair to say that community transport has been a success story in Northern Ireland over the past 15 years. The rural community transport scheme has very much added to the development of rural development projects and enhanced the development of community initiatives generally in rural areas. In my constituency, places such as Carrickmore, Omagh and Strabane have had, if you like, depots that have facilitated the organisation, management and structuring of rural transport projects that have been very successful. However, there is now a great concern about funding.

An issue that the Department for Regional Development has to address is the SmartPass. In the past, the SmartPass has only been able to be used with travel on Translink facilities. Rural community transport initiatives feel that they need to get a slice of the funding as well to sustain the costs that are associated with running buses.

The rural community transport project that we have in West Tyrone involves about 30 full-time workers between Derry, Strabane and Omagh. There are 40 volunteers. I think that Roy Beggs referred to the amount of volunteer work. If we did not have people working for virtually nothing then that transport infrastructure would not be able to work at all.

There is concern that the health authorities have become dependent on rural community transport providing travel for patients, particularly older people, who have to attend hospital appointments. That poses a resource difficulty for the organisation that is providing the buses. However, a cutback in the funding for travel to hospital appointments on rural transport buses puts the whole service in jeopardy and means that people who live in

isolated areas, particularly older people, are at the mercy of friends and relatives who try to transport them. Surely, as a society, we need to make sure that there is funding allocated for those people.

Lastly, there needs to be co-ordination between DARD, DRD, the health authorities and the Department of Finance and Personnel to try to make sure that we have a streamlined approach. It is not good enough to depend on ongoing piecemeal funding. I urge the Minister to help to co-ordinate sustainable funding for rural transport buses. As I said earlier, the service has been one of the success stories. If it were to be diminished because of a lack of funding, we will all have neglected our rural communities.

Mr Dallat: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Byrne: Yes, indeed.

Mr Dallat: Does the Member agree that in any future planning anywhere in the North, community transport should be an integrated element and should not be an add-on, ad hoc facility that does not meet the needs of the people and the various communities that it serves?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Byrne: I thank my colleague for that intervention. He is quite right: we need a co-ordinated approach, and there needs to be sustainable funding into the future. This cocktail of funding and the uncertainty surrounding it is not the way forward. Given that there has been such a strong emphasis on developing rural transport projects that are working well, the duty is on government and the authorities to try to make sure that there is sustainable funding into the future.

I appeal for co-ordination and for the Minister to try to make sure that his Department will lead on the issue. I also support what the Chairman of the Committee for Regional Development said about the Committee looking at the issue in the new year. We all recognise the importance of that.

Translink has provided a very good public service but it has not provided a flexible service. Rural transport initiatives provide a flexible service, which has been one of the beauties of the whole system, which has been experienced by many people.

Mr Dickson: I thank the proposers of the motion and the amendment for bringing them to the Chamber. I am happy to support the motion and the amendment.

There is an issue, which is highlighted in the motion, with hospital appointments and how people in rural communities get to their hospital appointments if a community transport service is not available to them or they do not have personal transport. Mr Beggs gave us a very good example of trying to get from his home between Larne and Carrickfergus to Antrim Area Hospital. Even in an urban area such as Greenisland, getting to Antrim Area Hospital using public transport is not the easiest thing in the world.

In a sense, these are mom-and-apple-pie proposals. There is nobody in the Chamber who does not support the concept of quality rural community transport. What we need from the Assembly, the Executive and our Ministers is an appropriate cross-cutting approach. One reason why I was elected to represent my constituents in the Assembly was to make life better for people.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I used to be the officer in charge of a rehabilitation centre for older people and I was often exasperated by the fact that school buses and health buses were passing each other on laneways in rural areas and there was no joined-up thinking. That is an example of what the Member is talking about.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dickson: Thank you. I thank the Member for that intervention. I wholeheartedly agree that this is not just a cross-cutting issue about Departments trying to work out how it is best funded and delivered; it is a matter of all those organisations, in the widest possible description of the public sector, that have four wheels on the ground working together to deliver for communities.

That is one reason why I believe I was elected to this Assembly: to try to put forward practical solutions to the problems that we face in our community. I would like to see that being developed and taken further forward.

12.45 pm

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on the matter. I am encouraged

by some things that he has said in the past, particularly about this, and I urge him to work with colleagues in other Departments to see, genuinely, what we can do to get some joined-up government for a change.

It would be remiss of us if we did not refer to the excellent work done by voluntary organisations and by individual volunteers, such as good neighbours who take their elderly neighbour, the person with a disability or the person they know to be isolated to their hospital and health centre appointments. However, there are other organisations, including the Red Cross, community groups, churches and many others, working together to deliver on behalf of their neighbours and friends in communities across Northern Ireland.

It beggars belief that in 2011, we cannot get a joined-up community transport strategy for Northern Ireland. As my colleague said, we should be co-ordinating these activities. Our top priority must be to deliver people to hospital for their appointments. If we do not do that, it will push a great deal of cost on to the health service and cause a great deal of stress to the individual who wants to get to their hospital appointment. We know how distressed elderly people in particular can become when they cannot do what they have been asked to do. Some people might suggest that if you are given an appointment for 10.00 am and you live in the glens of Antrim, it may be best to ring the hospital to tell them that you cannot get there by 10.00 am, but many people want to do what they have been asked to do. It behoves us to try to achieve a better service on behalf of our citizens across Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs referred to social isolation, which is another issue that community transport can and does tackle. It is important that we work together, and, ultimately, it is important that we attempt to rural-proof all policies and decisions made by Ministers and Departments in Northern Ireland. Community transport is one of the key issues requiring rural-proofing.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. As someone who sits on the Regional Development Committee and who did so in the previous mandate, I am more than aware of the issues affecting community transport schemes and how they work. As has been said, many people involved in community transport are volunteers and I commend them

for the excellent work that they do. The service that they provide can too easily be forgotten. It is good that so many of the Members who have spoken have put on record their thanks.

As someone who lives in a rural area, it is important that I give a bit of an idea of how people who live in such areas are impacted by the fact that they can no longer attend hospital appointments through the community transport scheme. I am glad that the Minister is here and I hope that he will listen and work with the other Ministers, including the Health Minister and the Finance Minister. In that vein, we support the amendment.

As I said, I live in a rural part of Northern Ireland. We are experiencing difficult weather conditions today but that does not only affect people in rural areas. Many people do not have access to cars. Many people, especially more vulnerable and older people, are isolated in their homes and while their family members are away working, they depend on visits from care workers, who can, on some days, be the only people they see. The importance of rural community transport, certainly in my constituency, is paramount in that it gets people access to local services.

This is an important issue, which could be addressed to allow people to attend their hospital appointments if the funding were provided. Again, I hope that that message does get across. Until last year, Investing for Health provided the funding to allow community transport schemes to take patients to their hospital appointments. On a constituency basis, due to the fact that the Mid Ulster Hospital and the South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon are now reduced to glorified health centres, it is more difficult for local people to access those services and they have to travel to hospitals that are further away. I suppose that our local hospitals are now Antrim and Craigavon. Unfortunately the service will not allow those patients to be taken via the community transport scheme.

I could change this debate into one about the wrong decision to reduce services in those hospitals but I have no doubt, Principal Deputy Speaker, that you would quickly bring me back to this debate. However, I want to again put on record my opposition to those decisions. The decision on the Mid Ulster Hospital will certainly

be reversed. However, I will stick to the debate that we have.

Other Members have gone into facts and figures. I certainly feel that there are isolated, vulnerable people in our rural communities who need help and access to a service that they have had for quite some time. It has worked very well, and I ask the Minister and his Executive colleagues to do whatever they can to reintroduce funding so that community transport schemes can take people to hospital for medical appointments.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I know that most of the people who have spoken here today are from rural constituencies. I am from one of the most rural constituencies in the North of Ireland, which is Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Access to hospital appointments is a vital issue, particularly for people who are disabled and the elderly. I commend the Department for funding rural transport and I welcome the Minister here to listen to this important debate. The big problem is that patients travelling for medical care to hospitals outside the county are not funded under the rural transport fund.

Rural communities face specific challenges due to their geographical location, the dispersed nature of the population, less-frequent public transport services and the location of specialised healthcare. In Fermanagh, we are looking forward to the opening of the new hospital, and I hope that it does not end up like a glorified health centre, as the Member opposite said. I hope that there will be greater provision in that new hospital and that fewer people will have to travel to Belfast and Derry. However, the fact will remain that many patients with consultant-led appointments will have to travel to centres of excellence. That is understandable.

I have spoken to people involved in rural transport in my area, and they say that many people who have to travel outside the area cannot be funded by them. However, they do offer advice to members and patients about what options are open for them to travel. They tell them to speak to their GP about a patient transport service and free ambulance service. However, those options are based on medical need. Decisions on who gets access to the transport scheme are arbitrary, and I have been told that GPs do not want the hassle. There are

cases of people who do not need the help but get it. On the other hand, there are people who need help but are not offered it.

Local rural transport services provide transport to bus stations and, therefore, access to Translink services. Travelling to Belfast can be fairly straightforward, but older and disabled people are fearful of travelling to Belfast city and then to and from their appointment. Travelling from Fermanagh to Derry involves much more complex travel arrangements. Someone travelling on bus from my area will need to transfer twice — at Omagh and at Derry — both on the journey there and when returning.

Under the social car scheme, which others have mentioned, volunteers use their own cars. Journeys can often cost approximately 60p per mile, and members are advised to seek reimbursement through the hospital travel costs scheme. For someone travelling to and from the Royal from Belleek, the furthest point from Belfast in my constituency, it will cost approximately £150. I have spoken to people who say that claiming financial help and receiving reimbursement is often complex. As with the patient travel scheme, there is often confusion over whether a patient is eligible for help. As a result, people often miss out on the support to which they are entitled and become a missed hospital appointment statistic.

The majority of people who must travel to hospitals outside the county feel that none of the options that I have outlined is viable. The main issue raised at a number of workshops with older people, which were arranged by local providers in Fermanagh, was transport to hospitals outside the county. I ask the Minister, who is a rural representative himself, to protect the community transport scheme, to ensure that people from rural areas are not disadvantaged in respect of medical visits and hospital appointments. I ask the House to support the amended motion.

Mr G Robinson: I am glad to speak in this debate, as I have worked closely with the providers of community transport in my East Londonderry constituency. I am a past member of the Regional Development Committee, and the topic was often on our agenda.

I appreciate the significance of community transport for the isolated and vulnerable throughout Northern Ireland. Community transport enables disabled, elderly or isolated

passengers to have a greater degree of independence and social integration. It is a well-known fact that people who have the benefit of good social integration and a good social life suffer much less from depression and have better health in general. Therefore, community transport could reduce our health spending as a consequence.

Community transport enables people to go into their local towns to do their shopping or attend GP and hospital appointments. That is a major psychological boost for many who live in isolated rural locations. Indeed, community transport can help urban users. That is especially the case for the older population who do not have access to public or family transport options. Community transport is their lifeline. As most Northern Ireland constituencies have rural hinterlands, all MLAs should be aware of the importance of this sector of transport to the rural population's health and well-being.

Money is scarce for every Department, but I hope that the Minister understands that the community transport scheme goes far beyond taking people to a social event and that it has great positive health benefits for the users. Therefore, I ask the Minister to protect a service that is a lifeline for so many people, especially the elderly, vulnerable and isolated. I have suggested previously that the scheme could be expanded, with other Departments perhaps looking at how they can use the infrastructure provided by community transport to their benefit. As budgets are limited, that may be a way of ensuring that there is no duplication of services and that there is value for money in all Departments, with community transport and passengers being key concerns.

Minister, it must be clear by now that I am supportive of the community transport scheme. I sincerely hope that despite all the financial difficulties, you will ensure that community transport is protected and possibly extended. I support the motion and the amendment.

1.00 pm

Mrs D Kelly: On behalf of the SDLP, let me say that we will be supporting the motion and the amendment. We welcome the fact that Sinn Féin recognises that the amendment strengthens the motion and gives recognition to the breadth of service that community transport provides. I congratulate the Members who tabled the motion on securing the debate.

I must declare an interest. I am a founder member of the Loughshore Care Partnership, which uses community transport at least once a week to bring some of our older people who live in very isolated areas of the lough shore to a social club. I am sure that the Minister will recognise that social centres have a preventative health function, in that they often break down social isolation and enable older people to come together at least once a week.

Such clubs have many strengths. They improve mental health and well-being by providing facilities that can be forums for discussion on a wide range of health and safety topics. Fire and Rescue Service officers, social services representatives and the police often come to give advice at those clubs. Therefore, community transport provides a very useful service, and one that is not just about meeting appointments at hospitals.

Members should note that my colleagues have issued a call to action to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development to look at a cross-cutting measure. As we know, nothing stands still these days, and community transport providers are not asking that a particular or special case be made. They recognise that there are opportunities to provide greater effectiveness and to make more efficient use of resources. There is also an onus on DRD, and on Translink in particular, to recognise that community transport can enhance departmental services and provide some of those services much more economically. Community transport is also more responsive to local need, and even to the needs of individuals.

Therefore, the Executive should look at this as a cross-cutting measure, and it is disappointing that that has not yet happened. Many road users encounter buses from different Executive Departments travelling to and from isolated rural areas, operating without joined-up thinking and in the absence of collaboration on how some of the services might be provided.

Other Members have reflected on the work of volunteers who provide the community transport service. In some of the notes that have been provided for us by the Assembly Research team, it is stated that, from 18 responses to a survey question, over one million trips were made and over 100,000 volunteer hours provided by the

organisations involved in community transport. Had all the organisations responded to that element of the survey, it is estimated that over 350,000 volunteer hours might have been the figure provided, and that would represent a more realistic figure.

At a time when many people — in particular, many young people — are out of work or have been unable to get it, volunteering represents a way in which people can not only give something to the local community but develop employability skills and a CV for future employers. Therefore, volunteering not only contributes to the service but is a reciprocal process, whereby the volunteer also gets quite a lot out of it.

Another aspect of community transport that Members mentioned is the uncertainty around funding, as well as the cocktail of funding. That is something that the Minister and others need to look at. Community transport has had to scratch around continually in the soil for funding year on year rather than have an opportunity to develop the service further.

That is not good in any organisation. Many Members will believe that the time of volunteer committees and community transport service managers could be better spent, rather than having to continuously chase after funding. Therefore, we support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I am grateful to the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment, which appears to have received widespread support. I was impressed by the tone of the debate and the constructive nature of Members' contributions, and I thank them for that. The debate gives me the opportunity to outline what I have been doing to maintain and enhance rural transport provision.

I am always reluctant to start by pointing out my specific responsibilities as Minister for Regional Development, but, clearly, the motion touches on the needs of rural communities and health services, which are areas in which other Ministers also have clear statutory remits. I fully recognise the need for interdepartmental co-operation, and it is a theme that I will return to. The focus, not only of the Department but of the Executive, must be on the needs of rural communities.

The rural transport fund is administered by my Department and has been in existence since November 1998. Its primary objective is to reduce social exclusion by improving and/or providing transport opportunities in rural areas for people with reduced mobility. The fund offers support through two means of assistance: subsidy for new rural services provided by Translink, which are economically unviable but socially necessary; and revenue and capital funding for rural community transport partnerships that offer a range of complementary services to the public transport network for their members.

Through a partnership between my Department, the general public and community transport sectors, the fund seeks to provide solutions to the transport problems faced by many people living in rural areas. The projects supported by the fund are required to demonstrate that they can fulfil some or all of the following criteria: improve rural people's access to training or employment opportunities; complement the work of other agencies involved in the development of rural communities; support a wide range of community-based activities and have a broad base of community support; and encourage volunteering activity. I join with other Members and pay tribute to the many thousands of people who volunteer their services, and, in many ways, provide essential assistance to their neighbours and friends.

It is important to make the point that the available budget is allocated on the basis of plans submitted by the partnerships. In that sense, it reflects the needs of local communities. It is clear that the criteria are wider than purely hospital visits, and I know that there has been a concentration on health issues, particularly hospital appointments, in this debate. However, many factors impact on individuals' health and well-being, and I was interested in the contribution from the deputy leader of the SDLP, who avails herself of community transport to bring her to bingo. *[Laughter.]*

My Department provides funding through the rural transport fund to eight rural community transport partnerships across Northern Ireland. To ensure that funding is targeted at front line services, we have been encouraging mergers and partnership working to take place between the partnerships. That has been progressing,

with stronger organisations emerging in areas such as County Down and County Fermanagh.

I am pleased to say that rural transport funding has been protected in the Budget up to 2014-15. The rural transport fund has an annual budget of £3.75 million for each of the four years of the current spending review. Around one quarter of that goes to Translink to support new or enhanced rural routes, and £2.6 million is paid to the eight rural transport partnerships.

Whilst the budget for the rural transport fund has been protected, there is no scope, in the current financial climate, for year-on-year increases in funding, and the partnerships have to manage the demand for their services and the pressures on their costs as best they can. That is a recurring theme, but it emphasises the need to focus on priority services.

In order to use the rural services, a person must become a member of their local community transport organisation and have difficulty accessing public transport. The extent of the overall bus network provided by Translink is important, but it is also important to remember that the objective of the rural transport fund is not restricted to health activities but that it is locally based. Thus, the Dial-a-Lift scheme can be used for a variety of purposes, including shopping, appointments with local doctors and health centres, local medical appointments, accessing the post office, visiting friends and family and accessing training and employment. Dial-a-Lift cannot be used for hospital inpatient appointments or home-to-school transport. The distinction reflects the long-standing arrangements made by health and education authorities in their respective areas of responsibility and, of course, the statutory and budgetary constraints that I have to work under. As I understand it, the Health Department has a statutory duty to make arrangements for providing or securing the provision of ambulances and other means of transport for the conveyance of persons who are ill, expectant or nursing mothers, or other persons for whom transport is reasonably required. That seems to be a discretionary power, but it applies equally to social services clients.

Current guidance seems to suggest that non-emergency patient transport services should be provided free of charge to those patients with a medical need defined by a doctor. I acknowledge

some of the contributions from Members as to how practical that is or whether, in fact, it is practical at all. The guidance does not necessarily mean that those with a clinical need for treatment have a medical need for transport.

It is not appropriate for me to comment on those matters directly, but it is important to put context to the debate. It is important to remember that the focus of the rural transport partnerships and the rural transport fund must be geographically restricted. If, for example, the limited numbers of vehicles available were being used for long journeys outside the area, the majority of members would be disadvantaged. That said, there is clearly a need for practical co-operation on the ground to improve access to services generally. I think I can point to a number of good developments in that regard. My Department has recently instigated a process to engage with Translink, the community transport sector and officials from the Health Department to explore areas where collaboration makes sense. I refer also to the maximising access in rural areas project (MARA), in which my officials will work with the Public Health Agency, the Agriculture Department and the Social Security Agency to address poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has already committed to increased funding under the heading of rural anti-poverty and social inclusion, and the MARA project will be part-financed under that initiative. The objective of the MARA project is to visit over 10,000 households in 286 rural areas, and it will almost certainly lead to an increase in membership of the rural transport partnerships, which will, hopefully, address isolation and access issues for those most in need.

The assisted rural travel scheme is funded by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. It provides £400,000 of financial support to allow rural community transport operators to deliver free or discounted travel for holders of a concessionary SmartPass, which was raised by Joe Byrne, among others. The initiative has increased the ability of older people and people in rural areas with disabilities to have equitable use of the SmartPass system.

1.15 pm

Let me firmly reiterate my own and my party's commitment to developing pragmatic and affordable solutions to assist rural communities in accessing transport and my willingness to

work with all my Executive colleagues to assist rural communities and the most vulnerable. I note that the amendment refers to the role of the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Clearly, resources remain a constraint. Equally, our willingness to engage across all Departments will be important. I assure Members that I intend to actively monitor and pursue those matters.

With regard to Members' contributions, Mr McMullan highlighted many of the practical problems that his constituents experience, particularly in the glens, and he focused largely on health appointments. However, as I have tried to outline, the system was not exclusively designed for that. There are other opportunities there.

In proposing the amendment, Roy Beggs highlighted the fact that Departments needed to work together and that other schemes, including the travel costs scheme, needed to be highlighted and promoted.

As Chairman of the Regional Development Committee, Mr Spratt made a helpful contribution and confirmed that the Committee is to conduct an inquiry into those matters next year. My Department will, of course, co-operate with that fully, and we look forward with interest to the outcome.

Mr Byrne raised the issue of the SmartPass, and we may correspond with him directly if he wishes to highlight specific cases.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I agree that the system is not exclusively for hospital appointments. However, does he agree that the service to take people to hospital appointments for inpatient services in urban areas has always been there and is currently being operated as a door-to-door service in urban areas?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the Member's point, and I understand the point that he is stressing. I had a brief discussion with the Health Minister this morning, and we are prepared to look together at issues of mutual concern. I hope to have discussions with other Executive colleagues, perhaps the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Finance and Personnel, to see whether we can make any improvements to the scheme. I remind Members that it is not a health-based scheme, and that remains an important point.

I agree with Mr Dallat's point that the system must meet the needs of local communities. Stewart Dickson referred to it as being motherhood and apple pie to a certain extent. It is an important service, and I know that he understands that. He paid proper tribute to those engaged in voluntary work. Ian McCrea also commended the volunteers, and he wants to encourage Departments to work together. I was not sure about his comment about either Dungannon or Magherafelt being glorified health centres. Important services are provided there.

Mr Lynch highlighted the problems of geography. George Robinson referred to the good social integration that is necessary and can be achieved through rural transport schemes. We have, of course, dealt with Mrs Kelly and her bingo trips.

All in all, I thought that the debate was very good and constructive. I look forward to working with Executive colleagues and, indeed, the Committee for Regional Development and other Members as we carry things forward.

Mr Copeland: In speaking to the amendment, I must say that I have learned three things: first, Members in this Chamber can talk faster than I can write; secondly, you should always have a pen that can outlast the time that Members can speak for; and thirdly, worrying does not really get you anywhere. I know that, because, in his summing up, the Minister referred to most of the things that I wanted to say about other Members' contributions.

This is an important issue, and we need to look at why things have changed and why this service has become necessary. We also need to look at why it needs further support. Things change generally because of changed circumstances. The way that our society used to be structured meant that people could use this scheme for shopping or for personal business. That included access to local health services, local pharmacies, post office or banking services, training and employment, or visiting family and friends. Those are all laudable things that used to be available because of the way that we lived. Somewhere near people's houses was a shop that they could walk to that stocked goods that they needed and that they could buy and get home reasonably easily. The issue now is that everything is centralised, be they medical and health services, shopping, banking, or a whole range of other things. People used to access those services by necessity, and they were

accompanied by social interchange and gave people the notion that they were not alone. However, that has gone.

Mr Beggs said that it would take three and a half hours to get from Larne to Antrim Area Hospital for a 10.00 am appointment and three and a half hours back. Presumably, that does not mean a young person or somebody possessed of great physical strength. Rather, it means somebody who is in some way infirm or who needs to get to the hospital but does not have a car and needs someone to take them. In this part of the United Kingdom, that seems an astonishingly long time to spend to access a basic service on which your physical well-being can depend.

Once again, we here have a chance to do something that is not only right but that will necessitate not just one Minister but many making an effort. Money is in silos to some degree, and, as in life, if a Government have sufficient money, they can pretty much do whatever they want. Ian McCrea spoke very well, and he said that he hoped that the message about the funding would get across to the Minister. The Minister looked as though he really hoped that the funding would follow the good wishes that Ian gave him. No one in their right mind would try to prevent the notion that people in need should be facilitated.

This particular service offers value for money and human contact to those of our citizens who are now, in some circumstances, bereft of such contact. It also brings forward the notion that we, as a society, can do things for each other. If local people were to provide a local service for local needs, in my view, it could be done less expensively, more humanely and better.

The issue between the amendment and the motion is, again, a matter of some interest. I did not think that I would stand in this Chamber to state that, on a matter of social importance, Sinn Féin has not gone far enough on this occasion. It limited its delivery largely to the health service, although there were some interesting contributions. I am not sure whether it was a slip of the tongue, but I picked up somewhere on Seán Lynch asking the House to support the motion as amended. I believe that that was possibly a slip of the tongue, but the truth is that I and we believe that, if it were amended, the motion would go further and would give us a chance to seek a solution once and for all.

It will be dependent not only on the Minister for Regional Development but on all the other ministries that have an input or can take funding.

Mr F McCann: I accept and understand that. However, let us look at the history and tradition of this place. Neighbourhood renewal is a classic example. We have been saying that we will get all the Ministers and all the Departments together to work out how to move that matter forward. Earlier, I said in my intervention that the motion is specific to health issues. It is to try to ensure that people do not fall through the cracks. As regards what you are talking about, we could be sitting here in the next mandate still talking about it because there is no push on it. We are being very specific in what we are arguing for in the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Member for those comments, which took about 23 seconds of the extra minute that I gained from the intervention.

The truth is that, as the Minister said, the most serious elements in the health service are already a statutory provision for the Health Department. Although we can paper the cracks, as you have referred to the issue, I believe that we should take the opportunity to address it holistically and, once and for all —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr Copeland: — settle the notion that we can provide this service more effectively and more properly for the benefit of the people.

Mr Ó hOisín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chuid freagraí go dtí seo. I think that there has been more winding-up done here today, and I do not want to cover anything that has already been wound-up.

I certainly support the motion. I appreciate the nuances between what Michael Copeland and my colleague here said in respect of the motion.

I pay tribute to the Community Transport Association and, indeed, to community transport charities that provide access to healthcare in the rural hinterlands. I pay particular tribute to Billy Moore in the North Coast Community Transport Partnership, which operates in my area, and to Paddy McEldowney for his Easilift scheme. I meet Billy regularly. He has gone from having 30 volunteer drivers initially to

somewhere in the region of 4,000. They carry out some 65,000 journeys in a year. That shows the depth and value that community transport charities have in our communities.

My colleague Oliver McMullan related the fact that a three-bus journey was required to get into Belfast from the glens of Antrim. I know of an area, only 15 miles from Derry city, where a four-bus journey is required to access Altnagelvin Area Hospital.

Stewart Dickson outlined the dichotomy between the service and the service provision. Cancelling an appointment is often not an option, given that you might have to wait for six or nine months to reschedule an appointment. Therefore, that is not an option for many people.

Joe Byrne rightly touched on the proposed co-operation between DARD, the Health Department and the Finance Department. I welcome the fact that the Minister has outlined the fact that an interdepartmental meeting on the issue will, indeed, be proposed. Likewise, I welcome the fact that the Chair of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has announced an inquiry into the provision of the service to rural communities. I look forward to the discussion on that matter in Committee.

The Minister fully recognised the interdepartmental nature of rural transport provision. He outlined the fact that it should complement the work of the other agencies. However, a few short weeks ago in the House, the Health Minister said that his priority was health not transport. If the Health Department invested into DARD's rural transport fund, that fund could be extended to provide the community transport operators with the ability to meet the health transport needs of people unable to access conventional public transport. It is really that simple. If only there was a way for departments to share budgets. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the DRD have a very successful partnership through the assisted rural travel scheme, whereby DARD invests money through the DRD to enable rural dwellers to use their SmartPass on dial-a-lift services. Joe Byrne touched on that point.

Minister, more than a brief discussion is perhaps required. This should be looked at

sooner rather than later. I welcome the entire debate. It was a bit parochial in places but that is to be expected. I hope that Members will support the motion and the amendment.

1.30 pm

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the dependency that our rural communities have on the community transport scheme for medical visits and access to other local services; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to work closely with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that this service is sustained to facilitate the most vulnerable people in our society.

Public Sector Pensions

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As two amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly believes that the proposed increases in public sector pension contributions are wrong and unjustified and that they will have a significant adverse impact on many workers; calls on the British Government to respond positively to the trade unions' proposals on pension reform and funding; and further calls on the Executive to review and reverse their decision of September 2011 to impose a 3.2% increase on contributions by members of the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee scheme.

The importance of this issue to public service workers and users of public services manifested itself last week when thousands stood on picket lines and attended rallies across the North. Their message was loud and clear: it is not about self-preservation; it is about fairness and justice. Why should ordinary, hard-working people be penalised for the reckless actions of bankers? Public servants are being unfairly targeted in a bid to solve a financial crisis that was not of their making. Not only is it an attack by the coalition Government on their pockets, which will result in, on average, £63 a month less in take-home pay, it is also an attack on their morale and can only adversely affect the delivery of services that already have to operate in an ever increasingly difficult financial context.

Across the UK, 20% of people have a stake in public sector pension schemes, either living on the pension or currently contributing. Here in Northern Ireland, 28.5% of our workforce is employed in the public sector, which means that the imposition of the reforms will have a disproportionate effect here. That is why it is so important that we, as an Assembly, and our Executive must accept that we have a role and influence in the measures, particularly regarding the pensions of Northern Ireland

Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC) members.

The Executive considered the issue on 22 September. With the exception of my party colleague Alex Attwood, they agreed to adopt the 3.2% increase across the board with no exemptions. I welcome the U-turn by Sinn Féin; it now agrees that NILGOSC members should be excluded. The NILGOSC scheme is self-funded. Unlike other pension schemes, whose contributions go into central Exchequer funds, the NILGOSC scheme contributions are retained by the scheme. Those pensions fall within our control. We should follow the example of Scotland, which has exempted its corresponding schemes from the cuts. We must stand up as a devolved Government and show that we are not here to just rubber-stamp Tory policy. We must aspire to our own economic policies and focus on stimulating the economy and creating jobs. Taking money out of people's pockets will do little to do that.

We fear that increased contribution demands will lead to more people opting out of schemes, which will ultimately cost the Government's social security budget later. I recognise that amendment No 1 calls for continued, and, I hope, intensified, negotiations between the Government and trade unions. We support that. However, the fact is that, while negotiations have been ongoing, the coalition Government have jumped the gun and enforced changes — changes that are already impacting on many people who are a million miles away from receiving the gold-plated pension schemes that some parties and sections of the media would happily have the public believe all public sector workers get as a right.

I spoke to people on picket lines at Altnagelvin Hospital, Derry City Council offices, Translink offices and a few other places in my constituency last week and to employees in this very Building today. Those workers are as susceptible as anyone else to tax increases, inflation, the rising cost of living and the draconian measures of welfare reform that are coming fast. We have a moral responsibility to protect them. Pay freezes, recruitment moratoriums and, now, an attack on their pensions — it is no wonder our public sector workers are taking to the streets.

In real terms, the change to the inflation measure for payment of public service pensions

from the retail price index (RPI) to the consumer price index (CPI) will cut the value of a public service pension by around 15% over the period of someone's retirement. There are also implications for workers in certain professions having to work longer, and I am thinking of firefighters and paramedics, among others.

I appeal to Members to support the motion today. We must not fall victim to the divide-and-rule approach of the Tory-led coalition Government. They are happy to demonise unions and have private sector workers turn on public sector workers, and vice versa, in a blame game with no winner, and they would be happy to see us do the same today.

I see merit in both amendments. However, I will find it very difficult to support amendment No 1, because it virtually emasculates the motion, although I have already agreed on the need for further negotiation. Amendment No 2, tabled by Sinn Féin, calls for the exemption of NILGOSC members and of workers earning under £32,000, but it does not go quite far enough. Many people earning over that amount are the sole breadwinners in their house, and we would be loath to see them have to carry an even heavier burden in any inequitable new scheme. The motion aspires to oppose any increases in public service worker contributions, and we feel that our accepting amendment No 2 might be seen as an acceptance of such increases and cause division in the sector when, now more than ever, unity is required. We do, however, note that the suggestion could be explored further.

Mr Cree: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert:

"recognises the fundamental changes to public sector pension provision across the United Kingdom; expresses disappointment that a resolution could not be found and that strike action was deemed necessary by trade unions; and calls on the trade unions and the UK Government to continue negotiations with a view to finding a solution and preventing further strike action in the future on this matter."

I support the amendment tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party. At the outset, I confirm that my party and I are fully aware of the importance of pensions. Indeed, in another life, I was a trustee of a national pension scheme, so I am well aware of the benefits of final salary pension schemes. I recognise that many people pay a significant amount of money into a pension pot

to enable them to enjoy their retirement and to maintain a good standard of living as they get older. We all aspire to that. Indeed, many will recognise the truism that pensions are really deferred pay. We are indebted to many public sector workers — doctors, nurses, teachers and civil servants — who all contribute to Northern Ireland as a whole and who are fundamental to the health service, the education system and other Departments.

The Ulster Unionist Party recognises the fundamental changes that are being proposed to public sector pension provision across the whole of the United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) has stated that for someone on a salary of £15,000, the proposals would result in the payment of an extra £37.50 in contributions a month. For someone on £40,000, that equates to an extra £100 a month. I understand that that is not inconsiderable or insignificant, especially during a time of austerity. However, the Treasury has made it clear that those who are 10 years or less from retirement on 12 April 2012 are assured that there will be no detriment to their retirement income, which is an issue that has not come out very clearly in the press.

As Mr Durkan outlined, the pension proposals have been brought forward following extensive research by the coalition Government. Lord Hutton led the independent commission, which produced its final report in March 2010. Its findings were clear. First, people are living longer, which means that the number of pensioners will continue to increase. Secondly, there is an imbalance between employee and taxpayer contributions; it is, therefore, only right that public sector workers are on an even playing field. Thirdly, the final salary scheme is unfairly biased towards higher earners.

Those are not the views of the Ulster Unionist Party; they are the findings of Lord Hutton, a former Labour Minister, and they were echoed by Danny Alexander, the Liberal Democrat Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and by George Osborne, the Conservative Chancellor. Those views represent all shades of Government. Therefore, it seems that there is broad consensus among political parties in Westminster that public sector pension reform needs to occur.

Of course, the current economic climate also needs to be taken into consideration. We are all familiar with the effect that the downturn has had on our near neighbour, the Republic of Ireland, countries such as Greece and Portugal, and, indeed, the euro zone in general. All of them are struggling. Public sector pension reform must be considered in that context.

On many occasions during the past few weeks, the Ulster Unionist Party has reiterated that it supports anyone's right to strike. However, my party's amendment underlines our disappointment that the dispute reached that stage. We would, of course, have liked to see a resolution that would have rendered such action unnecessary. Negotiations between trade unions and the UK Government did not bring about a positive outcome; that is why we are urging that those negotiations continue to find a solution. That can be the only sensible way forward.

It is of the utmost importance that we avoid a repetition of Wednesday 30 November 2011. It is any worker's right to partake in strike action. However, the cost to the economy was millions of pounds, with some estimates as high as £500 million. We cannot afford industrial action; therefore, we must find an equitable solution for all parties involved. For that reason, I support my party's amendment.

Mr McLaughlin: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "Executive" and insert:

"to respond to this imposition in a manner which excludes members of the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee scheme; notes the proposal by the Minister of Education to exclude all other public sector workers who earn less than £32,000 per year; and calls on all Ministers to explore similar options."

I speak in favour of amendment No 2, which has been tabled by my party, and to oppose amendment No1, which has been offered by the Unionist Party. My party's view could be characterised as disappointed but not surprised by the Unionist Party's amendment, given that that party campaigned for the Tories during the recent general election. The Assembly should not be particularly shocked that the Unionist Party now supports and slavishly accepts the outworking of Tory policies.

My party was drawn to the argument that some public sector workers who are members of the NILGOSC scheme, as opposed to the general

scheme, would be asked to pay twice. It was reasonable to consider the impact of that. We have made it explicit in our amendment that we support the exclusion of NILGOSC workers. That will benefit some 44,000 people, or 20%, of a public sector workforce of 220,000. My party is also concerned about the remaining 80%, many of whom are in the lower-paid category. The proposed 3.2% across-the-board pension levy would impact significantly on those people.

We ask the SDLP to consider our amendment. It was not clear in Mark H Durkan's opening remarks whether his party was prepared to offer any solace to those public sector workers who would benefit from exactly the same concerns that are reflected in the SDLP's position on NILGOSC. We ask the party to extend that to the wider public sector. Based on some economic modelling that was done in the Department of Education, the second largest spending Department, Sinn Féin suggests that we use our powers, limited though they are, to take an approach that was invited by the cavalier response from Westminster. That response was that we had to impose the levy or they would simply deduct the £140 million each year for a three year period and get their money anyway. In doing so, they offered clear evidence that parity, as an argument, did not apply, and that they were determined to get their pound of flesh.

1.45 pm

We are proposing a much more equitable approach for the less well paid members of the public sector. We are offering that protection, and we are doing it on the basis that we are satisfied with the economic modelling. If that modelling can be done in one Department, especially one of the larger Departments, it can be applied across all of the Departments.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. One of the concerns that the SDLP has with the Sinn Féin amendment relates to those workers who earn more than £32,000 a year. Sinn Féin has not provided the information on how much more those workers would be likely to pay, and they could end up paying 7% or 8% to make up for those who earn less. Without that detail, we find it hard to support the amendment.

Mr McLaughlin: I resist the temptation to say this, but you could research the issue, and perhaps it should be considered. Focusing on a scheme that benefits 20% of the public sector

does not meet the challenge or the reasons why so many public sector workers went on strike last week. We must demonstrate a commitment to protect front line services, which means protecting, to the extent that we can, our block grant settlement. We must also find a scheme through which the better paid — some public sector workers are very well paid — could support the levy that is being applied to the public sector pension scheme.

Our argument is that we should keep as many options open as possible, and our amendment invites other Ministers to do what the Minister of Education has done. He went to his Department and asked his officials to run some financial modelling on how this could be applied, and that is where the figure of £32,000 came from. We sought to establish a threshold that people would regard as reasonable in protecting the less well paid and the budget for our front line services. We also sought to acknowledge that those who are in the middle or higher levels of the public sector are capable of paying the levy and the recalculated levy through which the Westminster Government is clawing back their money.

That is the basis of our proposition. I hope that the party opposite, the DUP, which, in the past, has taken a similar line to us in these matters, will distance itself from simply accepting Tory policy and applying it, which is what the Unionist Party amendment invites us to do. That party is asking us to wash our hands of the problem, to say that it is not our problem, that we have no say in it and that we should simply apply it and blame Westminster. We can do more than that, we can do better than that, and our amendment identifies how we can do that. We must set a threshold. Let the other Ministers check with their Departments, do the modelling and come back to the Executive and inform the debate. That is the basis of our amendment.

Mr Hamilton: I support the amendment tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party. I think that it is a solid, sound and sensible amendment. They are labels —

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Do not go overboard.

Mr Hamilton: I have been encouraged not to go overboard, and I assure the Minister that I only said that for effect. Those are labels that I could not apply to the motion tabled by the SDLP or to the amendment tabled by Sinn Féin.

The DUP will not, during this debate or at any time, demonise anyone who was on strike last week or who chooses to take action. Although there was inherent protection for the low paid in the Executive's decision of 22 September, that followed the decisions that were taken at Westminster and a proposal to taper and phase-in the increases, we understand that there will be some who will be negatively affected and who will receive a pay cut as a result of the changes proposed by Her Majesty's Government. We have some sympathy for those individuals. We think that it was wrong, though, mid-negotiation, while an improved offer was put on the table, to go out on strike. I question the merit of having the strike. The only damage that it appeared to do was to those people who would have availed themselves of public services last week. Indeed, having spoken to many people in the private sector last week, as I do most weeks, I know that there is bafflement at what is being done in the public sector among people who have endured not just wage freezes but wage cuts and who would look enviously at the pensions being offered to many in the public sector.

I want to make another observation. The SDLP motion says that the proposed increases in public sector pensions are wrong and unjustified. If we were facing a scenario in which public sector pensions were being increased, we would not be debating that issue, nor would there be any public sector strikes. The Members opposite mean the proposed increases in contributions as opposed to increases in public sector pensions. I wonder how the public purse would afford that. It raises questions about the argument being put forward by the SDLP, but it is a stupidity that one comes to expect from that party, and I am concerned that it is being aped by Sinn Féin as well.

The basic point that we are putting forward is that you cannot play reckless games of Russian roulette with the principle of parity in relation to public sector pensions. You would not want to do it with social security either. It is a reckless, dangerous game to play, and the consequence of not following it, which is what is being encouraged by some in this House, is that ultimately, by 2015, the Northern Ireland block grant will be hit by £140 million a year repeating. Each and every year we would have that amount taken out of our block grant.

I agree with the Education Minister, who said that having to deal with that level of cuts on top of everything else that we have had to deal with could only affect front line education services as well as health services, local government, housing, and so forth. Those are the consequences of breaching parity. Even union leaders in Northern Ireland know that, in the long term, maintaining parity is to the benefit of public sector workers here.

The SDLP talks about Scotland as if it were a paragon of virtue on this issue. After a lot of huffing and puffing, the Scottish Government left it to scheme managers in local government to take the decisions that they do not have the courage to take. They also want to create, as endorsed by Sinn Féin, two tiers of public sector workers — those who pay increased contributions and those who do not. Why, instead of having pay parity, would you want to have that breach? Why would you want to have different sets of public sector workers in Northern Ireland?

The NILGOSC scheme is different — it is a funded scheme — but there is still a substantial deficit of around £800 million, which has nearly doubled in the past three years. That has, somehow, to be covered in the longer term, and it will have to be done through employer contributions if the Members opposite have their way. Although it does not have an effect on the block grant, as they rightly say, it has an effect on the amount of money that can be provided for front line services in housing, local government, education and transport in Northern Ireland. There is an impact on public sector spending in Northern Ireland as a result.

The Sinn Féin proposal sets an arbitrary cap at £32,000. As Pat Ramsey observed, the consequence of that would be great if it resulted in an increase of only 7% or 8%. That would be modest. In the Civil Service scheme alone, 16% of workers would then have to pay what the other 84% are not paying. That would have a devastating impact on those who would have to pay it. This is absolute madness. The Executive have taken a decision, which is binding on all Ministers, those from Sinn Féin and the SDLP included. We play fast and loose with pension parity at our peril.

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

Mr Hamilton: What we have before us is nothing but posturing and playing political games for the benefit of people outside, when they should be thinking about what is in the best interests of everybody in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. Although I appreciate that Members have a range of opinions on the matter, and that consensus may be an unrealistic objective, I believe that a number of valid points have been raised that we need to consider.

Coming on the back of last week's public sector strikes, which were well evidenced across Northern Ireland as well as on our front lawn, it is a particularly sensitive and relevant issue, as the consequences of any decisions made will have an impact on those whom we know and work with regularly. The public sector represents a huge percentage of the labour market in our society, and the level of performance and dedication offered in its service to our public should never be overlooked or undermined. Members will know that, in the past, when pitted against the private sector, the public sector was viewed as below par on salary scales, but because of that disparity, certain benefits were afforded to public sector workers in recognition of their service, including significant maternity and sickness arrangements, enhanced financial insurance schemes that were unavailable elsewhere and superior pension provisions.

In recent years, we have seen a role reversal between the public and private sectors, and a rise in public sector salaries has helped to redress the traditional economic balance between the two. As a result, the public sector is now generally better paid and pensioned as well as boasting a faster increase in the rate of pay, and a salary gap has subsequently emerged between the two sectors in the opposite direction. However, greater alignment is still achievable and necessary, and government proposals for reform seek to take into account the sustained ambiguities between the public and private sectors.

We cannot escape the fact that we have an ageing population. Employees in the private and public sector are working longer, which translates into an increased financial commitment bearing down on the public purse. We need to address that not only because it is unfair but because it serves as a barrier to rebalancing our economy

from an over-reliance on the public sector. Reform of the current system is now necessary, given the growing cost to the taxpayer. Public service pensions have increased by one third in the past 10 years to £32 billion, and the Office for Budget Responsibility predicts that, without reform, spending on pensions will rise by £7 billion over the next five years. In 1970, pension costs accounted for just 1% of GDP, yet today they stand closer to 2%, which is more than what is spent in total on courts, prison and police services.

Under the proposals set out by Westminster, individual pension contributions from public sector workers would increase by 3.2 percentage points with a staggered phasing-in period to be implemented between 2012 and 2014. As a counterweight against those increases, lower-paid public sector workers who earn less than £15,000 would face no increase, and those who earn less than £18,000 would have their contributions capped at 1.5%. The implications of the proposed changes were well summarised by Francis Maude MP with his analysis that the new measures, including a shift away from final salary schemes to a scheme based on average income, would leave the poorest paid public sector workers better off in the long term. Even taking into account any increase in personal contributions, these remain first-rate pensions that are markedly superior to those available in the private sector. In line with the reform, commitments have also been given to retain a form of defined benefit pension and protection of accrued rights to ensure that those within 10 years of retirement would neither have to work longer nor see their pension income reduced.

As a party, we have been consistent on our position on public sector pension regulation, as evidenced in Westminster where our East Belfast MP Naomi Long voted against RPI and CPI uprating changes. Although we support the Ulster Unionist Party amendment, it is probably worth highlighting the fact that, had that party succeeded in having any candidates elected to Westminster in the last mandate, it would have voted with the Government on this matter and not against it as we did.

The overarching objective of the reforms must be viewed in perspective, and although we realise that such changes are unfortunate, they are necessary. Those affected both directly and indirectly have just cause to be frustrated, but, arguably, the true source of their anger

should be the free rein that is still afforded to the wealthiest in our society, who are scattered throughout boardrooms across the UK. Those industry elites face no genuine pressure from the Government to show restraint either in salary or bonus payments despite the persistent pressure placed on public sector pay and pensions and the mounting scrutiny of ordinary private sector workers' salaries.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mrs Cochrane: Yes, OK. Thank you.

Mr Girvan: I am in favour of the Ulster Unionist Party amendment, and I feel that there is some merit in its approach. Unfortunately, the unions did not necessarily engage properly with the Government and went down the route of not only costing the country money but doing the same to their members, who have lost pay because of the strike. However, the whole community is suffering greatest, and it lost a lot of services on the day of the strike.

I am not saying that the people who took the opportunity to go out on strike were wrong. There is merit in voicing their opposition to what is being imposed on them by the Westminster Government.

2.00 pm

The issue of parity has been mentioned already this afternoon, and we agree with sticking with parity. This country would lose out in the area of benefits if we were not to do so. Mention has also been made of the £4.6 million that non-implementation of the scheme by April 2012 will cost the Northern Ireland Executive. That will add up to £140 million by 2014, and that money will be removed from direct front line delivery.

The SDLP's proposal focuses on the local government aspect, the NILGOSC scheme. That is only one part of public sector employment. There are six schemes in place, and we have to look at it as a whole. All of those schemes have some burden to bear.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way. Is the Member as surprised as I am that, potentially, the reason for the SDLP's motion sticking to the NILGOSC scheme is that its party's Minister presides over the relevant Department?

Mr Girvan: Thank you for that intervention. That is exactly the point that I was about to come

to. The SDLP is somewhat looking after its own house in the Department for which it has some responsibility.

The fact that we are here today discussing the pension scheme is not just to do with Northern Ireland. There is a world recession, and we have major shortfalls. It is not just the British Government that are suffering but the world's economies. As such, we all have a collective responsibility to try to address some of those measures.

Ms Ritchie: Will the Member accept that the NILGOSC scheme does not deal solely with local government but with people who are in the Fire and Rescue Service and people who are in other branches of that sort of activity? Therefore, the NILGOSC scheme is not solely the responsibility of the Minister of the Environment. In view of that, I ask the Member to correct his position.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Girvan: That makes it even worse. I do not wish to go back into much detail on that.

The Sinn Féin amendment proposes to cap it at £32,000 and have no increase. As other Members have said, that represents almost 84% of public sector employees. The remaining 16% of public sector employees would have to make up the shortfall, and that would be horrendous on a small number. Sinn Féin is the party that talks to us about dealing with everything on the basis of equality. The fairer way forward is to ensure that those who are definitely at the lower end, earning £15,000 and below, pay nothing additional and that those who earn less than £20,000 have a small increase.

The pension burden on our GDP was mentioned. People are living longer, and that is to be welcomed, but it also adds to the burden. For those people who are employed in the public sector, what is coming in through that money is what is paid out in the pension schemes. Unfortunately, with our shrinking public sector, we will be looking at an ever-increasing deficit. Therefore, it is important that we keep parity with the rest of the United Kingdom so that the Executive are not left carrying the can. That is the way forward. I support the Ulster Unionist Party amendment.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is unfortunate that we are having this debate, and we are doing so because there has been an attack on pension schemes. Some reports say quite clearly that there was a robbery on the pension scheme where people paid in all their lives for a pension — *[Interruption.]*

Sorry? If people want to raise a point of order or ask me something, then I will sit down, but they should not make snide remarks.

The point is that there was a robbery. Public sector workers have been putting their money into pension schemes all their lives, and yet they are being asked to work longer and pay more money because the money is not there to meet their needs when they come to retirement age.

Just to clarify, NILGOSC includes Fire Brigade workers and, I think, employees of the education and library boards and some health trusts. So it is a wider range of individuals rather than just those in areas under the Department of the Environment.

In west Belfast last Wednesday, I went round many of the picket lines with party colleagues, speaking to many of the people who thought that it was necessary and in their best interests to take some sort of action to put a halt to that. Instead of some of us walking through the picket lines, some of us stood on the picket lines and engaged with people and talked to them about the issues they are facing now and will face in the future.

Many I spoke to were very low paid workers. Many earn under £32,000. Our amendment is to try to protect people who earn £32,000 or less. I would genuinely ask the SDLP to read our amendment again. We are calling on all Ministers to explore that and similar options. I do not know how the SDLP cannot support that, because it is about exploring and getting the facts and figures correct before we move the issue on. So I ask the SDLP again to reconsider their stance on that amendment.

I listened to Leslie Cree, and no doubt we will hear from other members of the Ulster Unionist Party. We saw people such as David Cameron standing beside the Ulster Unionist Party just prior to the Westminster election last year. The Ulster Unionist Party in this day and age obviously still supports the Conservative Party. The fact of the matter, however, is that its

amendment is endorsing near enough what the Conservatives are trying to do here, namely, to railroad people into having to pay the maximum amount.

The British Government allowed the robbery on the pension schemes, and it is a shame that people are supporting that. The motion and the UUP's amendment allow them a free way out of that and provide a bit of wriggle room. It is unfortunate that the DUP has now jumped onto that bandwagon and seems to be supporting Tory policy when it comes to some of the cuts in some services, especially to the pension schemes here in the North.

As I said, however, I met and talked to people who earn very little money, and a lot of them come from where I live and the area I represent. It is about protecting the most vulnerable. If we can do nothing else, we need to do that: protect the most vulnerable. That is a big issue and a big challenge for us all. That will not be an easy issue for any of us to tackle, but people are being victimised. Low-paid workers will be roped into that scheme to pay an extra 3.2% into their pension schemes. They will not be retiring with any better pension. In fact, they will be worse off. If anything, we can send out the message today: let us protect the lowest paid workers.

Mr Weir: Obviously, there is a lot of sensitivity about this motion and this issue. We need to be mindful that a lot of workers are very concerned about the state of their pensions. There is a very genuine issue, and I can understand people being concerned.

However, it does not help if there is a degree of cant and hypocrisy. I note, for example, the previous Member accusing ourselves of, in some way, jumping onto some Tory bandwagon. That seems quite strange, given that his own party voted for exactly the same proposals only a few weeks ago at the Executive. I do not know whether there has been some form of Damascus conversion, or whether Saul Maskey has become Paul Maskey. I do not know. However, it does seem that there has been a degree of conversion on the other side.

Let us be honest: there is a very serious issue here. In trying to find a solution to the pensions issue, we have to realise that if you shift the burden from one group of workers, you are simply placing it elsewhere. We are in a very different situation to the one we were in many years ago.

As has been indicated, the ageing population has an impact. We cannot simply close our eyes and pretend that this is not happening. People are living longer. I do not need to say that in this Chamber, because sometimes when you are sitting in this Chamber it feels like you are living an awful lot longer. The actuarial statistics show that life expectancy is going up. That is not going to change. As years move on, that will become a greater burden. We need to ensure that the pensions system is fair and equitable.

Are we in the exact position where people should be signing off? I do not think that we are. To be fair to the Ulster Unionist amendment, it points to the need for further talks between the Government and the unions across the UK to try to reach an equitable solution. Let us remember that the cases for welfare reform and pension reform are inescapable.

This is largely based on the Hutton report. John Hutton, to be fair to him, is not a prototype Conservative; he has not even been a member of the Ulster Unionist Party at any stage. He is actually a former Labour Cabinet Minister. *[Interruption.]* I will be happy to give way.

We all have sins in our past that we have to confess to, but, to be fair to John Hutton, he is not someone who can confess to membership of either the Ulster Unionist Party or the Conservative Party. Anybody looking at this from a dispassionate point of view will see that there is a need for pension reform. There is a need for change, and there is no getting away from that. We would all like to see a solution emerge that has a national buy-in, and there is clearly more work to be done. As John Hutton said at the weekend, the general direction of travel that the reform needs to go in and its broad bones have been set. That is something that, ultimately, will have to be embraced.

One of the problems that I have with both amendments is that they disaggregate different forms of workers. It has been rightly pointed out that the NILGOSC proposals go beyond local government to a range of other workers: they take a chunk of workers in the public sector and put them in a completely different place to the rest of the workers. As Paul Girvan said, that, if anything, makes it worse.

Similarly, Sinn Féin's proposals are at least monetarily based. However, I am surprised at the figure of £32,000 being picked. As I am sure that the Sinn Féin Members can testify,

that is considerably above the average industrial wage. I am sure they know that from their own pay packets that come home each week. Again, that is simply an exercise in shifting the burden.

Either amendment would cost the block grant a large amount of money or, alternatively, cost other civil servants money. Pitting one group of public servants against another is shifting the burden. In the Sinn Féin amendment, some people at the upper end can opt out of the system, which simply places a much greater burden on a smaller number of people.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mitchel McLaughlin said that Westminster was quite happy to concede that there does not need to be parity on this. That should be a warning bell to all of us. Let us remember that in his statement last week, George Osborne raised the issue of regional pay settlements for public sector workers. The Government seem quite keen to break parity. That is a grave danger, and if we start breaking parity on pensions or wages, the people who will suffer in the long term will be public sector workers in Northern Ireland. So, the routes proposed by the SDLP and Sinn Féin are very foolish.

Mr McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Unfortunately, my time is up.

We need to stick with parity. We need to see a national agreement on this. Therefore, I support the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment.

Mr Nesbitt: I feel that I should begin by declaring an interest, because I am in receipt of a pension that is largely funded by the taxpayer. That comes after many years of working in the private sector where my attitude was much more of a hokey-cokey: in when I could afford it, but more often out.

A few years ago when I joined the Victims' Commission, I was briefed on the pension that I would receive as a commissioner. I found the employer contribution to be quite eye-watering. I accept that that was at the high end and that not all public sector pensions are particularly fulsome. However, I think the point needs to be made that all 108 MLAs are in receipt of such pensions, unless Sinn Féin Members, who take the industrial wage rather than the full salary, want to correct me. I do not know whether your contribution from your employer — the taxpayer — is to the value of the industrial wage or of the

full £43,000. Perhaps we can clarify that as we go along.

2.15 pm

Mr Weir: Perhaps there is a Sinn Féin retirement home for former MLAs and workers; maybe that is where a section of that money is going.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I was asking a serious question around clarification. I am simply not sure whether it is based on the industrial wage or on the full £43,000.

I support amendment No 1, not the proposed motion, and in order to explain why, I will go through it line by line. It begins by stating:

"this Assembly believes that the proposed increases in public sector pension contributions are wrong and unjustified".

Like Mr Hamilton, I will focus on the phrase "wrong and unjustified". I could have lived with the increases being described as "regrettable"; "as small as possible"; or that they should have been "an action of last resort". Indeed, I believe all three things are the case. However, to call them "wrong and unjustified" flies in the face of the reality of, for example, an Taoiseach's speech to the people of the Republic of Ireland last night, which warned of the economic times ahead. Perhaps Mr Maskey feels that the speech was written for him by David Cameron, but I think it might have been his own work. That phrase denies the reality of more emergency talks today between France and Germany on the problem of debt, and in the word "debt" we have the clue. We are all in debt, and we cannot go on as we are.

Many retired people look to enjoying themselves in a variety of ways; one great source of enjoyment for many is their families, particularly their grandchildren. Today, there will be a newborn or two coming out of our maternity wards. Each will have a little red book that they are given by the Health Service to monitor their health, but as well as having that in one hand, metaphorically speaking, in the other there will be an invisible invoice that will represent their share of today's £120 million that the Government must spend on servicing debt rather than funding services.

The reason why pension contributions have to go up is because of our debt. Currently, the United Kingdom makes £48.6 billion in debt interest payments annually. To put that in context, it would fund 1.5 million nurses; 1.2 million teachers; 1.1 million police officers; or 399,000 general practitioners. It is a question of debt and affordability and, although that is a matter for regret, it does not make what is happening wrong or unjustified.

Secondly, the motion:

“calls on the British Government to respond positively to the trade unions’ proposals”.

That tries to impose a prejudged outcome. I would rather call on both sides to enter positively into further negotiations in the attempt to find a reasonable solution. I am not sure what benefit anyone got from the strike last week, but I imagine that it at least gave many on the picket line the opportunity to vent their anger and frustration.

On a personal basis, I would like to compliment those on the picket line at Massey Avenue, who, as I entered the building last week, were extremely polite when handing over their little information leaflet explaining —

Mr Wilson: There was a better class of pickets on Massey Avenue.

Mr Nesbitt: That may well be, Mr Wilson. They very politely accepted the leaflet that I gave to them explaining why I felt I had to cross the picket line.

Finally, the motion calls on the Executive to reverse their decision to impose an increase of 3.2% on contributions by members of NILGOSC. It seems to me that the Assembly and Executive have no more spare cash than the Government at Westminster. It is not necessarily a proposal that I believe is grounded in the real world.

The Executive are struggling for money, Westminster is struggling for money and Europe is struggling for money. We are in a global recession, and it seems to me that if there were the sort of money available to fund what the SDLP proposes — or Sinn Féin in amendment No2 — we could do what Mr Maskey was calling for, which is to target it. I suggest that we would do better by targeting those in fuel poverty and particularly the most vulnerable. They are the people most likely to die over the course of another cold winter. I support amendment No 1.

Dr McDonnell: I want to say at the outset that the SDLP is committed to opposing the proposed changes to pension contributions. We argue that the best approach is to support the union proposals, made in their recent negotiations, as a proper way through the issue. Indeed, our Minister Alex Attwood was the only Minister to vote against the proposals when they came before the Executive recently.

There is a lot of confusion around some of the amendments, particularly the Sinn Féin amendment. It is right in principle, but it is a bit muddled in detail. In reference to Mr McLaughlin's comments earlier, I think it would be appropriate if Sinn Féin had done some meaningful research into financial modelling for that amendment, because, from where I am standing, it is hard to see it as anything other than a smoke cloud to confuse the position that Sinn Féin has already taken at Executive level. Mr Hamilton seemed to have a difficulty in reading the motion, so I want to point out that the motion states quite clearly that it is about pension contributions. I refer him back to the detail of the motion.

Public servants did not create the financial crisis, yet, to all intents and purposes, they seem to be unfairly targeted in solving the financial crisis. The proposed 3.2% rise in pension contributions means an average of something like £63 per month is taken out of their take-home pay. Whatever way that target is achieved and whatever variable there is, it will come back on the pension members. The Westminster Government have been negotiating with unions about changes to the pension schemes, and, to my mind, the unions have been co-operative, yet the Government have jumped the gun and forced those changes.

There are other options that the Government could have considered, including a tax on bank transactions. Earlier, we put forward various ways and means — some 57 options or costed money-raising ideas — to fill the £4 billion funding gap in our document 'Partnership and Economic Recovery'. We regret that that was substantially ignored.

I want to turn briefly to the NILGOSC scheme. That scheme is self-funded. It should have no relevance. Unlike other pension schemes, where contributions go into the central Exchequer, the NILGOSC scheme contributions are retained by the scheme itself and invested. It is a fully

funded scheme, and, in my mind and the mind of many others, there is no need for it to —

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that many in the private sector — some 66% — do not have any pension scheme, and that their rates, like everyone else's, have been continually increased to fund that scheme?

Mr Speaker: Dr McDonnell, you have a minute added on to your time.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I fully accept that, and I fully accept that there is a case for a comparison between the private sector and public sector, but that is not the issue here. The issue here is that pension schemes are being loaded to sort out the financial crisis that we are in. I happen to feel that it is unfair that those things should be unilaterally loaded.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Dr McDonnell: Sorry, I have given way once.

The NILGOSC scheme is fully funded. I understand that, even in the present situation, when they have their investments made, it is 85% covered, even in this difficult financial time. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue. It is quite obvious that the Member has no intention of giving way.

Dr McDonnell: We cannot have a granny state all the time. The NILGOSC scheme is quite capable of funding itself. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Beggs: Its deficit has doubled in three years.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr McDonnell: If I could respond to that silly remark: it is entitled. It is a private scheme that is run outside the state service, and, therefore, it is entitled. Equities are very far down at the moment. Equities will rise, and it will be in surplus. What do you expect them to do when it is in surplus? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Dr McDonnell: The Westminster Government recognise that the scheme is different. It is not being considered as part of the central scheme under the union and government negotiations. A separate employee/employer negotiation is

taking place on the equivalent of the NILGOSC scheme in England and Wales. In Northern Ireland, employers, employees and NILGOSC believe that an agreed way to revise pension provision can be found without the increase in employee contributions. It could be done in a phased and sensible way. The issue is pension reform, and it has to be done sensibly.

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

Dr McDonnell: It cannot be done in blanket format across all the schemes.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time when the next Member to speak will be Steven Agnew.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning

DEL: EU Engagement

1. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he plans to lead a programme of engagement between his Department and the European Union in the next six months. (AQO 898/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Yes. It is clearly important for my Department to maximise the benefits of EU engagement, and I am fully committed to that objective. I want to continue to make the most of the platform offered by the Barroso task force. My Department has already taken the lead on the thematic working group for competitiveness and employment, as well as being an active participant in the working groups for innovation and technology and social cohesion. A wide range of engagement activities is planned; for example, my Department is currently a partner in an application for funds under a progress programme entitled 'Regional Partnerships: activating untapped talent to deliver new skills for new jobs' and as the lead partner for the EU Empowerment and Inclusion Learning Network.

Through the office of the Executive in Brussels, we are engaged with the regional skills education and training network to identify partners for future projects in support of themes in the Northern Ireland skills strategy. The employment service, through the European employment services office, EURES, will be taking part in the European Jobs Fair in 2012. I have established an annual fund of £80,000 to encourage increased participation by the universities in the European framework 7 programme.

To assist my Department and others in our engagement with the European Union, the Executive are currently recruiting four new desk officers for the Executive's office in Brussels in order to improve contacts with EU officials and to help Departments pursue potential funding opportunities. To advance our role in the EU further, I intend to undertake a visit to Brussels within the next few months.

Mr Speaker: Questions 3 and 8 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his detailed response. How successful have Queen's University and the University of Ulster been in attracting research and development funding through the European framework 7 programme?

Dr Farry: It is an area in which we are always looking for continual improvement. Our recent targets in relation to drawdown across the Executive have been met, but we must continue to push ourselves further. It is one of those areas that has been identified where a lot more money could potentially be drawn down.

I am very keen to encourage cooperation between our universities and other research partners. We need to encourage a much more flexible system. At times, the bureaucracy around the framework 7 programme has curtailed some of the opportunities, perhaps needlessly. We need to use the good offices open to us to encourage a much more flexible approach so that we can take further advantage of the opportunities out there.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister has talked about the framework 7 programme. On a recent visit to Europe, we were told about the European social fund and how it is undergoing a lot of change. They are going to try to remove risk and reduce bureaucracy. What interaction has your Department had with our European partners on that important issue?

Mr Speaker: I must say to Members before the Minister answers that they need to continually rise in their places. Rising once will not get you a supplementary question.

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair for his question and welcome him back to these shores. It is an area in which we will want to have constant engagement with the European Commission and one for which we look to expand the office in Brussels so that we can take it forward.

It is important that we stress that the European social fund has been a major boon to Northern Ireland and to the work of my Department. When we look negatively at Europe, as is sometimes our wont in Northern Ireland — which is something I much regret — it is important that we do not lose sight of the importance of the different European funds and how they bring

money into Northern Ireland. Whole swathes of work are undertaken by my Department and through different funding partners whereby we support a lot of community and voluntary interventions, in relation to employability skills in particular, dealing with people who are entirely outside the labour market. That simply would not happen without the assistance of the European Union and, in particular, the European social fund. It is something we will keep a very close eye on.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his responses and his sound pro-European stance.

I had the good fortune recently to visit Brussels along with our colleague Basil McCrea, and we had a very interesting series of meetings and consultations on framework programme 7. I pay tribute to the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels, which is doing a good job, but would it not be appropriate for the Minister to send an official from his Department to that office to augment the complement there and bring about a benefit to its work?

Dr Farry: I take on board the Member's comments, and the spirit in which they were made. There will be four additional staff in that office, and I assume that the intention is to cover the breadth of the different Northern Ireland Departments. Each of the 12 Departments has different types of interaction with Brussels. If we ended up with all 12 Departments sending out departmental representatives, I imagine that there could be accusations of overstaffing and questions over whether that is a wise use of resources. Therefore, it is important that we try to pool resources as best we can. I am very keen to make sure that the voice of my Department and those interests are best represented. The current and newly proposed arrangements should be more than adequate in that regard. However, if they are not, we will keep them under review and come back looking for a stronger voice in the future.

Mr Speaker: Once again, a Member is continually looking up at the Chair. Members might need some training in and around rising in their place to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I, too, was on the trip to Brussels. *[Interruption.]* For research and development purposes, Mr Speaker. I recognise that Mr McCrea is far-sighted and a man of vision. He can look to the future on those areas of skills development, and I appreciated the input that he had on the trip.

Reference was made to the work that is done by the University of Ulster and Queen's University, but surely, as in other countries, there are examples that should be encouraged. Further education colleges elsewhere are engaged in research and development work — some to a very high standard, comparable to that of a university —

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

Mr Newton: We should encourage further education colleges in Northern Ireland to become involved in research and development.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Newton for his question. It is a pity that the Chairperson of the Committee does not have an opportunity to respond to the very leading comments that the Member made.

I take on board the point that the Member makes about further education colleges and their strength in research and development. My Department has an innovation fund, which we are currently examining, that aims to support colleges in how they engage with the business community and in developing new products, services and ideas. The fund is doing extremely well, and we have a number of very good success stories, but, again, there is still room for improvement.

The other point that is worth stressing to Members is that our research and development in Northern Ireland is overly focused on the university sector, with support from the further education sector, and it is not as developed as the private business sector compared with other regions of the European Union and further afield. Therefore, there is an issue.

As much as we encourage research through universities, and I certainly intend to continue doing that, equally we must encourage the private sector to engage in research and development so that we have a more balanced offering, like we do in many other aspects of our economy.

Careers Advice

2. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, given the current economic climate, what action his Department is taking to ensure that young people receive the most up-to-date careers advice. (AQO 899/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department's Careers Service and analytical services team, in conjunction with the sector skills councils, develop and maintain appropriate labour market information, which is used by careers advisers to ensure that young people receive the most up-to-date careers advice. Sector skills councils gather robust and reliable sectoral intelligence, which is a vital part of the skills and workforce planning and development process.

To date, 25 industry fact-sheets have been developed. They provide information on job prospects, relevant skills and entry requirements, as well as highlighting opportunities. All careers advisers are professionally qualified and receive regular professional development to ensure that they are fully up to date with all current and future skills shortages and opportunities.

The careers service has in place partnership agreements with 99% of post-primary schools across Northern Ireland. Those agreements allow schools, in consultation with careers advisers, the opportunity to select from a suite of services appropriate to the needs of their pupils. That includes the offer of an individual careers guidance interview for all year 12 pupils before they decide on their career pathways. Last year, over 20,000 individual career guidance interviews were delivered by careers advisers from my Department. All year 10 pupils are also offered assistance through the provision of group sessions, class talks and parents' evenings. Work is also undertaken with years 13 and 14 pupils on higher education, training and employment choices. In addition, careers advisers provide advice and guidance to young people in training and in further education colleges. That is to ensure that they are aware of the importance of improving qualifications and the up-to-date position regarding the current and future skills needs of employers in Northern Ireland.

Mr Spratt: Does the Minister recognise the difficulty that many university graduates are experiencing in getting jobs in today's economic climate? What is his Department doing to encourage young people to apply for more vocational jobs or apprenticeships?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Spratt for his question. I do not think that anyone is under any illusions regarding the difficulty that people, particularly young people, are having with unemployment and poor job prospects in Northern Ireland.

That applies as much to graduates as it does to anyone else. Nevertheless, it is important that we continue to send out the message that going to university and achieving a degree is a very positive investment for any young person. Figures show that a person with a degree stands a much higher prospect of finding a job than someone without a degree. My Department's skills strategy indicates that the jobs profile in Northern Ireland is going to change significantly over the next 10 years and that we will need more and more people with degree level or equivalent qualifications.

It is critical that the careers service ensures that the advice on the labour market that we are providing is up to date and that, although we accept and respect the choices that people make regarding their future career, we ensure that they do so with as much information as possible on which careers are attractive and opening and which are more competitive and difficult to get into. If we provide that, people will be able to make choices on where there is the highest level of growth and where they will have the best success in building their careers.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chuid freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. What action is the Minister's Department taking to ensure that there is better joined-up thinking between his Department, the Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Flanagan for his supplementary question. He raises an issue that I am mindful of, as are the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Education. I have regular formal meetings with my colleagues, and those are proving to be very useful. At those meetings, we flag up issues that are of mutual interest and areas where there are opportunities and, indeed, about which there are concerns. The Member will appreciate that careers is an area that cuts across my Department and the Department of Education. We have a careers policy in place. It is something that we will want to review within the next couple of years. Although there are aspects that I may wish to move ahead with, I think that both Departments will have a strong interest in having a broad-based review, and I am sure that there is a commitment to doing so within the next couple of years.

Mr P Ramsey: Given the increasing numbers of young people across Northern Ireland who are finding themselves not in education, employment or training, is the Minister content with the quality of careers advice that is being given in schools as part of the wider skills agenda?

Dr Farry: That is something that we will have to look at in the review. In my main answer, I highlighted that we had access to 99% of the post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. I would love that to be 100%. We are almost there, so good progress is being made in that regard. All of our careers advisers are professionals; it is something for which they receive specific training.

I am keen to look at where there are gaps and deficiencies in the current offering and to close them. I am keen to focus more on lifelong learning and careers. We sometimes think of careers advice as applying only to 16- and 18-year-olds as they leave school or university. However, people need to consider careers advice throughout their lives as it is rare for someone to stay in the same career, never mind the same job, for their entire working life. People will be looking to change careers, and it is important for us to make the service as accessible as possible for everybody.

2.45 pm

Mr Lyttle: How satisfied is the Minister with the Department of Education's contribution to careers guidance in our schools? How are we measuring the success of careers guidance outcomes in our schools?

Dr Farry: I respect the partnership and the engagement that we have. However, we have two Departments that move at different paces because we have to implement different aspects of the current careers strategy. Both Departments monitor the issue closely, and both Ministers are very mindful of it. It is of great interest to me and to the Member. All Members need to give the issue their increased attention over the coming months and years.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Queen's University Belfast: Oversubscribed Courses

4. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the oversubscription to the undergraduate and

postgraduate degree programmes at Queen's University Belfast in areas such as food quality, safety and nutrition; land use and environmental management, and agricultural technology. (AQO 901/11-15)

Dr Farry: Queen's University has confirmed that for the 2011-12 academic year, there were 474 applications for undergraduate degree courses offered by the university's Institute of Agri-Food and Land Use in areas related to food quality, safety and nutrition, land use and environmental management and agricultural technology, with 85 students admitted. That compares with 406 applications and 78 students admitted in the previous academic year. For 2011-12 postgraduate entry, 49 applications were received for areas of research carried out by the Institute of Agri-Food and Land Use, with six students enrolled. I welcome the healthy demand for those agrifood courses and research studentships and recognise the important role that Northern Ireland's higher education institutions play in supplying the sector with appropriately skilled individuals.

Similarly, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has confirmed that the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise is also experiencing increased demand for its agrifood courses, with total enrolments on further and higher education courses exceeding 1,000 for the first time in October this year.

A number of courses in the agrifood sector are also available at the University of Ulster and at institutions in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. The Department will continue to provide financial support for eligible students from Northern Ireland who choose undergraduate degree courses at higher education institutions in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland in the 2012-13 academic year.

Mr Frew: How does the Minister intend to increase those numbers when we are so oversubscribed? It is a very important sector, there is great growth in that area, and it is leading the country out of recession. What more can his Department do to increase the number of students here in Northern Ireland?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Frew for his supplementary question. I recognise the importance of the agrifood sector. I met representatives of that sector recently to talk about its skill requirements as it spans the full spectrum of skills training that we have on offer in Northern

Ireland. I have no immediate plans to increase the number of places. It is not my role to increase the number of places; it is a matter for the institutions to respond to the demand. However, no doubt the Member is aware that, on the back of the agreement of the Executive on the future of university funding and tuition fees in Northern Ireland, we secured some additional resources to allow us to expand university places in the first instance, with the option of going back for more. There is a commitment that those will all be within economically relevant science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects, and the key issue is whether some of the agrifood courses will fall into that category. However, that will be for the universities to consider, based on the level of demand. Nevertheless, the door of opportunity is open in that regard.

Mr Cree: Has the Minister any indication as to whether the demand for university places is rising or falling, and what action does he propose to take?

Dr Farry: Clearly, there is increased demand in the specific area of agrifoods, which the question addressed. I think that that reflects the consolidation and growth of that sector in Northern Ireland. We are expecting a higher level of demand overall for higher education places in Northern Ireland on the back of the very welcome decision that we took to essentially freeze tuition fees in line with inflation. That decision was taken in comparison with what was happening in other jurisdictions. Our decision will almost certainly lead to increased demand, in that local students will wish to stay in Northern Ireland, whereas previous cohorts might have considered going to Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland. We do not yet know how big that increase will be, which is why we have made an initial investment for additional places. If necessary, we also have the option of going back to the Executive for more funding to meet increased local demand.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, and I thank the Minister for his answers. What does the Employment and Skills Advisory Group, which the Department set up, say about employment opportunities in the area of food quality, safety and nutrition?

Dr Farry: I thank Ms Boyle for her question. Similar to my other answers, I will say that we recognise fully that that is an area of potential

growth in Northern Ireland. It is also an area from which Northern Ireland is tending to export. The whole drift of the Executive's economic strategy and, indeed, those aspects of the Programme for Government that deal with the economy are about encouraging more export-led growth. We have an existing base for that in the agrifood sector, and there is potential for more. It is also important that we look at the average level of salaries and at how they contribute to the economy. Certainly, my Department stands ready to give any assistance that is required to address the specific needs of any high-growth sector in our economy, and we are very willing to talk to the sector about that.

Graduate Employment

5. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what specific action he is taking to support graduates in finding employment. (AQO 902/11-15)

Dr Farry: The recession and difficulties in the labour market have made it more difficult for many people, graduates and non-graduates alike, to find and to keep a job. That is true in Northern Ireland, the UK as a whole and the Republic of Ireland. The latest data show that 73% of full-time students from Northern Ireland who graduated in 2009-2010 were in work six months after graduation, compared with 71% for the UK as a whole.

My Department has a range of initiatives in place to help graduates to find work. For example, more than 700 graduates have participated in the Department's entry into management programme, which is known as INTRO, and 89% of those who completed that programme went on to attain full-time employment. In addition, 193 graduates have gained relevant work experience on the graduate acceleration programme since it was introduced last year, and, of those, 51% have moved into employment.

My Department also works in collaboration with Invest Northern Ireland, offering other programmes, such as the assured skills programme, which includes graduate conversion programmes, and the software testers academy. The software testers academy is a 14-week training programme that includes a six-week placement with a leading IT company to provide graduates with the skills and experience that are required to apply for software testing

opportunities in the IT industry. That academy is aimed primarily at non-IT graduates, and successful participants will gain an industry-recognised qualification and a potential offer of employment. The Careers Service works closely with the employment service to support unemployed graduates. A pilot exercise involving collaboration with the Law Society to support unemployed law graduates was well received by clients, and consideration will be given to how that type of support can be extended to other sectors.

Future prospects for graduates will be linked to the performance of the labour market, particularly at local level. I trust that the initiatives that my Department outlined and that were mentioned in the draft Programme for Government and the draft economic strategy, which Executive parties support, will enhance people's job prospects, not least those of graduates. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that many commentators remain apprehensive about the prospects for the local, national and European economies.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. He mentioned the GAP NI scheme. Will he reassure the House that all is being done with colleagues in the Department for Social Development (DSD), particularly those in the jobs and benefits office, to make sure that they know about such schemes and their advantages so that graduates can be informed?

Dr Farry: Just to give some background to that, the graduate acceleration programme is part of the Steps to Work programme that my employment service offers.

The programme is delivered using a flexible multi-based approach and is adapted to meet the needs of individual participants. Within the 26-week qualification strands of Steps to Work, the graduate acceleration programme has been specifically developed to meet the needs of unemployed graduates. That element offers them the opportunity to have a work placement and to undertake a qualification to enhance their employability on the back of that. It would not necessarily fall under DSD's remit. When people on jobseeker's allowance come through to my employment service advisers, they will be picked up. We will wish to encourage any graduates in that direction.

It is a scheme that has been developed to recognise the fact that some people entering Steps to Work have advanced skills, in

particular employability skills, and that the general scheme was not appropriate for them. Therefore, the GAP programme exists to provide tailored assistance to people in those circumstances.

Mr Campbell: The Minister outlined the fact that 51% of those who completed the acceleration programme moved into employment. One would presume, therefore, that up to 49% did not. Given that very high rate of graduates being unsuccessful in obtaining employment, has the Minister looked at the numbers of student places for coming years?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Campbell for his question. First, the figure of 51% needs to be looked at in the context of overall levels of graduate employment and, on the contrary, graduate unemployment. It is still better than the population as a whole. Obviously, we are in very difficult and challenging economic times. While we can do a lot to work on people's skills and to give people opportunities, unless demand in the wider labour market gives rise to job opportunities, there will always be difficulty as regards how far we can go to get people into permanent placements. However, we will do everything that we can in that regard. It signals the importance of the Executive working together to address the economy as a whole and to provide people with those opportunities.

We need to give employers a very clear message about the importance of giving people work experience opportunities and work placements. A number of employers in Northern Ireland are very good in that regard. However, a lot more can be done. It is important that we signal to employers that it is not just about their giving something back to society but it is an investment for their companies. If they take someone on board, they may find that that person has the skills and ability to make a contribution to their company. They may offer that person a full-time job on the back of the work placement. We need to encourage employers to think a lot more about work placements.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail what efforts are being made in our local universities — Queen's and the University of Ulster — to help build up a spirit of entrepreneurship among students and to make a real difference in developing their business skills?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McElduff for his question, which highlights an important aspect of what is happening in universities. We are beginning to see a change in culture. It is no longer simply a case of people being encouraged to go down the narrow route of a degree and become qualified in just that particular subject. It is important that, throughout their time at university, students look to a whole range of employability schemes. In particular, we come across people who have had a very good idea and have done work on a product that is potentially marketable. However, unless those students are able to access training in business skills or to have access to business mentors, there is a difficulty in bringing those products to market. It is not only the student who loses out; our economy loses out if we are not able to deliver innovation from the core ideas into products that actually make a difference to our economy and boost our manufacturing and, ultimately, our export base.

Regional Development

A5 Road Project: Statutory Notifications

1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his departmental officials, in conjunction with Roads Service A5 project team, have all the necessary statutory notifications prepared and ready to be put in place to enable the A5 project to commence after the public inquiry report is published. (AQO 913/11-15)

3.00 pm

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): My Department's Roads Service has advised that the inspectors are currently considering the merits of all issues that were presented at the A5 public inquiry hearings. It is expected that they will report back to the Department in January 2012. Officials from my Department will then consider the issues and recommendations that arise from the report. Where recommendations are accepted, they will be incorporated into the design, and the notices for the final statutory orders will be revised accordingly. You will appreciate that the notices associated with the statutory orders cannot be amended until the inspectors' report is received and final decisions are made on the project.

After the recent announcement from the Irish Government about the funding for the A5 and

A8 projects, I will consider spending priorities across my Department when the budget for the A5 and other projects is confirmed.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm whether the capital funding for the A5 project is earmarked? Has all the necessary preparatory work been carried out by the Roads Service project team?

Mr Speaker: Before the Minister answers, I remind the House that this question is specifically about the A5. There will be an opportunity during questions 3, 6, 8 and 10 to widen out the subject, but this question is specifically on the A5.

Mr Kennedy: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for that guidance. I also thank the Member for his supplementary question. The recent announcement by the Irish Government has meant that it is necessary to have a discussion on funding issues. The Member will be aware that it was agreed at the recent North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting that officials from my Department and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in the Irish Republic will have discussions about the A5. I expect those discussions to take place in January 2012. It is important that I await the findings of the inspectors' report in case there are issues that have to be incorporated into the statutory approvals.

Lord Morrow: The A5 public inquiry was based on the presumption that the Republic's Government would supply some £400 million. Since we now know that that will not be the case, why is the Minister waiting for the outcome of that inquiry when he knows quite well that it will not go on in its present form?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I would also be grateful if the Member would, at some stage, indicate his preference as to the route of the proposed A5. We have never had the benefit of that guidance from Lord Morrow. He and other Members will understand that it is important that the inspectors' report is assessed for any changes that may arise to the route or the potential statutory approvals that may be required. That could impact on the overall scheme whenever funding is available.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answers.

In your previous answer, you mentioned a meeting in January 2012 between your officials and their counterparts in Dublin. Will you outline the terms of reference for that meeting?

Mr Kennedy: No.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister accept that the outcome of the public inquiry cannot be taken for granted, especially as fewer than 6,800 vehicles a day use sections of the route? Furthermore, does he agree that it would be very wasteful if people's lives and properties were blighted, potentially for decades, by a road that may not be built?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I think that it is clear to all Members that the recent announcement by the Irish Government about their contribution to overall funding will have clear implications for the type and nature of the A5 scheme.

It will undoubtedly impact on my Department's spending priorities and on those of the Executive. I am happy to indicate to the House that I am prepared to make bids for any available money to spend on road projects all over Northern Ireland, including the A5 project and others.

Mr Allister: Given the death blow that was delivered to the grandiose A5 scheme by the Republic's breach of promise, does the Minister agree that it would be far more relevant now to go through the necessary processes and preparations for other projects that are viable and that can be made ready swiftly so that they are ready to go?

Mr Kennedy: I advise the Member that we are doing that.

DRD: Investment Strategy

2. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the implications of the draft investment strategy for his Department. (AQO 914/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the publication of the draft investment strategy, which sets out the proposed capital allocations to Departments for 2011-2021. However, I continue to have a number of concerns regarding the indicative allocations to my Department for water, public transport and roads between 2015 and 2021.

The draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland proposes £600 million of investment for water and waste water for the six years beyond the Budget period. That will enable us to maintain the current high standards of drinking water quality. However, we face significant challenges in improving the standards of waste water collection and treatment to meet European quality requirements, such as the water framework directive.

The proposed allocations for public transport could be consumed in total by the rapid transit project during 2015-16 and 2016-17, thereby leaving pressures in pursuing Translink projects such as bus and train replacement and maintaining a safe and reliable rail network.

The indicative allocation for roads over the 2015-2021 period is around £195 million per annum, excluding the Republic of Ireland receipts in relation to the A5 and A8. That will enable my Department to take forward a programme of structural maintenance, albeit targeted primarily at the strategic road network, along with a programme of minor capital works, while leaving in the region of £100 million per annum for strategic road improvements.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his reply. Given the reduced capital funds available and the uncertainty over future funding, does the Minister agree that it is vital that all future capital investment for roads is carefully assessed so that the benefits to the economy and to the citizens of Northern Ireland are maximised, in respect of removal of traffic congestion and improvements to travel times and road safety?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I absolutely agree: I think that it is crucial, in these times of economic constraint when budgets are clearly under pressure, that not just every pound but every penny is spent wisely and to the maximum benefit of the people whom we have the honour to represent. I see it as being my role as transport Minister to seek to improve the strategic road network in not just one part of Northern Ireland but all over. I hope that I will have the help and co-operation of Members of the House and the Executive.

Mr Byrne: Can the Minister say whether the Department's capital spending will centre on trying to achieve economic development for

the region overall, including balanced regional development?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. It is clear that the Executive's priority will be to regenerate the local economy, and I think that transport issues and regional development policy will very much play into that. I hope that that can be recognised and properly funded. As a member of the Executive, I certainly want to play my part in improving road links and transport networks all over Northern Ireland, with a view to improving the economic prospects of the entire population.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his responses to date. Has he any intention of bringing up any planned improvements to the A4/N16, which links Belfast and Sligo, at the next NSMC meeting in transport sectoral format?

Mr Kennedy: The strict answer to the question is no.

Roads: A2, A5, A6 and A8

3. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister for Regional Development, given the amount of funding allocated in his budget for the A6 dualling scheme, whether this would be sufficient to include the Dungiven bypass project. (AQO 915/11-15)

6. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the funding implications of the announcement by the Irish Government that they will no longer be able to meet their funding commitments to the A5 and A8 road projects. (AQO 918/11-15)

8. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Regional Development if the A2 upgrade project will be included in his review of the spending priorities for the strategic roads improvement programme. (AQO 920/11-15)

10. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his most recent discussions with the Irish Government in relation to the funding for the A5 project. (AQO 922/11-15)

Mr Speaker: Will the Member repeat the question number?

Mr Ó hOisín: Ceist uimhir 3. I asked question number 3.

Mr Kennedy: Sorry, Mr Speaker; my English is not as good as yours. With your permission, I would like to reply to questions 3, 6, 8 and 10 together as they concern similar or related issues.

As you are aware, the A5 and A8 dual carriageway schemes have been taken forward as a result of an agreement between the Executive and the Irish Government. At the North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting on Friday 18 November 2011, it was noted that provision of more funding by the Irish Government for progression of the A5 and A8 projects is being deferred and that, in that regard, the Irish Government will provide £25 million per annum in 2015 and 2016 towards the project. The relevant Departments are now preparing a new funding and implementation plan for the two projects for agreement at the next NSMC transport meeting, with endorsement at the next NSMC plenary meeting. That process will, undoubtedly, affect the funding that is available to my Department and, therefore, potentially, delivery of the strategic roads programme.

When the funding is confirmed, I will review spending priorities across the Department, including the impact on the strategic roads programme. That will address the progression of schemes such as improvements to the A2/Shore Road in Greenisland and the A6, which include the sections between Londonderry and Dungiven and Randalstown and Castledawson. The Dungiven bypass is an element of the larger A6 Londonderry to Dungiven dual carriageway scheme. Funding has not been provided specifically to commence that scheme in the current budget period.

My Department's Road Service expects to publish an environmental statement draft direction order and draft vesting order in early December 2011 for the 30 km dual carriageway from Londonderry to Dungiven, including the dual carriageway bypass off Dungiven. Publication of those orders will invite formal comment and objection, which will most likely lead to a public inquiry in 2012 to examine the case for and against the scheme. Roads Service has advised that there is no merit at this stage in decoupling the Dungiven bypass element of the overall project. If deemed necessary, it could be done at a later date. The issue will be kept under review.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he not agree that, without decoupling, the Dungiven bypass aspect could be held hostage to the completion of the entire A6 project? Would delivery of the bypass as a stand-alone project not be a more prudent use of resources at this time?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am aware that he has made representations consistently on the issue of the Dungiven bypass and has raised the subject of decoupling from the main scheme. With regard to necessary statutory approvals and legal processes that we are due to complete, my Department's officials continue to advise that, at this stage, there is no merit in decoupling the scheme, although we are prepared to review that. However, as we work our way through the various stages, we will, of course, keep the House and the Member informed.

Mr B McCrea: I commend the Minister for the efficiency of his answers thus far. Given that we have discussed at some length the implications of the absence of funding from the Republic of Ireland, can he tell the House whether there is any other way that he could raise funding for the road, such as by toll or bond? Is it the case that the road is simply uneconomical and threatens the viability of other good projects?

3.15 pm

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful, I think, to the Member for his supplementary question. The issue is still under consideration and work is ongoing by officials to decide the best way forward. As I said in a previous answer, it is clear that the recent decision by the Irish Government will have a significant impact on the original scheme. Therefore, we need to be in a position to bring forward and spend the money that has been allocated in this budgetary period on sections of the A5, the A8 and other road schemes across Northern Ireland.

As transport Minister, I want to enhance the strategic road network. Mention was made of other schemes. Those include the A6, the A26, the A2 and the A4 Enniskillen bypass, which was mentioned by the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. All of those projects are worthy of consideration. The fact that they extend all over Northern Ireland is proof that there is interest. It is also proof that people want to see how we can improve the strategic road network.

Mr Hilditch: Bearing in mind the state of readiness of the A2 and the £16 million cost that has been attributed to the scheme, are we not in a position to help the building industry by looking seriously at that and by making some announcements in the next few weeks?

Mr Kennedy: I again acknowledge the interest of the Member, his constituency colleagues and the local councils that are involved in the A2 scheme. However, before construction work can begin on site, it will be necessary for several important stages to be successfully completed. Those include a pre-qualification competition for suitable tenderers, the subsequent tendering procedure, and, finally, the preparations by the successful contractor to commence work on site. It is envisaged that the minimum time needed to complete those procedures is one year.

Mr Dickson: I want to add to the comments made by my colleague from East Antrim. Having spent £16 million and given that, as the Minister suggested, we are only one year out, does the Minister agree with me that the A2 scheme should be at the top of his list of priorities?

Mr Kennedy: The Member is teasing me to give him the answer that he wants. We are still considering all of those issues, and the A2 features along with a number of other projects. There is no want of trying by the Member and his constituency colleagues in the representations that they have made. I encourage him to keep banging his drum in the way that I bang mine.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister confirm whether the funding will be negated if we were to go ahead with a section of either the A5 or A8?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. The funding scenario has clearly changed after the announcement by the Irish Government. I remind the House that, because the A5/A8 scheme was an Executive priority, it is legally the case that, if the project were not to proceed, the money will go back to the centre. It is my job, as Minister for Regional Development, with my responsibility for roads, to identify schemes that we can spend that money on effectively and efficiently to improve the road network all over Northern Ireland. That includes the A5 and the A8. I do not want to be in a situation in which the Executive have to hand money back to the Treasury, having given the excuse that they cannot spend it. I can spend

shedloads of money on road improvements all over Northern Ireland.

Roads: Grit Boxes

4. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will consider improving the application process for the installation of grit boxes. (AQO 916/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I assume that the Member's question relates to the criteria used by my Department's Roads Service for assessing applications for salt bins. The winter service policy and procedures operated by Roads Service follow the well-established practice of targeting the limited resources that are available for this service on the busier main through routes. However, the policy also provides some consideration for roads that are adopted and maintained by Roads Service but which do not qualify for inclusion on the gritting schedule. In such cases, salt bins or grit piles may be provided for use by the public on a self-help basis.

The current policy does not limit the numbers of salt bins or grit piles in any area, provided the required criteria are met. However, salt bins are not normally provided within 100 metres of another bin. Roads Service already commits significant resources to maintaining approximately 4,500 salt bins and almost 40,000 grit piles provided on public roads. On the basis that salt bins and grit piles are replenished on average two and a half times during a typical winter season at a cost of approximately £70 and £15 respectively, that equates to an overall spend of nearly £1 million. In light of that commitment and increased budgetary pressures, I currently have no plans to review the criteria used for the provision of grit boxes. However, if the Member has some suggestions that he considers would improve the application process, I will ask my officials to consider them.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his answer. With the first snow over the past day or so, this is going to be a matter of concern to a lot of residents, including older people. Has the Minister assessed the cost-efficiency of rolling out a more proactive scheme of grit box installation? I seek his assurance that any schemes that have been approved in advance of today will be installed before we get into the depth of winter this month.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He is indeed right; over the weekend, we have seen the advent of wintry conditions, and I hope that everyone will be able to travel safely in the coming period. Roads Service officials have been working very hard to provide gritting on the road network, and I know that that is appreciated by Members of the House and other public representatives.

Over 300 staff, some on a nightly basis, will be helping to create safer conditions across the road network. Members will know that it is not possible, nor economically sensible, to promise to grit every single road and every pathway. That is why salt bins and grit piles play an important role. I want to encourage people to help their neighbours, provide self-help in areas and avail themselves of the salt bins and grit piles as much as they possibly can. In answer to the Member's question, I have no current plans to conduct a review, but all those matters are kept on an ongoing review basis, and I hope and expect that where new sites are identified, salt bins or grit piles would be in place for the coming weeks and, perhaps, months.

Mr Storey: I am somewhat disappointed that the Minister has no plans to review the criteria, especially in light of some concerns that he is aware of and that have been raised by some of my colleagues, Michelle McIlveen in particular, about the grading that he has used in the criteria. Those have resulted in situations in which disabled people and elderly people cannot meet the criteria and are left clearly at a disadvantage. That has happened in some areas in my constituency. Will the Minister assure the House that he will revisit that element of the criteria with particular regard for elderly people and disabled people?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. He will be aware that there is a register for particular users, from an emergency medical background, that can give assistance. One of the benefits of using the current criteria is that the policy ensures that over a quarter of the total road network, which carries over three quarters of all traffic, is salted. That is achieved through fair and objective criteria. If the Member has particular concerns on behalf of constituents or about local roads, I ask him to contact the local section office to see whether officials can consider the road in question for inclusion on the gritting schedule.

Mr McDevitt: At Question Time a year ago, I asked the Minister's predecessor what assurances he could offer us in the face of the imminence of winter that things would be better. What assurances can this Minister offer the people of Northern Ireland that improvements have been made since last year? Specifically, will he outline what new co-operation protocols are in place with local government and other statutory agencies so that the disastrous situation that unfolded last year does not unfold this year?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am working very hard, as are my officials and all staff in the Department, to try to ensure that we make provision for the winter conditions that are now upon us. I can confirm for the Member that some 110,000 tons of salt has been purchased for distribution along the road network. That is effectively twice the amount that we normally expect to use in what is termed a "normal winter", whatever that is. Last year, we had very abnormal conditions.

Considerable progress has been made in getting some agreement at section office level with local councils, and I encourage all the councils in Northern Ireland to avail themselves of the co-operation map that is available so that town centres and village centres, or specifically identified roads, are covered. It would not be sensible for me to say that every footpath and every roadway will be gritted, because that is not possible. However, a level of co-operation is possible between Roads Service and local government, and I hope that it can be maximised. I know that many councils have already signed up to that and are working well. I encourage that, and I also encourage elected Members and representatives to play their part in identifying any problems and to contact their local section office, the Department or me about that issue. I am very hopeful that, working together, we can have a better outcome. However, I cannot legislate for bad weather.

Rural Roads: Winter Weather

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's plans to keep traffic moving in rural areas in the event of severe winter weather conditions.
(AQO 917/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Roads Service carries out a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter service season. As well as a number of routine pre-season checks, planning includes ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff where required, that all winter service equipment is in working order and that stocks of salt are adequate. Last year, as I have indicated, salt stocks amounted to some 65,000 tons. However, we have reviewed that assessment and now have approximately 110,000 tons. The salt barns that are strategically placed in depots throughout Northern Ireland are filled to capacity, and arrangements are in place to supplement stocks of salt during the winter period if necessary.

Roads Service salts main through routes that carry more than 1,500 vehicles a day. In exceptional circumstances, roads that carry between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles a day will also be salted. The application of that policy ensures that almost one third of the total road network, which carries around four fifths of all traffic, is salted. However, local roads are not overlooked, and small settlements in rural areas containing 100 dwellings or more are provided with salted links to the nearest road on the main salted network.

3.30 pm

Priority secondary salting is provided to around 50 rural schools that are most affected by the adverse weather conditions. In addition, salting may also be undertaken in urgent situations, such as to provide access for the emergency services; unforeseen circumstances, such as funerals; or to help to get fuel or feed stocks to farmers. Arrangements are also in place to use farmers and contractors to assist in clearing snow from local roads and for the provision of approximately 4,200 salt bins and almost 40,000 grit piles on public roads.

Private Members' Business

Public Sector Pensions

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly believes that the proposed increases in public sector pension contributions are wrong and unjustified and that they will have a significant adverse impact on many workers; calls on the British Government to respond positively to the trade unions' proposals on pension reform and funding; and further calls on the Executive to review and reverse their decision of September 2011 to impose a 3.2% increase on contributions by members of the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee scheme. — [Mr Durkan.]

Which amendments were:

(1) Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert:

"recognises the fundamental changes to public sector pension provision across the United Kingdom; expresses disappointment that a resolution could not be found and that strike action was deemed necessary by trade unions; and calls on the trade unions and the UK Government to continue negotiations with a view to finding a solution and preventing further strike action in the future on this matter." — [Mr Cree.]

(2) Leave out all after "Executive" and insert:

"to respond to this imposition in a manner which excludes members of the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee scheme; notes the proposal by the Minister of Education to exclude all other public sector workers who earn less than £32,000 per year; and calls on all Ministers to explore similar options." — [Mr McLaughlin.]

Mr Agnew: I declare an interest in that both my partner and my mother are public sector workers. Although I will obviously not be signing off on any decision on pensions, it is important that Members declare any past, present or potential future interests.

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

During the strikes I went out to the picket lines not only at Massey Avenue but at the Ulster Hospital and the station in my constituency, and I also joined the rally. I listened to the concerns of public sector workers, and it is right to do so. I have listened to unionists on the other side of the House, by which I mean unionists from political parties as opposed to trade unionists. On the

one hand, they have said that they support the right to strike, but, on the other hand, they seem to condemn people for using their right to strike. Indeed, many Members crossed the picket lines. That is a shame, because we are served well by public sector workers.

I have heard the argument about the inconvenience caused by the strikes, but that only highlights how important to our way of life are the services that the workers will have provided 364 days of this year, particularly in the health service, where they are literally saving lives. They are the heroes of our society, and it is a shame that some in the media have sought to make villains of those people. Across many debates when we discuss our public servants, health workers and teachers, we, rightly, talk about the quality job that they do for us, our children and our families. However, when they called for our help and support, many of us were found wanting and crossed picket lines. I condemn that.

There has been much talk about the Assembly's role in pensions. In many cases, it is a reserved matter, and it has been said that there is little that we can do. However, when a proposal was made on what the Assembly can do on the NILGOSC pensions scheme, everyone jumped up and down and said that we cannot do that. The danger of breaking parity has been talked about, particularly by Members from the DUP and Ulster Unionist Party. There may be some genuine concerns, but where are our negotiating skills now? On the danger of breaking parity with the rest of the UK on corporation tax, we are reassured by Members on that side of the House that they are in negotiation with the UK Government to ensure that any impact on the Northern Ireland block grant is minimised. Why can we not have the same support for our public sector workers? Why are our Ministers not negotiating with the UK Government on public sector pensions?

Why are they willing to go over and lobby on behalf of the multinational companies that operate in Northern Ireland but will not go over and negotiate on behalf of our public sector workers? That is what they should be doing and what we should continue to do. It is not for just the unions to negotiate but for our Ministers. We are a devolved institution but we should be seeking to engage constructively with the UK Government to ensure the best deal for our public sector workers.

Mr Nesbitt mentioned fuel poverty. It is an issue of great concern to the House and certainly to me. I spoke about it a number of times, particularly in relation to the green new deal and the benefits that that can bring in alleviating fuel poverty. However, we have to make sure that the workers of today do not become the fuel-poor pensioners of tomorrow by ensuring, first and foremost, that they are properly remunerated.

I support the motion. I will not support the Ulster Unionist amendment, which I see as a sideswipe at the unions.

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

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Deputy Speaker.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I thank all the Members who took part in the debate, even though, given how little was said about pensions, and how many Members waved the flag and told us how much they supported the strikers and did not go through picket lines and refused to break the strike, I suspect that a lot of this has been about grandstanding rather than what we can genuinely do about the pension problem that we have here in Northern Ireland, across the United Kingdom and, indeed, wider afield as we can see from the actions of other Governments not just in the UK and the Republic of Ireland but across Europe.

I will, at the very start, outline the context in which all of this takes place. As a number of Members rightly pointed out, this did not arise because some dyed-in-the-wool Tory decided, "How can I get the boot into the workers?" This is as a result of an investigation undertaken by a former Labour Minister who was tasked with looking at what to do about public pensions at a time when the expectations of pensioners are rising, people are living longer, public finances are under pressure, we find that we are facing an increasing pension bill and, as some Members pointed out, the percentage of GDP that goes towards pensions has doubled over the past number of years. That was the problem.

I met Lord Hutton when he was doing the investigations for his report and was pleased that his view of life was not that he wanted to drive public sector pensions down to the lowest level but that he wanted to preserve what he believed was good in public sector pensions. In doing so, however, a price had to be paid and a

reality to be faced up to. He pointed out in his final report, as some Members rightly pointed out, that the final salary pension arrangements in the public sector were unsustainable financially for the reasons that I have given.

He recommended their replacement with alternative models. He wanted to move from final salary to career average, and retirement age linked to the state pension age, which meant, of course, that the age at which people would receive their pension would go up in line with pension age. He also wanted the cost of pension provision to be shared more equitably between public service employees and taxpayers, hence the increase in contributions. Let us not forget that the alternatives to people who receive the pension paying for their pension are that the taxpayer pays for them or that they are paid for through reduced public services.

I listened to the likes of Mr Agnew, who said that we have to value the public services that those people provide. Of course we do, but from where are we going to get the funds to provide those public services if we expect, at the same time, the burden for pensions to be borne by the public purse or the taxpayer?

The last thing that he said was that the accrued rights of current employees should be protected. That is the policy that has been adopted by the coalition Government. Looking at what has happened in other jurisdictions, I think that at least Lord Hutton's principles, which have been agreed by the coalition Government, are much better than what we have seen in the Irish Republic, for example.

The SDLP and Sinn Féin would point us towards the Irish Republic and say, "There is where your destiny lies." We do not have a Government that create a situation where people, after paying over the years for their pensions and getting to pension age, suddenly find that the contract has been slashed and that they do not get the payments that they expected. It is significant that the two parties that have opposed the reforms most vehemently in the House are the ones that point us to the Republic and say, "There is where your destiny lies." The coalition Government have not gone down the route of the Republic, and the accrued rights of current employees will be protected.

I take issue with Sinn Féin, because it is as if they never ever signed up to the position adopted by the Executive. I see Mr Maskey in the Chamber.

Some Members were asking whether he was Saul or Paul and whether he had had that bright shining light experience where he changed his ways — a “road to Da-Maskey experience”, perhaps. From what he said, his party may as well never have signed up to what went through the Executive.

Despite the fact that the Environment Minister sought to wriggle out of his commitments as an Executive Minister, the Executive signed up to three things. First, we were committed to the principle of delivering a targeted level of savings to the cost of public sector pension schemes in Northern Ireland, subject to the details of how those savings will be delivered being worked through over time. Secondly, we agreed to adopt a consistent approach for each of the different public sector pension schemes. Thirdly, we agreed to authorise engagement with unions to discuss a graduated approach that protects lower-paid public sector workers. That is what we have agreed to.

Members can say that that is signing up to Tory Party cuts if they want, but to me it is simply being realistic. The fact of the matter is that a decision has been made: the pension contributions will go up and a bill will be given to the devolved Administrations. The devolved Administrations can then pay that bill whatever way they want. They can continue to subsidise pensions, or else they can ask for additional contributions from the people who will benefit from those pensions.

There is no point in pretending, as the SDLP has done, that the issue can be avoided. Mr Durkan had 10 minutes in which to speak. He said that NILGOSC was different, and I will deal with that issue in a moment or two. He then said that Sinn Féin was simply implementing Tory cuts and that the SDLP would not support Sinn Féin's proposition that people who earn over £32,000 make extra contributions. End of story. He had four minutes left at that point, in which he could have told us what the alternative might be. I watched the clock, but he stopped short at six minutes. He said that the SDLP would not implement the reforms for NILGOSC, for the lower paid in other Departments or for those who earn over £32,000, because to do so would be unfair. However, he did not have a clue about what he wanted to do. That is not responsible politics but cheap political grandstanding.

It is avoiding any responsibility. People have a right to oppose a particular measure if they want, but they should at least give us some ideas about an alternative. There should not be a silence in which no ideas come forward. The amendment proposed by Sinn Féin was all about telling the world how wonderful they are.

3.45 pm

As for the SDLP, we were told that that Alex Attwood did not vote for this; that they did not cross the picket lines; that they supported the strikers, and everything else. Its motion falls into two parts, the first being that NILGOSC should be exempt because it is different. I do not think that the SDLP has quite understood the difference between a NILGOSC scheme and other schemes. They said that it is different because it is a funded scheme. They seem to think that being a funded scheme means that it is fully funded. There is a difference; a scheme can be funded but not necessarily fully funded. Of course, the definition changed when Mr McDonnell said that the scheme was fully funded and could meet 85% of its commitments: 85% does not mean fully funded. I do not care what kind of mathematics you do; I do not care what school you went to — 85% is not fully funded.

There is a current deficit of £800 million in the NILGOSC scheme, and that is bearing in mind the fact that employer contributions will go up by 5% over the next three years. That contribution increase does not come out of thin air; it does not fall from heaven — it comes out of services. At local government level, it means either that people will pay more rates or that council services will be reduced. At central government level, it will mean that education and library boards, schools, the Housing Executive and all other bodies covered by NILGOSC will have to pay more out of the grant that the respective Departments give to those services.

The idea that this is costless is so much nonsense. There is a cost; if we do not take decent contributions from NILGOSC members, the deficit could be funded, I suppose, in a number of ways. First, as the leader of the SDLP suggested, you could gaze into your crystal ball and say that the stock market will rise and that that will cover it. I wish that I had his knowledge of what stock markets are going to do. In fact, I should have a bit of a chat with him, because I think I can avoid providing any pension

fund myself: just have a chat with Alasdair McDonnell, stick your money where he says it should go, and, hey presto, you will be OK — you will fill an £800 million gap. I want only a fraction of that, for goodness' sake, so I would be quite happy to take some advice from him. Otherwise, the money will come from services or increased contributions from taxpayers.

The idea that NILGOSC, being a funded scheme, is exempt from all of the pressures is wrong. It is not fully funded, it has a deficit and it is experiencing increased employer contributions at present. Indeed, we do not know whether those contributions will have to go up in future.

The second argument was that we should follow the example of Scotland. It is very significant that the Scottish Executive did not say that they would not put up the contributions of local government workers. The Scottish Government, in the fanciest piece of footwork — although you would expect nothing else from the Scottish nationalists — have simply passed the buck to the employers and told them to make the decision. I suspect that, once the local council elections are out of the way next year, those councils may adopt a similar position to the Scottish Government. That is significant. Despite all the bluster from the Scottish Government, they said that, with regret, they would have to implement increases for those workers under their control.

The other thing that members of the SDLP suggested is that we should not implement any of that at all. We do not know what their grand plan is. I would be quite happy to give them the opportunity to tell us what they intend to do. Do we fund it ourselves, do we find the £140 million and, for the local government scheme, do the employers find the money that is required to fill the gap, or do we cut services? Those are the options. We cannot bury our heads in the sand.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister agree that cutting services would be likely to mean compulsory redundancies because that is what the savings could result from?

Mr Wilson: Of course, that is the kind of nonsense you have from the Green Party. I will finish up on Sinn Féin's position, which is that we go for only those earning over £32,000, which would mean that the burden would fall —

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

Mr Wilson: — very heavily on a very small proportion of workers —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Wilson: — some 16% in the Civil Service, 12.3% in health and social care and 19% of firefighters.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support amendment No 2. It has been an interesting debate, which has, sadly, developed along predictable lines, with some variations to the normal script about the austerity measures and how Governments will try to fund the economic crisis that we find ourselves in. As Sammy Wilson said, we point very much to the South. The message from the Taoiseach in the South last night was, "you did not cause the crisis, but you are going to pay for it". It is a similar message in London, and just as we do not advocate support for that in the South, we do not advocate it coming from London either.

Our amendment offers an opportunity for the Executive and the Assembly to examine the issue. I do not think that the vote — the Minister outlined the three areas of the vote — actually prevents the Executive examining how the issue is tackled. It actually gives them the freedom and the power to do that. The opposition from the DUP is based on the parity argument. Parity is a very useful shield to hide behind when you do not want to address something, but the reality is that the message from the Westminster Government was that we must take it off pensions, lose £140 million a year over three years, or whatever way we choose to address that.

Rather than losing front line services through that loss to the Budget, the Executive took an approach that allows them to look at pensions and try to decide, with the powers that they have, to find a better way of doing that. All that our proposition asks is for people to explore that. I am not sure what reticence or hostility the Finance Minister has to beginning to explore that within his own remit. You would think that someone who exercises power, albeit limited, in this Assembly would like to do that to the fullest extent to see how they can provide the fairest possible deal, rather than simply saying that that is what they are doing in London, so that is what we have to do here.

I cannot understand the SDLP's opposition to our amendment. I do not think it was fully explained. As was said, Mark Durkan explained what it was opposed to, but did not explain what it is in support of. A proposition of ours, which he said did not go far enough, actually goes substantially further than the original motion. Alasdair McDonnell accused us of muddled thinking and not having our research done, then Pat Ramsey accepted that the SDLP had done no research for the proposition it put forward. If there is some muddled thinking, it is the type of thinking that leads to a party putting out a statement condemning people for crossing picket lines, when one of that party's members, Conall McDevitt, crossed a picket line in London. That is the sort of muddled thinking that we have.

The approach in the Executive was either to lose some of the block grant or to put this motion through and then explore, in a local fashion, as we have local powers, how that could be achieved. It is incumbent on all of us to examine that. In his closing points, Sammy Wilson put figures to us. There are figures that I have seen that dispute the balance between those who are in the highest-paid bracket and could carry the burden, and those who are in the lowest-paid bracket. Let us examine all the figures. Instead of examining the figures of one Department or one section of the Civil Service, let him, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, bring forward a comprehensive set of figures that support that, and then let us have a debate as to what would be the fairest deal.

There is no parity issue here. Parity is a useful shield; people hold it up and say that we cannot deviate in any sense from what is done in Westminster. However, we breach parity quite regularly. In this instance, it was quite clear that the Westminster Government were saying, "Here is what we are doing. If you do not go along with the general principle, you will lose a certain amount of money out of your block grant, but how you achieve that in your own local set of circumstances is a matter for you." Therefore, let us explore how we achieve that in our own local set of circumstances.

Let us see if we can find a better and fairer deal that protects the lowest paid in the Civil Service. Remember that they have been hit in an awful lot of ways as it is. Some people fell outside the equal pay settlement and did not benefit from it as they should have done; that is an ongoing

matter. Let us examine whether we can do this in a better way. Let us not just say, "That is how it is done there; this is how it is done here." There seems to be reluctance on the other side of the House to deviate from anything that is done in Westminster in case it weakens the Union somehow.

There is little point in us having Executive powers here unless we explore ways to get a better deal for the people whom we represent. In the arrangements that have been voted through in the Executive, there is scope for the Executive to look further at how they deal with these matters. As our amendment suggests, I suggest that the Executive show a bit of courage, stand on their own two feet and start to examine a range of options —

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

Mr Murphy: — for how they can achieve a better deal for all workers.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to all the Members who have contributed to the debate. There has been a sense of unrealistic expectation in some quarters about what the Assembly and the Executive can do and even about what our national Government can be expected to do. Some people have accused us of cheerleading for the Conservative Party because we have had an electoral arrangement with them. Listening to some Sinn Féin Members, you would think that the financial crisis that has affected the United Kingdom started 18 months ago. As Lord Hutton said, the pension reforms should have been made years ago.

Those Sinn Féin Members have also forgotten that, as Chancellor, Gordon Brown raided pension funds in the late 1990s, which affected so many people in both the private and public sectors. You cannot have all of those things both ways. You cannot argue that Labour was somehow the great salvation of the UK, when it led us into the financial crisis and has almost bankrupted the United Kingdom. The Labour Party spent and spent and spent, and we are in a deep financial crisis because of that.

We also heard from Sinn Féin about how it would be much better if we looked down South and did things together. In his speech last night, Enda Kenny said that there is a €16 billion difference between what they bring in and what they spend. We have a £9 billion subvention.

Therefore, you want to increase it from €16 billion up into the mid-20s. That is crazy, crazy stuff; completely unrealistic politics and economics.

Mr Murphy: It is interesting how the Member points to us as cheerleading for the British Labour Party. It is our colleagues to the left who have a connection with the British Labour Party, just as they have sisterly relations with the party that is now in government in the South. We have never "cheerled" for the British Labour Party or the Dublin Government. In fact, we are the strongest opponents of what the Dublin Government are doing in the Dáil.

Mr McCallister: It might be of benefit to the Member if he did attach to some party, even if it was the Labour Party, because at least that party has an economic policy.

As the Member said, the SDLP has sisterly relations with the British Labour Party and the Irish Labour Party. We also heard from Mrs Cochrane of the Alliance Party. The Lib Dems seem to have moved from being the Alliance Party's sister party to being an embarrassing old aunt that it does not really want to admit that it is connected to in any way, simply because it is now in government. I know that the Alliance Party's Member of Parliament for East Belfast does not sit with the Lib Dems because of the pressures of being in government in very difficult times.

Right throughout the debate, unrealistic points have been made by both the SDLP and Sinn Féin about how we pay those bills and fund those schemes. I took the time to stop and speak to those on strike last week on the picket line. I came in here to work as usual.

4.00 pm

We have to be realistic about how we fund Northern Ireland within the constraints of what we are given in the block grant, how we pay for all the services and the consequences of our actions, as the Minister rightly mentioned. If we move money from one pot to another, there will be consequences. If the Minister does as the motion asks with respect to the NILGOSC scheme, there will be consequences, whether in your rates bill, cuts to services by local government or cuts to the education and library boards.

We are having this debate while Mr Murphy's colleague is writing to the schools to take £100

per pupil from each of them. At the same time, Mr Murphy wants better pensions; he does not want to take money off schools; and he does not want to pay for tuition fees. There are consequences to all those decisions.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that, if the pension issue is not addressed, the Sinn Féin Education Minister may have to write out to take more money off schools?

Mr McCallister: That is a useful intervention. It is exactly the point that I am coming to, and that which the Minister was making. When you move money from one area or protect another, there will be consequences. Members of this House have to face up to the fact that there will be consequences further down the line. If the NILGOSC scheme has a deficit of £800 million pounds, someone must fill that massive deficit. Someone has to contribute more to the scheme. Many people in the private sector do not have any pension or have only limited pension provision. We need to encourage people in all sectors to pay into a pension scheme, or we will be storing up a major problem for years to come.

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

Mr McCallister: I support the UUP amendment.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, although there were many contributions with which I did not agree.

I draw Members' attention to a key issue in the debate. The vast majority of people who will be targeted by the rise in pension contributions, and, therefore, by a cut in their monthly wage which my colleague Mark Durkan referred to, of about £62 per month, are among the lowest paid workers — predominantly women — who provide services right at the coalface: in classrooms, in the Fire and Rescue Service, as bin men or council workers, and right across our leisure service provision. Many of those people entered into a contract of employment on the understanding, as Mr Nesbitt pointed out in his contribution, of what the pension agreement was to be.

When times were good, no one complained, because often the public sector worker was lower paid than the private sector worker. The public sector workers made that decision for a

number of reasons, some of which, I am sure, included greater security of tenure. That is not the case any longer, as we know, because public sector workers are under pressure all the time nowadays. They also made the commitment knowing that they may be paid less today but, in the longer term, their pensions were more secure. This is an attack on those very principles. Those people entered into the contract in good faith, and on the basis of what their pension contributions would be.

Furthermore, I am sure that all our constituency offices are aware of families at the lower-paid end of the scale who fall into the benefits trap. Many people have sometimes to make a decision as to whether it pays them to work. I know that that is a matter of debate, here and at Westminster, in discussions about welfare reform and how to get people back into jobs. Of course, we all know the sad reality of the times we live in.

There are not many jobs to be had, as many of our young people in particular will know, because they are not even getting into training or university, never mind employment. Therefore, people need to bear that in mind. People go out to work, and that £62 cut in their take-home pay could make the difference between whether it is profitable to go to work or whether it would have been better to stay at home and remain on benefits.

Mrs Cochrane remarked that the fat cats at the top end of the private sector are not being targeted by the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition Government. Indeed, on more than one occasion, the trade unions have called on the Government to start drawing in the tax that is due from many of the large corporations. How many billions of pounds have been written off by this Government in income tax that they have not pursued? It is always easier to run after the low-paid worker and the public sector worker in particular.

We also need to bear in mind that when people voted for the Assembly and the devolved institutions, as many other commentators and contributors have said this afternoon, they did so in the good faith that the Assembly would make a difference and make local decisions count and make the right decisions for the people here. Of all the devolved institutions, we all know that the people in the North rely heavily on the public sector for employment.

Unfortunately, when Sinn Féin and the DUP did their negotiations at the point of devolution, the billions of pounds that they said they would get from the Government failed to materialise. Therefore, there is little comfort for those who went out on strike on Wednesday in respect of how the devolved Administration is delivering for them.

We have heard scurrilous remarks that one of our party members crossed a picket line, but that is not so. Mr McDevitt attended a meeting, with the blessing of the trade unions, to put the issue to the Labour Party and others, alongside Westminster MPs, so you should check your facts. *[Interruption.]* However, one indisputable fact is that on 22 September, Sinn Féin voted with the DUP, the Ulster Unionists and the Alliance Party to implement the cuts and the rise to pension contributions to NILGOSC workers. However, we will not be churlish; we welcome the fact that Sinn Féin has now joined us on this particular point. In its amendment, Sinn Féin tried to put forward proposals looking at a cut-off point at which other public sector workers would not face a rise in their pension contributions. As other Members said, that needs further working out and further detail, and I hope that others will allow those discussions to take place at the Executive, and I wish them well in that task.

The Finance Minister, as is his normal performance, blusters about, accusing and pointing the finger at everyone else, but he seldom comes up with any solutions in relation to the budget. Mark Durkan and Alasdair McDonnell referred to the document that our party produced in relation to ideas to save money and better investment, yet the DUP and Sinn Féin refuse to acknowledge it. *[Interruption.]* If some Members wish to speak, I am happy to let them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. At all times, I encourage the cut and thrust of politics, but when five conversations are going on at one time, the Member is right to complain. I ask Members to make their remarks through the Chair. Please continue, Mrs Kelly.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Agnew: Does the Member agree that the Finance Minister could overturn the policy that his party put in place, which sees people who live in houses worth less than £400,000

subsidising the rates of those who live in million-pound mansions, due to the cap on rates?

Mrs D Kelly: Others can look forward to that suggestion from the Green Party; perhaps it will help the Finance Minister in his considerations. The Finance Minister also said that our party colleague the Minister of the Environment, Alex Attwood, was grandstanding; however, I suggest that Mr Wilson has much to learn from the Scottish Finance Minister, John Swinney.

It is he who exhorted that a London decision should not be imported on to the equivalent local government pension scheme in Scotland. If others took lessons on how to stand up to the British Government, not only might our public sector workers be in a better position today, but so might workers right across our public services.

Some Members referred to North/South co-operation and criticised the Irish Republic, its economy and the difficulties that it faces. It does not face those difficulties on its own, I hasten to add; there is a recession across Europe and globally. One might ask why, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is because of reckless decisions that were made by the banks and the banking institutions. Let us not forget where this came from. It was not the public sector workers who created the crisis, but it will certainly be them and the end service-user who will have to pay.

One other point that I want to make is that if the unionist parties, in particular, could recognise the benefits of greater North/South co-operation on a wide range of fronts, we could save a lot of money. There would be greater efficiency, effectiveness and better service delivery. That is one of the spirits and institutions of the Good Friday Agreement that the DUP has failed to grasp.

I note that while Sinn Féin tries to extol itself as some radical leftist party in the South, it is very much a Tory implementer in the North. There is certainly partition within that party as to where it lies.

The SDLP is proud to be associated with the Party of European Socialists across Europe. We have no difficulty in standing up for social justice and a better deal for those who are trying to do a day's work for a proper day's pay and who have signed up to terms and conditions.

People would do well to remember that the British maxim of divide and conquer is still very much prevailing today. That is what the proposals to

increase pension contributions and to cut public sector pay are about. The DUP talks in disparaging terms about strikers, and the Ulster Unionists have not much to talk about either in that respect. If one looks back in history to when the North was brought to its knees, one will see that the institutions and deal that were on the table in the early 1970s, and which prevail today, would have gone ahead if it had not been for the strikes and the way in which the whole of the North was paid to stand still, alongside an increase in the IRA violence campaign.

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

Mrs D Kelly: I do not think any of us need lectures on history. We on this side of the House certainly do not need lectures. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that, if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2, as the wording of the original motion will have been changed to such an extent that it would not be in order for the House to vote on amendment No 2 as well.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 55; Noes 28

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lewis, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Beggs and Mr Cree.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mr Durkan, Mr Flanagan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney,

Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Durkan and Mr McGlone.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that amendment No 2 will not now be put to the House.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 54; Noes 28

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lewis, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Lord Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Nesbitt and Mr Spratt.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mr Durkan, Mr Flanagan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Mr McDevitt.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the fundamental changes to public sector pension provision across the United Kingdom; expresses disappointment that a resolution could not be found and that strike action was deemed necessary by trade unions; and calls on the trade unions and the UK Government to continue negotiations with a view to finding a solution and preventing further strike action in the future on this matter.

Adjourned at 4.38 pm.



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