

# Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 9 October 2012  
Volume 78, No 2, Part 1



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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 9 October 2012

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Ministerial Statements

### North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways

**Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998 regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) inland waterways meeting that was held in Armagh on 9 July 2012. The Executive were represented by me, as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and by junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and by Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of state with special responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs. This statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The Council received a progress report from Mr John Martin, the chief executive of Waterways Ireland, on the work of Waterways Ireland, including the following significant achievements: the provision of 591 metres of additional moorings; the proposed sponsorship of 101 events to promote the awareness of the waterways across all navigations; ongoing maintenance of the waterways, with 97.5% of the waterways remaining open during April and May; two new publications, entitled 'A Taste of the Waterways' and 'What's On', to promote and support the use of the waterways; and continued involvement and engagement with the INTERREG IVc Waterways Forward project.

The Council noted progress on the development of the Waterways Ireland 2012 business plan and budget. It also noted Waterways Ireland's annual report and draft accounts for 2011.

The Council received a progress report on the restoration of the Ulster canal from Clones to Upper Lough Erne. Ministers noted that the project is progressing through the planning application process in both jurisdictions and that an interagency group has been set up to examine all possible options to advance the project. Ministers discussed options prepared by Waterways Ireland to progress the Ulster canal project. Those will be explored, taking account of fiscal constraints.

The Council consented to one property disposal, and it has arranged to hold its next inland waterways meeting on 12 December 2012.

**Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure):** In February, the Minister advised that proposals would be brought forward for a board for Waterways Ireland. Will she give us an update on that? Will she also provide details of the terms of reference for the interagency group that has been set up to advance the restoration of the Ulster canal?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Chairperson for her question. She is right: advice was given in February that a board would be brought forward, and that is happening. There are proposals to bring forward a board for Waterways Ireland. Those are being developed by officials in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and progress on that will be detailed at the next NSMC meeting.

I do not have the terms of reference for the interagency group here, but I will certainly forward them to the Member in writing. The interagency group had its first meeting in Dublin in September. At least that is some progress.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas don Aire as an ráiteas sin. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she give us a more current position for the planning applications for the

Ulster canal? Does she foresee any difficulties in the planning process in either jurisdiction?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an bhall as ucht an cheist. The current position is that the applications are being progressed in both jurisdictions. Monaghan County Council and Clones Town Council requested further information, which was provided by Waterways Ireland. Some objections were lodged by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and the Department of the Environment (DOE) Roads Service. Waterways Ireland met both in June, and I think that the main concern was around the newt population. Reasonable solutions are being worked out by Waterways Ireland with both planning authorities. We hope to make further progress by mid-October to advance the planning applications in both jurisdictions.

**Mr Elliott:** As a follow-on from the Ulster canal issue, it is quite interesting that Roads Service is objecting to canal proposals. This place has an unusual way of working.

Minister, will you give us an update on the estimated costs of the Ulster canal project? Is there any indication of where those costs will be met? In other words, who will pay for it?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** To spare the blushes of the Member's party colleague, it was actually DOE Roads Service that raised the objection. Rather than it being an objection to the project progressing, the concern was really around the newt population and followed NIEA concerns about indigenous wildlife populations.

The Irish Government have always said that they would meet the full costs of the restoration of the Ulster canal. Obviously, they have raised concerns about the fiscal constraints that have been placed on them. However, what they said they will do — I have repeated it at every opportunity here — is to progress each stage of the restoration programme. The introduction of the interagency group will help to try to meet the full costs of the project. The Member may be aware that the full costs of the project are over £171 million, with a €45 million cost for the Clones to Upper Lough Erne part. The interagency group, which includes the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), the tourist bodies and all the other Departments, will help to look at ways in which we can potentially expedite meeting the costs to advance the restoration of the canal.

**Mr Hilditch:** The statement indicated that consent was given for one property disposal,

yet the communiqué from the meeting that is on the website indicates that consents were given for a number of property disposals. Can I have clarification on which is correct?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** There was just one; that information is erroneous and I will have a look at it. There was one property disposal and it was not contentious.

**Mr Swann:** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. Sorry; my apologies, Mr Speaker — that is not a premonition, I hope.

What is the time frame for the Ulster canal project? If the Irish Government are not going to provide the moneys, are there any other options? Are there European moneys that we can look for in order to move the project forward?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** This is similar to the question that the Member's party colleague asked. The whole point of bringing in an interagency group was to try to expedite the timescale. If things go to plan, you could be looking at restoration within anything between eight to 10 years. Design work could take a year to 18 months, and minor construction work could take place two to five years after that. Rather than waiting to get the full budget, we need to make a start. That start is in the planning process at this stage, and the interagency group considered those issues at its first meeting in September. There is huge interest in the restoration of the Ulster canal and we need to do everything we can to ensure that it is achieved.

**Mr McMullan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the information she has provided so far. Will she indicate what level of economic return can be anticipated following significant investment in developing our waterways?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The levels of economic return will vary depending on the type of activities that take place, but that is not lost on any of us. We are not just looking at the restoration of the Ulster canal; the interagency group can, particularly with the expertise of groups such as the SIB, consider how we can enhance, support and further develop our tourism product.

Recently, there was a fishing competition in the Fermanagh lakelands, and, for five days fisherpeople came from all over and spent money in the area, which is well needed. That is the kind of thing that can be of benefit to all the towns and villages surrounding waterways. I can get more specific figures for the Member if

he would like to see me after the debate, but I feel that the tourism product of our lakes and waterways in particular could be better developed. We need to look at more ways to do that, and we need to be creative about it, because, at the end of the day, these towns and villages more often than not rely on the tourism and angling products to help boost the local economy. That is something that we all have to shoulder.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for her statement, and I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. The Minister is quite right that there is a huge interest in the restoration of the Ulster canal, and she mentioned the passage between Clones and upper Lough Erne. Has there been any further discussion about the Ulster canal in Belfast, particularly around Stranmillis? Is money being sought by her Department from Europe to help progress that section?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The Member will be aware that I met Belfast City Council on this issue. Members from other parts — Newry, Portadown and Strabane, for example — want the same thing. I want to look at the overall package rather than hold back any one geographical part until we get the money for the rest. However, I am open to keeping the potential for that under review. We are looking at other opportunities, some of which are with local government. In fairness, some local government bodies are more active than others and Belfast City Council is, to its credit, very active. However, we are looking for additional opportunities to provide other sources of funding or even potentially to match the funding that comes from Europe or other sources.

**Mr Molloy:** I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome the continuation of her support for the Ulster canal. Is it possible to start work on the Ulster canal from Lough Neagh along the Blackwater and to create a navigation authority for Lough Neagh other than Waterways Ireland?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** There were two questions there, and I think that the Member knows the answer to both, but he should not let that get in the way of a good story. It is with regret that I confirm I do not have the money for a single navigation authority for Lough Neagh. In fairness, it did not come up in the North/South statement. I will write to the Member with further details, but I do not have the money for a single navigation authority for Lough Neagh. I am looking at the potential to extend the navigation arrangement

that is there, and I am doing that in partnership with the Lough Neagh Partnership.

**10.45 am**

**Mrs McKeivitt:** It is great to see the Minister back on her feet to make statements. In answers to a lot of questions, she has talked about the Ulster canal as a tourism product. In a progress report, the chief executive of Waterways Ireland speaks about significant achievements, one of those being:

*"the proposed sponsorship of 101 events to promote the awareness of the waterways across all navigations".*

Are any of those promotions there to help encourage the use of our waterways in events such as the World and Police and Fire Games, which will come to Northern Ireland next year?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for her question and, indeed, for her kind thoughts. The World Police and Fire Games is a huge challenge for us all, and we need to exploit every single opportunity and asset that we have to ensure that it is, as its logo states, the friendliest games ever. However, even though Belfast bid for and will host the World Police and Fire Games, many of the activities are outside the city, which I think is proper. Our waterways are going to be part of that. I will be meeting the World Police and Fire Games company very soon, and this and other potential assets — including our cultural product, which has a lot to offer — will be part of those discussions.

## North/South Ministerial Council: Languages

**Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure):** Mr Speaker, with your permission, in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, I wish to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Language Body meeting, which was held in Armagh on the 9 July 2012. The Executive were represented by me, as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and by junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht; and Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs.

The meeting dealt with issues relating to the Language Body and its two constituent agencies, Tha Boord o Ulster Scotch, and Foras na Gaeilge. The Council received progress reports from Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency on collaborative work and other activities of the two agencies. Those included ongoing collaboration on governance and promotion issues, including revision of the equality scheme and participation in joint showcase events and in the Young Ambassadors programme. It was noted that the chairpersons and the CEOs of the agencies are in discussions on a schedule for joint board meetings to focus on and progress joint projects.

The Ulster-Scots Agency completed another very successful run of the 'Pat and Plain' drama series at 11 schools and, in conjunction with the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association, launched the Ulster-Scots foundation certificate for education in Highland piping at Stormont in May this year. In conjunction with the Ulster-Scots Community Network, the Ulster-Scots Agency delivered plantation workshops to over 400 children at 17 schools in Ulster, 14 of which were in the border counties of Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal.

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

Foras na Gaeilge developed an online training network for translators and editors, and provided accredited translators and editors with a new edition of the translation memory resource, encompassing both public service terminology and general terminology. Foras na Gaeilge also implemented improvements under its action plan for Áis. For example, orders can now be placed by e-mail and the introduction of

an online ordering system is being examined. It continued to build links between Ireland and Scotland through the Colmcille project and Tonnta, which is preparing to link schools in Belfast, Donegal and North Lanarkshire through podcasts.

The Council noted that discussions have taken place at ministerial level on the 2012 budgets with the focus on the delivery of key priorities and the maintenance of front line delivery services. Once the budget allocations have been agreed, and following Finance Ministers' approval, the 2012 business plans and budgets will be brought forward for approval at a future NSMC meeting. The Council also noted that it was the language bodies' intention to lay the 2009 and 2010 accounts in the respective Houses by the end of this year.

The Council received a presentation from Foras na Gaeilge outlining progress on the development of a new funding model. The Council noted that 167 submissions had been received during the consultation process, which ended in April this year. The Council noted a revised implementation plan prepared by Foras na Gaeilge, and agreed that Foras na Gaeilge would provide final funding proposals at the next NSMC language body meeting.

Ministers noted recent developments in regard to the major new English-Irish dictionary and approved, within the existing budget, a revised timetable whereby the online electronic version will be published by the end of this year and the printed version will be published in 2015. The Council noted that proposals are being developed by the Ulster-Scots Agency to promote and support Ulster-Scots hairtlan areas. The aim is to preserve, protect and present Ulster-Scots heritage through geographical designations. The agency will, at a future NSMC meeting, present plans to develop and refine the Hairtlan project through partnership with key stakeholders. The Council has arranged to hold its next language body meeting on 12 December 2012.

**Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure):**

The Minister referred to the links that Foras na Gaeilge has and is building with Scotland, yet, strangely, the work of the Ulster-Scots Agency appears to be solely in Northern Ireland and some of the border counties in the Irish Republic. When can we expect some tangible progress in the agency's work in Scotland and America? Further to that, is the Minister confident that the language body reports and accounts for 2009-2010 will be laid by the end of the year, given previous delays?



**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I will take the last question first. I asked about the 2009-2010 budgets and reports before I came here. It seems almost like a case of *déjà vu* every time we have a report from the language and waterways bodies in relation to budgets and reports. I have been told that things are progressing as anticipated and that they are on target. Even the fortnightly report from both agencies indicates that things are still on target. I will again make it clear, particularly after today, that I expect those reports to be laid as promised and as the commitment was made to me and junior Minister Bell at the last meeting.

In relation to the Chair's first question, there was a delay with the business case to extend the remit of the Ulster-Scots Agency to include visits to Scotland, but that was sorted. Minister Wilson and I had a meeting, and it was sorted. I would like to see progress from the agency and its proposals for progress, because that was the main impediment to things extending. That impediment has been removed, and I will be keeping a careful watch on how those programmes and, indeed, those services and experiences are extended beyond the current remit.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an dara ráiteas a thug sí dúinn inniu. I thank the Minister for her second statement. What is the current position of the review of core funding?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The current position is that I have not seen the proposals from Foras na Gaeilge yet. I understand that they have been recently submitted. As I outlined in the statement, 167 submissions were made regarding the core funding arrangements. I look forward to seeing what those recommendations are. A commitment was given by me, Jimmy Deenihan and Minister McGinley at the meeting to make sure that those new funding arrangements are as robust as possible. It was outlined in the statement that support to front line services will be maintained as best as possible, but, rather than speculating on what they are, I will wait until I receive a full report. I will certainly bring a report back to the House based on the progress report that Jimmy Deenihan and I receive. We anticipate that full report being with us well in advance of the next meeting in December.

**Mr Swann:** Minister, you noted the launch of the Ulster-Scots foundation certificate for education in highland piping. That was done in conjunction with the NI Royal Scottish Pipe

Band Association (RSPBA). Recently, the RSPBA NI 's piping and drumming school had its budget halved. Will she comment on that cut and on whether any other avenues are being explored so that the school's full budget can be reinstated?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The Member will be aware that that issue was not mentioned in the statement. However, as it is a genuine question, I will find out what the situation is and write to him.

**Mr D Bradley:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis, agus fáiltím roimpi ar ais chuig an Tionól. I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome her back to the House.

An féidir liom an cheist seo a chur ar an Aire? An dtig léi a dheimhniú nach rachaidh an t-eagrán nua maoinithe, nó an dara leagan de, nach rachaidh sé chun dochair eagraíochtaí Gaeilge anseo sa Tuaisceart agus go seasfaidh sí an fód do na heagraíochtaí sin? Will she assure the House that the new version of the funding model will not, in any way, disadvantage Irish-language organisations here in the North?

The Minister probably saw the leaked details of the new model in 'The Irish Times' last week. Will she assure us that she will fight to ensure that Irish-language organisations here get the best possible deal out of it?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. I give a 100% assurance that I will fight for the organisations that are based here in the North. Honestly, I did not see the leaked details in 'The Irish Times'; this is the first that I have heard of them. As the Member will be aware, it is not the first leak, and I have no doubt that it will not be the last.

The Member's question is a serious one, and my answer is serious. Given the nature of funding for the Irish language across the island and the commitment, particularly in the Programme for Government, to the strategies for Irish and Ulster Scots — in this instance for Irish — it is imperative that we have robust infrastructure and strong support in the community to meet the needs of that sector. Sometimes, meeting the needs of that sector includes meeting the needs of funded groups, because you cannot deliver a service without the resource on the ground.

I cannot give an assurance about the new funding model at this stage because I have not seen the proposals, nor can I judge what effects

they will have. However, I can promise that I will fight the corner for people from this jurisdiction and for the language across the island. I will make sure that the funding arrangements are truly representative, meet the needs of everyone on the island and are not skewed towards some to the detriment and disadvantage of others.

**Mr Hilditch:** The aim of the Hairtlan project is to preserve, protect and present Ulster-Scots heritage. The manor house in Whitehead, County Antrim, which is one of the most important buildings in Ulster-Scots heritage, has recently been placed on the market for sale from the private sector. Will the Minister ensure that this crucial property is discussed at some level in the future, especially from the point of view of public access and, perhaps, public ownership?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I can assure the Member that I will make enquiries about the property and see whether I can advance those issues. It may, perhaps, involve discussions with local government in conjunction with the Ulster-Scots Agency. It is important that, in bringing projects such as that forward in the area of special heritage protection, they are complementary and sympathetic. I cannot give an assurance other than that because I need to know the details, but I will certainly investigate it.

**Mr McMullan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister. What is the current position on the production of new Irish-language and Ulster-Scots dictionaries?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The Member will see from the statement that a hard copy Irish-language dictionary will be available by 2015, and there will be a presentation on the online version by the end of this year. The ministerial advisory group on Ulster Scots is looking at a glossary of spelling and terms to help to agree and bring forward a standard, but there has been no discussion about an Ulster-Scots dictionary at this stage.

**11.00 am**

**Mr Humphrey:** The Minister referred to the workshops that the Ulster-Scots Community Network delivers across Ulster. I have attended many of those workshops, which have proven to be very successful, and the children were very receptive to them. Will the Minister make a commitment to the House today that she will make provision for more Ulster-Scots workshops across Northern Ireland? Will she

ask the Minister of Education to provide extra resource and funding so that she can do so?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I will not ask the Minister of Education to provide resource for something that is my responsibility. I would not pass that on to any Minister. The Minister of Education has met me and the Ulster-Scots Agency, and he seems genuinely committed to trying to help in any way possible, although that does not mean that he will provide funding. I agree that the more workshops that we have and the more widespread the awareness of the agency and its work, the better. We need to look at ways of passing on that legacy and heritage, particularly to children and young people. In fairness, that responsibility is mine in the first instance. If I find that other Departments can assist, I will approach them, but I will do that on the basis of having investigated it first.

## Executive Committee Business

### Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

**Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):** I beg to move

*That the Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.*

The regulations were laid before the Assembly on 30 March 2012. They are being introduced so that jobseeker's allowance recipients who have been the victim of actual or threatened domestic violence, as defined in the regulations, can, in some circumstances, receive the benefit without having to meet the requirements to be available for and actively seeking employment and to have a jobseeker's agreement.

The regulations will enable victims of actual or threatened domestic violence by a partner, former partner or certain family members of the claimant to access the easement for an initial period of four weeks, if the incident took place within 26 weeks before the claimant notified their benefit office about it, provided that they are not living at the same address as the perpetrator at the time of the notification. If the claimant then provides written evidence of the kind required by the regulations during the initial four-week period, the easement period will be extended effectively to 13 weeks. Claimants will be able to access the easement once in 12 months.

There is strong evidence to support the amendment. Although no research exists on the impact of domestic violence on benefit recipients in particular, there are data on the incidence of domestic violence in the wider community. Data taken from the Police Service of Northern Ireland's annual bulletin revealed that 9,546 crimes with a domestic abuse motivation were recorded in 2010-11. Of the 9,546 crimes recorded, around 68% of the victims were females aged 18 or over, 21% were males aged 18 or over, and around 10% were persons aged under 18.

The easement is designed to reflect the fact that victims may experience domestic abuse at the hands not just of partners but of other family members. Domestic violence is not restricted

to those in intimate relationships. I believe that support should be offered to those victimised by family members, including members of a partner or former partner's family.

For victims on jobseeker's allowance to take advantage of the easement, they need to disclose the abuse. There is consensus in the evidence that domestic abuse is under-reported and that victims may be unwilling to disclose it, particularly to officials. Research on behaviour in abuse cases shows that victims may take two to three years to leave the abusive relationship permanently and that there may be a number of incidents of abuse in that time. Therefore, the victim may need support over a longer period than 13 weeks.

I feel that it is unacceptable to offer longer periods on jobseeker's allowance without the need to meet the job-seeking conditions. Jobseeker's allowance must remain a benefit for those able to seek and undertake work. It is therefore necessary to limit the time that claimants can be treated as meeting the job-seeking conditions. Those with problems that cannot be resolved within the 13 weeks of the deferral may be able to be treated as available for and actively seeking employment for up to a further 11 weeks under the procedures for claimants experiencing domestic emergencies. The corollary of the change that I have outlined is that anyone who is unable to undertake job-seeking activity after the maximum period that the two deferral periods allow should not be eligible for jobseeker's allowance. Those who have limited capability for work for reasons of illness can claim employment and support allowance.

I am sure that you will agree that the changes are worthwhile and necessary to ensure that victims of domestic violence receive the support that they require to help them achieve financial independence at a time when they are unable to take up work.

**Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank the Minister for bringing the regulations to the House. As he outlined, they refer to a deferral period for jobseeker's allowance for victims of domestic abuse and violence in which they will be treated as being available for employment and actively seeking work and as having a jobseeker's agreement if they do not have one.

The Committee originally considered the SL1 for the regulations at its meeting on 16 February 2012. At that time, the Committee

asked for more information from the Department on the level of consultation that it may have had with organisations that deal with issues of domestic violence and so on, such as Women's Aid. The Department came back quite quickly and indicated that a number of groups had in fact been contacted about the regulations. Although there was still concern about the initial four-week deferral period being perhaps too short, the proposed regulations were generally welcomed. The Committee discussed that issue and ultimately agreed that there was sufficient provision in the initial four-week period for the victim of domestic violence or abuse to produce such evidence as is necessary to have the deferral period extended to the 13 weeks provided for in the regulations.

The Committee therefore agreed on 19 April that the regulations were supportive of victims of domestic violence and were beneficial. They give such victims access to funds in their own right and therefore a level of stability in their life at a very difficult time, thus allowing them to plan their way ahead and deal with the traumatic circumstances in which they live. The Committee supports the Assembly's approval of the regulations.

**Mr McCarthy:** I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to welcome the Minister to the House. Domestic violence and abuse is horrendous and heinous at any time. Anything that the Assembly can do to overcome that and help victims has got to be welcomed. We support the motion.

**Mr McCausland:** I am pleased with the consensus of support across the Assembly for the regulations. I thank the Chair, Mr Maskey, and the Social Development Committee for the positive way in which they have dealt with the regulations.

The regulations provide that a person who has been subject to domestic violence can be treated as meeting jobseeker's allowance conditionality for a period of 13 weeks in a 12-month period. That will give victims of domestic violence access to funds in their own right to help them achieve a stable position from which they can begin to look or resume looking for work. In some cases, it will help victims to maintain independence from their abuser in circumstances in which lack of funds may have made them return to the relationship.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

I thank Members for their interest in the regulations. I hope that they will back them and

agree to the changes that will ensure that victims of domestic violence receive the support that they require to aid their financial independence at a time when they are unable to take up work. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.*

## Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage

**Mr Speaker:** I asked that Whips be briefed on this important issue, and, yesterday, they were briefed. Under Standing Order 32, a reasoned amendment to the Second Stage of the Bill has been tabled, and it is published on the Marshalled List of Amendments. As this is the first time that there has been a reasoned amendment to the Second Stage of a Bill in the current mandate, I will take the opportunity to remind Members about the effect of one being made. Standing Order 32 allows for an amendment to be proposed that states a reason for the Assembly not to agree to the Second Stage of a Bill. So, if a reasoned amendment is carried at Second Stage, it is fatal to the further progress of the Bill, and the Bill will fall. I remind all Members of the consequences.

Turning to today's procedure, I will shortly call the Minister for Social Development to move the Second Stage, followed by Mr Mickey Brady to move the reasoned amendment, and the normal process of debate will then take place. After the winding-up speeches, the Question will be put that the amendment be made. If the amendment is made, the Second Stage of the Bill cannot be agreed and the Bill will fall. I hope that that is clear for all sides of the House.

**Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):** I beg to move

*That the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 13/11-15] be agreed.*

As the Minister for Social Development, I have the duty to introduce what is one of the most substantial pieces of legislation that the Assembly has been asked to implement to date. It is the culmination of the wide-ranging debate that is taking place here and in the wider community about the future of our social welfare system. That debate is about issues that will have a major influence on how we address poverty and disadvantage and how we grow our economy. The two are very much linked. Economic growth is a necessary prerequisite to tackling poverty, and getting people into work is the only way that we will ever succeed in lifting our people out of poverty.

It is not reasonable to argue that the welfare reform programme and the focus on getting people into work must await a time when jobs become available. Implementation of welfare reform needs to take account of our current economic difficulties. In preparing those who are not working with the skills and attitudes to

work that will make them ready for work when it becomes available, we need a welfare system that not only works in the good times but, more importantly, is capable of effectively supporting people during periods of recession.

As we discuss the Bill and the regulations that will follow, let us not underestimate the challenges that we face. As a region, we have the highest levels of economic inactivity in the United Kingdom. There are over 120,000 households in Northern Ireland in which no one is working, and over 60,000 children live in a household where no adult is working. There is clear evidence that the incomes of families where no adult is working are heavily skewed towards the bottom of the income distribution, with over six out of 10 families in the bottom quintile and 93% of families in the bottom two quintiles.

If, through the changes included in the Bill, we are successful in getting more people into work, we will have made a start on tackling a root cause of poverty and we can make a contribution to addressing issues such as low educational attainment and high levels of ill health that are often found in areas of multiple deprivation. There are people in our society who have never worked and have no concept of what work means or requires of them, so we have to change systems, behaviours and attitudes, and we have to change fast, without leaving the most vulnerable behind. As Minister for Social Development, I am committed to tackling disadvantage and building strong and vibrant communities across Northern Ireland. So, I give a high priority to measures that will mitigate the negative impacts on individuals, their families, their households and their communities.

### 11.15 am

Welfare reform is not the only reform that I will bring forward to reduce disadvantage and shield communities. I will shortly bring to the House proposals for the reform of the Housing Executive, together with a new housing strategy. I am also working to develop a range of complementary changes that will benefit poorer people and disadvantaged communities.

The substantial costs of benefits are paid under parity arrangements directly from the Westminster Budget, and I have no doubt that our approach to those parity arrangements will be at the centre of the debate. I say to the House that we have a clear choice. If there are substantial costs involved in changes that we want to make to the Bill, we will have to pay for them. Breaking parity is a choice that we can

make, but it will have huge costs that will be met through less money for schools, hospitals and the police, or we will have to find the additional resources by introducing local charges to meet the costs. As Minister for Social Development, I argue in the strongest possible terms that such an approach would be dangerous to our economic position, hugely damaging to our public services and indefensible in terms of the possible consequences for people who are struggling to work and support their family with little or no support from the public purse.

That does not mean, however, that we blindly implement all the changes that were introduced at Westminster under the GB Welfare Reform Act 2012. Together, we must identify and implement changes that take account of our particular needs in Northern Ireland but are consistent with the constraints of parity. Through the Assembly, the Executive and the Executive subcommittee on welfare reform, we can decide on the type of changes that it is within our remit to make, and I will comment on some of those later in the speech. Of course, I am working hard to achieve changes through ongoing discussions with Department for Work and Pensions Ministers. Those meetings with Ministers and officials at Westminster have been going on for a considerable time since I came into the Department, and the next meeting with David Freud is scheduled for next Tuesday.

I present the Bill to you because I believe that, if we are to be successful in tackling poverty, making people's lives better, supporting families and growing a more sustainable economy, the core principle behind universal credit is right: people are always better off by working than not working. Universal credit can help to tackle poverty, make people's lives better, support families and grow a more sustainable economy. Through universal credit, there is a real opportunity to develop sustainable support through engaging more people in work and economic activity. Grasping the opportunities that the reforms bring, together with the further development of our economic strategy, can contribute to a growing and vibrant Northern Ireland economy that is able to provide better support to households and children. Failure to do that will lead to continued and possibly increased poverty, which will increase stress on those same families and children and give them no possible escape from the poverty trap.

I also suggest that most of us are supportive of the principles underpinning universal credit. We all want to see a welfare system that provides financial support not only for those

unable to work due to illness or disability but for those who can work but are unable to find work at a point in time. We also want to see a system that enables and supports, in a practical way, a return to work but, at the same time, challenges those who refuse to work.

Therefore, there are aspects of welfare reform that I support, and there are aspects that I am trying to change. Let me say that there are other aspects that I personally do not like, but I know that I cannot change them because of the financial consequences. Translating the core principles into an efficient, fair and responsive system poses challenges for all of us here as we try to achieve the cultural and behavioural changes that these reforms will require.

My party has consistently opposed damaging and ill-considered cuts to the welfare budget. We accept, however, that there are major problems associated with welfare, and those problems must be addressed. Four key principles are central to the policy intent behind the legislation: we need, first, a welfare system that protects the vulnerable; secondly, a welfare system designed in such a way that it provides the maximum support and encouragement to get people involved in economic activity; thirdly, a system that is fair; and, fourthly, a welfare system that promotes personal and social responsibility. In the context of this change, we must ensure that we gain the maximum advantage for Northern Ireland through negotiating areas of operational flexibility and through the delivery of the benefits that are under the direct control of the Executive and the Assembly.

I turn first to a welfare system that protects the vulnerable. I am committed to implementing change that provides more support to those who are most vulnerable. Let me be very clear about this: people who are unable to find work or require support because they are too ill to work will be supported. Part of that support must come about through the better targeting of resources. It must include better assessment of the support claimants need to return to work. In some cases, that will not be possible, and we must ensure that people who are genuinely unable to work are supported and protected. Nevertheless, the default position needs to change from why claimants cannot work to how we support claimants into work.

Although lone parents will be able to claim jobseeker's allowance without having to undergo a work regime until their youngest child reaches the age of five, there will, of course, continue to be safeguards to allow parents to fit their job search requirements with their caring responsibility and childcare availability.

Improved childcare provision is an important element of the welfare reform programme, as it will help to remove artificial barriers to work, and we want to ensure that as many people as possible get the help that they need to engage with the labour market. We already know that about 65% of lone parents are working or would like to work.

I will now briefly outline one area of change under welfare reform that worries me. The Bill will introduce changes in the support offered to those who claim employment and support allowance (ESA) where the claimant is assessed as requiring support but capable of some form of work. ESA will be available for one year and will be paid on the basis of national insurance contributions. I have some concerns that the policy intention here is not solely about getting people back to work, which I support; rather, it is more about cutting the costs of welfare, which I do not support, given the potential vulnerability of those involved.

The Bill also allows for the abolition of disability living allowance for working-age claimants and its replacement with the personal independence payment. Like DLA, it will be available to disabled people both in work and out of work, and it will be non-taxable and non-contributory. This payment is also subject to new assessment procedures.

There is no question that, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in DLA uptake. That has attracted comment on the reasons for the increase and on the robustness of the system for deciding eligibility. Northern Ireland has a very high level of such claims, and, in the past 10 years, the annual cost of DLA has risen by 60%, from just under £500 million to over £800 million. DLA is over 20 years old. Our understanding of many disabilities has changed, and there is a changing environment, with an increasing commitment to enabling disabled people to enter the workplace. This means that we need new mechanisms for assessing and supporting disabled people into work that are consistent with those changes. The key changes will be an end to automatic entitlements based on having a certain health condition or impairment; a more objective assessment; and the introduction of more regular reviews of entitlement to the benefit. Although the reforms are designed to ensure support for those who face the greatest challenges in taking part in everyday life, my focus is on ensuring that its introduction in Northern Ireland is focused on delivering the best possible service to disabled people.

Many people were put on DLA and simply left there, year after year after year, without contact, intervention or support. They have been left languishing on DLA, which is not good for them. My Department is working with a large number of voluntary and community groups on mapping out how disabled people will claim the personal independence payment and how best to support them through that process. We appreciate very much the ongoing partnership with those organisations in the voluntary and community sector as we map out the way forward.

Since coming into office, I have been working to ensure that personal independence assessments are carried out in a way that will properly assess the support that people in Northern Ireland need. I have been consulting on the draft assessment criteria and have tasked my officials with ensuring that Northern Ireland cases are fully reflected in the assessment process. I will continue to work to ensure that the new arrangements provide support to those who have a disability and face the greatest challenges in leading an independent life. I am committed to ensuring that we make every effort to ensure that disabled people have equal access to taking up employment, thereby making a full contribution to Northern Ireland society.

Over the years, many of the most vulnerable in our society have relied on the social fund for financial support at times of crisis. I am sure that every Member is aware of the importance of that fund through their ongoing work, week by week, in their constituency offices. Although the system has many strengths, it also has drawbacks in that it has been largely restricted to people on benefits. It also led to some people using the system as another form of loan. The abolition of the discretionary elements of the social fund provides the Assembly with the opportunity to create a system of discretionary support for Northern Ireland that retains the fund's key principles but addresses its weaknesses by, for example, making provision for families on a low income to have access to the fund to meet emergency needs.

### **11.30 am**

The Bill proposes two changes to housing benefit. First, it will change the way that housing benefit is uprated from the retail price index (RPI) to the consumer price index (CPI). Secondly, it will introduce size criteria for the social rented sector and existing working-age housing benefit claimants who live in that sector. The size criteria will replicate those that

apply to claimants in the private rented sector. That is important, in that it will ensure equal treatment in the application of housing benefit, whether a claimant is renting from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, a registered housing association or a private landlord.

Housing benefit expenditure has increased from £312 million in 2003-04 to £455 million in 2009-2010. Although the measures are intended to control the increasing costs, I have been actively taking practical steps to minimise the most negative impacts of the proposed changes, as well as seeking to put in place long-term solutions to the structural problems that confront the social housing sector in Northern Ireland. I am keen to hear constructive ideas from all parties on practical steps that we can take to alleviate the most negative impacts of the housing benefit changes, and I will bring forward ideas in my forthcoming housing strategy.

One key issue is that, over the years, particularly in recent years, we have not built housing in Northern Ireland that matches up to the nature of the housing demand. A very substantial section of the housing waiting list in Northern Ireland is single people. Yet, time after time, the social housing development programme has ignored that particular need and has simply continued to build various sizes of family home, rather than meeting the needs of singles. That is something that I have taken up very clearly with the Housing Executive with regard to the design of its social housing development programme. It is important that, in the future, as the Housing Executive takes that work forward, it always keeps in mind the changes that welfare reform is bringing. That has not necessarily been the case in the past.

Since coming to office, I have doubled the discretionary housing budget over the SR10 period to help to address a short-term housing cost issue that individuals and families have to meet as a consequence of housing benefit reform. I am reviewing the social housing development programme, and I am involved in discussions on additional funding to help to secure changes in the types of house that we build in Northern Ireland to ensure that they meet the real needs.

The second issue that I identified was getting people back to work. We have created a highly complex benefits system that discourages some claimants from seeking work and, effectively, penalises those who have the lowest earnings potential when they find work. At present, in excess of 30 benefits and tax credits are available to those on a low income.

That often makes the whole process of claiming benefits difficult and unpredictable. Our increasingly complex welfare system is failing to meet people's needs. The system, as it stands, can often force people into making an impossible choice between working or doing their best for their family. Families can often be better off on benefits, rather than working. That cannot be right. I do not want to stigmatise or stereotype those who have to make that choice; rather, I want to put in place a welfare system that supports people in making lifestyle choices. As the system stands, people who want to work often find that they are better off on benefits. People who want to work often do not get the specialist support that they need from the current system. Therefore, I am working with Minister Farry on developing effective solutions to meet the needs of the long-term unemployed. People who want to work are hindered from doing so by the current rules, while the poorest and most vulnerable suffer because the available resources for support are badly targeted.

Let me be clear: in the changes that are proposed, work will pay. As we increase support to make work pay, it is right to ensure that claimants do everything that they reasonably can to find work or prepare for work. We will, therefore, tailor conditionality to individual circumstances and require all claimants to accept what will be called a "claimant commitment". From the outset, they will be asked to sign up to the idea that they will be provided with the necessary support and access to universal credit but will be expected to recognise that there is an applicable sanctions regime.

The toughest sanctions will apply to those who are expected to be seeking work but fail to meet important conditions. They should understand that, if they keep crossing a series of lines, they will eventually invoke the sanctions regime. The problem at present is that the regime is often confusing. When claimants reach the point at which they are about to hit sanctions, it comes as a big surprise to many of them that sanctions will be imposed and that the situation that they face is real and serious. If we let claimants know much earlier and introduce a regime that is easy to understand, with a simple tripwire process, they will know from the word "Go". That should disincentivise people from making the wrong decisions and taking the wrong turns.

Universal credit is at the heart of the changes that the Bill will introduce. It will be a single income replacement benefit for working-age adults. It will be easier to understand and



access, and, crucially, it will bring together in-work and out-of-work support, simplifying the current system of benefit payments and tax credits into a single payment for those out of work or on low pay. It will provide a more consistent system of support. For example, universal credit will allow people to see how they are better off in work because they keep more of the money that they earn from their employment, as well as being topped up with many of the benefits that they receive when they are unemployed. That is making real the promise that work will pay under universal credit.

Similarly, under universal credit, people remain registered with the system for two years after their claim has ended. Someone can get a full-time job and leave universal credit completely, but, if they lose their job or cannot work for a period because of a health condition, they will be able to start payments again almost instantly, ensuring that they do not have to wait for vital support. Delays in the system have been highlighted very often in the past, and that issue will be addressed.

Although the current complex and burdensome system is administered well, it can be slow in delivering, leaving already vulnerable people more vulnerable. I recently visited a food bank run by a church in Newtownards, where it was pointed out to me by the organisers that one of the reasons why some people had to use the service was delays in social security payments. I believe that universal credit, once fully implemented, will provide families with the support when they need it.

Universal credit will also provide support that is flexible enough to meet the needs of different claimants' circumstances. It will deliver a more responsive system based on actual earnings, making the transition between benefits and work much easier. It will remove one of the main barriers preventing people returning to work by providing the security of a minimum income, while retaining and, for many, restoring the financial incentive to work, with universal credit payments gradually being reduced as earnings increase. Even for those at the bottom end of the pay scale who are looking to take on extra hours or perhaps a modestly paid job there will be real financial gain, with the lowest earners retaining 35p of each additional pound earned. That is in contrast with our current system, which traps people in benefit dependency, effectively denying them the opportunity to become economically active through work that pays.

My Department has estimated, through modeling exercises, that universal credit, when fully implemented, will lift 10,000 children out of poverty and put an additional £110 million back into the Northern Ireland economy. Importantly, childcare costs will also be met by an additional element paid as part of the universal credit award. We will invest at least the same amount of money in childcare as we do in the current tax credit system, with additional support being provided to help those making their first moves into work by removing the restriction of childcare costs being payable only to those working more than 16 hours. So, universal credit will allow claimants to adjust their hours of work to suit their childcare responsibilities. It will allow people to set their hours of work more in line with their caring responsibilities, and, more important, it will be available regardless of the number of hours that people plan to work.

Members will be aware that the Executive are developing a childcare strategy for Northern Ireland. The changes to be implemented through universal credit will provide additional resources to complement the wider childcare strategy and, crucially, remove a significant barrier for many families who want to work but are trapped in benefit dependency.

Although growing unemployment is a worrying factor, growth in the economy will only begin to address unemployment, not economic inactivity. During the last period of economic growth in Northern Ireland, there was a substantial decrease in the number of people who were unemployed, but there was actually an increase in the economically inactive through long-term incapacity. The introduction of universal credit will help to remove some of the barriers that undoubtedly led to some people remaining economically inactive when jobs were available. Giving people clear information on the financial benefits they will receive in work as against the moneys they receive on benefit will help families to make real choices about going to work in the medium to long term.

Universal credit will have an important role in helping to address poverty and creating strong role models and stronger communities, but all that will require a change in the way we think about work and benefits. Although universal credit will ensure that work always pays by rewarding those who seek to work or to increase their hours, there is a leadership challenge for all of us in promoting a work ethic culture that will not only promote the well-being of the individual but make a positive contribution to their families and communities. Some time ago, I visited a centre in

Londonderry, where I saw the operation of a programme that supported people to make them more employable and help them back into employment. One of the key things that struck me very forcefully was a chart on the wall that emphasised very clearly the benefits to the individual, the family and the wider community of people being supported back into employment. That is crucial, and we need to emphasise that.

I have already mentioned the concerns of those who are working but are on a low income. We need a benefits system that is seen to encourage and motivate those on a low income to continue working and to strive to better themselves. Therefore, the Bill introduces a cap on those in receipt of certain social security benefits. The principle is that people who are unemployed and on benefits should not receive more than average earnings. That is a matter of fairness. Those who work hard, support their family and pay their taxes must be supported to do so. We must not have a benefit system that encourages people not to work and discourages those who are in work. Even though incomes are generally lower in Northern Ireland, the cap will be at the same level as in Great Britain. That is to our claimants' advantage. Members should also be aware that there are significant exemptions in the provisions, in particular for those also receiving disability living allowance, attendance allowance, employment and support allowance, if paid with the support component, working tax credits, war widow's or war widower's pensions or industrial injuries benefit.

#### 11.45 am

I recognise that there must be transitional arrangements. We will work intensively with the families affected once the cap comes in. We will help them to move into work, to change their circumstances so that they are not affected. We will make sure that families who need transitional support receive it. However, the principle in the Bill that we must make work pay must be upheld.

We need also a system that encourages personal and social responsibility. The foundations of the Welfare Reform Bill are social responsibility; establishing a fair contract between taxpayers and claimants; supporting the vulnerable; people accepting personal responsibility; and requiring claimants to be fully committed to working for their financial independence through work.

The introduction of universal credit will help people back to work, shift the over-reliance on

benefits and encourage the assumption of greater personal responsibilities for individuals and families. At the end of the day, universal credit will bring £110 million of additional money into Northern Ireland. We have to make that work and get people back to work.

I began by saying that the only way we could address poverty was through economic growth. The only way we can get public expenditure under control through welfare reform is by making it work, supporting personal responsibility and independence and making work pay.

There are other aspects of the Bill in respect of which it is argued by its architects and advocates in London that reform of how benefits are paid will increase the level of personal responsibility that individuals take for their life. Plans to end direct payments to landlords, limit opportunities for split household payments and introduce monthly instead of fortnightly benefit payments are key characteristics of the new universal credit systems. Those architects argue that those changes are necessary to make the experience of claiming benefits more like that of people who are in work, thereby making easier the transition from benefits to work. In a perfect world, that rationale might work, but none of us lives in that perfect world. I am not aware of any real support for those changes here in Northern Ireland. They could have damaging consequences for landlords not receiving rents and, eventually, tenants being subject to eviction; for children who are not properly fed because their main carer, usually the mother, does not have control over their benefits; and for families who run out of money before the end of the month. Recognising that — it is a recognition shared across the Chamber — I am in intensive discussions with DWP Ministers about the changes we require. However, there are real difficulties for us. All of this is dependent on a DWP IT system that requires flexibilities to meet the needs of Northern Ireland. For the Executive to run their own IT system, it would cost hundreds of millions of pounds, and handling these matters manually would also be punishingly expensive. I am, therefore, making the argument to DWP that it must provide us with an IT system that provides the flexibilities that we require. I have made it clear to DWP Ministers repeatedly that it is not possible to deliver an effective welfare system for Northern Ireland without the flexibilities that we require.

I also believe that the need for changes is not specific to Northern Ireland; rather, they should form part of the core system for the whole of the

UK. We must continue to argue for changes here that will meet our particular needs. There is a real danger that the changes that are proposed by GB, if implemented, would make life so difficult for households and families that, rather than encourage personal responsibility, we would destroy all confidence in a reformed welfare system before it had even begun; hence, achieving the flexibilities is our top priority.

We will also provide additional support through the Executive. Earlier, I referred to the opportunities and responsibilities that we, as a devolved Administration, have to address our own challenges around persistent and growing levels of poverty. Social security provision, significant as it is in this regard, is complemented by a wide range of non-social security welfare provision that is funded from the Northern Ireland block and is contained within departmental budgets. It ranges across many important areas and is aimed at promoting and maintaining health and well-being; supporting education and learning; ensuring access to justice; and promoting accessibility and independence. The funds associated with current non-social security welfare provision amount to approximately £400 million a year. With the exception of the social protection fund, which is centrally administered, the cost of all other non-social security benefits are met and managed within the respective departmental budgets.

As part of the welfare reform changes, the Executive will assume new responsibilities for the provision of discretionary support and domestic rates relief. While some additional resources will accompany these changes, there is likely to be a shortfall in funding. This could amount to a deficit in rates relief of £13 million in the first year — 2013-14 — and that may easily escalate due to inflationary pressures and increased demand in future years, giving rise to an ongoing reduced baseline going into the next spending review. No longer will the Treasury cover developing pressures, and the risk will fall to the Executive.

Through the Executive subcommittee on welfare reform, we have begun discussions about what the Executive's approach may be to these benefits, maximising the impact on those in need and complementing changes that are a result of welfare reform. As our scrutiny of the Bill continues, I suggest that it is important that the delivery of these benefits is considered in the context of the increasing pressures on budgets, targeting resources to those most in need and the outcomes of welfare reform.

In conclusion, as I have reflected to you, I believe there are four principles underpinning this legislation: to protect the vulnerable; to get people back to work; to develop a system that is fair; and to encourage personal and social responsibility. Those four principles must be considered together, and it is on that basis that I support the Bill. The Bill is far from perfect, and I am not saying that what will emerge from the scrutiny at Committee Stage will be perfect. However, I hope that, as part of the scrutiny process, we will identify changes that will not have significant costs but will address some of the Bill's shortcomings and develop a better welfare system for the people of Northern Ireland.

If we do not deliver on the Bill, Northern Ireland and those dependent on welfare support will suffer serious losses. Changes to housing benefit and incapacity benefits are already reducing the social security income paid to Northern Ireland. The measures to deliver these reductions are already in place; they are already happening. When universal credit begins, there will be an opportunity to increase the level of benefit paid into Northern Ireland to provide the additional income that I identified. However, the consequences of not delivering on the Bill are that we would get the negative aspects of welfare reform but not the benefits. Those dependent on welfare would experience real cuts without the potential for increasing their income through progression into work, as supported through various measures in the Bill. That means that our focus must be on ensuring that the reforms introduced through the Bill complement the work that the Executive are taking forward through the economic strategy.

Undoubtedly, we face hard decisions. Ultimately, however, no one, least of all our poorest households and communities, will thank us if, by our failure to make those decisions, we do not realise the opportunities available to us. Failure to make progress quickly will result in cuts to the incomes of our poorest families and substantial costs to the Executive. As I said, that would leave significantly fewer resources for schools, hospitals and the police or for building the necessary road infrastructure to help us to become more economically efficient.

I encourage Members to help me to progress this matter so that the Social Development Committee can set about finding ways to improve the Bill. I am grateful for the agreement of that Committee to hold many extra meetings over the next number of weeks to progress its scrutiny.

There has been discussion in the media about the possibility of deferment. The truth is that we have run out of road. There is no road left. Members are very well aware that we have a legislative process and that there are procedures and processes to be followed in the Assembly. The result of those is that there is a time frame for getting this or any other legislation through the Assembly. If we defer, there will be no road left and no time left between now and the crucial date of the end of March. There is no time left. Let us be clear about it: if we are to make that date at the end of March, which means getting the Bill through Committee and back to the Assembly and achieving Royal Assent, there is no opportunity for deferral. It is dangerous and foolish for anyone to suggest otherwise. You cannot change the calendar and add extra days, weeks or months. The time is simply not there. The road has run out.

If we do not make the end of March, what are the implications? The first is that, on 31 March, the social fund comes to an end.

Every year, almost a quarter of a million payments are made out of the social fund. Tens of thousands of individuals and families benefit from that social fund. They tend to be — indeed, they are — the most vulnerable in our society. They are the folk who look for help to put shoes on children's feet. They are the folk who come to get help to put clothes on a child's back. They are the people who come to get help to put food on the table. That is what the social fund is about. The people who seek that help are obviously the most vulnerable. Is anyone really suggesting that we should do something in the Assembly that would mean that, when we come to the end of March, we say to those people, "There is no support left for you."? How could anyone, in conscience, go for a deferral that would result in something as appalling as that? The social fund is one of the crucial issues, because it ends at the end of March. If we do not have a replacement in place, there will be no help for those vulnerable people. If someone says to me that they have a concern for the most vulnerable, we need to get legislation through to provide the support for those people.

### **12.00 noon**

We have many people in Northern Ireland whose jobs are dependent on providing welfare reform back-room services to regions in Great Britain. I think that there are about 1,500 of those jobs altogether in Northern Ireland. We desperately need those jobs at a time of

significant unemployment. It is good to have those jobs; people value them here. We are in danger of losing them if we get out of step with Westminster. Quite obviously, when DWP looks at where it gets the work done, it will not look very favourably on a region of the United Kingdom that has gone its own way. People in DWP in London will get cries from constituencies across England, Scotland and Wales that say, "Why can the jobs not come to my region? We are part of the system; those people are out of step." The fact is that those jobs are spread right across the Province. For example, about 150 are up in the north-west in the Londonderry area. Right across Northern Ireland, 1,500 people are working in that sector. Families receive income from those jobs, and breadwinners are reliant on them. I would not want to be the person who says to those 1,500 people, "Sorry if you lose your job. We were deferring, because we just wanted to keep talking about it."

Bear this in mind also: it is an issue not only of hitting the most vulnerable by killing off the social fund and endangering 1,500 jobs in Northern Ireland but of the Northern Ireland exchequer having to bear any extra cost. We are talking about a deficit that would build up to around £200 million. Let us be clear about what that £200 million means: it means that somebody is not going to have a teacher in a classroom; it means that a school that was looking for an extension will not get it; and it means that a hospital ward might be closed down or that nurses might be put out of work. Those are the real practical implications, and people need to grasp that. I heard one of the interviewers say on the radio this morning that this is D-Day. It is decision day. It is a decision about whether you kill off the social fund, put people out of work, close down school classrooms and put teachers, nurses or whomever out of work. Who will thank you for that? I would not want to be the one who has that responsibility laid on me.

Not only is there the practical issue of the £200 million to consider but there is the fact that the DWP IT system that we use operates right across the United Kingdom. If we were put in a position where we had to depart from it, cost would be also involved. We are not in a position in which Northern Ireland is going to start to develop its own IT system. That is simply not possible. Therefore, those are the key implications of any deferral.

A lot of good work has been done by the Executive subcommittee, and all the political parties were asked what they see as being the flexibilities that suit the particular circumstances

of Northern Ireland. Every political party was around that table; nobody was left out. We asked what the flexibilities are, and, in practical terms, there is a core of three issues. One is direct payments to landlords, which I touched on. It is important, and there are dangers if we do not retain it, owing to the fact that our housing sector and housing practice in Northern Ireland are different from the rest of the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, 80% of those who receive housing benefit, whether they are in or out of work, prefer to make direct payments to landlords. That is very different, and it is almost the exact opposite of the situation in GB. We want to retain that, and that is why we need that flexibility built into the IT system right from the start.

We also need to ensure that there is the opportunity for fortnightly and monthly payments. All of us can think of vulnerable people for whom it would not be good to receive twice as much money in one go. There is also the issue of single household payments versus split payments, and the point that, previously, some of the money would have gone into the hands of the mother in the house and probably would have been spent on the children. We need to retain that security and the opportunity for that security.

Those are the things on which everyone is agreed and on which we have been negotiating and continue to negotiate with Westminster. Indeed, there will be a further meeting with David Freud today week as part of that ongoing process. That work is ongoing, and that fight is still being fought. It is important; it is absolutely crucial.

**Mr Poots:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr McCausland:** Yes; indeed.

**Mr Poots:** What part of today's discussion would disable the Minister from engaging in those discussions with David Freud, putting that case and continuing to fight it? How would killing the Bill off today allow us to come back with a stronger or better position? Perhaps the Minister would like to facilitate understanding of that to the House.

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the Member for his intervention. He gets right to the heart of the matter. The way in which to make changes and the time to make changes is at Committee Stage. We all know that that is when it happens. At Committee Stage, we can continue the negotiations that have been

ongoing for some time and that, I believe, are coming towards a conclusion.

These are big issues. The IT system that will deliver welfare reform is extremely complex. I took the opportunity of going to England to see some of the design work and was surprised at the complexity and scale of that work. The work to redesign welfare delivery involves one of the biggest IT projects in the world today. It is important that we realise that. It is also important that we realise how to slot in the flexibilities that are specific to and required by Northern Ireland.

As I said, that work is ongoing but is coming to a conclusion, and there will be clarity in a very short time, as the Bill goes through Committee Stage. If, for whatever reason, people seek to defer the Bill today — I cannot read people's minds to know the reasons that they have for that; they will have to give an account themselves — there is absolutely no doubt that there will be serious implications for the Assembly, our Budget, the people in Northern Ireland and, particularly, the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Bell:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Is it not the case that some of the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland are young people? Any social worker working in childcare knows that the social fund is the first port of call. The fact that there have been over 230,000 applications to the social fund over the past year proves how many vulnerable people there are.

Even though we know that the Second Stage of a Bill is about process and that changes are to be made in the Committee Stage, is it not right that the overriding principle of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 — that you always act in the best interests of the child — should be the paramount consideration and should be the one that we use here? We should follow the process and seek to make changes for the most vulnerable where we can at Committee Stage. That is paramount, and it is in the best interests of vulnerable people in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the Member for his intervention. The point is well made: our priority must be to secure the interests of the most vulnerable. That is why we are seeking these flexibilities; that is why I am confident we will get flexibility; and that is why we continue to work on that. However, the point at which we get full confirmation of those flexibilities will be in a few weeks' time. We will know exactly where we stand very shortly. At the same time,

we cannot defer this matter. If we do, we will miss the deadline at the end of March, and that will have all the attendant consequences I have spelled out.

I am sure that the Speaker will be able to keep us right on this matter: no one should imagine that if this matter is deferred, it will be deferred for a week or two. It is not just a matter of putting this off for a week or two and then coming back to it. The process and procedure in this place would mean that the matter will be put back until well into next year — I think that I have the Speaker's agreement on that point.

We must remember that this is not a matter of deferring the Bill for a week or two so that we can have a bit more thinking about it. We have had months and months of thinking and we have had months and months of discussion. This is decision day; this is the end of the road. The decision has to be made today or we will put ourselves in a position whereby the Bill could not come back to the House until well into next year and we would have even more serious consequences than those I have outlined already.

I have laboured this point because the seriousness of the matter before us and the importance of its proceeding has not yet really dawned on some folk. Whatever reasons people might have for wanting to defer the Bill and seek more time cannot take away from the fact that there are three core flexibilities that people are seeking and that we are working on. We will continue to do so, and we will know very soon where we are going on those. We will soon get an answer from DWP and, in parallel with that, the work can be ongoing regarding the —

**Mr P Robinson:** Will my friend give way?

**Mr McCausland:** Sure.

**Mr P Robinson:** I am grateful. I know that he has laboured the point, but I think it would be worthwhile for him to make the point once more. Parties across the House are agreed on the changes that are required. Negotiations are ongoing with the Department in GB in order to get those changes.

There are two options before the House: one is the deferral of the Bill in order to allow negotiations to take place. The consequences of that have been outlined, and they include the loss of jobs; the loss of £220 million from our block grant and the consequence that that will

have on Departments; and the closing down of the social fund.

The other option is to allow the negotiations to take place while the Bill is in Committee Stage, with everyone deciding, without prejudice at the end of Committee Stage, what action they will take. So, the same outcomes are possible without any cost. Why on earth would anyone take the option of closing on the worst aspects of the outcome, where people would be out of work, our block grant would be cut and where we would end up shutting down the social fund that exists for the most needy?

**Mr McCausland:** The First Minister could not have put it any more clearly or more starkly than that. There are only two options, and I think common sense states very clearly which is the right option; to proceed today, to put this legislation through to Committee Stage and let the members of that Committee scrutinise it. I welcome the fact that the Committee is committed to working extra days in the week and to working over the Halloween recess to ensure that the deadline is met. That shows that they know there is a deadline. That is why they are putting in the extra days. That is why they will work over the recess.

## 12.15 pm

Let us focus on the areas that we can change. Let us ensure that we protect the most vulnerable. Let us not waste time arguing about those matters that we cannot change. Let us work as a collective to mitigate the worst aspects of the planned changes and, at the same time, deliver the best possible welfare services for the people of Northern Ireland. I hope that Members have taken careful note of the arguments put forward, the implications of going down a particular road, and the wisdom of making the right choice on the basis that was so clearly set out by the First Minister.

**Mr Brady:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*Leave out all after "That" and insert*

*"the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill be not agreed pending further consideration and adjustment to better reflect the specific circumstances, obligations and needs of our people; because, while recognising the need for a simplification of the benefit system and development of work incentives, the Bill's proposals have their origins in austerity policies being pursued at Westminster which are targeted at the most vulnerable and*

*disadvantaged in society and which clearly do not adequately address the specific circumstances and needs of our people and will create significant hardship and difficulties for many individuals and families living in socially disadvantaged unionist and nationalist communities; in addition, the payment proposals of universal credit*

*(a) do not reflect the specifics of our labour market and the prevalence of the weekly wage;*

*(b) fail to take account of an established pattern of direct payments to landlords; and*

*(c) in proposing a single household payment, fail to meet specific statutory equality obligations which require social policy to mitigate any adverse impact on named groups, including women and children;*

*and furthermore the Bill fails to take account of*

*(i) the impact of increased punitive measures on jobseekers in a society emerging from conflict and recovering from a legacy of discrimination in employment;*

*(ii) the fact that there is currently no statutory duty to provide affordable childcare, yet the Bill increases conditionality for lone parents;*

*(iii) the existing housing stock and the legacy of segregated housing, in relation to the introduction of an underoccupancy penalty;*

*(iv) the high rate of error in the work capability assessment which is creating hardship and uncertainty amongst many sick and disabled people who are being wrongly declared fit for work; and*

*(v) the anomaly of a benefit cap that was primarily devised to address extortionate housing costs in London but has discriminatory consequences for families here with more than the average number of children.”*

I state at the outset that tabling the reasoned amendment is not about defeating the Bill. The reasoned amendment is about creating an opportunity for further consideration and adjustment; it is not about curtailing the legislative process, but using that process to promote better outcomes.

Every political party in the Assembly has expressed serious concerns about this legislation, and that includes the Social Development Minister and his party. Indeed,

members of his own party voted against the Bill in Westminster.

**Mr Wilson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Brady:** No; I am trying to concentrate. This is not an attack on the DUP or any of our Assembly colleagues. I add that we are not against the simplification of the benefits system. We are not against work incentives. Indeed, we are not against reallocation of social housing to better reflect housing need. But what we are dealing with are Tory policies being pursued at Westminster that are targeting the most vulnerable in our society and do not address the specific circumstances prevailing here in the North.

For Tories, the poor are poor because they are not poor enough. So-called welfare reforms are predicated on the notion that poverty is not the result of too few resources, but too many. According to Iain Duncan Smith, poverty is a delinquent "lifestyle choice", made possible by easy access to "too-generous welfare". This definition of poverty is cultural rather than economic, and has negative implications, including the criminalisation of the unemployed. It is a shift away from job creation as a strategy to tackle worklessness, and, as part of a so-called welfare-to-work programme it enforces unpaid labour, underpinned by the threat of destitution. These changes are not about tackling poverty but about tackling the poor.

There is no doubt that the adverse impact of changes in welfare provision will be felt most harshly here. The vast majority of the richest 2% live in London. The very rich do not live here but a high percentage of the very poor do. The impact on poverty will hit the North hardest. In some of our most deprived areas, where many small businesses rely on the benefits spending power of their customers, cuts in welfare will adversely affect local economies. People spend their benefits where they live, and marginalised communities are likely to experience even greater marginalisation in the wake of these cuts.

Universal credit is the cornerstone of the British Government's plans, the idea being that it will be simpler and more transparent. A whole range of separate benefits become options within universal credit, and diverse ways of administering them collapse into one process. Putting all your eggs in one basket may appear simpler, but the issue is how the process and its outcomes work. People's lives and needs are complex, and the benefits system either reflects that or it risks imposing unfair, one-size-fits-all outcomes.

Universal credit is designed to be a continuous benefit that can be opted in and out of, and it is intended to be administered in real time. However, we still do not know if the IT system for it will be in place and fit for purpose. The Minister said that it would be one of the largest IT processes in the world. That was also the case in 1993, when we had the biggest computerisation since the NASA space programme. It went £55 million over budget and did not work properly. I think that we need to keep that in mind.

The proposed introduction here of universal credit reflects the nature of the low-paid, insecure labour market that the current British Government are fostering: a market in which people will be forced to accept unsuitable employment, move in and out of work, and work more or less on a week-by-week, day-by-day basis to suit the needs of their employer.

Welfare reform is predicated on the notion that it will provide a pathway to work, but, with too few jobs available, it will not necessarily be waged work. There is no doubt that meaningful work and a living wage remain the best route out of poverty, but welfare reform is not about that. It is about reducing benefits and imposing conditions and sanctions to make people accept any work, regardless of their circumstances or the suitability of the employment being offered.

Universal credit is designed to underpin unskilled, low-paid, part-time, temporary, insecure employment. It is also designed to compel people to take those kinds of jobs, even if it is detrimental to their needs or circumstances. Where no jobs are available, people will be compelled to work for their benefit. That is already happening, particularly to the young unemployed, the most easily branded as work-shy or scroungers and the most vulnerable to official bullying. We should not imagine that most of them are being trained or are gaining meaningful work experience, because all of that costs money and commitment. Many are working under the threat of their benefit being withdrawn.

The changes so that someone under the age of 35 will not be entitled to single occupancy housing benefit and the reductions in that benefit mean that up to 6,000 people could see their benefit reduced by half. For many, that reduction is tantamount to being a notice to quit. The numbers of homeless will undoubtedly increase. It is interesting to point out that 37% of the people who qualify for the single-room rent are working and on low pay. In the last mandate it was accepted that direct

payment to landlords was the best solution, and approximately 86% of tenants here are in that category, so it is essential that that is maintained.

The current proposal is that universal credit will be paid to one nominated person in a family. Universal credit will not safeguard personal access to welfare support for women in couples. Here in the North, women comprise 53% of benefit recipients and, given that many more women than men work part time and are on lower wages, they rely more on benefits and tax credits and those make a larger share of their income. It simply means that many of the changes and cuts will disproportionately impact on women. It cannot be assumed that there is equality in the division of household income and financial decision-making in all families.

There is evidence that women readily spend their income on their children and on household essentials. That enhances economic family stability and alleviates child poverty. With benefits being rolled into one, there is concern that women will lose access to any financial resources. There is also a growing concern that universal credit will create a financial disincentive to the second earner in a family, which, in most cases, is a woman. There is also a great concern that universal credit is to be paid monthly in order to resemble a salary. However, many people here in low-paid jobs are paid weekly or fortnightly. Monthly payments of universal credit will compel low-income families and lone parents to access debt. Monthly payments have the real potential to impact adversely on the emotional and physical health of women and their dependants. In a recent interview, David Freud said that some people could be paid more often for up to two years, so we shall see if that will be considered.

As well as a redefinition of poverty, the sick and disabled are being judged in terms of a discredited test, not primarily on the basis of a medical evaluation of their overall health and physical condition. Those assessments are being carried out by a tick-box exercise, assessing what they can do rather than what they cannot. A person's condition may have stayed the same, worsened or be life threatening, but they could still be awarded no points under the test. Many people facing reassessment are having their benefit reduced or, in some cases, withdrawn. There is no public confidence that the proposed changeover from DLA to the personal independence payment will be handled any better or more sympathetically. It is likely that the same type of test will be applied.



There is no doubt that the underoccupancy penalties will cause great trauma and hardship to many people. We do not have the available housing stock for people to downsize and, because of the nature of the society in which we live, people are willing to move to areas where "suitable housing" may be available. We need to look at the whole issue of under-occupancy in a sensible and constructive way.

I can understand why some working families might question our objection to the benefit cap, but it needs to be realised that it was designed to block extortionate rents in London. A small percentage of those impacted here — about 1% — will be children who are in place with larger families. It would not cost a lot to meet that need. In fact, in his speech yesterday, George Osborne announced a further cut to benefit and the loss of housing benefit to under-25-year-olds, many of whom will have children, it has to be pointed out. These cuts will affect all our constituents.

The Minister mentioned the social fund and talked about shoes and clothing. In my experience — I do not know what it is like in other areas — clothing, shoes and similar items that come under community care grants and the social fund, have been a very low priority, and very few grants have been given. That might be worth checking.

I say again that these cuts will affect all our constituents. Party colleagues and I have met representatives of the four main Churches, disability groups, advice groups, the unions and many others, all of whom expressed grave misgivings about the impending benefit cuts.

I have attended meetings across the North about welfare reform and its potential impact. Last Tuesday, I attended a meeting in a church on the Newtownards Road in east Belfast, and the message from people there was the same, which is that change, mitigation and flexibilities are required.

I urge the Assembly to look seriously at our reasoned amendment. It is a real and serious attempt to focus on legislation that affects all our people. I ask other parties to look at the legislation with us, and let us see what we can do to go forward constructively.

Sinn Féin has been consistent since the initial stages of welfare reform were introduced in 2007, and that is well documented in Hansard.

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by

leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.26 pm.*

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

**2.00 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Regional Development

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I advise Members that question 1 has been withdrawn.

**Mr Weir:** No, it has not.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** My apologies. I call Mr Peter Weir.

**Mr Weir:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The unwithdrawn question 1.

### Traffic Congestion: Belfast City Centre

1. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development what additional actions his Department intends to take to alleviate the traffic congestion faced by commuters and business users in the centre of Belfast. (AQO 2613/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** I thank the Member for his question. Now for the detailed answer.

The roadworks in Belfast city centre are part of the Belfast on the Move initiative, which aims to provide increased priority for public transport, pedestrians and cyclists. The new bus lanes accommodate public transport, emergency vehicles, cycles, motorcycles and permitted taxis, and they are operational from 7.00 am until 7.00 pm. Let me make it clear that there is no war on motorists. It is regrettable that some people have suffered disruption to their journeys during the bedding-in period.

One of the objectives of the project is to persuade people who drive through the city centre without a destination there to travel around the city centre. That will free up street space for more sustainable modes of transport and for people who need to drive into the city centre for shopping, work or leisure. It is designed to make car and bus journeys faster and easier. When new road layouts are introduced, it takes time for everyone to get used to the new arrangements. It is the same for Belfast on the Move, and it will take time before the full benefits are realised.

My Department continually monitors traffic flows, both on the ground and by CCTV, to ensure that buses and other traffic flow as efficiently as possible, minimising delays for all road users. Yesterday, I met representatives of the Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Belfast City Centre Management who expressed their concern that media coverage was sending out the wrong message. Let me take the opportunity to send out the right message: Belfast is open, Belfast is accessible, and Belfast is a good place to do business. On that point, the Chamber of Trade and Commerce, Belfast City Centre Management and I are agreed.

My Department has introduced park-and-ride facilities at the outer edges of the Belfast metropolitan area —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Minister, your two minutes are up.

**Mr Kennedy:** — and we will continue to expand on those. I reassured the Chamber of Trade and Commerce that we have no plans for city centre roadworks in the pre-Christmas period.

**Mr Weir:** What assurances can the Minister give that special arrangements will be put in place in the run-up to Christmas to deal with what has been a very problematic situation to ensure that there is a good flow of commuter traffic and that traders are not disadvantaged in the vital seasonal period?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am happy to take the opportunity to say that I had a very productive meeting yesterday with Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Belfast City Centre Management representatives. We are very aware of the need to continually promote Belfast as a destination. We have indicated that we will work together in the run-up to Christmas to provide additional measures to encourage people to travel into Belfast.

Let me stress again that this is not a war on motorists. The rationale for enhancing public transport is a good one that has significantly benefited other cities in the United Kingdom and in other parts of Ireland. The proposals were consulted on, and I believe that, in the longer term, they will show benefit to the travelling public in Belfast.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister

will be aware that Committee members visited Nantes and Dublin in the past year to view the rapid transit systems in those places. The system in Dublin, which transports half a million people morning and evening, is certainly very impressive. Will the Minister assure the House that the minimum six-week bedding-in period will be adhered to, so that the system in Belfast can have a chance? You are aware of, and you alluded to —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question, please.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** — the adverse press that there has been. I ask for an assurance that there will be a bedding-in period of at least six weeks.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and, indeed, for his support and that of the Chairperson and other Committee members who joined me on that visit to Nantes to look at its rapid transit system. It is worth saying that Belfast On The Move is the precursor, if you like, of that. Therefore, it is important that Belfast On The Move be allowed to bed in, settle down and work.

The plan and my expectation and hope is that we can progress to a rapid transit system for the city of Belfast that will help to move people, whatever their business is — work, shopping or leisure visits. My commitment is to enhance the public transport experience in Belfast in line with that of other European cities, such as Nantes. I am grateful for the ongoing support of the Chair and members of the Regional Development Committee.

**Mr A Maginness:** I accept the Minister's rationale. It is perfectly reasonable and legitimate. However, the experience of the ordinary commuter has been one of shambles, not of "Belfast on the Move". Either I am losing my marbles or the Minister has lost his marbles previously. Minister, this needs to be rethought and rethought quickly.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful for the supplementary question. I must say to the Member, however, that significant consultation has taken place on the proposals. A full public consultation was launched jointly by the then Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, and the then Lord Mayor and a colleague of the Member, Councillor Pat Convery, in Belfast City Hall on 30 September 2010. That consultation, which included Belfast City Council, Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Belfast City Centre Management, showed broad support for the proposals. Indeed, comments were received

on 29 September 2010 from Belfast City Council, of which he is a former member. They were as follows:

*"The Council generally supports the 'Belfast on the Move' proposals to promote sustainable transport options for the city centre. The proposal to reduce the amount of unnecessary through traffic in the city centre is welcomed, however, the measures must ensure the city centre remains accessible for leisure, shopping and business use. The increased priority for pedestrians and public transport in the city centre is supported along with the need to provide sufficient dedicated parking spaces for disabled people."*

I say, "Amen" to that. I support that. That is the rationale that we seek to implement.

As I said, I regret any inconvenience to travellers, particularly that which happened on a couple of occasions recently. However, there will be an inevitable bedding-in period. We will continue to monitor and work at it. It works in other places, so there is no reason that it should not work in Belfast.

**Mr Allister:** From time to time, we hear wild talk about the cost to our economy of parades that briefly block our streets. Can the Minister tell us whether he has any idea of the cost to our economy of the mayhem that he has brought to our city centre streets?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for a very helpful contribution. *[Laughter.]* He will know that I was recently parading on the city centre streets of Belfast. I am sure that that gives him much comfort.

Yesterday, I met the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce. There had been comment and suggestions in the press and in the media generally about losses to business and so forth. I am not in the business of putting Belfast out of business. I have made that abundantly clear. What we will continue to do and what I have asked the Belfast Chamber and Belfast City Centre Management to do is to monitor the situation and to report directly to me on it. Likewise, we will continue to monitor progress and traffic movements in the city centre and continue to improve the system so that we can refine it to a way that makes it work completely at all times of the day. There were other mitigating circumstances in Belfast, particularly last Tuesday. The adverse weather played a part in some of the travel disruption as, indeed, did minor accidents, which always have the

capacity to disrupt the flow of traffic. There was also the failure of the synchronisation of the traffic lights. My Department cannot be blamed for that, but, nevertheless, it had an impact. We continue to work at all of the issues.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that questions and, indeed, answers should be relevant to the original question.

## A55 Outer Ring, Belfast

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department considered developing a strategy for extending the A55 Outer Ring in Belfast which would allow for better traffic flows to the north and west of the city. (AQO 2614/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** Improvements to the strategic road network, which includes the A55 outer ring road were considered in the development of the Belfast metropolitan transport plan, which was published in 2004. Extension of the A55 in west Belfast beyond the Monagh bypass was not identified as a priority, and, indeed, a scheme linking the top of the Monagh bypass to the Crumlin Road had been formally abandoned in the previous Belfast urban area plan of 2001.

The Member will be aware that I made an announcement on 19 September 2012 that the A55 Knock Road widening scheme between the Glen Road and Kings Road is to proceed, subject to funding. I am mindful of the affordability of the scheme in the current economic climate. Capital funding in this Budget period is already committed to constructing major road improvement projects such as the A5, the A8 and the A2. Timing of the delivery of the A55 Knock Road widening scheme will be determined by subsequent Budget settlements agreed by the Executive. The proposed scheme will help to improve road safety and provide a more appropriate standard of road in this key strategic route.

**Dr McDonnell:** I am sure that the Minister can make the connection between this and the previous question about how relief around the A55 would help to ease up the city centre. Can he give the House any idea of the extent of the investment needed to provide the greater Belfast area with a transport infrastructure that is fit for purpose, particularly in the light of the city centre changes?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and, implicit in that, his support for changes to the overall road

infrastructure, not only in Belfast city centre but throughout the wider network. If we had, for instance, £100 million, we could look at a York Street flyover, which would significantly transform some of the travelling habits of our population. If we had £100 million, we could perhaps introduce a rapid transit system without delay. That is the scale of the commitment that the Executive would need to carry forward if they are serious about wholesale and widespread improvement to the strategic road network that would make a positive contribution and improve the flow of traffic both in the city centre and its outer limits.

**Mr Spratt:** I suggest to the Minister that more people are using the outer ring as a result of what has been happening in the city centre. Will he encourage officials in his Department to publicise the fact that the outer ring could be used more and more by the 60% of commuters who do not stop in Belfast city centre?

**Mr Kennedy:** The Member makes a very important point, which I gladly welcome and endorse. To ease the flow of traffic in the city centre, there is the opportunity to use alternative routes, be it the A55 or, indeed, the M3 and other opportunities. That is an important message for the travelling public to hear. We need to reduce the volume of traffic that travels through the centre of Belfast simply as a through route. It is of no value to the local economy, particularly to the shops and so on, and it has the capacity to contribute to congestion. Going forward, organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce and city centre management should put greater emphasis on that information, which is very necessary. I welcome the comments of the Chair of the Regional Development Committee and would welcome any ongoing assistance from him and members of the Committee on that issue.

2.15 pm

## Bus Station Offices and Depots

3. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions have taken place between his Department and Translink on the future of bus station offices and depots. (AQO 2615/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** With any new proposals for bus station offices or depots, future investment by Translink is always considered by the Department as part of the three-year corporate planning process, which includes the agreement of future capital investment plans. It is important to state that Translink is expected

to produce plans in line with the broad strategy set by my Department in the regional development and transportation strategies. All investment opportunities will, of course, be subject to economic appraisal and affordability testing. Over the next two years, a limited bus capital budget is to be provided to Translink, and, as in previous years, we will seek to continue to address pressures on capital budgets through the in-year bidding processes. Those pressures include bus replacement.

Whilst Translink can use its internal resources for bus projects, that is likely to be very difficult because of the revenue deficits that it is projecting over the next two years, and, because of the commercial remit of Translink, it has to consider all these decisions in overall terms. Translink will also contribute to the wider review of depots used or owned across all Northern Ireland Departments that the Strategic Investment Board plans to undertake in liaison with the permanent secretary subgroup on asset management.

**Mr I McCrea:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware of a meeting that was held with members of Cookstown District Council — I declare an interest as a member — about the decision to close the Cookstown depot office. In light of that, will the Minister give an assurance that, in the case of future decisions on depots or offices, a full consultation will take place with the local authority in the district, borough or whatever they are called before a decision is taken to ensure that people are made aware and it is not just landed on them at the last minute?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Indeed, we had a meeting in Cookstown about this. Translink reports that it recently reorganised the facilities at Cookstown following the retirement of one of its officials. It is satisfied that the range of facilities on offer is appropriate to the business needs of the bus station and the local community that it serves. There are no plans to cancel any bus services to or from Cookstown. The current facilities position on the Cookstown bus depot is that the office is open each Wednesday from 10.00 am until 2.00 pm to deal with anyone who wants to speak face to face with a Translink official. Primarily, that will be for SmartPass applications from senior citizens and those between 60 and 64. The station facilities include the waiting area and toilets, and, as before, they are open to the public from 7.00 am until 6.00 pm. Translink has expanded its service to its customers through SmartPass, and there are 13 PayPoint agents in the Cookstown area, including local

shops and filling stations, where Translink customers can get smart card top-ups for purchasing discounted bus journeys. Timetable enquiries from the Cookstown area are now largely managed through the Translink centralised contact centre, which already deals with 95% of such requests Northern Ireland-wide.

**Mr McAleer:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In recent times, the Committee for Regional Development has received representation from concerned traders and councils officials in Banbridge. Are there any proposals to provide a bus station for Banbridge?

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question, although my recollection is that he is a very long distance from Banbridge. However, his intervention is welcome. The provision of bus facilities in Banbridge has been the subject of much discussion over several years. Following several high-level meetings involving Translink, local councillors, local representatives and me, Translink submitted an economic appraisal for the provision of bus facilities in Banbridge, and this is being considered by the Department.

**Mr Rogers:** I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Keeping to the parochial theme, I would like to know whether he has any indication of when Kilkeel might have a bus station that meets the needs of the travelling public.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. The Member is correct in asking when Kilkeel might expect a new bus station. It has an existing facility, which, I know, is not considered to be satisfactory. Indeed, I recently met representatives of Newry and Mourne District Council. I know that the Member has tabled questions for written answer on this. Identifying a site that would be adequate and meet all the requirements has been a challenge, as have the budgetary considerations. We will continue to have conversations as necessary, but my sense is that there has been no early identification of a site that meets all the requirements, and finance remains an issue when it comes to how, when and how quickly it could be funded.

## Cycling

4. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to encourage more people to

cycle to places of education and employment. (AQO 2616/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** My Department has a range of plans that build on the progress already made. My Travelwise team continues to focus on ways to promote a sustainable travel programme of activities and promotions. This includes school visits, providing promotional material and supporting events such as Bike Week. The promotion of cycling is part of a series of measures contained in workplace travel plans developed with employers. Travelwise has been actively involved in administering the tax incentive scheme that enables employees to lease a bike. There has been a very encouraging uptake in Departments this year and growing interest from other employers. Indeed, I trust that the Assembly Commission will make the scheme available to its staff in the near future.

We also collaborate with other Departments and organisations, such as Sustrans and the Cyclists' Touring Club, to promote cycling. The recent cycling skills and cycling safety booklet produced in collaboration with DOE is a good example of that. Roads Service is committed to providing safer roads for all users, including cyclists and pedestrians, by utilising a range of measures, such as road safety engineering, traffic calming and enhancement of the pedestrian and cycling network. Infrastructure investment promotes employment, and there are other benefits of incorporating cycling into a fully integrated transport system. An active travel strategy has recently been developed with the assistance of stakeholders. Its key objectives include increasing the number of trips undertaken by cycling by 2020 and facilitating walking and cycling to schools. I will shortly bring the strategy before the Executive and develop a detailed action plan. Although resources need to be secured, the critical issue is that we need to co-operate across Departments more effectively to give the issue the profile that it deserves.

**Mr McCallister:** I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. Will he detail the infrastructure that has been put in place in schools to promote cycling? I am, as he is, very committed to this, as it is important to get kids involved early in an active lifestyle.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member. Of course, we all remember with fondness the great drama of Harry's arrival in this world and the role that you played in the birth of your second child. It is a bit early for a bicycle, mind you. *[Laughter.]* My Department will continue to

liaise with schools wishing to explore the benefits of school travel plans, and we will continue to promote sustainable travel in schools throughout the annual Walk to School week and associated events held in that month. I was surprised at the Education Minister's reply to my Executive paper, when he pointed out that, although his Department previously funded minor works at schools, it could no longer do so because of financial pressure and priorities.

**Mr G Robinson:** Does the Minister agree that cycling is a good form of exercise and recreation? Would he encourage cyclists to wear helmets at all times for road safety purposes?

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I very much agree that cycling can lead to and improve a very healthy lifestyle. In my role as Minister, I have been playing my part. The Department has lent me a bicycle to cycle the roads and pathways of south Armagh and other places. I always wear a helmet, and I recommend that for everybody.

**Mr McDevitt:** It is disappointing to hear the news that the Department of Education is not supporting the provision of extra cycle facilities in schools. Can the Minister tell us a bit more about the cycle to work scheme in the Civil Service? Does he expect to reopen it next year? Does he expect the Assembly to definitely follow suit and offer staff here the opportunity to access bikes at a reasonable price?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Indeed, we recently met to discuss that very issue, and it was a very helpful exchange. I very much endorse and want to promote the scheme that exists in the Civil Service and to offer staff the opportunity to purchase bicycles. I have the strong view that the staff under the authority of the Assembly Commission should also be given that opportunity. That would also improve the public profile of cycling. Since the recent Olympics and Paralympics, we have seen evidence of how the profile of cycling has significantly improved, and that is all to the good. I would very much welcome an early decision from the Commission on the matter.

Edward Street, Downpatrick

5. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline when Roads Service intends to reimplement the previously trialled one-way system at Edward Street, Downpatrick. (AQO 2617/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** Roads Service has no immediate plans to introduce a one-way system on Edward Street, Downpatrick. The Member will be aware that the amalgamation of two primary schools during 2011 in the Edward Street area has significantly increased congestion on an already busy residential street, particularly at school opening and closing times. The temporary one-way system on Edward Street referred to by the Member was put in operation for approximately four weeks in late 2011 to accommodate resurfacing works. It was not a trial aimed at resolving traffic concerns in that area of the town. Following the removal of the temporary one-way system, requests were made by elected representatives to introduce that measure on a permanent basis. It was acknowledged that the temporary one-way system demonstrated to local residents the advantages and disadvantages of such a system, if it were to be introduced permanently.

Earlier this year, officials in Roads Service consulted residents of Edward Street and surrounding areas, seeking opinions on a one-way proposal. A number of objections to the proposals were received. The majority of concerns during the operation of the temporary one-way system related to the additional vehicular traffic that was dispersed into surrounding residential streets. Some surrounding roads had difficulty dealing with larger service vehicles and buses.

**Mr Hazzard:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Given the urgency of this situation — indeed, a young child was knocked down on Friday morning — did the emergency services, including the PSNI, Ambulance Service and the fire agencies, consult Roads Service on the issue?

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Roads Service officials would, as a matter of course, consult the various agencies, and, of course, we will continue to monitor traffic issues at that location in Downpatrick. A number of options and mitigating measures are being considered. Those include the widening of adjacent streets, principally St Dillons Avenue, and the implementation of an area-wide traffic-calming scheme in an attempt to deter traffic from the area.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Before we move on to questions for the Minister for Social Development, I remind Members that private

conversations should take place outside the Chamber.

**2.30 pm**

## Social Development

### Social Enterprise

1. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made with delivering on his Department's commitment to invest in social enterprise growth to increase sustainability in the broad community sector. (AQO 2627/11-15)

**Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):** We have made significant progress on delivery against that Programme for Government commitment. Work has commenced on developing a policy framework for community asset transfer. We have appointed a delivery partner, Development Trusts NI, to build capacity in the voluntary and community sector to ensure that the sector is in a position to take advantage of future opportunities. We have initiated a pilot social enterprise growth project in a disadvantaged area of Lisburn, through the Resurgam Trust, and a further pilot will be taken forward in 2013 and onwards. A joint mapping exercise with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is under way. That will be finalised by the end of December 2012 and will identify opportunities for future growth in the social economy sector.

**Mr Hazzard:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. Will the Minister assure the House that his Department will maintain extensive engagement with the sector so that the relevant stakeholders will be allowed to shape the policy?

**Mr McCausland:** I assure the Member that that will indeed be the case. We want to learn from good practice that is already out there and happening. That is why we are working with, for example, Development Trusts NI, which has considerable expertise in this area. In this, as, indeed, in all other areas, we are very keen to engage with stakeholders.

**Mrs Hale:** Will the Minister tell the House what role Development Trusts NI has in the delivery of the Programme for Government commitment?

**Mr McCausland:** Development Trusts NI has a key role to play as a delivery partner with government in developing and implementing the community asset transfer policy framework. My Department has invested £247,000 in the organisation over the next two-and-a-half years to enable it to develop capacity in the voluntary and community sector and to ensure that organisations are ready to take advantage of opportunities that will arise. The partner organisation in GB, Locality, has extensive experience in that work, and I am confident that the organisation can make a real impact in transforming communities in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Copeland:** Social enterprises are bucking the economic trend, with many growing faster than the economy in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister believe that the Executive's economic strategy includes enough direct measures to further boost the social sector?

**Mr McCausland:** I am sure that the Member is aware that the primary responsibility in that area resides with DETI. That having been said, we have a particular role to play in the more disadvantaged areas through neighbourhood renewal, and we support a number of enterprises through that. I am very conscious of that, because I have been talking to and hearing from a number of them in recent days. We will certainly continue to do all that we can to support the development of social enterprises and to sustain them in those most disadvantaged areas.

**Ms Lo:** Tendering for public contracts can be a very daunting experience for social enterprises. What has the Minister done to help the sector to gain contracts from the public sector?

**Mr McCausland:** I am sure that the Member will be aware that there are requirements and legal statutory obligations in tendering processes. Those arise sometimes from the Treasury and sometimes from Europe and beyond. The encouraging thing is that there are examples of local social economy projects tendering successfully, which shows that it can be done. We need to make sure that others have access to the expertise and experience so that they can replicate what has already been achieved.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I should have informed the House at the beginning that question 6 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

## Town Centres: Investment

2. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister for Social Development if his Department has explored any options for assisting local businesses with start-up costs associated with the establishment of business improvement districts. (AQO 2628/11-15)

9. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Social Development what action he is taking to halt the continued closure of shops on the high street. (AQO 2635/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** I will take questions 2 and 9 together, because they both relate to town centres. I am very concerned about the upward trend in shop vacancies in Northern Ireland, which is being experienced not only here but across the rest of the UK. My Department employs a range of actions to encourage investment in our town and city centres. In the past five years, we have invested in the region of £100 million on urban development grants, comprehensive development schemes and public realm schemes.

In addition to those programmes, I initiated the Department for Social Development (DSD) High Streets Task Force, which was tasked with reviewing the support provided by DSD and gathering the views of high street traders on what could be done to help them. I introduced legislation to allow for business improvement districts (BIDs) in Northern Ireland. I am pleased to say that the BIDs Bill is progressing well and is with the Social Development Committee for consideration.

The issue of assisting local businesses with start-up costs for BIDs was raised during the consultation and, more recently, at the Bill's Second Stage. I have undertaken to look closely at what is happening in other areas before finalising the arrangements here. The amount of funding available in other jurisdictions is not large. In England and Wales, a fund of half a million pounds has been made available to provide loans for setting up BIDs. In Scotland, grant funding is available for amounts of up to £20,000, but BID proposers are required to complete a number of preparatory tasks before being eligible to apply for funding. Furthermore, the application form highlights that the pot of money for grants is limited, so every BID may not secure a grant.

That is not just a matter of the Government putting money in but about businesses seeing the benefit of it for their own area, taking the initiative and driving it forward. It is about



businesses helping themselves and having control over how their money is spent.

**Mr McDevitt:** I listened very carefully to the Minister's reply. Does the Minister acknowledge that there will often be a need to stimulate a business improvement district? Therefore, can he confirm that he is minded to explore positively, during this short period, how, when necessary, the state in this jurisdiction will be able to support business improvement districts, which need a little bit of help to get off the ground?

**Mr McCausland:** If the Member reflects on what I have already said, I made it absolutely clear that we are looking at what is happening in other parts of the United Kingdom. I set out the situation in Scotland and England, and we will reflect on that. We are talking to folk in different towns across the Province who are interested in developing BIDs. I have met people in Ballymena and talked to traders in Belfast as well. Those are just two examples. Public realm work is an issue that often arises in the course of conversation. Therefore, we are talking to people, we are listening to them, and we are reflecting on what happens elsewhere. It would be wrong to prejudge, and I am sure that the Member would not expect me to do that.

**Mr McClarty:** When does the Minister plan to implement any of the opportunities identified in the Coleraine town centre master plan, which he launched in May, in order to reverse the decline in local businesses on Coleraine's high street and, indeed, on any other high street in Northern Ireland?

**Mr McCausland:** Across Northern Ireland, the Department is making interventions, which are generally appreciated by traders. I have been in Coleraine, and the Member has been at events at which we have looked at the way forward for Coleraine town centre. For example, there are urban development grants, comprehensive development grants, public realm schemes and master plans. The task force is looking at the high street and what makes for a healthy high street today. We are in a different situation altogether, and what will work today is not the same as worked 10 or 20 years ago.

I am encouraged by the work that has been undertaken. I am also encouraged by the task force's engagement with traders and by the things that they are suggesting and we are responding to. As regards Coleraine, we are keen to move ahead as quickly as possible,

depending on the market and other factors that the Member is only too well aware of.

**Mr Hilditch:** Does the Minister have any plans to extend the Living over the Shop (LOTS) programme?

**Mr McCausland:** The Department's new urban regeneration and community development policy framework, which is currently out for public consideration and consultation, establishes town and city centre regeneration as a key policy priority. I believe that one way to safeguard the future of our town centres is to make better use of the empty space above retail and office units for housing.

Support for the LOTS scheme was voiced at a series of task force meetings. In the past, the Housing Executive delivered a limited number of successful Living over the Shop schemes. I believe that more can be achieved, and I intend to revitalise the Living over the Shop initiative as part of the broader package of town and city centre regeneration.

## Housing: Dungannon

3. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the declaration of unfitness of 14 homes by the Housing Executive in Dungannon district. (AQO 2629/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** The 14 homes in the Dungannon district that were declared unfit by the Housing Executive are all houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). The Housing Executive is responsible for the registration of HMOs, which are private rented properties, and for ensuring that they meet certain standards. It is disappointing that so many properties have been found to be unfit. However, the fact that notices have been served indicates that the Housing Executive continues to fulfil its responsibilities in this area.

**Ms McGahan:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. What is the timescale for making those properties right for people? Have any checks been carried out on other houses in the Dungannon area?

**Mr McCausland:** As I pointed out, the total number of properties was 14. Two properties were found to be unfit for human habitation; specifically, they were deemed not to meet the minimum fitness standards for a dwelling. Both failed the standard due to inadequate provision of light and ventilation to a habitable room in

each property. Eleven properties failed the HMO standard due to the number of occupants living in the dwellings. The properties are classed as HMOs and are, therefore, required to meet minimum fire and amenity standards. Each property failed to meet those minimum standards. Another property failed to meet the HMO standard due to neglect in the management of the property, and it requires substantial repairs and maintenance. So, 13 of the 14 properties were deemed to be unfit due to shortcomings in their configuration and in the number of occupants living in them. Those are things that can be addressed by the people who own the properties, so I encourage them to take that forward.

**Mr Campbell:** I know that the Minister takes a keen interest in vacant dwellings owned by the Housing Executive and housing associations. In the past year, he has been to Ballysally in Coleraine, where he would have seen vacant dwellings under the auspices of SHAC. Will he reassure the people living close to those properties and those on the waiting list that everything that can be done will be done to ensure that they are brought back to a habitable state?

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the Member for his question. I know that he is very conscious of the issue in Ballysally, because he has raised it with me on various occasions, as have a number of his colleagues. The fact is that a number — but not the entire number — of those vacant properties are about to be brought back into use by the housing association. My one reservation in all this is that if you do only part, there is still a certain element of blight there, which can make it a little bit more difficult to fill the properties even though they are brought up to a very good specification. I think that we need to keep watch on that over the next while.

I am very keen to get empty homes back into use. We have housing and accommodation needs across Northern Ireland. One contribution to addressing that need is the Living over the Shop initiative, and the other is to get empty homes back into use.

**Mr Rogers:** Following on from that, empty homes are not always unfit homes. What action is the Minister's Department taking to bring all homes that are declared unfit up to a satisfactory standard?

**Mr McCausland:** The fitness standard for houses varies from area to area, and as the Member says, no two situations are exactly the same. Unfitness levels in social housing, for

example, are, by and large, very low. There are still some pockets that we must not ignore; I acknowledge that. I have asked the board of the Housing Executive to bring forward a number of possible stock transfers to start to tackle those small pockets of unfit social homes.

**2.45 pm**

The recent successful pilot at Rinmore in Londonderry, if replicated in other areas, could offer a way forward for many residents who have been waiting many years for important improvement work. I have been pressing the Housing Executive very strongly to make sure that it steps up to the challenge and addresses that issue. It worked in one case and there is no reason why it cannot work in others. The Housing Executive has identified a number of areas. We gave it a target for social homes to be passed over to housing associations to be brought up to standard. I want to see that target met.

## Regional Infrastructure Support Programme

4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the selection criteria and process used for all themed bids for the regional infrastructure support programme. (AQO 2630/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** For each of the themes, the Department adopted a two-stage process in putting the new arrangements in place. The first stage involved expressions of interest and applications from interested parties, with those deemed best placed to deliver the new arrangements progressing to stage two, which was the normal economic appraisal and decision-making process. As is the norm with all the Department's funding arrangements, no commitment to provide funding is made until the decision-making process is complete and a formal contract for funding issued. The selection criteria for each theme are available on request.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Did his Department complete an economic appraisal for the Women's Consortium bid, which had been given preferred bidder status? Will he outline the main conclusions of that appraisal?

**Mr McCausland:** The Member raised the issue of women in disadvantaged areas. The concern was whether the necessary level of co-

operation was in place among the larger regional women's sector organisations, and whether the new arrangements would work if there were not that level of co-operation. That led to the conclusion that it was best not to proceed. That decision was not taken lightly. Given the substantial sum of money involved, I need to be absolutely sure that the arrangements will work. There was a concern there.

There were two areas of the five in which it was decided not to proceed. One was the women's sector in disadvantaged areas and the other was volunteering. There was also a decision to delay and reflect further on that one, but that was the reason with regard to the women's sector. There were issues internally in the sector.

**Ms P Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. How is the programme planned to proceed after March 2013?

**Mr McCausland:** We are looking carefully at both areas I mentioned: volunteering and the women's sector in disadvantaged and rural areas. We will reflect on those, and it will take some time for us to consider all reasonable options. However, we will be looking at the options for the period after March 2013. There is a need for support. It is important that it is done in a way that is viable, sustainable and effective. That is why we are taking the time to reflect.

## Fuel Poverty

5. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made on his Department's commitment to introduce and support a range of initiatives aimed at reducing fuel poverty, including preventative measures. (AQO 2631/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** Tackling fuel poverty remains a key priority for my Department. Alongside continuing to deliver mainstream schemes such as the warm homes scheme, the Housing Executive's heating replacement scheme, a benefits uptake campaign, and winter fuel and cold weather payments, my Department is working on a number of exciting new pilot schemes.

I recently launched a boiler replacement scheme, which offers a grant of up to £1,000 towards the cost of replacing old, inefficient boilers if a family has an income of less than £40,000. The Housing Executive received over 14,000 expressions of interest in the scheme

and is sending out application forms. A total of £12 million has been allocated to the scheme over the next three years, with £4 million available for grants before the end of March 2013.

My Department is working with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the University of Ulster, the Housing Executive and a number of local councils to deliver energy efficiency improvements to homes in small, concentrated areas. The University of Ulster has developed a sophisticated targeting methodology that can identify areas of poor housing and low incomes and could indicate a high prevalence of fuel poverty.

A pay-as-you-go pilot scheme for oil was launched in February this year, and the results have been extremely positive. I am keen for that technology to be rolled out, and my officials are having discussions with Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services. I asked officials to progress that important initiative as quickly as possible as I believe that the installation of pay-as-you-go systems for oil would significantly help households struggling to pay for a fill.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response, which was particularly important given some of the initiatives that he rightly outlined. Will he accept and implement the recommendations of the fuel poverty report, which was approved by the House?

**Mr McCausland:** We will certainly look at every piece of documentation and every proposal that emerges. We will consider anything that we think is viable and will help the situation. If it is practical and it works, we will certainly give it good consideration.

**Mr Gardiner:** Has the Minister's Department recently undertaken any research to determine the most up-to-date figures for people considered to be in fuel poverty?

**Mr McCausland:** Yes, indeed, and I referred to that in my initial answer when I spoke about the work being undertaken by the University of Ulster. Its sophisticated targeting methodology can identify areas of poor housing and low incomes, which might indicate a high prevalence of fuel poverty. We have been working closely with experts through the University of Ulster; indeed, that work is quite innovative, and I am very encouraged by that.

There is, therefore, academic rigour. Anything that we do in future will be evidence based, which I think is the point that the Member was making.

**Ms Brown:** Is the Minister aware of any new technologies that will improve the energy efficiency of homes?

**Mr McCausland:** I am always open to new and innovative ways to improve the domestic energy efficiency of households in fuel poverty. Glen Dimplex, for example, which is based in Portadown, has developed a quantum system that is being trialled in Scotland. The quantum project is an electric heating system that uses surplus renewable energy from wind farms to heat dwellings. The Housing Executive received a copy of a University of Strathclyde report on the system's performance, and that report is being considered. That, in addition to my previous answer, highlights the fact that we are keen to make advances on this important issue.

## Supported Living Schemes

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on supportive living schemes being developed within the East Antrim constituency. (AQO 2633/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** The Housing Executive is working with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and housing associations to progress a number of supported accommodation projects in the East Antrim area. These include 19 units of supported accommodation for adults with a learning disability in the Larne area, the development of supported accommodation for eight people with a learning disability in the Newtownabbey area, and a business case has been developed for supported accommodation for frail older people in the Greenisland area. In addition, a need for additional supported accommodation for older people with dementia in the Newtownabbey area has been identified, and work is under way to include that service in the programme.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for his answer. There is a growing need to support the elderly and the disabled in the community. When does he expect a housing association to be appointed to take forward these plans and develop further concrete plans and proposals to ensure that there is a facility in the Greenisland area?

**Mr McCausland:** I do not have to hand the full details of the timetable for the scheme in Greenisland. I will, therefore, come back to the Member with those details. I assure him that we want the matter to be taken forward as quickly as possible.

**Mr Eastwood:** What is the Minister's assessment of the success and future of supported living schemes in Northern Ireland?

**Mr McCausland:** There is clearly a need for schemes. It is hard to answer such a very broad question; different people may reach different conclusions. We are keen that more is done in a number of areas. For example, key targets were laid down in the Bamford report, and, sadly, we have not been meeting those targets.

At the end of 2011-12, 96 Bamford units had started, against the target of 200 starts. No Bamford units have started on site during 2012 to date. However, a number of scheme proposals are business-case approved. In the light of that level of progress, the securing of starts on 850 units of supported-housing accommodation during the years 2011-12 to 2014-15 is indeed a challenging target. Our concern about the Housing Executive meeting its targets in regard to the Bamford report reflects concerns that we have had about it reaching targets in a number of other areas. So, it is not unique to that particular issue.

## Housing Associations

8. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Social Development how his Department holds a housing association accountable for the development and management of its housing developments. (AQO 2634/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** The social housing development programme delivered by housing associations is managed on my behalf by the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive monitors all aspects of delivery, including assessment and approval of each individual housing project and payment of grant on completion of each key stage. The main tool for regulating the development and management of registered housing association schemes is the 'Housing Association Guide'. The guide covers aspects around development, finance, procurement, governance and housing management. The Department's inspection team carries out a rolling programme of inspections to determine each housing association's compliance with all aspects of the 'Housing Association Guide'.

**Mr Givan:** I am grateful to the Minister for the response. I may need to come to him with regard to a particular case, a housing association in my constituency that, so far, has failed to address an antisocial behaviour problem. I am not at that point yet, but I hope that the Minister will be able to assist me if I need to come to him.

The Minister will be aware of how the Clanmil Housing Association conducted itself in taking forward the Redwoods development. Can the Minister tell us how he was able to assist in holding Clanmil to account for that particular scheme?

**Mr McCausland:** It is clear that mistakes were made by the Clanmil Housing Association in that case.

The background is that Clanmil opted to purchase already-completed private sector apartments for social housing in an area of high housing need. The expectation was that the apartments would remain private. That was the nub of the problem.

A key condition of funding from my Department is that a housing association must first undertake community consultation before entering into any agreement to purchase. When concerns were raised by the local community, I asked for the facts, and it was obvious to me that the consultation had been inadequate. Clearly, it had not fully addressed community concerns. The consultation was carried out over too short a period, and it was conducted over a public holiday period when many residents were away from home. I insisted that the consultation period be extended to allow for a more inclusive and meaningful engagement with local residents and elected representatives. As a result, we were able to reach an accommodation, and the apartments have now been secured for social housing for the over-55s. It is my view that the plans are now wholly appropriate in a context of housing need and mixed-tenure development.

Since then, I have also introduced new procedures for consultation that set out in more detail my expectations for more meaningful, genuine consultation, including a defined timeline to allow for proper engagement. That community consultation should include not just the general community but also the area's public representatives, who have a particular knowledge of the situation and the issues that may arise.

3.00 pm

## Ministerial Statement

### Health: Transforming Your Care

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement to the Assembly on 'Transforming Your Care', the report of the review of health and social care services in Northern Ireland, and my plans for public consultation on changes arising from proposals in the report. Members will recall that 'Transforming Your Care' was presented to the Assembly on 13 December 2011. The report outlined a compelling case for the reform of health and social care services, and it proposed a new model of care built around the individual patient and service user, not institutions.

I have said many times that my aim is to have a health and social care system that is safe, resilient and sustainable into the future. For that to be the case, it is essential that we take decisions that will ensure that our services are fit for purpose for the challenges that lie ahead. My vision is to build a health and social care system that improves care, ensures better outcomes for patients and clients and enhances the experience of health and social care for all our service users. To achieve that vision, we need to look at how we can improve our health and social care and, in so doing, reshape how we interact with all those who use our services. I am convinced that that aim is shared by the people who deliver services daily throughout our health and social care system.

I have set out, on a number of occasions, the inescapable context for change. Our society is changing; we have a growing and ageing population, with people living longer. That, of course, is something to celebrate, but it also means that there are more people with long-term conditions. That, inevitably, places more demands on our health and social care services, including our hospitals and other resources. The treatment and care of citizens is also changing. We have increasingly specialised services, with technology driving many improvements in how we can design and deliver care. Therefore, changing how our services are provided is an inevitability. I want to ensure that those changes are planned and managed so that they will bring optimum benefits to patients, service users, staff and the wider community.

We need to recognise fully the implications of the demographic changes and the demands and pressures that they bring. 'Transforming Your Care' indicated that demand for services could grow by around 4% a year by 2015. We need to improve services, but we need to do it in a way that secures improved productivity and value for money. We need to think differently about health and social care and about how we use and deliver services in response to changing circumstances. What has not changed is a belief in the core principles of the NHS, which are that health services are generally free at the point of delivery and are based on individual need, not ability to pay; that they are funded by taxation; and that they are available without prior restriction on which cost-effective treatments or therapies individuals should receive. Thus, the best available cost-effective services will be provided for all citizens. Those principles remain fundamental to the delivery of our health and social care services.

The proposals in 'Transforming Your Care' set out at a strategic level how we might effectively meet the challenges through a new model for the delivery of integrated health and social care services in Northern Ireland. The new model of care is focused on ensuring that more services are provided in the community, closer to people's homes where possible. It is about prevention, earlier interventions, promoting health and well-being and having more personalised care that is planned and delivered around the needs of the individual and is tailored, as far as possible, to suit them.

A key early objective in the delivery of reform was the development of population plans for each of the five local commissioning groups by the end of June 2012. The population plans identify the needs of the local population on the basis of demographics and population health trends and identify how those needs should be met in future. In my statement to the House on 3 July, I advised Members that I had taken delivery of the five draft plans and published them on the departmental website. The plans are complemented by an overarching strategic implementation plan that draws together the key elements of the population plans, including cross-cutting regional aspects. The strategic plan is to provide a coherent framework for the planning and delivery of health and social care services over the coming years. I also advised that, over the summer period, the draft plans would be subject to quality assurance work and, once approved by me, would form the basis of formal consultation. The quality assurance stage has now been completed, and the revised strategic implementation plan and population

plans have been forwarded to me by the Health and Social Care Board. I have agreed that the revised plans should form the basis of the public consultation that will start today and close on 15 January 2013.

I want to outline to Members the key proposals that have been developed as a response to 'Transforming Your Care' and form the basis of the consultation process. The draft population plans and strategic implementation plan set out proposals for how our health and social care services can be shaped over the next three to five years. The consultation that I am launching today will ask patients, service users and the wider public for their views on the proposals. A consultation document entitled 'From Vision to Action' summarises the main services covered in the implementation plan and population plans and the changes being proposed. It includes questions to prompt consideration and responses on the proposals — proposals that affect all of us who use our health service. It is available on the website [www.TYCconsultation.hscni.net](http://www.TYCconsultation.hscni.net).

A fundamental principle within TYC is the shift in service provision: moving treatment and care out of the hospital sector and into the community, closer to people's homes. A key vehicle for facilitating that is the development of integrated care partnerships (ICPs) across Northern Ireland. ICPs will bring together health and social care professionals across the secondary, primary and community sectors to work in collaborative networks to deliver a more complete range of services for people in their local communities. They are to be based on multidisciplinary working, with general practitioners playing a leading role but with clinical leadership also available from other health and social care professionals. In the main, ICPs would focus initially on supporting frail older people to maintain their independence and on people with certain long-term conditions, namely diabetes, stroke and respiratory conditions. That would include a focus on improving how treatment and care is delivered and the provision of an environment for new ideas and innovations, with a stronger emphasis on prevention and early intervention. ICPs would also put in place arrangements to identify those who are most at risk of having to go into hospital unexpectedly and to develop plans and actions to prevent the need to go to hospital. ICPs are a new approach and should play an important role in reducing emergency admissions to hospital and supporting the movement of services out of the hospital sector and into the community. In so doing, ICPs would involve strong collaboration with

providers in the voluntary and community sector and independent healthcare providers.

With a growing and ageing population, it is essential that we support older people through the prevention of ill health and a focus on health and well-being. Among those over the age of 70, rates of ill health and disability increase significantly. Many excellent services are provided for older people. However, there is still much that can be done to improve the care they receive. The model being proposed would help to do just that.

'Transforming Your Care' also highlights the benefits to patient care of new technology, in the form of telehealth and telemonitoring, in helping to support people in their own home and to identify potential problems or a deterioration more quickly to allow earlier interventions to be made. I have promoted strongly the use of Connected Health to improve patient and client care. It provides significant opportunities for doing so and will help to mitigate the demands on our resources. Northern Ireland is well placed to lead the way in developing Connected Health solutions to overcome the challenges we face.

The consultation document includes proposals around the provision of statutory residential care. With more people being supported to live independently in their own home, the model of care would change to reflect a fall in demand for residential care for older people. The statutory sector currently provides around a quarter of all residential care homes. In many trust-provided homes, more than half the beds are currently unoccupied, due in part to the efforts of trusts to support more people in their own community. It is expected that demand will continue to fall. Likewise, a number of homes are in need of significant investment.

During the next three to five years, the current number of statutory residential homes would be reduced by at least 50% across Northern Ireland, as we support increasing numbers of people to live in non-institutional settings. That does not necessarily mean a reduction in residential homes provided by the independent sector — where there continues to be a demand for those services, they will continue to be provided — nor does that targeted reduction include homes that provide services for older people who are mentally infirm, including those with dementia, or those in nursing homes. It is crucial, however, that safe, suitable and better alternatives to residential care, such as supported living, self-directed support and more respite care, are in place for those who need it. In that respect, closures would be taken forward

in a planned and phased way, with residents, families and local communities involved in the local consultation process. That raises the issue of whether the statutory sector should be involved in the provision of residential home places, and I do not envisage over the longer term that it should be. It is proposed, therefore, to restrict new admissions to statutory care homes.

The review of mental health and learning disability, which is referred to as the Bamford review, provides the context for proposals for services for people with mental health issues or learning disabilities. The proposals focus on the continued implementation of the Bamford action plan, including raising awareness of mental health issues and reducing the stigma associated with mental ill health; continuing to extend the care provided in the community rather than in hospitals; and ending long-term residency in institutional care. The proposals being consulted on include reducing the number of people in institutional care and inpatient beds by moving existing residents into community living through intensive home support alternatives that are based in the community, supported living arrangements, individual budgets or nursing or residential home care where appropriate. We will work towards ensuring that no one will be a long-stay resident in a mental health or learning disability hospital by 2015, with people moving instead to alternative community-based living arrangements. Changing how we support and care for people with mental health issues or learning disabilities would inevitably lead to changes to the long-stay units, with some closing or being used to provide more immediate or short-term care.

The proposals for mental health care also include the development of six inpatient acute mental health units for those aged 18 and over. To reduce stigma and ensure access to acute elective care, it is desirable to locate mental health hospitals close to acute hospital provision where possible. There would be one site in each of the Northern, Southern, South Eastern and Belfast Trust areas, with two in the Western Trust area, suggesting that those should be located in proximity to Altnagelvin Area Hospital and the South West Acute Hospital. It is also important to recognise the key roles that carers play and to improve access to the respite and short-break services that are so vital to improving their quality of life.

We need to ensure both the future sustainability of our hospital configurations and that acute services adhere to best practice in quality outcomes, infrastructure and staffing. The TYC

report concluded that it is likely that it will be possible to sustain only five to seven major acute hospital networks in the future. Creating hospital networks and reorganising acute services would mean that hospitals would not work in isolation. Hospitals of different sizes would work with each other to deliver the fullest range of specialist and acute services. That would mean that, for the majority, each acute hospital network would serve a resident population of 400,000, but, in the case of very specialist services, it would serve the whole of Northern Ireland.

It is imperative that hospital services are provided in a safe and sustainable way. There is evidence that, where the volumes of activity for a speciality are relatively low compared with the norm, there is greater potential for higher mortality rates. There are also implications for the skills of specialist staff in circumstances where they do not see enough cases regularly to keep their skills up to date. Specialist posts in hospitals with relatively low volumes of activity also have implications for recruitment, with a resultant over-reliance on locum staff.

The consultation includes proposals for the reconfiguration of acute services. Those are based on criteria that have been developed to provide a consistent basis against which our hospital services will be reviewed on an ongoing basis. The criteria, which are outlined in the consultation document, are these: safety and quality; deliverability and sustainability; effective use of resources; local access; and stakeholder support. The consultation invites views on those criteria. The consultation document also sets out options for how the acute hospital networks would develop and how services would be configured. The four hospitals in Belfast — the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast City Hospital, Mater Hospital and Musgrave Park Hospital — would operate as one network, with clinical services dispersed across the sites in the best available configuration. Emergency department configuration across the network will be consulted on separately.

I am well aware of the local population's concerns about the reconfiguration of services in the Northern Trust area. We cannot ignore that significant change would need to occur at the Causeway Hospital. The community in that area needs to be able to access quality services over the coming years, and it is important that we plan carefully to deliver on that objective. The consultation seeks views on three potential options for addressing the fragility issues at the Causeway Hospital. I am clear that there is merit in examining the

benefits of strengthened networks between the Northern and Western Trusts or by possibly transferring responsibility to the Western Trust, if that were to work better. As with all the proposals, my concern is the service for the patient. Following the completion of the consultation exercise, decisions would need to be made quickly on the way forward to ensure that sustainable services are in place for the long term.

### 3.15 pm

In the Southern Trust area, the existing networking between Craigavon and Daisy Hill hospitals would be built on, with further changes to maximise effectiveness in line with the acute care criteria. In the South Eastern Trust area, the proposal is for a network of the Ulster, Downe and Lagan Valley hospitals, with links with Belfast. The GP out-of-hours care model for urgent care at Downe Hospital would be extended to Lagan Valley Hospital. In the Western Trust area, the new South West Acute Hospital would network with Altnagelvin and Craigavon hospitals. Altnagelvin would provide a wider range of services in future, including cancer services and enhanced orthopaedics and cardiology. There is also scope to develop our links with the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain to improve healthcare for citizens here and to be able to offer services to those from other jurisdictions. The consultation will seek views on developing those links.

Population health and well-being are crucial elements of TYC and support the Department's proposed framework for public health, Fit and Well — Changing Lives, which is currently the subject of public consultation. I encourage responses to that exercise.

On maternity and child health, the proposals reflect a commitment to the implementation of the objectives in my Department's maternity strategy, published in July this year. That means promoting the normalisation of birth and increasing the number of women having their antenatal care in the community rather than attending hospital. The proposals in the consultation document will also seek to support healthy pregnancies and promote good parent/child relationships in a child's crucial early years, as well as supporting child health through the prevention of ill health and promoting health and well-being.

It is essential that children be given the best possible start in life. That includes a focus on early intervention and a multiagency approach in family and child care, preventing children having to be separated from their family and



enabling some children to remain safely with their family. Where that is not possible, we want to ensure that alternative arrangements can be put in place to bring permanency in the best interests of the child.

The consultation document also includes proposals for how people are treated at the end of life, to ensure that there is choice in how and where care is provided. People must be treated with compassion and dignity through palliative and end-of-life care, with the aim of reducing the number of people admitted to hospital inappropriately.

My aim is to ensure the safety of all patients and clients and the quality and sustainability of our services. I know that that aim is shared by all who provide that care. It is vital that we continue to take decisions and pursue actions that are necessary to improve outcomes for the population. The proposals in 'Transforming Your Care' and the response to them focus on how we plan and deliver services to support the reform and modernisation of our health and social care system. Where, following this consultation exercise, it is concluded that specific major changes in services should be progressed, further public consultations will be undertaken for those specific services.

This exercise is not about cost cutting but about improving service delivery and making better use of the available resources. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that the resources allocated to health and social care are used in the best possible way for the benefit of all citizens in Northern Ireland.

As with any major change in delivery of services, there will inevitably be impacts for our workforce. We need to ensure the best possible deployment of staff in delivering services in the future. It is also anticipated that there would be reductions in our overall workforce of around 3% over the next three to five years. The changes proposed with the shift in services into the community may mean some staff working in a slightly different way or in a different place. Some staff may choose not to make the change, and they will be supported in their decisions.

The consultation exercise seeks your views as patients, clients, services users, service providers and citizens about how we respond to the proposals set out in 'Transforming Your Care'. During the consultation process, there will be a series of public engagement events. We will aim to ensure that everyone is informed and involved in the process and has opportunities to make their views known. I

therefore encourage you to engage with this important consultation, let us know your views and be part of the delivery of change. I have also agreed that an information leaflet should be provided for every household in Northern Ireland to inform citizens about Transforming Your Care and advise them on how to be involved in the consultation process. The leaflet will be issued next month.

We have an opportunity now — one that does not come along too often — to reshape our health and social care system to improve care and the outcomes for users. We should build on the excellent practices that already exist to help make improvements across the system. I believe that there is broad consensus in our community and among those who deliver health and social care on the need to make change. I want everyone to contribute to that change so that we move in the right direction and in the interests of the quality of care for our community and the sustainability of our services. I commend the statement to the House.

**Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and for the briefing that he provided to me and the Deputy Chair this morning. It is a long statement, and there are a lot of issues that people need to take hold of in it. I agree with the Minister that everybody should get involved in the consultation exercise. If we want to make change, we need to make sure that everybody is part of that change.

Minister, I have a couple of questions. Your statement referred to the proposal to close at least 50% of statutory residential homes, but that does not necessarily mean a reduction in the number of private residential homes. Can you provide assurances today that the Transforming Your Care strategy does not represent the privatisation of elderly care? There is also the issue of GPs being central to everything in primary care. We are talking about moving people from the acute sector into the community. Will you outline whether all GPs are signed up to this at the moment? If they are not, what could be the impact of that on communities? Finally, did the equality screening exercise that you carried out identify any groups that would be adversely affected by the proposals?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for the question. First, with respect to the closure of residential homes, there is less demand for residential care. Throughout the Transforming Your Care

process, we have identified a greater desire among the public, as there is among young people who become incapacitated, to spend their later years in a real home — the home of their choice — as opposed to a residential home. In that respect, we need to observe and honour the wishes of the public, and we seek to do that. Providing more respite care for carers and more support for people in their own home is one aspect of that. However, it will be demonstrated by a reduced demand for residential care homes.

Secondly, many of our residential care homes were built in the quite distant past. Many do not meet the standards for room sizes, overhead hoists and so forth that would be available in many other facilities. I cannot ask members of the public to use a facility owned by the public that is perhaps not as good as a facility that is available in the private sector. Therefore, if the private sector is doing its job well in that respect, it will continue to receive support to carry out that work.

With respect to GPs and their support for the process, we have set up integrated care partnerships. Although people will focus on a range of things today, I encourage them strongly to focus on integrated care partnerships, because that is the area in which we will drive the change needed to move people from secondary care to primary care. In general, GPs are getting involved in that, are supportive of the consultation that is happening and are working with us on a lot of the issues. There are a few who are not.

A primary equality screening exercise was carried out on the draft strategic implementation plan. That took place over the summer period. The screening exercise has not highlighted adverse impact on any of the section 75 groups.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** We have one of the longest lists of Members wishing to ask a question. I therefore ask you to be brief in your question and allow as many Members as possible to question the Minister on this important document.

**Mr Wells:** The Minister outlined a series of clinical networks of hospitals. Does he have any plans to reconfigure the boundaries of the local commissioning groups and/or the trusts?

**Mr Poots:** We are looking at stronger networking at the moment, and there are some fairly obvious opportunities for that between the likes of the South West Acute Hospital and

Craigavon Area Hospital, as well as Altnagelvin Hospital. There will be a gravity pull towards Altnagelvin Hospital for many of its services, because the new radiotherapy centre will be open by 2016. I expect that people will prefer to go to Altnagelvin as opposed to Belfast. The orthopaedics unit at Altnagelvin Hospital will be enhanced, and, as there is no fracture clinic or orthopaedics unit in the Northern Trust area, I suspect that people in that part of Northern Ireland will want to go to Altnagelvin. We are introducing 24-hour cath labs in Belfast and in Altnagelvin Hospital, which will be a huge step forward in the treatment of people who suffer heart attacks. That will be a superb service that will be readily accessible to people in the Northern Trust area at Altnagelvin. In addition, there is already a strong urology services network between the Causeway Hospital and Altnagelvin. In all this, there may be the opportunity to strengthen that network and have more consultants available to work at Altnagelvin and the Causeway Hospital, thereby helping to deal with some of the fragility issues at the Causeway Hospital.

**Mr McCallister:** I welcome the Minister's statement. He will know — I have mentioned it before — that one of the most difficult things he has to do under Transforming Your Care is to move money from the acute side to the community side. There is much to be welcomed in his statement, but there is no reference to the money or to the progress that he is making on shifting that financial responsibility. Why not, and will he update us on that?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for his question. I wish him well as he moves on from being health spokesman for his party. We had a good working relationship, and I trust that that will continue to be the case with Mr Beggs as he assumes that position.

The situation is that we had planned to move around 5% of the funding from secondary care to primary care. That is a crucial role, and, as I indicated in my response to the Chair of the Committee, the integrated care partnerships would have that very important role. The GPs will be closely involved in developing the systems and mechanisms whereby work that was once carried out in hospitals can be carried out in the community.

Some of that work will involve shifting allied health professionals who are available in the hospital setting into community settings, so that they are available in a local health clinic rather than a hospital that may be further away. The shift in funding that we are looking for by 2014-

15 amounts to £83 million. The Health and Social Care Board and others who are working with integrated care partnerships will put immense pressure on them to deliver that change.

**Mr McDevitt:** I commend what is a very comprehensive statement. There appears to be a shift towards a totally privatised residential care sector. That sector is currently well regulated from the point of view of standards in the homes, but there is no financial regulation around the robustness of the businesses that are responsible for those homes. Therefore, there is no safety net if something goes wrong. How will the Minister assure us that those homes are underwritten properly if we go down that road?

**Mr Poots:** I did not raise that issue today because I thought that it had been dealt with when we first brought forward 'Transforming Your Care'. We are looking at nursing homes and residential homes having to apply for a bond in the first place and lay down a bond, just as builders who start developments do with Roads Service, for example, to ensure that they are sustainable, so that we do not have a situation in Northern Ireland such as happened in GB with Southern Cross. That recommendation is in the 'Transforming Your Care' document, and I refer the Member to it.

**Mr McCarthy:** The headlines in this morning's 'Belfast Telegraph' tell us how the majority of our nursing profession are under extreme pressure and are dissatisfied.

Staffing levels are poor, the workload is increasing, and nursing care is being delivered by less-qualified staff. Given those depressing facts, is the Minister satisfied that patient care remains genuinely paramount as he pushes ahead with Transforming Your Care, or is what we are hearing just empty rhetoric?

**3.30 pm**

**Mr Poots:** I would never say that what you read in the 'Belfast Telegraph' is empty rhetoric. I disassociate myself from such a view — that paper occasionally gets it right. However, if it is talking about the standards of care, I suspect that it is not getting it right. In spite of all the damning news put out by a number of media and press outlets, people whom I do not know regularly approach me in the street. They tell me that they were in hospital and received excellent care; that a relative was in hospital and received excellent care; or that an elderly relative who had fallen received care that was

second to none when undergoing an operation and then getting back on their feet. I hear that all the time.

I get fed up with Members who want to come here and denigrate our health service. It is one of the best in the world, and I am very proud of it. I am very proud of our nursing staff, as they make an excellent contribution. I welcome the survey that received responses from 14% of the qualified nursing workforce across Northern Ireland. It is important that we listen to the concerns of nurses who take the time to participate in surveys. However, the numbers represented here are very low, and I suspect that many of the nurses who did not respond are very satisfied with the work that they carry out. I may have some insight into that issue.

**Ms P Bradley:** I also thank the Minister for a very comprehensive statement. Will he outline the opportunities that Transforming Your Care (TYC) offers to the voluntary and community sector and to social enterprises?

**Mr Poots:** Social enterprises and the voluntary and community sector will provide very exciting opportunities in the future. Healthcare is an area in which we can support communities. We can create more jobs there, and we can create opportunities for people, particularly the long-term unemployed, to get into useful, viable work. The wide range of services provided by the voluntary and community sector will be vital in ensuring that proposals in the 'Transforming Your Care' report are realised. It is likely that there will be significant additional demands on that sector and that it will help to sustain and develop services.

I am committed to a mixed economy for the provision of care. We talked about the private sector earlier. The community sector can do an awful lot in, for example, domiciliary care. The voluntary sector does excellent work in mental health and learning disability care. It is very important that we use those people — I mean "use" purely in a kind way — to maximise the delivery of health and social care. In doing so, we can provide the best possible health and social care to the people who need it, whether they are patients or people who have a learning disability or mental health issue.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. I am pleased that networking between Daisy Hill and Craigavon will be built on. The 'Transforming Your Care' report came out in 13 December 2011, and a leaflet will be issued to the public next month, almost a year

later. After a lot of general information on the report, we are now getting some of the specifics. Is the Minister happy that the leaflet will provide enough information to enable people to make a qualified and measured response to the consultation?

**Mr Poots:** I want the public to be as well informed as possible so that I will be made aware of any genuine concerns at an early point. Sometimes, politicians and others get a little exercised about an issue but do not really reflect the views of the public. I want to hear from the public. If the public think that this is the correct trajectory, that is good. If they think that we are on completely the wrong course, I need to hear that, change course and seek to amend. We have sought to take as wide a view as possible in the drawing up of those reports thus far. However, I think that this is the most crystallised opportunity yet for the public to get involved in the consultation process and make their views known.

**Ms Brown:** I thank the Minister for his statement to the House. What would the introduction of a 111 number mean for Transforming Your Care?

**Mr Poots:** The 111 number is currently being piloted in parts of England and is due to be rolled out in spring 2013. It is being introduced there to make it easier for the public to access healthcare services when they require medical help quickly but their condition is not life-threatening. The introduction of a 111 number has the potential to drive improvements in the way in which health and social care delivers care. It would provide the opportunity for aligning call-handling and triage processes with other urgent care services, including the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS). A single number would assist in ensuring that patients would have access to better information and more help and understanding on how to access the best care, especially urgent care, when they need it, with patients being referred to a service that has appropriate skills and resources to meet their needs.

My Department and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and NIAS colleagues are monitoring the development of the 111 service to ensure that we learn from experiences in England and add value to any service that may be developed here in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Gardiner:** I thank the Minister for his statement. When the report was published, he said that he would need £70 million to see it through, including £25 million for 2012. Will he

provide an update on his efforts to obtain that money?

**Mr Poots:** Thankfully, I can. The HSCB has undertaken work to consider the financial implications of TYC and its linkage to quality improvement and cost-reduction work. The financial modelling exercise has been conducted at a high level. It has concluded that there still remains an affordability gap for 2014-15. However, that is not unusual at this stage.

Normal processes will follow with the HSCB to understand more fully the financial gap and how it will be resolved. In addition, the shift left into primary and community care and other investment proposals in the strategic investment programme and population plans have to be taken forward with the budget allocations that are available.

I am grateful for additional funding from Sammy Wilson and the Department of Finance and Personnel. My Department made a bid of £90 million through the Executive's invest-to-save programme in 2012-13 to support the implementation of TYC and other health and social care proposals. We believe that it is a well-considered proposal. We hope for a positive outcome on it.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. I refer him to the Bamford review. He mentioned continuing to extend care that is provided in the community. He may not be aware that during Question Time, his party colleague the Minister for Social Development said that the Housing Executive was not meeting its Bamford targets. How does the Minister propose to implement fully the Bamford action plan?

**Mr Poots:** We intend to meet Bamford targets by delivering, by 2015, on moving people out of hospital care into the community. I pay tribute to my colleagues in the Department for Social Development. Perhaps they have been more capable of delivering on that than the Department of Health and have been in a slightly better position. They have worked closely with us thus far. I look forward to working with them over the next two to three years. I made a strong commitment, today and over the past number of months, that my Department would, indeed, want to deliver that by 2015. DSD is a crucial partner in ensuring that that happens.

**Mr Rogers:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Where is the proof that there are safer and better alternatives to statutory residential care? My colleagues and I in South Down know that places such as Slieve Roe House in Kilkeel offer an A1 service in statutory residential care. In passing, the Minister mentioned the private sector doing its job well enough. Can he reassure me that the private sector would provide the same level of care?

**Mr Poots:** Reassurance comes from the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) and the regulation of residential and nursing homes. A very rigorous regulation process takes place, and I welcome that because the stronger the regulation, the better the outcomes for the people who we are providing care for. However, if the Member is of the view that homes that were built 30 or 40 years ago and which would cost a huge amount of money to renovate are better than homes that are newly built, I can tell him about Blair House, which I recently opened in Newtownards. Mr McCarthy, Mr Hamilton, Mr Bell, Miss McIlveen and others were present at that opening. I do not hear any of those Members saying that that is a poorer service or poorer care than we are offering in the public sector. It is a brand new facility that has been built to be fit for purpose. The unfortunate reality is that not all of our facilities are fit for purpose, and to bring them up to that quality of service would cost many millions of pounds. I believe that that money would be better spent elsewhere in the health and social care sector.

**Mr McQuillan:** I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, can you outline the benefits of transferring the responsibilities of the Causeway Hospital from the Northern Trust to the Western Trust?

**Mr Poots:** We already have evidence of how networks can work well, and I point strongly to the existing Daisy Hill/Craigavon network. I had the privilege of going to the high dependency unit in Daisy Hill Hospital, where I saw how new technology can assist. Through a robot, an intensive care consultant talked face to face with the individual at Daisy Hill, and the consultant, who was in Craigavon, could analyse that individual and work closely with the doctors there and provide that added experience and skill set without being on site.

I can see opportunities for Causeway Hospital, where it is perhaps more difficult to get consultants, to get consultant support through new technology advances, which will enable us

to sustain services in a better way than might otherwise be the case at Causeway. I outlined how Altnagelvin will be developing radiotherapy services, a 24-hour cath lab and wider orthopaedic services. All of those will be hugely beneficial to the people in the Causeway area. The networking between the hospitals is important in that, if you have a consultant who is based in Altnagelvin, it is much easier to get that consultant to travel to Causeway to carry out work. A lot of the consultants who are based in Antrim live in Belfast, so it is more of an issue to get those consultants to work at the Causeway Hospital. As a result of networking with Altnagelvin, there are greater opportunities to have more consultants with the specialist expertise to work in that facility.

**Mr McMullan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Minister, you touched on part of the question that I was going to ask in your answer to the Member who asked the previous question. Can we be guaranteed by you that the Northern Trust will remain and that this will not, in some way, lead to the future demise of the Northern Trust because of the public problems that it is having? Given the rural area that we cover here, I take it that the Ambulance Service comes under the same vein of thinking.

**Mr Poots:** There are no proposals to do away with the Northern Trust.

**Mr G Robinson:** Will stronger networking arrangements for the Causeway Hospital, either with Altnagelvin or with Antrim, make it a more attractive place for specialist doctors to work in? I thank the Minister for his statement.

**Mr Poots:** As I said to Mr McQuillan, I do think that. It is a much more attractive option for a doctor to be living somewhere between Causeway and Altnagelvin, which is a particularly beautiful part of the world with good schools available. The scale of work there will test all the skills of a young, go-getter consultant and allow them to expand their skills. They get all of that, and they also get a very pleasant area to live in with good schools and so forth. So, it is a much more attractive option to consultants than is currently the case to have that facility available. We all need to recognise that there is an issue with consultants at the Causeway Hospital. We are operating with too many locums, and we need to fix that.

**3.45 pm**

**Mr Dickson:** I thank the Minister. Minister, will you agree with me that you have an uphill

struggle in selling your plans to what is effectively a sceptical public? I look forward to the analysis of the consultation process. The public are particularly sceptical about elderly care and the care packages that are proposed. Do they not, in reality, create a great deal of social isolation among elderly people? Do you not share my serious concerns about the closure of trust homes?

**Mr Poots:** Social isolation will not be resolved by taking people from their own homes and placing them in nursing or residential homes. If that is Alliance Party policy, the public would be truly sceptical of it. I am not sure whether that is the party's policy as Mr Dickson is not the health spokesperson.

Elderly people, generally, want to be in their own home where they have been for all of their life. To deal with social isolation, we need to look at the opportunities and to work, particularly with the voluntary and community sector, on how we bring people together with other people to enjoy a bit of fun and conversation. However, that does not mean putting them into residential homes or nursing homes. Mr Dickson is coming out with a flawed policy.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for his statement and put on record my appreciation of the nurses and doctors at Antrim hospital who treated me for a minor injury during the summer.

From family experience, I am aware of two elderly people who were returned to their homes following hospital treatment with very limited independence and mobility. Within a short time, GPs had to be called and ambulances returned those people to hospital before both were successfully rehabilitated at Clonmore residential home. If, as is the case in the draft plan, Clonmore, Lisgarel and Joymount residential homes were to close, how would such patients be successfully rehabilitated? How are the existing patients to be cared for?

**Mr Poots:** It is very important that, first, people do not stay in hospital longer than is required, because hospital is not a place to be if you do not need to be there. Secondly, we must have appropriate discharge so that, at the same time, we do not discharge people who are not ready to go home or, indeed, to intermediate care. An intermediate care facility has been developed right beside Antrim hospital. It is a brand new private sector facility. So, those facilities can be offered to people. Whilst we may not deliver

the service, it will not stop us from buying that service.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for his statement, and we look forward to engaging in the consultation process over the next number of months. The Minister rightly makes reference to a focus on early intervention and a multiagency approach to family and children's care. With my education hat on, I want to ask him this: what plans are there to extend the Roots of Empathy programme for schoolchildren?

**Mr Poots:** The Roots of Empathy programme is excellent value for money and is a programme that I support strongly. A high level of interest has been shown by stakeholders, including staff at primary schools and early year providers, in the Roots of Empathy programme. The Public Health Agency is examining the possible scale and pace of expansion of the programme, and a major benefit of it is the legacy of skilled staff who represent a major resource and support to schools. In 2013-14, over 100 schools across Northern Ireland will run the programme to the benefit of over 1,500 children. Schools are being selected to reflect higher levels of disadvantage, albeit that school populations cannot always be identified so precisely.

Our early years interventions and interventions in the primary school years have to continue because they are absolutely critical if we are to get better educational outcomes. If we get better educational outcomes, we also get better health outcomes, better job prospects and have less trouble with young people getting involved in the juvenile justice system.

**Mr I McCrea:** I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. He used the words "compassion and dignity", which are two words that, unfortunately, cannot be used for the many patients who wait for hours on end in the A&E at Antrim. Will the Minister assure me that he is determined to improve the A&E services at Antrim and that there is the capacity in the Northern Trust to return that compassion and dignity to those patients? Will he also comment on how he sees the importance of the minor injuries unit at the Mid Ulster Hospital?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for his question. Unfortunately, we are where we are with Antrim Area Hospital. I will still go back to the fact that two hospitals closed consecutively — the Mid Ulster and the Whiteabbey emergency units — but we did not have the capacity at that time to absorb all that. The decision that was made was unfortunate, but, nonetheless, we have to

live with the consequences of it. We are working our way through it in Antrim, and a new facility is being developed. I am dissatisfied with where we are with reducing the waiting times, so I am not satisfied that we have reached a stage that is acceptable either to me or the public. So, more work needs to be done there. Staff in the HSCB know that we are dissatisfied, and staff in the Northern Trust know that we are dissatisfied. The pressure will continue to be piled on those organisations to ensure that we get a service in the Antrim Area Hospital that is considerably better than that that has been experienced since the closure of the Mid Ulster and Whiteabbey hospitals. The minor injuries unit in the Mid Ulster provides a very important service. I encourage people to use it, as it is an excellent facility.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister is going to consultation. Is he listening, or is this just a process that has to be gone through so that we can get to the predetermined outcomes that already exist? Certainly, where the Causeway Hospital is concerned, the omens are not good, because any of the hospital meetings that I have attended would not accord, for those stakeholders, with the Minister's vision of the hospital as a satellite outpost of Altnagelvin. What acute services does he anticipate retaining in that satellite outpost of the Causeway, and what about the rump of the Northern Board? Will it ultimately be rolled into Belfast, where some people seem to think Antrim exists to serve in any event?

**Mr Poots:** The Member can put labels on particular facilities and run those facilities down if he so desires. I happen to think that the Causeway Hospital provides a good service, and I wish to continue with most, if not all, the services that are provided at that hospital, if that is possible. However, if the Member thinks that the current situation, where you have nine consultant positions, with six covered by locum doctors because the posts have not been filled, is sustainable, he truly is on a different satellite from the rest of the Assembly.

The truth is that we need to ensure that there is real and true sustainability, and we need to think somewhat differently about how we achieve that. If there is a lack of consultants taking up the positions that exist in the Causeway, it is because what has happened and what has passed heretofore clearly has not worked. So, we need to have that full-time, sustainable service at the Causeway. That is what we are working towards. I hope that the Member will work with us, as opposed to against us.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. He alluded to the impact on the workforce and the possible reduction of 3% in the next three to five years. Has he had any discussions with the unions on possible workforce reductions?

**Mr Poots:** Yes, my officials met the unions today to discuss the outworkings. Over the course of each year, there is around 2% staff turnover in the health and social care system, so, over three to five years, there will be 6% to 10% of a staff turnover. For us to lose 3% of staff should not involve compulsory redundancies. There may be some specialist areas in which there is the occasional voluntary redundancy, but I suspect that that would be quite limited. Most will be found through people who are retiring or moving on and through reassigning positions. In all of this, we will still be employing and taking on new people to come and work in the health and social care system over the next three to five years, but we will not be under as much pressure to recruit as many.

**Mr Dunne:** Minister, as you are aware, there is considerable interest from GPs in such areas as Bangor and Lurgan in the provision of hub well-being centres. How can such proposals be forwarded under Transforming your Care.

**Mr Poots:** Transforming your Care does see the way forward. We have identified 27 areas for hub centres, and that process will be moving ahead. As I indicated previously, we are taking forward two pilot projects at present. What I will say, and say very clearly, is this: for the centres to work, I believe that we need the GPs under the same roof as the specialist nurses and allied health professionals, providing that multidisciplinary team. If GPs do not want to do it, they will damage the prospects of achieving this. Therefore, where we have areas where general practitioners are keen to get involved in the development of new hubs and put their name to the paper as being a key player in that, the centres will be delivered much more quickly. They will deliver considerably better services for the public, because a GP, linked with a podiatrist, a physiotherapist, a senior diabetic nurse, and all of that, will be able to provide the range of skills under the one roof that will avoid hospital admissions. I encourage the primary care practitioners to help us and to come together with us to ensure that that is the case, because it will dramatically change the care that we provide for the wider public.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment.

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

## Executive Committee Business

### Welfare Reform Bill: Second Stage

*Debate resumed on amendment to motion:*

*That the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill [NIA 13/11-15] be agreed.*

*— [Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]*

*Which amendment was:*

*Leave out all after “That” and insert*

*“the Second Stage of the Welfare Reform Bill be not agreed pending further consideration and adjustment to better reflect the specific circumstances, obligations and needs of our people; because, while recognising the need for a simplification of the benefit system and development of work incentives, the Bill’s proposals have their origins in austerity policies being pursued at Westminster which are targeted at the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society and which clearly do not adequately address the specific circumstances and needs of our people and will create significant hardship and difficulties for many individuals and families living in socially disadvantaged unionist and nationalist communities; in addition, the payment proposals of universal credit*

*(a) do not reflect the specifics of our labour market and the prevalence of the weekly wage;*

*(b) fail to take account of an established pattern of direct payments to landlords; and*

*(c) in proposing a single household payment, fail to meet specific statutory equality obligations which require social policy to mitigate any adverse impact on named groups, including women and children;*

*and furthermore the Bill fails to take account of*

*(i) the impact of increased punitive measures on jobseekers in a society emerging from conflict and recovering from a legacy of discrimination in employment;*

*(ii) the fact that there is currently no statutory duty to provide affordable childcare,*



*yet the Bill increases conditionality for lone parents;*

*(iii) the existing housing stock and the legacy of segregated housing, in relation to the introduction of an underoccupancy penalty;*

*(iv) the high rate of error in the work capability assessment which is creating hardship and uncertainty amongst many sick and disabled people who are being wrongly declared fit for work; and*

*(v) the anomaly of a benefit cap that was primarily devised to address extortionate housing costs in London but has discriminatory consequences for families here with more than the average number of children.”— [Mr Brady.]*

**Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development):** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. In speaking as the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, I wish to make the following points in response to what the Minister said this morning.

I want to make it clear to the House that the Committee has not had the opportunity to consider the reasoned amendment, so there is no Committee decision on that. Therefore, I will not be making any comment on it in my role as Chairperson. Nor has the Committee formally decided its view on the Bill, so I intend to reflect its general views on the Bill to date, and those are based on issues that have been raised through discussions with departmental officials and stakeholders over a fairly lengthy period. I hope to record faithfully the views of Committee members across all of the parties from those discussions.

Despite the Bill being introduced in the Assembly only last week, I advise Members that the Committee for Social Development has been proactive over the past year or so. In fact, it had seven pre-legislative briefings from departmental officials on the Welfare Reform Bill as introduced at Westminster.

The Committee has also been briefed by key stakeholders on the flexibilities required in the implementation of the Bill to address the specific circumstances that we have to deal with in the North.

#### 4.00 pm

The Deputy Chairperson and I, along with the Committee Clerk and in the company of the Minister, met Lord David Freud on 18 May to

put the case for the need for flexibilities to reflect those specific circumstances and to highlight concerns on behalf of the Committee's stakeholders. We reported the detail of that discussion back to the Committee. I make it very clear that, at the meeting on 18 May, as a matter of record, Mr Freud agreed that the situation here was more grave than elsewhere. On that basis, he accepted the need for greater flexibility in how the Bill is administered. As I said, it was reported back to the Social Development Committee that the Minister responsible for this in Westminster agreed with us that our circumstances were worse than those elsewhere. To his credit — I want to be honest about this — he also said that he did not accept that our circumstances were as bad as some stakeholders were arguing. We did not have to agree or disagree on that; the point I am making is that, on behalf of the Social Development Committee, we got from that Minister an understanding that our circumstances were worse than elsewhere and that we were entitled to some flexibilities. The Minister then committed to considering what flexibilities may be appropriate. I will come back to that in a few moments.

Furthermore, over the time of our deliberations on the Bill, there have been numerous seminars that have informed people about the changes that the Bill would introduce. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of our stakeholders in being proactive in holding the seminars, discussing the reforms and producing reports. That has been a positive contribution in trying to move forward the debate on flexibility. I thank those stakeholders for inviting members of our Committee to participate in a number of those events.

A number of superlatives have been used to describe the Bill, but, suffice it to say, it is undoubtedly the most comprehensive change to the benefits system in perhaps a generation. Because of that, it has engendered strong opinion among stakeholders. That has also been reflected in the Committee's discussions on the issues. It is a large and contentious piece of legislation, no matter what way we look at it, with 134 clauses and 12 schedules. I recognise that now is not the time to comment in detail on all of them; rather, on behalf of the Committee, I will concentrate on the key principles and highlight the opinion of the Committee.

To begin on perhaps a positive note, it is fair to say that streamlining administrative or bureaucratic processes is something that we can all welcome. There are currently more than

30 different benefits, and the system itself is considered to be difficult to understand, particularly for a range of claimants. On the face of it, therefore, a simpler system that replaces the complex system of working-age benefits and credits with a single set of rules would be welcomed by the Committee. The new system is referred to as universal credit. As I will indicate in due course, although the proposed system is theoretically simpler, serious concerns are shared by members of the Committee on the detail of how universal credit will be administered.

In addition, the Committee welcomes incentives to encourage and assist people back into work and supports the principle that work should always pay. Indeed, the Department advised the Committee that many people in work would receive substantially more support than under the current benefit system. If that is the case, that would be welcomed.

We are advised that universal credit will be paid once a month to a nominated person in the household. Stakeholder groups have told us repeatedly that the capacity of many people to budget over a month, when they have been used to receiving payments at different times of the month, is a serious issue that has not been properly addressed. The Committee shares those concerns.

On direct payments, the Minister himself has told the House that over 80% of those in receipt of housing benefit opt to have that payment made directly to the landlord. That provides assurance for those people and for all of us that people will not fall into rent arrears and will at least have a roof over their head, despite any other financial pressures that they might have. However, under the universal credit proposals, this will be paid directly to the claimant, except in particularly exclusive circumstances. The Housing Executive and housing associations, as well as representatives of the private rented sector, have expressed concern that this could lead to increased arrears and possibly increased evictions. The prospect of increased homelessness as a result of this payment option under universal credit is of concern to the Committee.

The issue of underoccupancy for working-age claimants in the social rented sector is a serious concern for the Committee. Under the Bill, if a house is underoccupied by one room, housing benefit will be reduced by 14%. If two rooms or more are unoccupied, housing benefit will be reduced by 25%. There are high levels of underoccupancy in the North, with the Housing Executive estimating that up to 40,000 of its

tenants will be affected. The options for tenants are to make up the shortfall in the rent or move to a dwelling that they can afford. However, as we heard from the Department — the Minister also mentioned this — such one- and two-bedroom houses are in very short supply here, and, for a person on benefits, making up the shortfall may simply not be an option.

The proportion of people of working age who are in receipt of DLA in the North is approximately twice the level in Britain. There are a lot of reasons for that. It seems certain that fewer disabled people will qualify for PIP than currently qualify for DLA, and those who do may qualify for a shorter period or receive reduced support. The Committee heard that that had the potential to impact on personal mobility, independent life in the community and adequate standards of life. Also, assessment for personal independence payments will be carried out by a third-party provider. Again, there are a lot of concerns around that. The Committee has concerns about that, given that the assessment process of a third-party provider for the work capability assessment is, going by some opinion and, indeed, going by the latest report from the Department, in many ways seriously flawed. The potential for that to be repeated with the PIP process is causing concern.

The Committee received briefings from women's groups and organisations, including the Commissioner for Children and Young People, on the impact of many of the reforms on women and children. Claims will be made on the basis of households rather than individuals, so it will be necessary for one person to be nominated to receive the payment. There are concerns that the main caregivers, even in this day and age, are usually women. Therefore, women could find themselves without the necessary financial access or control of the money to ensure that children are properly provided for. The Committee acknowledged that flexibility on how and to whom such payments are made should be further investigated.

One of the key concerns that the Committee had was in relation to the lone parent conditionality provision, which requires lone parents to be available for work when their child reaches the age of five. The Committee voiced concern that the absence of a childcare strategy and the necessary resources and infrastructure to underpin such a strategy may restrict a claimant's ability to seek education and training opportunities.

Concern was also expressed about the proposal to limit the contribution-based ESA to one year. Again, the Minister referred to that this morning. This has the potential to adversely impact on older people, who are more likely to have built up a long record of national insurance contributions. This was seen as a fundamental change to the national insurance scheme and raised the question of where the rest of the money goes from individual contributions paid over 20 or even 40 years.

The sanctions regime is also being overhauled in the Bill. While a simpler regime, in principle, is to be welcomed, there are still serious concerns. For example, should a claimant fill in a form incorrectly, that person will face a financial penalty. Given that it is anticipated that forms will be filled in online and some people are likely to be very vulnerable and have difficulty filling in forms in any format, this is a cause of concern. It is also worthwhile pointing out that the current administrative penalty and cautions will be replaced by a new minimum administrative financial penalty for benefit fraud or 50% of the amount overpaid — whichever is greater — up to a maximum of £2,000. In addition to that, they will have a loss of benefit for up to four weeks. That is two sanctions for one contravention of the rules, and many members of the Committee thought that it was important to have a closer look at that.

This is an enabling Bill, which has been a cause of angst for Committee members, as much of the detail on its implementation will be provided to the Committee and the Assembly by way of regulations. At last week's meeting, the Department was still unable to give any real detail on the regulations because the regulations in Britain, on which ours will, undoubtedly, be based, will not be finalised or published until 10 December. Again, that is of concern, given that, as I have said before in the House, promises made at the primary legislation stage often fail to materialise in the secondary legislation. In other words, people have been told that, if they wanted to make some change to a Bill, they did not need to do so at the primary legislation stage because they could do it in the secondary legislation. However, as we have often discovered, primary legislation sets narrow parameters within which secondary legislation must deal with issues of concern.

The Committee, of course, acknowledges the arguments for maintaining parity, and there are many views across the Committee on that. However, it also recognises the need to try to do things differently here because of our

particularly difficult and different circumstances. Unfortunately, to date, there has been little indication from the Department that it will be able to achieve the required flexibility through regulations. That makes real scrutiny of the Bill difficult.

Today, in my role as Chairperson, I have attempted to highlight the range of key concerns expressed by Committee members on the basis of discussions with departmental officials and stakeholders over the past year. It is important to place it on record that the Committee has been speaking with virtually one voice on all these issues. Although the Committee can support certain principles of the Bill, the detail of the proposed operation and implementation of the Bill is such that it makes it very contentious. With that in mind, I will, in a couple of minutes, depart from speaking as Chair of the Committee to speak as an individual Member.

I want to make this point clear: the Committee has taken its responsibilities very seriously in listening to all the views and all the parties. As I outlined, we had extensive engagement with a range of stakeholders and the Department, including, on more than one occasion, the Minister. We have made it abundantly clear that we intend to fully facilitate scrutiny of the Bill in the time ahead. In fact, we have allowed for three days a week over the next number of weeks to do so. So, whatever happens this afternoon, the Bill will be given full and maximum scrutiny. In fact, we have already gone looking for evidence. We have said that we want to ensure that all stakeholders who expressed opinions and had a range of views will have the opportunity, in the coming weeks and months, to make those views known again. Hopefully, that will help the Committee and the Assembly to make the Bill better, which is what we are all determined to do. In our discussions, we will endeavour to make sure that we deal with the range of equality and human rights issues that the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission formally brought to the attention of the Committee and of individual members and, indeed, parties on the Committee.

With your permission, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I will now finish speaking as Chairperson of the Committee. I hope that I have faithfully represented the Committee's views. As I said, the Committee has not had the opportunity to deal with the reasoned amendment and has not taken a formal view on the Bill. Invariably, however, members from all parties expressed a range of concerns about certain aspects of the Bill and made clear their

determination to make it better and reflect the circumstances that endure here in the North as opposed to those in England, London or elsewhere, which are not our concern.

I would like to make a few points as a party representative. My colleague Mickey Brady has tabled a reasoned amendment and has spoken to it, and, obviously, I support it. I would like to make a few points on that. I do not want to rehearse all the arguments and issues raised by Mickey Brady. Some of my party colleagues will return to some of the detail in the course of the debate. The Minister, when introducing the Bill's Second Stage this morning, referred to his duty. I urge the Minister and all of us to remind ourselves that it is our collective duty, across all parties, to help to protect the most vulnerable. They are not the preserve of one party. There are people who are vulnerable, unemployed, sick or on a low income across all communities — nationalist, unionist or whatever community — who, in many cases, rely on some form of support from the welfare system. That is as it should be.

#### 4.15 pm

Over the past year or more, there has been much talk, across the range of stakeholders we have met, about flexibility and mitigation. Speaking from a party point of view — I think that Mickey Brady referred to this point earlier — we have met a wide range of organisations, from all the Church leaders, trade unions and the major charitable organisations to people in the community and voluntary sector with relevant and specific expertise across a range of these issues, not least the disability advocate organisations. We have engaged with a wide range of organisations, some of which I alluded to earlier. I think that I can say, hand on heart, that at every one of those engagements people urged us to make sure that we gave full scrutiny to the Bill to try to make sure that even within the parameters of parity, whatever they may be, we get the Bill as flexible as we can to reflect the circumstances that pertain here. Then the other side of that, of course, is that the Executive would look at whatever mitigation measures they could introduce if there are people who we believe are so vulnerable that the Executive have to step in. I think that the Minister alluded to some of that.

I am pleased to understand that, over the past several months, the Executive have been examining what the consequences of the implementation of the Bill may be and how that may read across the Departments, including Health, Education and other Departments. I understand also that Ministers, including the

Finance Minister, have been looking at what the cost to the Executive may be if the Executive or Assembly decide to take measures to mitigate some of the most adverse impacts of the Bill and how those measures may be taken. However, that is a discussion for another day.

What I am pleased to say is that there are people from the Executive right through the Assembly parties who have been working on this for a considerable time. They have been putting their shoulders to the wheel in examining the consequences of the Bill. Some of them may even be good and beneficial, but others that are more negative have to be addressed. I am pleased that the Executive have done work to identify what those needs may be and what the Executive may do by way of interventions. We will have to deal with that down the line.

As a party, our approach from day one has been that we have a Welfare Reform Bill coming down the line, and it is now with us. We said to people from the outset in all our engagements that we have to deal with the issue of parity. We cannot and do not ignore that. As a party, we are saying that we are governed to a large extent by the issue of parity in how we dispense welfare. We all know that, in many respects, the benefit levels set in London are supposed to pertain here and in other regions of what they would call the UK. What we are faced with then is how we make a Bill more applicable to the needs of the people that all the parties in the Chamber represent. I stress that, when we met David Freud here in Belfast, he made it clear that he understood. I will not in any way misrepresent his views. He shared our opinion that the circumstances pertaining here are worse than elsewhere. He said that he would look at the types of flexibilities that we may have to introduce. Interestingly, he also referred specifically to the IT system and made it clear that he felt that the IT system would not be a barrier to allowing for some flexibilities here. In fact, if one looks at the Hansard report from, I think, the beginning of January of this year in Westminster, one sees that David Freud made it clear that the ability to allow for flexibilities was being designed into the IT system. So, I do not accept that there is an absolute barrier in relation to the IT system delivering flexibilities for people here.

Our approach as a party has been to have discussion at Executive level on this, and I outlined some of that discussion. We had discussions directly with the DUP. We met the Minister and David Freud. I and party colleagues met Theresa Villiers, the Secretary

of State, just a week ago. Martin McGuinness, on our behalf, several months ago made representations to her predecessor, Owen Paterson, on exactly the same issue. British Ministers have told us at all times that our stark circumstances as they prevail in the North of Ireland mean that we should have flexibility in the way in which the Bill and the system will be administered. We are looking for the colour of their money. We have not seen one of those flexibilities agreed to yet.

I want to put it on record that I and my party colleagues Paul Maskey MP and Louise Ferguson, who is one of our colleagues in the Assembly, met Theresa Villiers just a couple of weeks back. Coming away from that meeting, I was rightly concerned, because she made it clear — again, I do not want to misrepresent her — that issues around even the monthly payment were fundamental. That is her word, not mine. She made it very clear that these are fundamental issues that people such as Iain Duncan Smith are determined to see through, because they believe that that is the right way to do business. I said to her that that underlined the need for us to have that meeting with her, because, on the one hand, British Government Ministers are telling us that they need to agree to the flexibilities, but, when we talked to the Secretary of State, she said, "But hold on, these are fundamental issues". Either they are fundamental issues from which they will not depart or agree to flexibility on, or we have a reasonable case here to shape the Welfare Reform Bill so that it better reflects the needs of the people we represent. We then get the flexibilities or we do not. The problem for us is that, at this moment, we are being asked to pass the Second Stage and agree to the principles of a Bill that will continue to narrow our ability to change its details as we move forward in the months ahead.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Maskey:** I am not giving way at the moment. Thank you, Dolores, but you have plenty of time to speak. I just want to make my points. Every Member will have their opportunity to speak.

In my view, we as a party are on the record as having diligently tried to work with the other parties and the British Government to change the Bill in what we believe to be fairly modest ways to reflect our particular circumstances. However, as yet, there has been no direct result from any of those discussions.

When this was dealt with at the Executive in recent weeks, we made it very clear that, as the Bill stands, we would not as a party support it. I

want to deal with some of the public arguments on this, though I do not want to dwell on them. We have heard people say that, if Sinn Féin were serious, it would veto the Bill, table a petition of concern and so on. I will make it clear that, as a party, we considered all those options. However, we took the view that we are not looking to kill the Bill, block it or forget about it. We take the view that there will be a welfare reform Bill. There may even be positive aspects to it. We took the view that we wanted to be responsible and did not want to create a crisis in the Executive by simply saying that we were going to veto the Bill. However, we did, in fact, veto the Bill coming before the Executive for months. We did not say that publicly, advertise it or grandstand on the issue. The fact of the matter is that the Bill was not introduced until very recently. We made our position clear, because we wanted to deal with the Bill in a responsible way. We want all the parties to stand shoulder to shoulder. However, we made it clear that, in letting the Bill into the Assembly, we were not supporting it as it stands.

As I said, because we have not yet received any firm commitments from the British Government to amend the Bill as appropriate for the people we collectively represent, we are taking this step today with what we call a reasoned amendment. We think that it is actually a very reasonable amendment. It sets out the stall, and I call for support from all parties in the House to send a clear message to David Freud and his colleagues in London. We all heard George Osborne and David Cameron yesterday extolling the virtues of billions of pounds more coming off the welfare system in the next number of years.

I remind people that there are people in our society who are frightened about losing their job. Weeks ago in the Assembly, Members were decrying the fact that a lot of people in FG Wilson and other places had lost their job. So, on the one hand, we are going to decry the fact that they have lost their job and will perhaps be thrown on the dole queue, but, in the next breath, a week or so later, we are prepared to simply endorse legislation coming from Westminster that will, in effect, make the plight of those people worse once they are thrown on the dole. We cannot ignore that contradiction.

As I said before and as I will say again, maybe we will not be able to get any major changes to the legislation agreed with the British Government. However, if we do not try, we should be ashamed of ourselves, and rightly so. I say that because, collectively, as parties, we represent a lot of people out there who look to

us for support in a time of need and, unfortunately, in a growing recession. I call on the parties to support the reasoned amendment, which will defer the Bill for as long as it takes.

I want to deal with the issue of a petition of concern and vetoing the Bill. We chose not to veto the Bill, because we are not interested in causing a crisis in the Executive. I do not believe that people in our communities would thank any of us for creating a sense of crisis. We take our responsibilities seriously, so we want to try to amend the Bill. We considered a petition of concern, an option that is open to us at any point in the legislative process. Therefore, a petition of concern is not off the table. However, what we are trying to do is to say to parties, "Let us defer the Bill. Let us stop its Second Stage and go collectively to David Freud and his ministerial colleagues in London to get the changes that, he readily says, we are entitled to have". Therefore, these are entitlements and not a wish list that someone has drawn up. These are things that, we believe, better meet the needs of the people we collectively represent.

The reasoned amendment is not one that seeks to work out what is different or what parties disagree on. This morning, we heard the Minister cite a number of examples on which he shares the concerns that we have highlighted. No doubt we will hear from other parties this afternoon that share those same concerns. We share those concerns, so let us find a way of dealing with them in a manner in which we can change the Bill. We believe that that is very doable.

We do not accept the argument that, for some reason or another, we will end up facing a bill for £200 million. That figure was plucked out of the air yesterday. There is no reason why the Bill needs to be deferred indefinitely. The Assembly has not yet dealt with a successful reasoned amendment. The Assembly will set its own precedent when it wants to reintroduce a Bill. That is for this Assembly to decide, not Westminster or — dare I say it — Dublin. The Bill Office has told Members what precedents have been set in Westminster and Dublin, but we are supposed to set our own precedents.

We could have this agreement with the British Government settled in a fortnight. The Minister for Social Development is meeting the Minister next week; my party is meeting him the following week. Therefore, we could have agreements tied down very quickly, and the Bill could then complete its passage. All of that is very possible. Bear this in mind: if the Bill is

not passed within a particular legislative time frame for some reason or another, current legislation remains in place, so we would not move into a void or a vacuum.

Furthermore, the social fund has been raised quite a bit. This Assembly decides how the social fund is disbursed. Power has now been devolved to it to design a social fund and disburse it in a way in which we believe is appropriate to our circumstances. Incidentally, until this month, that would have been a breach of parity. We have discussed that with departmental officials. Until very recently, we could not touch the social fund because of parity. We had to accept that we could not discuss it. However, now the British Government have decided to devolve the social fund — that is a breach of parity.

I referred to this earlier, but thankfully the Executive have been looking at perhaps taking mitigating measures. Some of those mitigating measures would also breach parity and would mean that the Executive would have to foot the bill for any breach. That is a judgement and decision for the Executive to make. I do not know what the outcome or their final decision will be, but the Executive have certainly considered it as an option, and I am glad that they have done. It means that the Assembly and the Executive have to take decisions.

Yesterday, in the Chamber, Members argued for more money for the farming community because of the specific circumstances of the agricultural community. The Minister was asked, because of those special circumstances, to provide additional support, and she came up with £15 million. Let me remind Members that that £15 million comes out of the education or health budget. Those are choices that parties and Executive Ministers are making, and rightly so, because that is what we are here to do. Unfortunately, choices have to be made at times. I am glad that other Ministers and DUP colleagues have made it clear over the past number of days that some of the changes that we seek to make to the Bill are about process and administration, not about money. Some of them would cost no money at all. Some of them are about changing how the system works and some are about perhaps reducing the level of sanctions that we are talking about imposing on some people.

None of that has to cost money; all of it is about the process and how we administer the system. We have been told repeatedly by British Ministers that we are entitled to some flexibility in our system because of our circumstances. I simply want to hold them to that.

### 4.30 pm

I do not want to go in to all the issues, but our reasoned amendment refers to issues such as the monthly payment. As we know, the monthly payment, under universal credit, is designed to be paid to a single person in the home. If we are all honest about it, we know that the big fear is that that is a regressive step. It means that, for the most part, a lot of women will once again be brought back to the position in which they will be dependent on somebody for every single penny that they might need to spend on their household. Is that what we want? Maybe some people do. Some of my best friends are men, but some men are not very fair when it comes to money in their household. That has been a traditional problem that we have dealt with. I am old enough to have grown up in Belfast when the done thing was that the man got the money and the woman waited until she got her money from the man. Sometimes, it was not an awful lot. I do not want to see that type of regressive social policy being reintroduced.

People like Iain Duncan Smith are mega-millionaires. It is all right for those people to say that people can budget their money over months; they can budget every decade because of the money that they have. The evidence that we have is that people do not budget their money on the basis of how often they get paid; they budget on their income. A lot of people in our society are on low incomes that do not stretch very well month to month. A lot of people in our workplace are on low incomes to the point at which they get paid weekly or fortnightly. Universal credit has to provide for those people who want to have more regular payments. It should not be left to officials with discretion in very limited circumstances to say that a person cannot budget. You are going to have to go into debt to prove that you may fall into debt. Is that what we want to do? I remember the Simon Community's advertisements about people being four pay packets away from homelessness. Is that what we want? Universal credit will pay people in arrears to start with. Then, we are going to put them in another three months' arrears and work out that they cannot budget their money. They will be in debt; they will have started on that slippery slope. Is that what we want to do? I do not think so. It is not unreasonable for us to ask the British Government to make and agree that commitment. They could do it after a phone call from Nelson McCausland; he does not have to go to London to get that response. He could get that response from the Minister in London very quickly if they were minded to do that.

Despite their rhetoric about us needing flexibilities and that they are prepared to give them, they have not granted any yet.

There are issues around direct payments to landlords. The Minister has repeatedly reported to the House in recent weeks that 86% of people who are in receipt of housing benefit opt to have their money paid directly to the landlord because they do not want to go into debt. They know that, if they had that money over a month and they are on a very low amount of money, they are likely to spend it or dip into it. Again, that is setting them into a spiral of debt. It is setting them into the situation in which they are not going to have enough money to pay their rent. That is a slippery slope to people being homeless.

On the work capability assessment, the departmental officials were at the Social Development Committee perhaps a week ago and reported on how the process around that is not very good. I have been diplomatic in my reference to the Department; most people think that the system is very flawed. That is what will transfer across from the reassessment of people on DLA to PIP. We, as a party, have no difficulty whatsoever with having a system in which people who claim sickness or disability payments are routinely reassessed. However, the primacy of medical evidence has to be at the heart of that process; not people who tick boxes and ask people whether they can move this way and that way. Those assessors are not properly trained. We have argued that with the Department, and we have not yet received a satisfactory response. People are assessing people without taking medical evidence into consideration. In a lot of cases, people who were disqualified from their payments have won their cases on appeal. Some people will tell you that they do not appeal because they are afraid of appealing or think that there is no point because they have lost their case. Is that what we want? I do not think so. I think that we are entitled to a system of assessment that is based on the primacy of medical evidence. It is no good officials telling me that the problem is that doctors will not provide evidence unless claimants pay the money. I do not care about that. The Health Department should take that up with the doctors. GPs are probably paid enough, and they are probably on a reasonably good salary and remuneration package that they can help people who are sick or disabled in some way. We should have a system in which a person's medical evidence is taken into consideration when their ability to work is assessed. A lot of people go to work, but a lot of people are in receipt of that benefit. We are saying that medical evidence needs to be given

primacy when people are assessed for that benefit. As yet, we do not have a process that people are confident in, and we are saying, reasonably, that we should fix the process. However, we keep talking about it and we keep getting reports. Professor Harrington is into his third year of producing reports, yet he has not set foot in the North of Ireland. In Britain, he has gone into local offices on spec and at short notice, carried out inspections and saw how claimants, or customers as we like to call them these days, have been treated in the process. He has not set foot in the North of Ireland and, yet and all, we are supposed to take reports from Professor Harrington that he is happy enough with the way the system is. I am sorry, no later than two or three months ago, Members from all parties in the Chamber were talking about this process. Lord Morrow and many other Members from the opposite Benches complained about people from their constituencies who were treated badly during the process of reassessment. That is what we are saying. Let us get it fixed. It is not too much to ask. Let us deal with the concerns we have.

Underoccupancy is another issue. To his credit, the Minister referred to the fact that we do not have the same housing stock flexibility here. We can blame the Housing Executive or successive Ministers for that all we want. However, that will not matter to the person who lives in a wee terrace house on the Shankill Road, Tiger's Bay, north Belfast or Dungannon, and who, in six months' or a year's time, might be told that, although it is not a Tory mansion, their house is a three-bedroom house and they will have to pay more for it than they can afford. If they cannot pay, they will have to move out. Where are they going to move to? We have things here called segregated housing and intimidation, and there is not a week goes by here that someone is intimidated out of a house somewhere on the basis of their race or religion. Are we going to tell those people that there is a house on the other side of the peace line and they should move to that house? You might say that is a special circumstance and that we will subsidise it. Does that mean that the Executive will subsidise that person? Theoretically, that person is able to live on the other side of the peace wall, but is not allowed to live there because of their colour or creed. Will we pick up the tab? Will the Executive pick up the bill for that? The British Government are going to want their money. Will we tell those people that that is, actually, suitable accommodation? It is actually not, because they will not be able to live there for 24 hours. Is the choice going to be that they move out or get put out, or will the Executive take the

political decision that we will pay for that? Will that mean that we will pay for discrimination and intimidation? Those are big questions that we need to address. What we are saying is that, until there is the housing infrastructure that enables us to reallocate people through social housing to more appropriate accommodation, the provisions on underoccupancy cannot be passed. We would love and welcome the provision of more social and affordable housing, so that people will have those flexibilities. We will discuss with the Minister how we can provide that, and that will be our focus in the time ahead. However, how can we expect to introduce a Bill that provides that, even though there is not appropriate accommodation, if people, theoretically, have more rooms than they are entitled to, they will have to pay or get out? I do not think that that is the type of society we want.

Lone parents' conditionality is another very important issue. We do not have the same infrastructure here. In England, local authorities have a statutory obligation to provide childcare, but we do not have that here. Are we going to pass a Bill at Second Stage that will mean that lone parents will have to go to interviews or take up jobs within 48 hours — we do not really care where they get their childcare from — or they will be put on a sanction. Do you know what? The sanctions run from 91 days to three years. We think that they are quite draconian sanctions for people. We are expected to pass a piece of legislation sending out the message that we will impose this on people even though we will not give them the facilities, infrastructure or support to see that they get into work, yet this Bill is supposed to be all about getting people into work. I would like to see jobs being created in the first place, but leaving that to one side, placing sanctions on people and cutting their money will not exactly make their lives any easier. It will not get them more skilled-up, nor will it give them any more opportunities, and not providing childcare is another issue that means more lone parents will not be able to avail themselves of education. I know a lot of lone parents who are not only desperately willing to work, but would love to be able to go to work tomorrow morning, but they cannot get childcare that is affordable. Members in this Chamber have raised that issue more times than enough, so we know there is a problem: we are saying let us deal with it, and let us do so reasonably.

As I said earlier, we think there are reasonable requests for change and flexibility in the reasoned amendment. I could raise a lot of other specific issues, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, but I will leave that to other



Members. All I want to do today is to say that we can shout and disagree as much as we want, and I suppose that is what people do in these places, but, at the end of the day, none of that will amount to anything more than hot air unless we collectively decide that we will work together, when the dust settles, in order to tackle the differences that we believe need to be enshrined in a piece of legislation.

I am very concerned, and I will use the Landlord Registration Scheme Regulations (NI) 2012 that we have been dealing with for the past few months by way of an example. That was going through in the last mandate. I read the relevant Hansard reports and spoke with party colleagues, because I had an issue as a South Belfast representative having had problems with some landlords in that area, particularly those in charge of HMOs. I am not talking about all landlords — far from it — but, nevertheless; we were told that the landlord registration scheme would be very effective. We were told that it would do A, B and C, and that big sanctions would be placed on that small number of landlords who misbehave in how they treat their tenants. Members were then told not to worry about it because it would be dealt with by way of secondary legislation, through a statutory rule.

What do we have now? We have a statutory rule — that we passed here the other week on that basis — and we were then told, "sorry, you cannot go that far; the primary legislation does not allow you to do that". Now, that surprised members of the Social Development Committee from all parties. People from all parties said that they did not think that to be the case. We had been told that we could come up with a very good registration scheme, but we were then told that it falls well short because the primary legislation does not provide for it.

Our concern is that we are being asked to pass a Bill that is a piece of enabling legislation that will be followed by subordinate legislation for up to another year. There will be regulation after regulation, and this Department lays more statutory rules than any other Department, perhaps more than all the Assembly Committees put together, I do not know. It is probably close to that. We are being asked to pass this particular Bill, and then to try to get changes by way of a statutory rule, as I said, yet we are always told that we cannot really make such changes. At every meeting, officials will say, "Sorry; it is an issue of parity". I have explored this very patiently, I believe, although I know that I can sometimes be quite curt at meetings, but I have tried to do my job diligently in the Social Development Committee. I have

asked officials not to just tell me it is a parity issue and shut me down from thinking about it. I have asked them to tell me what the statutory rule or piece of legislation is designed to do, and what it might cost if I decide to do something different. We can then make decisions as to whether we want to go down that road.

My party and I are not prepared to accept an argument stating that "it's parity, dear; forget about it". We do not accept that. Parity has never properly been explored. Dealing with flexibility in the system does not have to mean breaking parity. As I said, I am glad to hear that the Executive have considered mitigating measures that might break parity and that they are prepared to pay for it, even for short periods. Thankfully, the principle has been broken, and rightfully so, I think, because all parties across the Chamber still have to do their best to help those people out there who are vulnerable.

What we are simply saying, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, and I say this to all Members, is that although we all have our different views, this is not about grandstanding, it is about us trying to get a better Bill. The easy way to grandstand would be to veto the Bill and to let Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness fight out the row on 'Spotlight' or something like that. That would be easily done and that is not going to solve the problem, because we would still have to come back to a welfare reform Bill.

#### 4.45 pm

So, we are saying: "Let's roll our sleeves up. Identify what the issues are. See what we agree on — and we have actually all agreed on quite a lot — and let's take those talks directly with the British Government in short-shift time and get the changes to this Bill, which they actually acknowledge that we are entitled to have". So, we are looking only for what we are entitled to; that is all. We are not looking for any more than that. We are not looking to kill the Bill. We are not looking to kick this into touch. We want to deal with it quickly. We set our own precedence in this House. We will come to the Bill as quickly as we possibly can. We believe that the changes that we require to the Bill are not that difficult to deliver. We are saying let us work together and deliver those changes, and we believe that we can do that quickly. I rest my case on that for the moment.

**Ms P Bradley:** My constituency of North Belfast has some of the most economically deprived,

and, as such, I am committed to addressing poverty and worklessness, and their effects on our communities. Nevertheless, I am a firm believer in a hand-up and not a handout principle. I also believe firmly that the welfare system should be there as a short-term measure for those who need it most. I find that constituents who contact my surgeries regarding benefit advice are often completely confused and frustrated by the maze of benefits that they are expected to navigate, as well as being unsure of the various regulations around each benefit. I believe that moving to universal credit will help to ease the process for those who find themselves in the unfortunate position of having to ask our society for support. I also believe that moving to this credit will allow for work to be more attractive, for many of the people that I speak to tell me that they simply cannot afford to work; it is simply financially better to be on benefits. As the Minister stated, we need to make work pay.

As a member of the Social Development Committee, I, like the rest of my colleagues, have made a firm commitment to examine all aspects of the Welfare Reform Bill. We, as a Committee, unanimously decided to devote what equates to — as the Chair stated — an extra two days a week to discuss and debate the Bill, clause by clause. At Committee Stage, we will also have the opportunity to hear from the Department and the many lobby groups. All the Sinn Féin amendments will be discussed fully at that Committee Stage, which is exactly where they should be debated. At no time have I heard from anyone that we have a perfect system in place. Most people here today would agree that our current welfare system is in need of a major overhaul.

I would like to address some of the issues in the amendment, and, as the Minister stated, there are core concerns from all parties. In the Chamber, only recently, we debated the issue of direct payments to landlords. My amendment called for the necessary systems to be put in place to allow for choice of payment, because we realise that it would prove financially detrimental for some if direct payment was not in place. I also believe that the move to monthly payments will benefit some of those who wish to return to work, as often people express concern about how they will support themselves and their family if they take up a monthly paid job. However, I also recognise that for others monthly payments would not be a viable option, and I support the Minister's endeavour to bring about flexibility to allow — within the administration of the reform — an option of biweekly payments.

For those in our society who have a genuine disability or illness, there should be no fear. As has been stated, we must protect the most vulnerable. The only people who should fear the changes are those who really are fit and able to work, even if that work is different from what they have done before. In Northern Ireland society, we are often inflexible when it comes to work. We identify one career path and tend to stick rigidly to it. The current global economic situation means that we have to be more flexible, and I believe that the changes in the Bill will help people become more flexible.

Let us be clear: we are a devolved Administration, which means that we are extremely limited in how far from Westminster policy we can afford to deviate, and we have an obligation to maintain parity with the United Kingdom. In previous debates and from the Minister in this debate, we have heard of the potential financial costs of breaking parity. The Minister and his Department have worked to ensure that the Bill takes account of our situation in Northern Ireland, while ensuring that parity is maintained. I, therefore, believe that we have the potential to improve on the implementation of the Bill.

I am a realist at heart, and when I was elected to the House, it was with the realisation that some of the decisions that I could be making could possibly be unpopular with some people, but realism and common sense must prevail. We cannot afford to break parity and we cannot afford our current welfare bill indefinitely. What I find most alarming is that we have been developing, at the core of our society, a generation that does not see employment as an option and that views welfare as its right. None of that is good for Northern Ireland as a whole or for our citizens. I, therefore, support the Bill and oppose the tabled amendment.

**Mr Copeland:** First of all, I apologise to you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and to the Minister and, indeed, Mr Mickey Brady, for missing their opening remarks. I was unavoidably absent from the Chamber this morning due to constituency business, which had been previously notified to the Speaker.

With your permission, sir, I will speak about the general principles of the Bill shortly. However, I would like to make a few comments in regard to the timing of this debate. As I rise to speak today, I look back with a sense of frustration at recent events, not only since last Thursday evening, but throughout the progress — or not, as the case may be — that the legislation has made. It is, in my view, an indictment of the two main partners in the Executive, having

dangerously delayed the Bill for so long, that there is now not only a genuine danger of it not receiving Royal Assent in time but a question about whether it will pass the stages that it needs to in this House.

This piece of legislation, the biggest reform of our social security system in generations, has, as has been said, the potential to encourage thousands of our people to move from welfare dependency into employment, to make the failing system fairer and to save billions of taxpayers' pounds. However, it also has the potential, if implemented wrongly, to destroy lives, to take away support from people who cannot afford to lose anything else and to leave behind many of the most vulnerable in this society, whom this Assembly has a moral obligation to protect.

Although I will talk on the reasoned amendment and the Bill together, I would like to make a number of preliminary remarks at this stage. I look across the Chamber at the Sinn Féin Benches and I see, obviously, an Assembly group that is not at ease with the Bill. I have no doubt that they have major concerns. I look at their amendments and, honestly, can agree with many, if not all, of their points. However, I also see a party in danger of neglecting its legislative and governance responsibilities. Their proposal to delay would be understandable if this was April or May, but it is not; it is October. Thanks to their track record on the issue, both in the Executive and behind closed doors, they must at least share some of the blame, as well as their partner, for the farce of only managing to bring the Bill to the House at such a late stage. I ask them one simple question: why have you, as lead partners in the Executive, left it so late? The Bill is so important to so many people that we quite simply cannot afford to get it wrong. Every Executive meeting at which they and their colleagues refused to get this on to the agenda meant, in reality, less and less time for the House to put right the obvious failings that will flow from this flawed legislation. It is the same for the regulations. Indeed, they make the very point at the beginning that flexibility and consideration of Northern Ireland are crucial to the foundation of the entire Bill.

This Bill — these words that we are meant to be having a so-called high level discussion about today — was not drafted here in Northern Ireland, does not reflect Northern Ireland and shows absolutely no compassion for Northern Ireland. Where, Minister, are the differences between this Bill today and the Welfare Reform Act that received Royal Assent in March? Show us the flexibility that, you have said,

Northern Ireland should exploit. If that flexibility lies within the regulations, tell us exactly which ones they are and what you intend to do about it. Your officials have had seven months. I ask you, Minister, to explain how they used them.

Of course, you could forgive us for knowing why Sinn Féin may have tabled this so-called reasoned amendment. The dogs in the street have a view; they can see it and they believe that it is a game of political brinksmanship, which it may or may not be. Sinn Féin thinks that waiting until now will allow it to send out hard-hitting statements so that its base will suddenly realise how anti-welfare reform it has been the whole time. I doubt whether the electorate in Northern Ireland likes being taken for fools. We have, thank God, put behind us what was once called an acceptable level of violence. Now, we are in danger of developing an acceptable level of political brinksmanship. Both are wrong. Both create casualties and neither represents good governance.

On that point, no matter what Sinn Féin says, there are some questions that will require further answers. Mr Maskey, cleverly, has predicted one of those questions and has gone some way towards addressing it. My first question is quite simple; why now? I apologise for repeating myself on this point, but it needs to be said. This Bill has been trapped in the corridors of Stormont Castle for months. Surely they should have used this time to put right what they considered to be the Bill's main failings. Would a delay now be a sign that they can complain about the passage of the Bill as much as they like but are, perhaps, resigned to seeing what may be its inevitable passage?

Perhaps the Sinn Féin leadership has suddenly realised that although it quite happily sits in the Northern Ireland Executive, which I welcome, overseeing what could be perceived as slashed services and depriving Departments such as Health of adequate funding, it sits in Dáil Éireann in the city of Dublin and, effectively accuses that Government of treachery for doing something very similar to what has had to be done here.

Secondly, for how long does it want to delay this Bill? Is it for an hour, a week, a fortnight, a month? It cannot be for a month, as we know, because there simply is not time.

My final question to Sinn Féin is the one that it may find most difficult to answer. If it is so diametrically opposed to the Bill in its current form, why was it not blocked in the Executive before it got here? On that latter point, even though it would appear —

**Mr Maskey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Copeland:** Sir, I will follow your example.

On that latter point, even though it would appear that the Department for Social Development got up to even less work over the summer than everyone was expecting, Sinn Féin and the SDLP must realise that they can effectively kill off this Bill and all of the little original work that has gone into it.

Nevertheless, my criticisms of Sinn Féin's actions on this issue are all the more frustrating for me, given the fact that the points that it raises in its reasoned amendment strike a chord. The reasoned amendment rightfully talks about the need to consider Northern Ireland's special circumstances. Neither I nor the Ulster Unionist Party want to be accused of being particularly parochial on welfare reform across the United Kingdom. As I have said, we recognise the need for change, but we must remember that, first and foremost, we are elected here in Northern Ireland to protect its citizens and address their needs.

Had this Bill been introduced before the summer recess with some, even primitive, detail on the regulations, as should have been the case, I would have had no difficulty in supporting Sinn Féin its efforts. However, as it knows, as well as everyone else, with the Bill coming forward at this late stage, we cannot easily allow its proposal to succeed. That is all the more upsetting, given that I and my party firmly believe that this Bill, as currently set in front of us today, is a bad deal.

In fact, I would go as far as to call it a rotten deal. I respectfully challenge the Minister to acknowledge that he has thus far been unable to make any even remotely substantive changes to the Bill.

#### 5.00 pm

Now that I have made a few preliminary remarks on the delay, and before the Minister assumes that I or my party is calling for an outright breach of parity, I assure him that we are not. I have heard the word "parity" used more often in the past 18 months than I did in the first half-century of my life. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, parity means:

*"the state or condition of being equal, especially as regards status or pay".*

The Ulster Unionist Party understands parity. We often accept it, but we believe that Northern

Ireland should not be entirely bound by it. Where room for flexibility exists, we should at the very least explore it, if not outrightly exploit it. On that point, as has been said, parity is often about much more than just financial matters. It is as much about operational matters.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

The Bill is about more than how much benefit a person is entitled to. Instead, it is a fundamental overhaul of the system. It is not only the amounts of money that are changing. So too is almost every other aspect. There is the scragpage — if that is the right word — of so many benefits and changes to entitlement and even simple administrative issues such as the frequency of payment. Whereas I do not dispute for one moment that there are currently far too many benefits with far too much complexity, I have to express a little bit of scepticism about the motivation behind this reform. The reasoned amendment also touches on that issue.

The coalition Government in Westminster has gone to great lengths to dismiss the notion that the whole welfare reform agenda is centred on cost-cutting. When I look at the current Work and Pensions Secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, I see a man who I believe is possessed of compassion and genuine belief in what he is doing. Nevertheless, I cannot help but listen to other Cabinet Ministers and leading party figures and fear that the current pressures on spending are being used as cover to attack a system that some people are ideologically opposed to.

We must remember that the measures contained in the Bill and the changes to the social security system were announced as part of the coalition Government's June 2010 Budget and October 2010 spending review. Comments in recent days have done little to reduce my fear. Indeed, I have heard it said directly in the media that the sole purpose behind the latest raft of proposals is cost-cutting.

Do not get me wrong. I recognise the financial situation that the United Kingdom Government is in. As a nation, we are spending more than we are collecting through tax receipts. As of last month, our national debt stood at a staggering £1.04 trillion, which represents 66.1% of national income and £41,500 for each and every household in the country. Think about that for a moment; £41,500 for every single front door in the country.

Of course, some people may say that it is a bit rich for an Ulsterman to complain about spending more than is raised through taxes. However, I can quite happily refer them to the days when the city of Belfast contributed 20% of the United Kingdom's GDP. I tell them that I look forward to the day when we get ourselves through these current economic crises — which we will — and when we, in this part of the Kingdom, become net contributors once again.

Social security is a huge expenditure for the Treasury. Overall, the UK will spend well over £90 billion on welfare, excluding the state pension. In this financial year, £5.4 billion will be expended in Northern Ireland. It is said that the Westminster Government wants to cut that spending by £18 billion by 2015. However, that plan factored in economic recovery, which has not happened as yet.

The Bill contains 54,000 words. It is estimated that it will slice £317.9 million off the welfare bill in Northern Ireland over the next three years. That equates to £5,800 a word, and let us not forget that this money is above and separate from the block grant. Let us not forget that this money supports the poor, the needy, the sick and the disabled. The proposed legislation is, essentially, a matter of mathematics, and, as we all know, mathematics is a very unforgiving science. To quote — or misquote — Charles Dickens in 'David Copperfield':

*"Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen pounds and six shillings, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds and six shillings, result misery."*

Mr Speaker, I will take a few more moments to go through a number of issues in the Bill, or, as you may prefer to have them called, the general principles of the Bill. I will start with Part 1. Not only does the Bill overhaul benefits but it wipes many of them out completely and starts from scratch with the introduction of universal credit. The scrapping of so many central benefits such as income support and child tax credits could, in theory, make what has always been a complex field more straightforward. We have no choice but to listen to the Department for Work and Pensions because the Department for Social Development has yet to demonstrate a shred of independent thought. DWP tells us that the overall objective of universal credit is to address poverty by tackling worklessness and benefit dependency. I agree with the Prime Minister, as does probably everyone else in the Assembly, when he says that people should always be better off in work.

It is on this point that I will briefly make reference to the invisible half of welfare reform. You do not represent a constituency like East Belfast — I assume it is much like anywhere else in Northern Ireland — and not frequently hear of the concerns of the people who go out to work day after day and manage, but only just, to pay their bills. They do so without so much of a thank you from the Government, never mind being given support. People are struggling out there.

We can express real shock and real distress at occasional large-scale job losses, and the Executive Departments can call all the economic summits they like. However, all the while, it makes little immediate impact on the ordinary man or woman who receives no support from the Government. Effectively, as much is spent in Northern Ireland on social security as on the health service. I do not know many working people who would begrudge anyone their entitlements but they, rightly, need reassurance from us here and the Department that no one is taking the system for a ride. This welfare Bill should be as much about equality for them as it is about ensuring provision for those who will benefit from it.

Getting back to the issue of universal credit, I suppose that, of late, the benefits system has come to reflect the stereotype of government: complex, unwieldy and intolerant to learn from its own mistakes. The welfare system has more than 30 benefits, each with their own rules and criteria. I think that the idea of a single benefit is preferable. Without wanting to go into too much depth, I have concerns about a number of issues that surround universal credit. You would not think from reading Part 1 of the Bill that it is, effectively, setting in stone a complete overhaul of our benefits system. Despite the fact that the Bill runs to 133 clauses, seven parts and 12 schedules, it is, in many ways, purely enabling legislation. It broadly lays out the parameters of reform, and the real detail on the hardest hitting proposals and the deepest cutting thrusts will actually come in the form of the regulations.

The most concerning aspect of this whole debate is that the Assembly is being asked to walk blindly into the unknown. I recognise that the overall regulations are still out to consultation, but we are being expected to approve the creation of a new benefit without even knowing the amount of money and the rates of money that will be paid under it. A mountain of research on universal credit has been conducted over recent months. We are all aware of the frequently quoted findings of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which are that,

initially, welfare reform will affect all parts of Northern Ireland society equally but will increasingly have a harder impact on those on lower incomes.

I will go a little further on that point. Save the Children stated that single parents working longer hours on low pay will be substantially worse off under universal credit. It is hardly the new wonderful benefit that some would have us believe. I heard the Minister state that the introduction of universal credit will lift 10,000 children out of poverty. How many children will it push over the edge and into poverty? We must also remember that the latest figures from the households below average income measure show that 21% of children in Northern Ireland live in relative poverty. The fact that 50,000 children live in what is termed as severe poverty is a shocking statistic and one that we all should be truly ashamed of.

The previous Programme for Government contained a target to reduce severe child poverty, and the Executive agreed a definition. However, the current Programme for Government appears to have dropped such a target. Why? To me, that looks like an admission of defeat before even trying. Of course, it is no surprise that even when there are government targets, as vague and unbinding as they are, such as the target to reduce fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, this Executive appear blasé about missing them. It is important that we remember that more than half of the children designated as living in poverty are part of a family in which a parent is in work.

As the Bill is seemingly just a copy of the one debated in Westminster at the beginning of the year, I am disappointed that the Minister has not been able to put forward his view and ask for it to be taken into account that Northern Ireland is completely lacking when it comes to a fully operational childcare infrastructure. I respectfully suggest that that needs to be addressed. This major factor means that Northern Ireland's lone parents will face a disproportionate share of pain through changes to universal credit and the additional conditionality and sanctions.

Another issue, one of many still to be laid out in public, is the major shift in the payment of benefits. I have concerns, for example, about the frequency of payments. The coalition Government have often stated their idyllic vision of monthly payments helping people to budget more appropriately and adapt to working conditions more smoothly. One small difference in Northern Ireland, however, is that

the majority of people, even among those of us lucky enough to enjoy work, are not paid monthly.

I will give a very simplistic example of what could happen: a family or household receives a monthly entitlement but, within the first week, is forced by circumstances to spend a significant proportion of that filling their oil tank. How does the Department propose that this family will manage for the remainder of the month? The cynical observer may say that the family should have demonstrated more sense than spending too much on one utility. However, if the same observer realised the trauma that the family would, no doubt, have gone through when deciding whether to enjoy the benefit of heat or food, I am sure that he or she would understand why peace of mind on this issue is preferable. That was, I admit, an unsophisticated case, but it is one that I am sure will be encountered far too often if monthly payments are forced on the system here. It is the first change that the Ulster Unionist Party will seek to reverse, and we hope that the Department will be able to demonstrate some of the much talked about flexibility.

I also have concerns about regulations flowing from the Bill dictating that payments will go only to a single recipient in a household. Where a couple makes a joint claim, they will have to decide who receives the single payment. Very few of us know exactly what goes on behind the closed doors of any home, apart from our own. Giving total control over what may be, in some cases, significant amounts of money to a single individual would, to me, raise concerns about the welfare and vulnerability of other persons in the same household but also dependent on the same money. I ask the Minister to detail what research has been done, either here or across the water, to determine how, in households where there may be domestic violence, a fair and reasonable method of payment can be retained. I accept that this, again, may be a hypothetical issue, but it is one that the Department must surely be considering.

#### 5.15 pm

Of course, there is the issue of direct payments. I believe that it has taken such prominence during the discussion on welfare reform because, to me anyway, it makes absolutely no sense at all. Again, the Government may look towards the ideal scenario of a family on universal credit hurriedly searching for jobs, budgeting well with their monthly payments and always making sure to keep enough aside to pay the rent. That is idealism and, unfortunately, it very seldom imitates reality.

The Consumer Council has interesting research that shows that Northern Ireland comes bottom of the UK league of financial capability — a damning indictment. Indeed, it found that one in five people here feel that it is not important to keep up to date with financial matters.

Direct payments are genuinely an issue that baffles me. No one — and I mean no one — with any sense wants this, apart from officials. I could maybe understand if tenants were crying out for it to be built into the Bill and the regulations, but they are not. In fact, for those tenants who would like to avail themselves of direct payments, the option is already there. Very few take it up. The Department for Work and Pensions and maybe even the Department for Social Development might think that empowering people with the responsibility to pay their rent to their landlord may be a positive step but, to me, forcing such a move is totally contradictory to what any responsible Government should even consider doing. Over the past months, I have heard countless welfare and advocacy organisations pleading for direct payments to be avoided. They fear that personal debt will rocket and that, for many, rent arrears will spiral out of control and homelessness may then, unfortunately, become an even greater problem.

On top of that, we must also be aware of social and private landlords. The latter is a group of people whom I am not afraid to criticise when things go wrong, but, in this case, they will be faced with significantly reduced financial security that comes from direct payments. The housing associations that the Executive are dependent on to meet housing targets have, up to now, been able to secure borrowings at highly competitive rates, maximising their capital resources and subsequently delivering a good deal for the taxpayer. Any change to the current system could dramatically scale back the availability of necessary private finance.

The Minister will, no doubt, be aware of the five demonstration projects that the Department for Work and Pensions has announced in order to prepare for the changes. These demonstration projects will run from June 2012 to June 2013. Will the Minister detail whether Northern Ireland will be running similar demonstration projects, and if not, why not?

I will make one last point on direct payments and then move on. Tenants already avail themselves of direct payments. In some cases, up to 20% of tenants do that, and that is welcome. Therefore, when the Minister inevitably stands up later and makes excuses about IT systems not being capable or gives

explanations about IT systems not being capable, he may even be able to use the excuses of DWP about personal responsibility. Either way, I urge him, on this particular issue, to show some compassion for the people whom he is charged with looking after. There is a very simple answer to this. Rather than simply having direct payments or none, why is the Department not offering a choice? If people continue to insist on it, the Department could gently nudge them towards accepting and taking up that responsibility, if it believes that they can handle it. Indeed, DWP has already announced such flexibility for lone parents.

I suppose that the benefits cap has been one of the more interesting aspects of the whole debate on welfare, with many people coming down on one or other side of the argument. At first glance, the proposal to limit the level of entitlement to welfare benefits to £500 a week for a couple and £350 a week for a single household makes sense to me. If we are serious when we say that work should always pay, the only way to truly ensure that is the introduction of a cap. Interestingly, the benefits cap is an issue through which strict parity will benefit Northern Ireland, as it will effectively be set to correspond with the level of earnings in Great Britain. For clarification, will the Minister detail exactly how many households will be affected in Northern Ireland? I have sought that information from the Minister previously, but, as yet, I have not received a definitive answer.

I do not need to reiterate all the points that other Members and I made on the changes to housing benefit, many of which have already been enforced in Northern Ireland. We all know the issues — an increasing housing benefit budget being slashed by unsympathetic means.

Given our lack of appropriate housing, I sought guarantees from the Minister previously on the safeguards arising from the changes to the shared room rate. I ask him again today whether he can tell me what he has done. Can he tell me that Northern Ireland's housing stock will be able to adapt to the changes to housing benefit now and in what is yet to come?

I will now move to a wider issue. If made law, many of the requirements that are laid out in this legislation will place significant requirements on claimants, and they will be expected to meet those requirements to receive benefits.

I do not want to stray from the debate too widely, but I remind the Minister that the number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits stood at 63,100 in August.

Sadly, if recent events are anything to go by, that is heading in only one direction. I am sure that, until recently, even the Minister looked on appreciatively when he noted that Northern Ireland's unemployment level was below the UK average. I am sorry, but with a rate of 8·2%, we are now on the wrong side of average, and we are significantly off-message with our economic inactivity rate of 26·9%, which is the highest among the 12 UK regions.

We must also remember that young people who are growing up in workless households are much more likely to struggle to find stable employment. The point that I am making, Mr Speaker, is that, as I skim through Part 2 of the Bill, I can see all the new glossy clauses on conditionality and sanction. I have seen and heard little over recent months about how the Department expects people to move from benefits to jobs when so few jobs are available.

I am in no doubt that welfare reform must work in tandem with a revitalised economy, improving our education system and increasing early intervention. There is a clear link between long-term unemployment, cycles of deprivation and health, and Northern Ireland must begin to tackle the plight of those people who are becoming trapped in a web of dependency. Today's proposals do nothing to answer those questions.

Although it is not fair to blame only the Department for Social Development, which, after all, appears to have taken its usual unwavering direction from DWP, I find it sadly characteristic that, even in the biggest shake-up of welfare in generations, it has found the time to devote enough energy to reviewing its counter-fraud and error capability.

Officials and the Minister are keen to detail that, under the Bill, claimants who fail to report or are negligent with their claims will face strict financial penalties. I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that, although his Department administers around £5 billion each year on benefits, it incurred losses of only £54 million in 2011 to error and fraud. Any right-thinking people will say that £54 million is still too much, and I agree, but it must be taken in context. That accounted for 1·1% of total expenditure, and it compares very favourably with estimates of over 2% for the Department for Work and Pensions. Of course, like any good Department in Northern Ireland, DSD distances itself from the blame for supposed failings. I make the point that, of the 1% loss, 0·4% is fraud, 0·3% is customer error and the other 0·3% remains official and departmental error.

Another major element of the Bill is the introduction of the personal independence payment (PIP), which will, beginning in June 2013, replace disability living allowance. Of course, it is emblematic of the way in which the process has been conducted that, even now, we have very little idea of what the detailed design of PIP will look like. Although I hope that there will be a simplification of the process, I hope even more that the Department is aware of what it is letting itself in for by taking this on at the same time as the introduction of universal credit.

The Department claims, quite rightly in my opinion, that DLA is in dire need of review. It has not been looked at since its introduction 20 years ago. Again, DLA is a benefit about which there is quite a degree of genuine public concern. Every year, the Department administers three quarters of a billion pounds of Treasury money on that benefit alone, which is a sum bigger than many of our Executive budgets put together. The need for disability living allowance and personal independence payments, when introduced, is comprehensive, but we need to ensure that it is targeted at those who need and deserve it. With over 10% of our population — 180,000 people — currently in receipt of DLA, I hope that the Department is fully prepared for the body of work that it, and its staff on the ground, is about to embark on.

I wait patiently for the regulations coming forward — the details, the final rules — on what constitutes "daily living" and "mobility" activities when assessing entitlement to PIP. I cannot emphasise to the Minister enough the sheer importance of getting that particular aspect of welfare reform right. People, whether they be on the mobility component or the daily living component, will be subsequently judged, and for many other schemes, using that determination. For example, what about members of victims' groups in Northern Ireland and their eligibility for funding through channels such as the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund? I plead with the Minister to give a commitment that such individuals will not be disadvantaged through the reforms.

Of course, it would be remiss of me not to use this opportunity to raise my concerns about the overall assessment process of the new payment. I urge the Minister to look at the work capability assessment and everything that has gone wrong there, and learn, sir, please, from those mistakes. There is a justifiable concern that a private company involved in that travesty will now be in a prime position to secure the bid for assessing personal independence payment applicants. If that happens, all that I will say is that the Minister needs to think long and hard



about the performance-related measures that he builds into that particular contract.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Copeland:** No. Mr Maskey did not give way, so I do not think that I will either.

Finally on PIP, if I could make one request of the Minister, it would be this: be understanding of Northern Ireland's individual need. The small Province that we all jointly call home is but a small dot on the global map and has emerged out of 40 years of murder and mayhem, something that continues to contribute to the fact that the current main disabling condition for disability living allowance recipients here is mental health problems. That is over 40,000 people, many of whom already believe that this world can be a scary enough place, and who are now to run the gauntlet of being forced through new assessments. If people on disability living allowance are not successful in their applications for PIP, that will have a far greater impact than just the immediate financial loss, for it will affect their entitlement to other forms of support. If they decide to appeal, they will face even further costs, in the tribunals. Some, I have no doubt, can and should be removed off this benefit. However, those about whom I am most concerned are the silent majority who will remain too afraid to speak up and have no one to speak for them and claim what they are entitled to.

**5.30 pm**

I urge the Minister to ensure that there remains an appropriate level of support and information for people during this entire process. Given that there will be huge numbers of people involved in the adoption of universal credit, not to mention the transfer to PIP, it is vital that appropriate provisions are put in place to ensure that the process runs as smoothly as possible. As elected representatives, we all know the value of independent advice services in our constituencies. Without them, I doubt that anyone in the House believes that the current social security system would be able to cope currently, never mind after the reforms are brought in.

Throughout my time in Castlereagh and east Belfast, I have worked closely with organisations such as Advice NI, and I cannot stress enough the role that those organisations play. Therefore, I make a specific request of the Minister to support the inclusion of a new clause in the Bill, which gives people a statutory right to independent advice and support.

Another huge issue facing all of us here today, especially if the amendment is successful, is the future of the social fund in Northern Ireland. Unless today's legislation proceeds through all the necessary channels correctly, there is a risk — and I do not think it is a bluff or a threat — that all the crucial support that this offers may disappear. It is highly regrettable that we now find ourselves in the situation of needing to make haste or rush. We must bear in mind the hundreds of thousands of people who benefit from this fund each year. Surely, Minister, there are safeguards that you could put in place so that this situation cannot come to fruition if we find ourselves out of sync with the current timetable.

Given that welfare reform has now come to the fore, it is important that the Executive as a collective body come to agreement on the future of passported benefits in Northern Ireland. From what I can see, the problem is the same as it is with every other issue, which is that every Department administers its own individual benefits. Until the Departments can put that silo mentality to the side, the argument is over even before it has begun.

It will be necessary for Departments here to develop new solutions to enable them to have new criteria in place for the introduction of universal credit. I am glad that there appears to have been at least some planning for this, given that Departments across the water are in discussions with officials here. Of course, much like everything else in the Bill, these efforts look to me to be too little, too late. It is unsurprising that I have been told that the Department for Work and Pensions is currently, and, allegedly, desperately, trying to pull together an interim IT system to buy a little time.

The Minister may not have wanted it raised here today, but I am sure that he has yet to receive one willing participant. However, the issue of introducing income thresholds for eligibility for these passported benefits must be confronted and addressed. I am led to believe that the Executive subgroup on welfare reform, which my colleague Danny Kennedy has been faithfully attending for months on end, was recently debating this issue. Just on that point, given the situation that we see here today, with the Bill being introduced so late that it is right on the wire, and, to some, the subsequent grandstanding Sinn Féin amendment, what does the Minister for Social Development actually believe that the subgroup achieved? One thing is for sure: it certainly was not political consensus. I would appreciate it if the Minister could provide an update on his

intentions for this group now that the Bill has finally been introduced.

I have raised a number of specific issues in the Bill and the regulations that may flow from it. There is no doubt that the proposed legislation places upon us a heavy responsibility, as these changes will impact on a great many of our citizens. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that each of us is aware and takes into account the things that may, and will, flow from our actions here today.

At this point, I would like to mention the level of public awareness about what is coming down the line. If you asked people in the street whether they know about imminent welfare reform, I am sure that many of them would say that they do. However, if you then asked them to explain it, they would be stumped. That is not their fault; rather it is a failure of the Department to adequately inform the public about what is coming.

We all know about the digital television switch-over and have done so for years. However, for the past number of months, we have not been able to go anywhere — even the Great Hall — without being confronted by messages about the digital switch-over date. Those messages are everywhere: on the radio, on billboards and even on the television itself. Yet there are huge gaps in public awareness about the most radical shake-up of social welfare in the past 50 or 60 years. Of course, the rationale behind the TV switch-over campaign was to avoid a surge of people turning on their televisions to see blank screens, but surely people getting letters saying that their benefit has gone or has been scrapped will have an even more daunting effect. Therefore, all I say is this: the Department needs to consider getting its act together on this and start clearly communicating the message to the public that big changes are coming and that the support that people may be receiving now could be very much reduced and significantly difficult to obtain in years to come.

It may surprise people outside the Chamber who are listening to this debate that we are speaking in such a methodical tone, but that, unfortunately, is the manner of the Bill. It was clearly drafted with little compassion or understanding. It is all the more disappointing that Northern Ireland had an opportunity to make its points but that it has, so far, been unsuccessful. I fear that the ship may have already sailed on many of these issues. The failure of Northern Ireland to adequately get safeguards built into the Bill here and in London means that we all face an uphill battle.

The burden that is about to descend on us here and on the Committee for Social Development is unique because, out of the three devolved Assemblies and Parliaments that serve the United Kingdom, we alone accepted the devolution of these responsibilities. We will consider, discuss and eventually arrive at the dreaded moment when politics become real and we are required to make judgements and take a decision in the sure and certain knowledge that we will bring misery to so many of our people.

As I approach the end — you will be glad to hear — I wonder, to misquote Winston Churchill, what is the good of all this. The only guide to a man or, indeed, a political party is their actions; the only shield to their memory is their conscience and the rectitude of their actions. Without this shield, it is very unwise to go down any path as we are so often let down by the failure of our calculations and the unforeseen outcomes of our actions. With this shield, however, we will walk always in the legions of the righteous.

The Bill in its current form will, in effect, remove money from the Northern Ireland economy that is not currently included in the block grant. The overwhelming majority who benefit in the current legislation from those payments do not have any real disposable income after the essentials of shelter, food, heat, light, power and clothing have been apportioned. The Minister referred to claimants moving to work. However, he is negating the fact that Northern Ireland has a low-wage economy, and, unfortunately, too many people find themselves in the position of needing to almost subsidise their wages with benefits. Although the Bill and the subsequent regulations may have a cost saving, I genuinely fear that they will inevitably force already struggling families to rein in their spending that little bit extra, and an immediate knock-on effect will be felt by local businesses.

I hope that today's debate and even some of what I said will be of some benefit to the Minister, even if it is the case that Committee members reiterated what many of us have held as long-term concerns. Unfortunately, the Minister has yet to indicate that he has listened.

The truth behind all the numbers and rhetoric is that the legislation will impact on people. It will impact on people regardless of their age, race, religion, colour or gender — many of them, to our shame, among the most vulnerable and helpless. I think of the former UDR soldier awaiting an ESA appeal. He suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder having witnessed his comrade being blown in half in front of him. A

few years later, he came home to find his partner in the act of taking her own life. He held her limp body, calling for help, but no help came. He broke down at the last appeal hearing and, on the advice of a doctor, it had to be abandoned.

I think of the young woman with whom I attended court this morning in a last-ditch attempt to prevent her from acquiring a criminal record. Expelled from school in her early teens and currently at tech learning basic literacy and numeracy skills, her daily medication list would baffle most pharmacists. Those medications are an attempt to treat ADD, ADHD, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, threatened schizophrenia, self-harm, mild spectrum autism and personality disorder. That is a lot to carry in a 20-year-old head.

I think of the young woman who recently had a meeting with my party leader and me. Her legs, from her knees to her waist, are scarred with razor cuts like railroad tracks after she desperately tried to eradicate the memory of years of sexual abuse at the hands of her brother. Her ESA appeal, and it should never have got to that stage, had to be abandoned, and the process was tantamount to cruelty and torture. I know because I was there.

Those are among the people who will find that the amount of money that currently allows them to subsist at the lowest levels of society is cut to the point at which subsistence is impossible. There are difficult decisions coming down the line, and the Committee, under the guidance of Mr Maskey, faces many long days of work. Admittedly, because of the short timescale, we will not, in my view, be able to dedicate the appropriate time that each of those people deserve.

The Bill will affect every demographic in every constituency. Therefore, no political party should ever believe that it should be awarded anything but the maximum scrutiny. When we consider this legislation, as we must, word by word, line by line, paragraph by paragraph and clause by clause, we must ask ourselves several questions. What happens if we support this? What happens if we do not? Who will benefit and enjoy advantage? Who will not benefit and endure disadvantage? What will it cost? Finally, perhaps for me most importantly, can another way be found?

Today's debate, which has plenty of words but little in the way of detail, will be followed by regulations that we have yet to see. However, that, I fear, will be the most painful part and where there is least room for amendment. This

is all the more frustrating given the fear that many of the regulations may, by necessity or design, be brought in through confirmatory resolution. How is the Assembly meant to demonstrate total scrutiny of these proposals when Members' chance to vote for them comes six months after they have been introduced? I ask the Minister to detail by what procedures he envisages each of these regulations coming through.

Drawing my remarks to a close — there will be a cheer now — I reiterate the Ulster Unionist Party belief that there are too many benefits with too many differing criteria. To do nothing is not an option. Inaction would only make things worse in future years as welfare expenditure starts to cripple public spending. When something is starting to fail, you fix it. However unpalatable these proposals may be, we are faced with the reality of a coalition Government seemingly unprepared to listen and a Social Development Department that has yet to make its voice heard.

Nothing that I said should be taken as support for the Bill. However, the reasoned amendment takes us all into uncharted and dangerous waters. On balance, to enable the Committee to do its work, we will allow the Bill to pass Second Stage. I must warn the two main parties that this is not a blank cheque and that we reserve the right, in future, to follow our conscience and, if necessary, withdraw support for this flawed, compassionless, soulless mathematical calculation that does not put people first.

**5.45 pm**

It is the responsibility of everyone in the House to ensure that what we do now, we do right. I will leave you with one final quote, which is from a film called 'Forrest Gump':

*"That's all I have to say about that."*

**Mr Durkan:** I find that, when Mr Copeland starts to speak, you never know what you are going to get. I oppose the Bill and support the reasoned amendment. It will be hard to follow what was quite possibly the best and certainly the longest speech I have ever heard in opposition to legislation.

In the event that the amendment falls, we wish to go further. We in the SDLP accept, indeed welcome, the need for a simple, more accessible benefit system, but we will not accept the Bill, which, as it stands, is a shameful attack on the vulnerable in our

society. We will not swallow the Tories' peddling of cuts dressed as reform, nor will we accept the demonisation of people on benefits.

This Assembly must do what it was elected to do. We must represent the people of Northern Ireland, and we must, in this case, defend them. In its current form, the Welfare Reform Bill does not recognise any specific circumstances of Northern Ireland. We are not oblivious to the implications and the constraints of breaking parity. We hear loudly the threatening noises from Westminster and their echoes in this Chamber and over the airwaves, but we cannot and will not accept any legislation that will force thousands of our citizens into poverty.

We previously said that we would not accept the Bill without some concessions and flexibilities, some of which are rightly identified in the amendment, which I will speak about in more detail later. We have been patient in waiting for the Minister to secure the concessions. I do not dispute the effort of the Minister or his officials, but we must examine the results to date. Despite ongoing meetings and negotiations with DWP and Lord Freud, we have not been presented with anything that takes specific account of our circumstances. Is DWP leading DSD a merry dance? We need to see real evidence of its commitment if we are to let this Bill pass even to its next stage. We are not prepared to just rubber-stamp Tory legislation. The Minister will argue today that we have no choice and that we simply cannot afford to sustain our own welfare system. I agree and understand. However, the ball is in the Minister's court, where it has been for some time.

We have received continual assurances that work is ongoing and progress is being made in securing a better system for the North. The specific circumstances of this region have been acknowledged time and again, yet here we are today with what is basically a blueprint of a Tory Bill. It is not working in England, and it will most certainly not work here.

The legislation is an insult to the people of the North, and it is insulting to this institution as a law-making body. We are meant to be a devolved Government. We are bound to legislate in a manner that serves our people best, but allowing the Bill to pass as it is certainly does not do that. That is why we support the reasoned amendment and why, should it fall, we are prepared to explore triggering a petition of concern to prevent the passage of this attack on our people.

While the amendment is not exhaustive, it certainly encompasses the real concerns we all, I am sure, share relating to the Bill. Yesterday, our party, through our Executive Minister Alex Attwood, explored the utilisation of Standing Order 35. Its utilisation would instigate the creation of an ad hoc Committee to deal with equality and human rights issues in new legislation. We recognise the consequences of dumping parity, but it would be weakness to allow our people to be dumped on by parity. Our idea with this Committee is to stretch parity, not to break it, so that welfare law and administration can be formed, and informed, by the rights and equality protections that are promised to all our people. Those are duties with which this Assembly is corporately charged.

Specific issues relating to women and children are covered under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and such a Committee would thrash those out fully. We must use our constitutional tools to make a better job of what is clearly a bad cross-over Bill. If we do not, we are guilty of a dereliction of a dramatic capacity and of indifference to the Bill's serious implications for vulnerable people.

Furthermore, Standing Order 35 makes the Bill an issue about Assembly responsibility. We have already heard about the Minister's discussions with Freud. Alex Maskey, the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, spoke of a meeting with Lord Freud in the near future. My own party, the SDLP, has also made representations and has had meetings in that manner. At one of those meetings, we were given assurances on direct payments and on the possibility of retaining fortnightly payments.

However, this privatisation of parties going separately suits DWP. We need to work together on this as an Assembly. This Committee would be a tool for us to do so in an open and transparent manner. It would flag up the gross inequalities in the Bill and prove our need for concessions to Westminster. It transpires that the Standing Order can be invoked only by a Minister acting with Executive approval or by the relevant Committee Chairperson. I appeal in both directions that that be given serious consideration. It would give an outworking to the very pertinent points that have been made in the reasoned amendment. It would not have a massive impact time wise, and it can only strengthen the Minister's hand in his ongoing negotiations.

The SDLP has been consistent and vociferous in its concerns about and opposition to welfare

cuts. We have a strong track record on welfare reform at Westminster, in the Executive, and in the Assembly. Indeed, several months ago, I tabled a motion calling for the mitigation of the negative impact of this Bill on vulnerable people to be escalated to the highest political priority of the Executive.

In the past, we have seen the prioritisation of other issues, such as the devolution of policing and justice, the Presbyterian Mutual Society, and, more recently, corporation tax. However, the House rejected our calls. Now, it looks as though this issue has become a very high political priority, and we firmly believe that any threat or prospect of impasse could have been ameliorated by earlier decisive action.

Another strand of our proposal incorporated the formation of an Ad Hoc Committee to work on the Bill, and, today, we renew that call with reference to Standing Order 35. Such pre-legislative scrutiny may have staved off the need for brinkmanship now.

**Mr Bell:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Durkan:** Sorry. No other Members have given way today, and I will not do so either. Thank you. I will be here for quite some time; if I need a break, I will come back to you. *[Laughter.]* Where the Bill is concerned, we have always agreed that our welfare system needs reform. However, we cannot stand by and see it completely dismantled. The rationale given by the Tories, which has been regurgitated here in the past and again today, is that the Bill is about making work pay and helping people into work. That is an admirable sentiment; however, it is also false. The real motivation here is clear: it is about cutting costs, and those who are on welfare are evidently a much easier target than big business and tax dodgers. Further evidence of that came out of the Conservative conference yesterday: there are to be further cuts, to the tune of £10 billion, and policies on child benefit that would not be out of place in some dystopian fantasy. It is easy to come up with those policies from the comfort of an ivory tower in Whitehall. The approval and implementation of them here — for us and by us — is a completely different proposition. I do not doubt for a second that every MLA in here has serious concerns about the impact of the legislation in their constituency and on their constituents, friends and family. We must, as I said, work together to make the Bill, which none of us can deny is an odious piece of legislation, less damaging. However, as it stands, we cannot accept it. The SDLP cannot and will not vote to let it pass.

Although what we know about the Bill is terrifying, and what it will enable is even worse, the real devil is in the lack of detail. Passing the Bill in its current form without regulations is inviting even further cuts and hardship. We have seen the appetite of the coalition Government for attacking the vulnerable. Who is to say what a single Tory Government might do in the future? The Bill enables them not so much to move the goalposts as make them portable so that they can be moved over and over again.

Let us look at what we know: the Bill will have a major impact on people's incomes, their housing, their mental and physical health and their independence, and on the lives of men, women and children. It will have major repercussions across society as a whole, not just on benefit claimants. Millions and millions of pounds will be lost from our local economy, and that will inevitably result in further job losses and shop closures.

Should the Bill progress to its next stage, we as a party and I as an individual, along with my colleagues on the Social Development Committee, will work tirelessly to identify, craft and table positive, realistic and achievable amendments to it. The areas that need improved are manifold. My party colleagues will elaborate on them later, but I will give an overview of what we see as the major problems. The proposal for a single household payment to one nominated person has caused great consternation, particularly among those in the women's and children's sectors, who correctly view it as a highly retrograde step that will inevitably lead to an increase in financial abuse and, more than likely, physical abuse and family breakdown. We should enable split payments under equality grounds.

Universal credit is to be a digital self-service — I am not going to talk about the digital switch-over, so do not worry. People will be expected to make their claims online. I want to know exactly how it is intended that that will be managed, given people's lack of access to computers and their lack of confidence and computer literacy. The Committee was presented with research from Ipsos MORI on the matter. Despite what I felt was clever manipulation of statistics to disguise it, the research indicated that that could and will be a real nightmare. The Government say that they will assist people, but I have concerns over the time frame and the amount of money that it will take to get people, particularly older people, digitally ready. Furthermore, what are the implications for our many rural dwellers here,

where broadband connectivity is patchy, to say the least?

The move towards universal credit, we are told, is also about teaching responsibility. The household payment will be monthly, and claimants who have little or no experience of budgeting will be expected to learn the hard way.

We fear that this monthly payment is fraught with danger. It maximises the risk of families running out of money weeks before their next payment and having to rely on charities or, much worse, on loan sharks to survive. I believe that an increase in real poverty and debt is inevitable. The policy has been defended as mirroring the experience of working households, all of which, we are told, are paid monthly. From Westminster, this displays a complete lack of knowledge, lack of research and, indeed, a lack of interest. We know that the vast majority of households here comprise people who are on low incomes and are still paid weekly. Iain Duncan Smith recently spoke about ensuring that the IT system has the capacity to retain fortnightly payments for vulnerable people and families. Who defines "vulnerable"? If the IT system can differentiate for a few, surely it can differentiate for many.

#### 6.00 pm

Universal credit will streamline existing benefits. We have seen the commencement of this streamlining with the migration of claimants from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance, prior to its subsumption into universal credit. This process has been traumatic for thousands of claimants, particularly here in the North where we have higher levels of incapacity, especially through mental health conditions, which have been attributed to the legacy of the Troubles. These circumstances were not recognised when this regulation was introduced, and its impact has been disastrous. We have a fitness-for-work assessment that is not itself fit for purpose. People's lives have been wrecked, and people's conditions seriously worsened. The Department has been unable to handle the huge number of appeals, many of which have been successful following erroneous assessments. We must ensure that lessons are learnt. We must address this mess and, of course, be certain that the new personal independence payment test for DLA claimants is fair and robust.

Universal credit is not only for those out of work or unable to work. Some 200,000 people here are on tax credits, many of whom have very specific circumstances. Streamlining the system treats people as numbers, with little or no regard for circumstances. We need further clarification of what circumstances might, would or could be considered, especially for caring responsibilities and for those caring for severely disabled persons.

The introduction of, and increase in, sanctions on people on universal credit deemed fit to work is very worrying. Where are the people who dreamt this up from?

**Mr Hamilton:** I will give the Member his answer as to who dreamt this up. We know where the legislation was dreamt up. Like all legislation, it came from across the water, but it was implemented in Northern Ireland. The Minister who introduced the primary legislation was the Member's party colleague Alex Attwood.

**Mr Durkan:** Thank you for the intervention. I asked where the legislation was dreamt up. As the Member said, we know where it was dreamt up. It was certainly not dreamt up here either by my party colleague or by your party colleague the current Minister. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has the Floor.

**Mr Durkan:** That is not where it was dreamt up. It was not dreamt up here, but we have to live with it. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Durkan:** Was that another intervention?

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Durkan:** With the unemployment rate here in the North so high, and there being so little in the way of job creation and opportunities, this is not so much helping people into work as taking money off people for not being able to find work, or, given the flaws in the work capability assessment, people who are physically incapable of work.

We need to focus more on job creation. Not only are we incapable of creating jobs for our people but we are imposing draconian measures that will force more and more of our young people to leave their families and take their chances in Australia or wherever.

There are also issues around the imposition of sanctions on an individual when there is a single household benefit and the impact that such sanctions will have on children in that household. The single household payment, or rather the nominated person provision, is also likely to cause confusion when one partner reaches pensionable age. For example, will a couple's eligibility for exemption be determined by the age of the older or younger partner?

The implications of this Bill for housing here cannot be overstated. We have already debated some aspects of this in the Chamber, most recently when we brought forward a motion, two weeks ago, calling for the retention of direct payment of housing benefit to landlords. Under universal credit, it is proposed that these direct payments are abolished, and that can lead only to debt, hardship and homelessness. Housing benefit requirements here are very different to those elsewhere in the UK. Given that the majority of claimants in Northern Ireland have never had to budget for rent on any basis, it will be much more difficult for individuals and families to adjust to the universal credit system as a whole. It is also accepted that people here are less financially capable than their counterparts in the other regions. People here will require much more support and training to learn the skills needed to manage their financial affairs. In Northern Ireland, there is a reliance on Post Office accounts that is not prevalent in other jurisdictions. This will increase the difficulty for tenants to make payments to landlords on time, as the accounts do not allow for outward payments.

Underoccupancy is another aspect of the Bill that is hugely punitive and draconian. Tenants will see their housing benefit drastically reduced and will have to make up the difference from other components of their universal credit, which is already based on subsistence levels. Given the segregated nature of our housing stock and our very limited number of smaller housing units, this policy will be unworkable here.

The Bill deals with the development of personalised support through the personal independence payment. We are in favour of the aim to support disabled people to exercise choice and control and to lead independent lives. However, we have genuine concerns, which are shared by people with disabilities, their carers and their advocates. Although we appreciate the need for reform to create a simple and efficient system, we worry that, in practice, the changes to DLA will do just the opposite. We have a duty to protect and

support the most vulnerable, and we will only accept a reform of DLA that is able to support disabled people and their families and enable them to deal with the additional costs associated with their needs. We have major concerns that, under PIP, differences will be based on age rather than on severity of disability. Another huge worry is the suspension of PIP within two weeks of a claimant's hospitalisation. The prevalence of mental illness here in the North is, in itself, grounds for us to be considered a special case, and the failures of the work capability assessment, to which I referred earlier, do not give us confidence that the PIP assessment will be thorough and take proper account of these considerations.

The extension of the qualifying period to six months will hinder those in need of urgent help or with short-term but serious conditions. We welcome the inclusion of special rules for those who are terminally ill, but we are worried that the removal of the automatic benefit entitlement for certain groups will have a devastating impact. Existing categories, such as blindness, deafness and severe mental impairment, must be protected and retained.

The impact of the Bill will be particularly harsh on women, and my colleague Dolores Kelly will elaborate on that later.

One aspect that I will touch on, though, is the benefit cap. Last week, the Committee received a high-level briefing on universal credit. I explicitly asked whether child benefit would be included in the benefit cap and was eventually told by departmental officials that it would not be. I welcomed that and was going to laud it today as a beneficial breach of parity, as well as a very surprising one given the DUP's opposition to the exclusion of child benefit at Westminster. However, at lunchtime, I discovered that child benefit is, in fact, included. That means that we were misled by departmental officials in Committee, although I do not for one second assume that that was deliberate. It is most unsatisfactory that we are today being asked to pass a Bill that is devoid of detail, with huge question marks over what is actually in it.

More disturbing is the fact that the inclusion of child benefit in the cap flies in the face of Programme for Government pledges to reduce child poverty, an area that is obviously close to Mr Bell's heart as he intervened to comment on it earlier. Squeezing the cap, using regulations along with child benefit, will play a big part in the further £10 billion of cuts that the Tories seek. What clause of the Bill, as it stands,

prevents such a move from being extended to here? Most of the detail that effects the key aims behind the Government's intentions for welfare reform — for example, simplicity and improving work incentives — is left to the regulations. We are concerned that the regulations will not be subject to effective scrutiny. We need the Minister to be clear on this issue. Indeed, a future Assembly and a future Minister, from whatever party, should be able to see some effort being made to protect them and, more importantly, families from such obvious prospects.

In conclusion —

**Mr Attwood:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Durkan:** Yes.

**Mr Attwood:** I wanted to let you finish your remarks before I asked you to give way. I wonder whether the Member would agree with me that Mr Hamilton made a very curious point when he mentioned my name in dispatches as a former Social Development Minister. Would the Member agree that it was a curious point? His point was as follows: it was an SDLP Minister who legislated for welfare reform. Does he agree that that demonstrates that the SDLP certainly accepts that there is an obligation on the House to legislate for welfare and welfare reform? The point, however, is this: when the House legislated for welfare reform, I made sure that the sanctions regime that Mr Hamilton referred to was neutered. How was it neutered? It was because we were able to put into the body of law a different regime for parents here given the different childcare arrangements. We put into the body of law that childcare circumstances in the North were different from those in Britain, which meant that the law here would be different from the law in Britain. Yet Mr Hamilton would pretend to the House today that he is to legislate today on the basis of the second draft, which does not reflect the different childcare arrangements in the North. More than that, would the Member agree with me —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I have listened to the Member and given him quite a bit of latitude. As he will know, I continually say to all sides of the House that interventions should be short. They certainly should not be statements. I think that this afternoon, we have had a statement. Mr Durkan, please carry on.

**Mr Durkan:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention, and I think that I do agree. *[Laughter.]* Some of the points

raised by previous Members who spoke were even more curious, believe me.

For the reasons outlined — *[Interruption.]*

**6.15 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Durkan:** — the SDLP will oppose the passage of the Bill. We have talked a lot and heard a lot about operational flexibilities, but in the continued absence of any, we cannot support the Bill. Let me be clear. We are not opposed to welfare reform, but we are opposed to unfair reform. We support the reasoned amendment and believe that our proposal to use Standing Order 35 to establish a new, dedicated Committee could help to work through the points raised in the amendment and, indeed, the other parties' problems with it. We believe that there is time to work this out, but passing the Second Stage of the Bill today with no resolutions will reduce that time. It is for that reason that, should the amendment fall and should our calls go unheeded, we are prepared to activate a petition of concern. That is not —

**Mr Bell:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Durkan:** Yes.

**Mr Bell:** Earlier, you praised the IT skills of the House. You talk about the sham fight of a petition of concern, but, from the IT in front of me, I can see that Patsy McGlone — he is sitting in front of you — has tweeted that Sinn Féin will not support your petition of concern. You are too small a party for it to have any effectiveness whatsoever. So, can we get on with the real business of dealing with the Bill in Committee and dealing with the real issues that matter to people? Those are the social fund and keeping jobs, particularly the hundreds of jobs in the north-west. Your constituents are going to lose their jobs if we do not put this through, and you know that we have no option. Let us not have any more of this sham fight — *[Interruption.]* Your Member knows that it is nothing other than a sham fight, and you are mistaking the real business of the House.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. If we are to have interventions, let us have short interventions. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow the Member to carry on. Order.

**Mr Durkan:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is great to hear a member of the Executive talking about



jobs in the north-west. I would love to hear them talk about creating jobs, never mind protecting them.

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Durkan:** It has been reported —  
*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member should take his seat. Let us have all remarks made through the Chair. Furthermore, some Members are addressing other Members across the Floor as "you". They should not do that. Allow the Member to continue.

**Mr Durkan:** If the Member had let me finish — it has been reported to me that Sinn Féin has chosen not to support our petition of concern. That is a matter of great regret but not of great surprise to me. It begs the question of whether its opposition to welfare reform is real or rhetorical. Let me be clear: this is not about playing politics; this is about protecting people. That is why the SDLP was formed and what it is all about.

**Mrs Cochrane:** There are aspects of the Bill that the Alliance Party supports, but there are also considerable parts with which it has deep concern. However, I speak in support of the Bill. I also agree with a lot of the points that Sinn Féin raised in its amendment, but we do not think that the amendment is the best mechanism to deal with them.

The Alliance Party knows that the place to make significant changes to the Bill was at Westminster. Although that leaves us in a difficult situation, we need to acknowledge that our duty now is to progress with the Bill and make changes that are in our power at Consideration Stage. Delaying the process is not the answer, and the costs of delay are considerable, including, as the Minister highlighted, the risk that Northern Ireland residents who deliver social security services on a UK-wide basis could lose their jobs. Although I would have liked the Bill to come forward much sooner to allow us more time, I see no reason why we should delay it and why we cannot seek to tackle the issues in Sinn Féin's amendment through continued negotiations with the UK Government over the coming weeks, as well as making amendments to the Bill through the Committee Stage.

Although the social security system is devolved to the Assembly, it is in the interests of our constituents to follow parity with the rest of the UK. We do not have the tax base to sustain our

own local system or to pay for deviations from what happens in the rest of the UK. Parity, therefore, works in our favour, in that it ensures a level of provision that we could not otherwise afford. The Alliance Party does not believe that it is feasible for us to breach parity for benefits and qualifying thresholds, but we can work to push administrative and operational matters to fit with local circumstances. That is where our focus now needs to be. We should also ensure that the Executive are prioritising other factors that can mitigate some of the changes, including progressing affordable childcare and creating jobs.

When talking about our welfare system, I think that there is often a myth that people are divided into two distinct groups: hard-working taxpayers and those who are on benefits. A person may fall into either or both of those categories at some point in their life. Hard-working taxpayers can become seriously ill or lose their job or home, especially in the current economic climate, so we need to ensure that we have a system that provides support when someone needs it most.

It seems that all parties agree that we want to push the boundaries of parity as much as possible for our constituents, but we need to be realistic. It would be irresponsible for us as elected representatives to get people's hopes up that we can make vast changes to the Bill's operation here, given that the real place to debate and make significant changes to it was Westminster. Indeed, my colleague Naomi Long MP consistently voted against the Government's proposals for welfare reform at every stage in Westminster, and she supported a number of amendments that the House of Lords proposed that aimed to lessen the worst effects of the Act.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Cochrane:** No, I will not, given some of the comments that were made.

She supported amendments that would extend contributory ESA to 24 months, exempt cancer patients from the new rules and reject the Government's moves to stop young disabled people who have never worked from receiving contributory ESA. Unfortunately, the Government defeated those amendments. She also objected to the Government's confusing proposals on cuts to child benefit and to a cap on benefits. She voted against the Bill at its Second and Third Readings in Parliament.

There are countless provisions in the Bill, and I will focus on a few specific points where I think

that we could approach things differently in Northern Ireland while still working within the realms of parity. A completely different IT system is out of the question, for example, but making more frequent or split payments of universal credit to those who want it should be possible. Choice is key, and we need to appreciate that not everyone is comfortable with budgeting on a monthly basis. Indeed, many who work in retail or construction are paid fortnightly. On the other hand, there are those who have been used to receiving a monthly salary but who have since lost their job and struggle to manage their budget when various payments come in at different times. It may not be completely clear what their total monthly income is. I, therefore, welcome that the Minister is seeking confirmation that the IT system can meet that purpose so that choice can be offered.

Another issue that I have previously spoken on is the underoccupation penalty. Although we will not be able to ignore the penalties, we need to recognise that there are not nearly enough one bedroom properties in Northern Ireland to cope with demand. So, we need to consider that the penalty will affect those who were allocated a property with more bedrooms than they require, often through no fault or choice of their own. Any social housing tenants who are deemed to be underoccupying their home by one bedroom stand to lose 14% of their housing benefit entitlement, with those underoccupying by two or more bedrooms losing 25% of that benefit. I understand that the Housing Executive and housing associations are trying to pre-empt those changes coming into force and have been taking steps to identify those tenants who will be affected. However, we need to ensure that everything that can be done is being done to prevent mass upheaval when those changes come in. We do not want to end up with more repossessions, rent arrears or people presenting as homeless.

I welcome the Minister's comments on housing stock, and I ask that he ensures that his Department will prioritise the review of all social housing stock and take a strategic and holistic approach to the construction of future housing. Of course, we in Northern Ireland have the added difficulty of having deeply segregated housing pockets. Often, the options for people moving house are even more complex in comparison with those for people in Great Britain. It will come as no surprise to Members to hear that I believe that shared housing could be an integral concept in the housing strategy and could help to alleviate some of the proposed changes in the Welfare Reform Bill.

We should also be cognisant of the fact that applications for universal credit and PIP will predominantly need to be made online and that the community and voluntary sector will, therefore, have a more important role than ever to play. We must ensure that enough fully trained staff are placed in jobs and benefits offices across Northern Ireland to assist claimants with filling in forms both in person and through helplines. I am sure that the Minister is well aware that, by investing in the community and voluntary sector, we gain value for money in front line advice services, which inevitably leads to financial savings for government. To curb the effects of the changes to our social security system, we should be investing in and using the advice sector to its full capacity.

Lessons also need to be learned from the staggering employment and support allowance appeal rates, with around 38% of appeals decided in favour of claimants. The work capability assessment carried out in the UK by Atos has caused significant concern. We need to ensure that the personal independence payment medical assessments are better thought out and that medical evidence will take precedence when decisions are made.

Another issue of concern is that over 133,000 people in Northern Ireland have a direct payment of housing benefit set up with their landlord, which ensures that their accommodation is never in jeopardy and helps to reduce the risk of personal debt. That system not only protects tenants but gives financial security to social landlords, enabling them to secure private investment at highly competitive rates, thereby maximising their capacity to deliver much-needed affordable homes to the taxpayer. Landlords who receive direct payments are, in turn, able to keep down the cost of rent. That is one feature that I would be extremely keen to retain, perhaps by having an opt-out scheme.

In conclusion, welfare reform should not be about reducing spend year on year. It should be about creating a welfare system that protects and provides for those who need it most. The Bill does not make easy reading for any of us who deal daily with constituents in real need. However, our duty to them is to seek to make amendments at Committee Stage in the coming weeks. I support the motion but not the amendment.

**Mr Hamilton:** Mr Speaker, you will be well aware of the criticism that you hear from time to time in the media that this House does not debate serious issues. I think that that criticism is sometimes fair. However, it could not be said

today that this very serious issue — described by a couple of Members as the biggest change in welfare legislation for a generation — is not being given serious care and attention by the Assembly.

I listened carefully, as, I am sure, did everybody, to the Minister's opening statement, and I took a couple of things from it. In the first instance, it is very clear that there are some positive principles in the Welfare Reform Bill. Certainly, there is a lot wrong with it, and I will come to that in a minute. However, in the cloud of the debate, you sometimes forget that there are positive principles, which the Minister highlighted in his contribution, such as getting people back into work and ending generations of unemployment. We know all about that in Northern Ireland. There are communities in Northern Ireland in which there are people who have not worked, and their families have not seen work for generations. That is not a good thing. We should not take any pride in having the worst record of economic activity in the United Kingdom. That is not something that we want to see continuing in Northern Ireland. In fact, that is something that we are trying to tackle, and we have agreed as a House on an economic strategy and on a Programme for Government that is deliberately tackling those problems and wants to get people away from being on welfare and into work. That is something that I hope that we are all united on.

The principle of giving people clearer information about what benefits they will remain on and what they will receive if they go into work versus what they would be in receipt of if they were purely on benefits is a sensible one. How many times have any of us heard from people in our constituencies who have said, "There's a job there for me, but if I take it, I lose this benefit and that benefit, and I will actually be worse off." We have all seen cases like that. We all know of people who have been in those circumstances. That is not good. Any principle in the Bill that will change that and make it clearer for people so that they know what benefits they will receive when they go into work is a good thing, and that should be welcomed and supported by the House.

We all know that making work pay is a good thing. There is a dignity in work. Even Mickey Brady, in moving his reasoned — I have to be careful not to call it reasonable — amendment talked about work being the best route out of poverty. It is not just for the fun of it or for a laugh that we have a target in the Programme for Government of creating 25,000 jobs; it is because we all agree and appreciate that getting people who are out of work into work is

the best way out of poverty. As other Members have said, far too many people in Northern Ireland are caught in poverty for generations. Getting them into employment may be difficult in the current economic circumstances. It may be difficult because of the lack of skills and the attitude that they have towards work, but it is the right thing to do nonetheless.

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Hamilton:** Yes.

**Mr Poots:** On his point about getting people back into work, does the Member agree with me that almost all the reports that have been done recognise that children who are brought up in homes in which you have generational unemployment are much more likely to have suicidal tendencies in their teenage years?

They have poorer educational and health outcomes. In general, the families of people who are in employment have better outcomes. Should we not be putting more of our efforts into bolstering the working poor and ensuring that they have higher levels of income? That crosses a broad field in Northern Ireland, and we really need to apply ourselves to that course of work.

**6.30 pm**

**Mr Hamilton:** I agree entirely with the Member. Given the position that he holds, he will know more acutely than some of the rest of us that employment is good not only because it puts money in people's pockets and gives them independence but because it has positive social impacts. A raft of research shows that those who are out of work have poorer health outcomes and higher incidences of psychological disorders. As the Member said, there is an increased incidence of suicide in those who are unemployed, and, concerningly, psychiatric disorders in children are more common in households in which nobody is in work. It is not merely a question of getting people into work simply for the sake of it so that they have more money in their pockets. If more people are in work and those who have been out of work generationally can be encouraged to get into the workplace, we will all see the benefits of that here in Northern Ireland, socially and economically.

The Bill contains principles that everyone could agree on, and there is some unity on those. Indeed, Mr Maskey said that he supports the principle that work should always pay, and I share some of Mr Brady's sentiments. There is

also unity in the House that we do not support every aspect of the Bill. Lots of things about the Bill are not positive. It is not the Bill that many of us would have designed had we had a blank sheet of paper to do so. It is not the Bill that would have come out of such a discussion. If the legislation had been entirely in the domain of the Assembly, it is not the Bill that we would have drafted. That is why DUP colleagues, along with others who attend Westminster — where they should be, representing the people who vote for them — voted against some of the worst aspects of the Bill.

**Mr McDevitt:** I thank Mr Hamilton for giving way. He is right to point out that the DUP had been consistent in its opposition to this type of legislation up to this point. Why are we not having a serious debate tonight about triggering the provision under Standing Order 35? That provision would strengthen the Minister's hand because it would allow a dedicated piece of work to be done by the House, over a 30-day period, specifically on the equality and human rights implications of the Bill. Surely that would make it easier for the Minister to go back and point out specifically not only where the Bill fails to meet the needs of the people of this region but where it potentially goes against the equality legislation by which we are all bound in this region.

**Mr Hamilton:** I was going to come to that very point at a later stage in my contribution. There are many things about the SDLP that I find bewildering and bizarre, but I cannot quite get my head around why its preferred tactic tonight is, instead of letting the Bill move through Second Stage into Committee Stage, to move it to another Committee. That seems bizarre to me. The SDLP does not want to put the Bill in Committee; it wants to put it in another Committee. There is ample time, and I have heard members of the Social Development Committee, including the Chairman, say that the Committee has cleared its diary and agreed to meet for three days a week — more if necessary. I am sure that members were overjoyed to hear that. The Committee has ample time to debate all the issues that the Member mentioned — all the issues that, we are all agreed, are imperfect — and, indeed, anything else that comes out of the consultation in which they will engage. Members cannot say that they do not want the Bill to go to a Committee that has cleared its diary and said that it will work three days a week to consider all the issues. The Committee is still not sure about all the issues that will be discussed, because it still has to go out to consultation with the public, so a raft of other issues could be raised that the Committee has not thought of or

looked at previously. There is ample time for the Committee to discuss all the Member's issues.

**Mr McDevitt:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Hamilton:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mr McDevitt:** I appreciate it, because this is an important point. The job of a Statutory Committee of this Assembly is to consider a Bill as presented, clause by clause. The provision under Standing Order 35 is separate; it is to consider whether the Bill meets the requirements of the equality legislation and the equality and human rights standards that are somewhat unique to this jurisdiction. I know that Mr Hamilton understands that they are two different things, and it is for that reason that I still do not understand why, if his party is so confident that this is a competent Bill according to equality and human rights standards, it would not allow it to be put to a legitimate test by an appropriate organ in this House.

**Mr Hamilton:** There is no debate with an individual who thinks that the Committee, which is constituted by the Assembly to scrutinise the Bill line by line, cannot also look at the issues that the Member has raised. The Member's party is represented on the Committee — *[Interruption.]* I am not sure; I think that one of them has disappeared.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member must be heard.

**Mr Hamilton:** Mr Durkan, who scurried off after his contribution, probably rightly so, is, I understand, a member of that Committee. Is he not competent to raise those issues? There is a terrible lack of faith — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber.

**Mr Hamilton:** There is a terrible lack of faith from the Member in his own colleague, although after his colleague's contribution, perhaps it is a lack of faith that is well justified.

If the Member and his party have concerns of the nature or variety that he raises, the Committee of this Assembly, which is statutorily empowered to look at all the issues around the Bill and other issues that will be raised by stakeholders when they submit evidence to the Committee's consultation, is the place to do that. It has cleared its diary and is able to do that. It is more than capable of doing that.

I will go back to the point that I was making before I was interrupted. DUP Members of Parliament, along with others, were in Westminster, where they rightly should have been, to represent the people who put them there in the first place, and they opposed the worst bits of this Bill. They opposed negative impacts on the most vulnerable in society —

**Mr McCartney:** To no avail.

**Mr Hamilton:** To no avail, the Member says.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber.

**Mr Hamilton:** I am not going to dispute the parliamentary arithmetic of the House of Commons, but — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Allow the Member to continue.

**Mr Hamilton:** Sinn Féin obviously has a policy of not going to Westminster. It fails every time to represent —

**Mr Humphrey:** At the moment.

**Mr Hamilton:** At the moment; that is right. Plenty of things have changed with Sinn Féin down through the years; it is probably only a matter of time. It fails each and every time to represent its people, but now that the Bill has come here, it is doing a lot of complaining. Sinn Féin does not do anything where it actually matters, which is in the House of Commons, on pieces of welfare legislation.

Indeed, changes were made, and the benefit cap is a prime example of that. With pressure that was put on during Committee Stage at Westminster, the benefit cap now excludes a lot of people on disability and pensioner benefits as well. That was something that the Government did not want initially, but because pressure was put on at Westminster, those people were excluded from the benefit cap. I cannot deny the parliamentary arithmetic of the House of Commons, but impacts and changes can be made.

If the Member does not want to represent his people, that is fine; that is his mandate and his choice not to do that. Nonetheless, he and his party are failing —

**Mr McCartney:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Hamilton:** Hold on a second. His party is, nonetheless, failing the people who vote for it to represent them on issues like this.

**Mr McCartney:** Will the Member outline what other changes his party wanted introduced at Westminster that are now contained in the Bill that is in front of us?

**Mr Hamilton:** The Member knows the answer to the question. Colleagues and others — not from the Member's party — opposed changes, or, rather, supported amendments that came from the House of Lords, where the Government were defeated, on disability benefits or changes that affected disabled people and people suffering from cancer. Sadly, none of those amendments made it into the Bill, but that does not take away from the fact that the Member's constituents voted — I am pointing at the Member, but, of course, he is not a Member of Parliament. However, colleagues of his who were elected to represent some of the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland were not there at the Houses of Parliament to make any arguments in favour of those people at all. They let down their people each and every time and they offer no representation where it is required. We have the opposition to those points at Westminster. However, the Minister also highlighted three other issues: direct payments, split payments and frequency of payments. It is interesting that there has been a commonality among all contributors to the debate so far that those are key problems with the legislation. They are not legislative changes but administrative or operational issues contained in the Bill. It is not legislative flexibility but operational flexibility, and that is permitted.

We have operational flexibility. In fact, the former Social Development Minister highlighted that there is flexibility on childcare. It is recognised at Westminster that our childcare system in Northern Ireland is not as sophisticated as that on the mainland. We have operational flexibility to take that into account. A consensus and commonality of position across all parties has been demonstrated here tonight and also in the Executive subgroup on welfare reform. Indeed, those issues are the subject of ongoing efforts by the Social Development Minister to get further concessions from the Government.

There are a lot of problems with the Bill. However, as much as we dislike those problems, our room for manoeuvre is severely limited by the principle of parity. The principle of parity is paramount. A lot of Members who stood up tonight and encouraged us to breach

parity are zealots of the Belfast Agreement. Yet, section 87 of the 1998 Act that gave effect to the Belfast Agreement states that we must have:

*"single systems of social security, child support and pensions".*

Those Members, who are still zealots of the Belfast Agreement to this day, even after people have rejected it, want to breach a key principle of that Agreement; that is a slightly odd position. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Hamilton:** Let me go on. We can breach parity if we wish, but it is not a pain-free or cost-free option. There would be consequences of breaching parity, if we were to go down that very foolish route. It is not that we cannot breach parity. We can breach parity, but we simply cannot afford to breach parity. Therefore, we should not breach parity.

There are serious consequences of not passing the Bill today. The first is the cost to the Northern Ireland Budget. If we failed to legislate for it, around £220 million would be lost to the Northern Ireland Budget in the remainder of this Budget period. We would also lose out on the £150 million of additional money that, as the Minister outlined, we would receive from changes to universal credit. However, first and foremost, we would lose over £200 million from our Budget in Northern Ireland at a time when we need it most. We do not have £200 million to fritter away by failing to maintain parity on social security. We do not have that money lying around, or down the back of a sofa in Stormont Castle, in DFP or wherever, just to give it back. We do not have it.

The situation will get worse, because the gap will increase the further you go on. If we fail to pass this legislation, the impact in the next Budget period will be not £200 million but £1 billion. This is at a time when, as we heard from the Tory conference in Birmingham this week, they are looking at cutting budgets even more and continuing to follow a path of austerity. If people think that we can play fast and loose with £1 billion as if it does not matter, quite frankly, they need their heads seen to.

**Mr Ross:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Hamilton:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mr Ross:** Does the Member agree that the position of the nationalist parties is actually even worse than that? If we were to follow their ideas of devolving a whole range of taxation powers to the Assembly and reducing fuel duty, the cost to public spending in Northern Ireland would be even bigger and the effect on the most vulnerable even greater.

**Mr Hamilton:** It is hard to envisage a situation that would be worse than taking a further £1 billion out of the Northern Ireland Budget over a Budget period, but the Member is right. If we were to follow some of the folly that is sometimes promulgated here by nationalist parties, the public spending situation in Northern Ireland would be far, far worse. The impact on service delivery here would be £200 million in the first instance and £1 billion in a future Budget period. The health service delivered by the Health Minister and the education service delivered by the Education Minister would be decimated by cuts like that.

**6.45 pm**

Secondly, it has been mentioned by the Minister and by Mr Copeland and others that if we do not pass this legislation, the social fund will stop. Even its very name suggests what the social fund does: it helps those worst off in society with their urgent needs, which, in many cases, come into their lives unexpectedly. There have been 250,000 cases annually in Northern Ireland, with tens of thousands of people going to the social fund to get the help that they urgently need. In the past year, some £82 million has been dispensed to people via the social fund. If the Bill is not passed, that money will simply stop dead. At a time when people are preaching about protecting the vulnerable, how is stopping the social fund protecting the vulnerable? It would do quite the contrary. We should maintain a system that supports the most vulnerable people in society.

The third serious consequence has also been mentioned by others. It is the impact on jobs. Around 1,500 people are employed in Northern Ireland on contracts where they administer benefits on behalf of people in England. Northern Ireland has the contract not only because of the competitiveness and skill of the people who do the jobs but because they are administering exactly the same benefits system as there is in England, Wales and Scotland. If they were not operating the same system, it would be unlikely that they would be able to continue to do that work. I am sure that there are countless Tory MPs in England who would be happy to stand up and say that because

staff in Northern Ireland are not under the same system that they are administering, the jobs should be brought to their constituencies in whatever shire in England where there are people who are out of work and hard pressed.

We would not only be hitting services by taking £200 million now, and £1 billion later, from the block grant, harming vulnerable people as a result, and dispensing with the social fund, we would be potentially putting 1,500 people out of work and creating more vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. People are preaching to us that we should be protecting vulnerable people in Northern Ireland, but deferral and defeat of the legislation would create more vulnerable people in Northern Ireland and harm those who are already vulnerable. That is not something that any of us on this side of the House wants to see happening.

The question has to be asked: for what? Is it so that Sinn Féin Members can stand up and grandstand and say that they have opposed this terrible, awful legislation and pretend that they are the tough guys? That is all it is. It is a sham fight. Some of us on this side of the House have seen plenty of sham fights and know a sham fight when we see one. That is what it is.

This has been debated for months. A common view on areas of concern has been agreed. It was agreed in the Executive that the Bill come to the Second Stage. When Sinn Féin Ministers in the Executive agreed for the Bill to be published and introduced by the Minister, what did they think was happening when it appeared in their pigeon holes on the second floor? Did they not think that it would come to this stage in the House? What were they agreeing to and accepting at that time? What has changed in a matter of weeks, other than a decision to put up some sort of great show that they are the great opponents of welfare reform and the great protectors of the vulnerable? In fact, what they are doing will do anything but protect the vulnerable. Some of us would be forgiven for thinking that we are seeing a Southern-driven agenda. There is a bearded gentleman who used to frequent these parts, albeit infrequently, who is sitting in the —

**Mr Spratt:** Francie.

**Mr Hamilton:** It is not Francie. He is sitting in the Dáil, castigating Fine Gael and Labour for implementing austerity measures, tax cuts and cuts to welfare in the Irish Republic. We can now get RTÉ up here and watch the news programmes. You have probably had it in your

own house for ever, Mr Speaker, in the north-west. We can see —

**Mr Brady:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Hamilton:** Hold on a second. We can see the programmes in which Sinn Féin members debate these issues and are lambasted by people from Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Labour and everywhere else because, while they are opposing cuts in the South, they are implementing Tory cuts in the North.

**Mr Brady:** I thank the Member for giving way. If the Member cares to read the Hansard report from June 2007, when his colleague Mr Campbell was Chair of the Committee for Social Development, he will find that Sinn Féin was opposing the initial stages of welfare reform then. We were not grandstanding then, and we are not grandstanding now. Do not try to divert the issue, please.

**Mr Hamilton:** If you are not grandstanding now and you have been consistent on this issue since 2007, why did you not pull a stunt like this back then? Welfare reform Bills have gone through this House since then and you never did anything like this. Forgive us for thinking that you are now simply grandstanding and putting up a straw man.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member should speak through the Chair.

**Mr Hamilton:** Sorry, Mr Speaker. I got carried away.

The Member needs to answer the question, and I will let him come in again if he can explain himself. He castigated the work capability assessments brought in through the previous Welfare Reform Bill introduced by Mr Attwood when he was Minister for Social Development. You castigated that, yet you did not do anything like this about that Bill and you let it glide on through. You did not put up any sham fight against that Bill and did not do anything for the optics. There is no explanation for that other than that you are grandstanding now.

The truth is that it is a Southern-driven agenda from Sinn Féin. It is trying to mask and paint over the problems it has in doing one thing in the Irish Republic and another in Northern Ireland. The truth is that they secretly want us to pass the Bill this evening and want it to move through Second Stage. In fact, that is probably not even a secret. It is pretty transparent that they want that because, if the Bill is so terrible and awful and the worst thing ever, and they

really want to stop it this evening, they can stop it dead right now. They can get 30 signatures. There are some signatures from Members from other parties, I understand, and you can muster a few yourselves, I am sure. They can put a petition of concern into your office, Mr Speaker, and kill the Bill dead, right now, but that is not what they have done, because they are grandstanding against the Bill. It is sham fight.

They are being careless and reckless with vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. They are playing Russian roulette with some of the most vulnerable people in our society by proposing that we take a risk and delay this. Mr Speaker, you made it very clear, as the Minister said, that time is running out. Indeed, time has run out. Sinn Féin contributed to the delay that got us to this position. It entirely created the delay, and that is why we are so late in coming to this and why we have run out of time. You have made it clear, Mr Speaker, that it is not simply a matter of putting it back a week or a fortnight. In effect, if we defer it this evening, the Bill will be killed. I presume, too, that if we were to defer it for a week or a couple of weeks, DSD will not be in a position to start to plan for things because it simply does not know what the Bill will eventually be. It does not have a clue what the ultimate legislation will be and so any planning would be a waste of money and time. Some of us are incredibly sceptical about the reasons that have been put forward by Sinn Féin for its opposition to this. If it were entirely credible, it would be doing something else.

I will turn to other contributions. I have already dealt with the SDLP and its dwindling numbers.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Quality, not quantity.

**Mr Hamilton:** I shall let others judge. It is difficult to stomach some of the criticism and the encouragement being offered to us to breach parity from a party that held DSD for the previous four years and introduced lots of welfare reforms. In fact, it did not just introduce welfare reform but introduced some of the hardest-hitting welfare reforms, such as cutting mortgage rate relief and the aforementioned moving of people from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance. Furthermore, people who should never be failing the work capability assessments are failing them, and any of us who are doing work in our constituencies see caseloads of an increase in appeals and in the number of people who should never be turned down getting turned down. That all came through on the watch of an SDLP Minister for Social Development, yet it now lectures a DUP one for doing exactly what it did.

**Mr Poots:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Hamilton:** Yes.

**Mr Poots:** I know that the SDLP was once very keen on DSD. Was it not the case that it had the choice of DSD and chose DOE because it was running away from the very issue that we are talking about today? It was not prepared to do welfare reform, and it failed to make any significant changes when it was doing welfare reform.

**Mr Hamilton:** Yes. My colleague Mr Bell mentioned Twitter earlier, and I remember watching that evening as parties selected Departments. After listening to the SDLP preaching time and time again about welfare reform, I thought that it would surely pick DSD when its turn came. What did the SDLP take? It copped out and took DOE.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I am pleased that the Member will give way. Will he acknowledge that when SDLP Members were Ministers for Social Development, they set precedents for parity differentials? As for picking DOE, perhaps that was because we had to clear up the mess left by previous Ministers in some Departments.

**Mr Hamilton:** With the SDLP's current level of electoral success, it will be a long time before it cleans up anybody's mess in any Department. The Member talked about the operational flexibilities that her Ministers were able to put into Bills. It will be interesting to hear the long list of those flexibilities. Maybe she will have an opportunity to list them later.

The point is that this is not the end of the Bill. I heard a couple of Members — indeed, even an SDLP contributor — say that we were agreeing the Bill here this evening. This evening is not the end of the Bill. There is time for those flexibilities to be put into the Bill, if that is where they need to be, and that is what the Minister is working on with his counterparts in DWP.

I turn to the Ulster Unionist Party. After witnessing the situation last night, with one UUP Member saying that they were in favour of an amendment, the next to speak saying that they were not sure and the party eventually voting against it, we are never entirely sure what its position is. However, I think that I welcome the UUP's opposition, at least to the reasoned amendment, although I have the same difficulty with that as with stomaching what the SDLP said about what its Ministers had done in the past, given that they introduced some of the worst welfare reforms that we have



seen over the past number of years. It is difficult to listen to anybody from the Ulster Unionist Party talk about a "rotten deal".

Mr Copeland said that the Bill had been drafted with "little compassion" only minutes after saying that Iain Duncan Smith was a man of compassion. As he made those statements, and as he branded it a rotten deal, he was surrounded by no fewer than five colleagues who ran in the 2010 general election on a Tory manifesto. Their manifesto was the Tory manifesto. Where does the Member's party think that the welfare reforms in the Bill came from? Did they drop from the sky? No, their genesis was the Tory Party manifesto that was shared by the Ulster Unionist Party in 2010. If any of the five sitting round him now had been elected — if people had not seen sense and decided not to vote for them — they would have been whipped in the House of Commons in Westminster to vote for the very Welfare Reform Bill that is before us now and which the Member called rotten. That is the truth of it, Michael. You know that that is the case.

**Mr Copeland:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Hamilton:** I will give way. I will let you in.

**Mr Copeland:** I fully accept that, and I listened to what you said. However, there are a good number of people in the Chamber now, as there have been in the past, whose past links are a good deal more noxious than that affair.  
*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Allow the Member to continue. Order.

**Mr Hamilton:** Mr Speaker, I have been had. I hereby declare my former membership of the Ulster Unionist Party. *[Laughter.]* I honestly do not doubt the Member's sincerity, and he knows that. However, he speaks about the cases of people whom he sees, I see, and other Members see. These are people who are already affected, and will continue to be affected, by welfare legislation. He asked whether another way could be found, but he asked that only this evening. A better time to have asked those questions was back in 2010 when his party and the five colleagues sitting round him were entering into an electoral pact with the Conservative Party at Westminster.

There are lectures that we can take and, sometimes, accept, but that is not one, Mr Copeland, that we can take here this evening.

*(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)*

Let us not have any more of this tonight, from those who are putting forward spurious arguments. We are not agreeing the Bill this evening. The passage of the Second Stage does not agree the Bill. Let it go to the Committee, where it should go, where the issues that have been raised this evening and the issues that will be raised with the Committee when it goes into its consultation can be debated and where amendments can be suggested, discussed and potentially agreed, if needs be. The consequences of not proceeding are far, far, far, far, far too grave for us to contemplate. Let the Bill get through its Second Stage, warts and all, into the Committee, where members of the Committee can work away at it and make the amendments that are required, if needs be, and the Minister can negotiate those with his counterparts in DWP.

**7.00 pm**

**Mr Campbell:** In rising to speak in the debate, I think that it is accurate to say that the one thing that unites Members across the Floor is that all of us accept that there are no easy choices. Anyone who does not accept that is living in a fool's paradise. There are no easy choices. If each of us individually and each of our parties collectively are doing the job we ought to be doing or even half doing the job we ought to be doing in our constituencies, we will have people coming into our offices, every day of every week, who are in need of assistance and help and who are claimants or attempting to be claimants of various entitlements because of the economic straits we find ourselves in. As all of us work to represent those people, we come to the point that we have arrived at today. Since there are no easy solutions, we have the exceptionally difficult position that we are in this evening.

As has been pointed out by a range of Members, there are good parts and, like the curate's egg, not so good parts in the Welfare Reform Bill. Most people — not all — accept that Iain Duncan Smith is manfully trying to come to terms with a burgeoning welfare bill that the Conservative Government want to curtail. The difficulty that we all have — hopefully, we all accept this — is that there is a constraint in respect of where the wriggle room that the Assembly has is. The Minister referred to the flexibility that he has been trying to and continues to try to extract from the Whitehall Minister. Because there is a restriction in that wriggle room, we know roughly where the benefits will lie if he is successful. He has outlined several times today, on radio and in the Chamber, that he is meeting the Minister, yet

again, this day week in order to pursue that issue further.

The problem is that, if we do not proceed to the next stage in this legislation, we will face a number of problems that the communities that we seek to represent will have to face. We can use a fig leaf or a pretence of a fight and an argument and a debate to say to those people, "This is what we are doing on your behalf". However, as has been outlined by a number of Members, the cold, hard reality is that, in the first case, the block grant will suffer initially to the tune of £220 million. That is the first tranche of the suffering that all our constituents will have to face as we attempt to pick up the pieces for the price being paid for our refusing to move today. No one has said where they expect to make those £220 million savings. As the Member for Strangford Mr Hamilton outlined, £220 million is just the start, because we then escalate to £1 billion. Just as no one was brave or, perhaps, foolish enough to explain where the £220 million savings were to be made, no one would even dream of saying where they were going to get £1 billion of savings from.

Then we move beyond the initial £220 million and come to the fact that there are approximately 1,500 people — our constituents — employed in administering welfare benefits across the UK. Just over 1,300 of those people are in the greater Belfast area, and almost 200 are in the Londonderry area. Which of our MLAs, in whatever party, will go to those 1,500 people and say, "Because I voted in a particular way, your job is on the line"? I have done a little research into where those 1,500 people come from. They come from areas of very high unemployment. If they become unemployed, those areas will become areas of even higher unemployment, because we will have just voted in a particular way. Who will explain to those people, "I have put your job on the line because I voted in a particular way on an issue that we have very little wriggle room with — very, very little wriggle room"? In addition to the £220 million that will go to £1 billion and in addition to the 1,500 jobs that could be at stake, we have the issue of — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Campbell:** We have the issue of the £80 million social fund. At lunchtime today, as the debate was about to get under way, I heard on the radio a person from the social and voluntary sector who deals with claimants on an hourly and daily basis. They were not going to get into whether it was right or wrong to proceed with the Bill, but they did say this: the social fund is

the lifeblood of thousands of people in Northern Ireland. What will happen if we vote to stop the Bill in its tracks tonight? That £80 million lifeblood will be cut off. Cut off. Let us get this on the nail so that people know exactly what they are doing when they vote. We have a threefold attack — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I ask that we have one Member speaking at a time and that all comments go through the Chair, please.

**Mr Campbell:** We have a threefold attack on the vulnerable in our society. If we go in the direction that the parties on the opposite Benches want us to, there will be a £220 million initial cut in the block grant and 1,500 potential job losses among our constituents who come from areas with many socio-economic problems. We will have to tell them that they face the dole queue, and we will have to tell the people who depend on the £80 million social fund as a lifeblood that that lifeblood has just been disconnected. That is the threefold attack on vulnerable people that the parties on the opposite Benches have to address.

Unfortunately, we had some comments today on how people voted in the past. Some were accurate, and some were less than accurate. I noticed that, in his contribution towards the beginning of the debate, the Deputy Chairman of the Social Development Committee, Mr Brady, commended the DUP for voting in the House of Commons earlier in the year against the greater excesses of welfare reform. Unfortunately, at the time, when we did so, he did not commend us. I have a quotation from the 'Belfast Telegraph' in which the DUP said that it did not think it was fair and reasonable to penalise cancer patients, the disabled or children. We also criticised the lack of time given to discuss the changes in welfare reform. Sinn Féin's party spokesman on benefit reform, Mickey Brady, said that the DUP would be better fighting to protect and enhance those who are most vulnerable in our society, after we had voted to do just that in the House of Commons, while his Members absented themselves from the vote. His Members could have come to the House of Commons and spoken and voted in favour of the most vulnerable, but they chose not to. Then the spokesperson on welfare reform, who commends us today, attacked us when we voted in favour of the most vulnerable in society. There is a cue here for people to get real.

As the Minister has said several times on radio and in the Chamber, we have reached the end of the road. People can use fig leaves. People

used fig leaves in the past, but they did not work. We have reached the end of the road, and it is time to man up. It is time to face the real picture. If people want to vote in a way that will hurt the people whom they say they represent, they have to own up to those consequences. The consequences are here; they are stark, and they are real. The people whom we say we represent will suffer if we do not take the steps that we have to take tonight for the lesser of two evils.

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the reasoned amendment. It is clear, it is logical, and it is necessary. Many people in our society are hurting. They are living below the poverty line and struggling to survive on very modest incomes, and many of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society are women. I mo óráid inniu ba mhaith liom díriú ar inscne agus ar an tionchur dí-réireach a bheadh ag na laghduithe seo ar mhná. In my contribution, I will focus on gender and the disproportionate impact that the cuts would have on women. Let us look at a few statistics: women comprise 53% of benefit recipients in the North of Ireland, yet they are more likely to work part-time, they are on lower wages and they rely more on tax credits, which make up a larger share of their income.

In a recent editorial in 'The Observer', it was claimed that one fifth of female wages consists of benefits and tax credits to compensate for low wages, while benefits make up only one tenth of male wages. Some people might want to talk about manning up. I want to talk about the need to woman up. Women are more likely to suffer violence in the home, and, in many cases, are forced to leave the family home and seek alternative accommodation.

In 1995, I attended the UN conference on women in Beijing. I, along with thousands of women from all over the world, from Governments and non-governmental organisations, debated, discussed and agreed targets to deal with poverty, inequality, women's rights and how Governments should respond. Governments signed up to that.

Alex Maskey, the Cathaoirleach — the Chairperson of the Committee — talked eloquently about the way in which women were treated in the past. Those days are gone, and gone for ever. Women fought hard for equality, along with many of our progressive male comrades, and women will continue to fight hard for equality. We will not allow backward steps. We will not allow inequality, and we certainly will not allow people to diminish women's rights.

Cad é freagra na dTóraithe? Níl siad seachtain fhliuch i gcumhacht ach tá siad ag iarraidh moltaí a bhrú isteach — ar scáth leasuithe — atá ag cur in éadan na n-athruithe i dTiomantais Beijing. What is the Tory Party response in Britain? It is hardly in government a wet week, and, under the guise of reform, it is trying to railroad through proposals that fly in the face of the changes and commitments in Beijing. No one should be under any illusion about the agenda that is at play here, and no one should be under any illusion about what women will or will not accept. The Tory Party is trying to pit workers against those who are on benefit and conveniently ignore that many of those who are working are so badly paid that, if they did not receive benefits, they would be well below the poverty line. We heard the comments about childcare and about draconian, punitive measures. The Tories are trying to impose their outdated definition of a family and their way of looking at the world through the prism of a male head of a household.

#### 7.15 pm

The Tories are attempting to punish women for having more than one child by threatening to cut their benefits if they have a second child. They talk about taxpayers having to pay so-called enormous amounts while such people sit on their couches etc, etc. We have heard it all before. However, they conveniently forget that they lobby and legislate for private education for their children — note the plural; there are no restrictions on the number of children they have — for tax breaks and for bonuses, you name it.

Tiomáineann siad thart ina ngluaisteáin gháifeacha, téann siad ar laetha saoire thar lear, cuireann siad a gcuid páistí go scoileanna príobháideacha, téann siad go hospidéal phíobháideacha nuair a bhuaileann tinneas iad, agus saothraíonn siad na múrtha airgid.

They drive around in their lovely cars, go on wonderful foreign holidays, educate their children in so-called public schools, have access to private healthcare when they get sick and earn huge amounts of money. They would not last one day as a single parent without proper childcare living in substandard housing on a modest income. They do not even realise that rearing children is work. Any woman or good father will tell you the work involved in rearing a child. That is very important work, and it needs to be acknowledged as work. One of the things that I find most offensive is the fact that they talk about the children of other people, especially those on benefits, only in terms of how much they cost them in taxes. They do

that for other people's children but not their own.

Glacann sé sráidbhaile le leanbh a thógáil — is iad ár dtodhchaí iad ár leanaí, agus ní foláir don stát gach leanbh a chothú, a oiliúint agus a chosaint; agus ní foláir don stát a chinntiú go bhfuil tacú ag gach leanbh a lán-chumas a bhaint amach. Ní hé sochair leasa shóisialaigh agus creidmheasanna cánach a ghearradh an dóigh le sin a dhéanamh.

It takes a village to rear a child. Children are our future, so the state must support, nurture, safeguard and protect them as well as ensuring that every child has the opportunity to reach their potential. Cutting benefits and tax credits is not the way to do that.

**Mr Bell:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Ruane:** No. The Member had plenty of time to speak. We heard him speaking loads of times today.

The question I have for the Tories is this: where are the jobs that they talk about? There are no jobs because of their policies in this part of Ireland over many years. They have plenty of money to pour into the military and into wars all over the world, but they do not have money for the most vulnerable. The question for us is this: do we as an Assembly blindly follow them, or do we make laws that are good for here? I say that we make laws that are good for here.

The Bill proposes that a single payment to cover everyone's entitlement in a family go to one nominated person in the household. That sounds like a simpler and administratively cheaper way, but it is generally agreed that it represents a transfer from purse to wallet, with control of the family budget passing mostly to men. As Alex Maskey said, some of his best friends are men, but it is women, when they get money in their hand, who are much more likely to spend it on important things for themselves and their children. It is estimated that, in 80% of cases, universal credit will be paid to the male partner. What does that do for women's equality? That is in sharp contrast to the current position whereby 80% of tax credits are typically paid to the main carer who, in 80% of cases, is the mother.

**Mr Humphrey:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Ruane:** No. The Member had plenty of time to speak. We have listened patiently to everybody.

This reverses progressive social policy that has specifically sought to put money into the hands of women and, ultimately, children. Research shows that money paid directly to women results in greater benefit to children and a better standard of living in the home. A single household payment will lead to greater financial dependency for women in the family. Women's economic autonomy is fundamental to equality. It is in everyone's interest — men, women and children — that women are equal in our society. While reducing women's status in the family, greater financial dependency increases the risk of domestic violence. Gender difference in the distribution of money in a household matters. Research shows that money going to women is targeted more effectively, particularly in meeting children's needs. Section 75 of the NI Act specifically requires social policy to mitigate any adverse impact on named groups, including women and children. I welcome the comments by the Chairperson of the Committee, Alex Maskey, that he and his Committee will scrutinise the Bill in relation to equality and human rights and that there will be a role for the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission.

The British Government have said that splitting payments between a couple is compatible with the universal credit technology. Lord Freud, in Hansard on 23 January 2012, said:

*"if we find that we need to make more splits than anticipated the computer system will allow us to do that. We are designing that in."*

So, why can we not do it? The British Government recognise that:

*"particularly in low-income households ... men sometimes benefit at the expense of women from shared household income".*

That is a quote from Hansard on 14 March 2011, column 126. On Report in the House of Lords on 23 January 2012, the Minister made it clear that the British Government were prepared to consider expanding choice in terms of couples splitting payments by percentages rather than dividing universal credit into its elements. So, 50:50 is more of a possibility than the child element being paid to the main carer. The Minister confirmed that the technology did not prevent that, so why can we not have it?

Our society has a choice. We can move forward on the basis of the survival of the fittest, dog eat dog and a mé féin attitude, or we can ensure that we have an inclusive society and

look after our elderly, sick and vulnerable. We should ensure that we have supports in place to help people during difficult times in their life and that our system provides them with a fair chance, educational opportunities and a way out of the poverty trap. Demonising single parents and those on benefits or tax credits, which is what the Bill would do, is not the way to go. Pitting low-paid workers against the unemployed is not the way to go. Our Bill needs to reflect the needs of society. The Tory agenda is not the way to go. Parties in this House should not follow the Tory agenda willy-nilly.

Sinn Féin wants to work constructively with all parties. We want unity because Sinn Féin has confidence in our powers as negotiators. We understand that all of us together can bring about changes.

**Mr Humphrey:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Ruane:** No, the Member has plenty of time to talk. I have listened carefully. The reality is that a subcommittee was established, there were major discussions, yet the Bill here tonight is the same Bill with no revisions. The Bill has not been revised. The points that were made have not been taken on board. We have heard all sorts of figures thrown out: £400 million, £200 million, £1 billion. My God, if we had a penny for every time we hear all that.

Maybe a good starting point, if people really want to save money, is to stop double-jobbing. They could attend one Parliament. If people are really serious about saving the Exchequer and the Executive money, maybe we should stop bonuses for our senior civil servants, senior police and all the rest. Yet, at the Committees and the Policing Board that I am on, I see other parties not supporting our motions to stop all those payments.

Let us get real about this. Yes, there are costs to implementing and bringing about changes. Equally, there are costs if we accept willy-nilly Tory Party policies. I will tell you how there are. My colleagues said it; Mickey Brady and Alex Maskey said it. How many people will be homeless because of this? How many single parents will be in very difficult circumstances because of this? I will tell you. There is not proper childcare in this part of Ireland. We will be demonising single parents, and that is simply not acceptable. We need to make sure that our single parents have support in place and that we get them out of the poverty trap, not put them in deeper and deeper and deeper. That is what the Bill would do.

The Minister asked us to help him. All of us. We will help him. The best way to help the Minister is to defer the Bill and to bring about the changes that we need. The Minister said that we did not have time to go down that road. Yes, we do; yes, we can; and yes, we have to. If we do not, we will have a bad Bill. We will have a Bill that is not good for our people. We will have a Bill that will see many of our people spiralling into poverty.

Many people here talked about the parity arguments. I have heard the parity arguments; we all have. Do you know what is very interesting here? Parity is used when people do not want change, yet, the minute they want to change things or to do something because it suits them, suddenly parity does not matter.

**Lord Morrow:** Like what?

**Ms Ruane:** Like Winsor 1 and 2 and special priority payments, which the DUP voted for last week. *[Interruption.]* In the Policing Board; I am on the human resources committee. There have been loads of times. In England, Scotland and Wales, we do not have an 11-plus, transfer tests or academic selection, yet some parties want to break parity when they think that it suits them, but, in reality, it does not suit them.

What we need to do is make laws that are good for the people in this part of Ireland. Some people are trying to say that Sinn Féin is somehow not doing its job by making good laws and fighting for good laws in the South of Ireland. We make no apology for fighting for good laws, North and South, to protect the vulnerable.

We need to be responsible. We need to move away from scaremongering. One example of scaremongering is the social fund. My colleague Mickey Brady tells me that the social fund is going to go to local authorities in England, so we will have to legislate for it anyway here, yet some Members —

**Mr Hamilton:** Will you give way on that?

**Ms Ruane:** No, I will not give way. We have already heard, for an endless time, from some Members. What we need to do — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Ms Ruane:** We are capable of legislating for what we want here and to protect our citizens. We do not need to follow willy-nilly what happens across the water. Let us make the

best of it and work together. I support my colleague Alex Maskey, who said that we should work together and have confidence in our negotiating skills.

People asked why we did not present a petition of concern today. I will tell you why. We could have, and we did not. The reason why we did not is that we wanted to be responsible in this debate — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Ms Ruane:** We want to make sure that we get changes. We want to make sure that we work with the DUP, the UUP, the Alliance Party, the Greens and the SDLP. Together, in a powerful way, we can go to England and say to them that, in the North of Ireland, we will not accept this. In the South of Ireland, we will not accept cuts either. So, folks, in conclusion — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Ms Ruane:** You do not begin negotiations by saying that we have no wriggle room. A bad negotiator would do that. What you do is begin by saying, "This is what we want. This is what we expect. We will fight for our constituents, and we will ensure that we get the best deal for everyone in our society". Sinn Féin is ready to do that. We are ready to work with you all to do that. We have a very competent team who know this inside out. So, join the rest of us, and let us really make change and not be browbeaten by a Government in London.

The Scottish and Welsh voted against this. So let us do what is good for this part of Ireland. Go raibh míle maith agat. Thank you.

**7.30 pm**

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

My party welcomes the appearance of the Welfare Reform Bill in the Assembly and the opportunity to debate its shortcomings. We also welcome the proposed amendment, even if some of the proposers seem to be in opposition to the Ministers and the Executive.

Indeed, it is a wide-ranging Bill with huge implications for many in the North. In view of its detail, its heavy reliance on regulation is a concern, particularly given the short time frame before implementation and the seriousness of these reforms. There must be much more detail provided, as quickly as possible, on the

regulations. It will be important to ensure that proper time is given to scrutiny. The lack of detail around a number of the proposals in the Bill is very worrying, again, especially because of the tight turnaround. A number of these measures will take effect prior to and during the introduction of universal credit. As much information must be provided to elected Members as they need for scrutiny of the Bill.

Ms Ruane — and I have to be fair to her as she is not here the moment — said that figures are being bandied about all over the place. The one reality that we know is that cutbacks are trundling down the line at us. We are not going to see that people are £600 million better off. In fact, the established best estimates are that the benefit bill in Northern Ireland will reduce by approximately £400 million, with around £30 million of that reduction relating to housing benefit. For many households, that means that they will find it extremely difficult to discharge their financial obligations, with significant shortfalls in the amounts of money they receive to pay their rent. Discretionary housing payments will not meet all of these shortfalls and, as we know, they are time limited. We will come to that in more detail.

It is my duty to speak about the reforms as they relate principally to housing. Research has shown that secure households provide community benefit by increasing the ability of individuals to enter into, and remain in, the workforce.

I mentioned the absence of detail. It is worthwhile looking at our counterparts in Scotland to see how they have evaluated welfare reform to date. It is important that this is read into the record. These are researches carried out by the Scottish Government's communities analytical services division. Councils responded to a pro forma asking about the effects of housing benefit reform to date and any key actions taken to mitigate them. The researches include: housing benefit changes, Scottish impact assessment; welfare reform, under-occupancy provision; evidence of supply of shared accommodation; evidence of impact of increased shared accommodation; modelling impact of benefit changes on 2012 homelessness commitments, impact of the changes coming into force; modelling impact of benefit changes on those of working age under-occupying a socially-rented property; estimated availability of shared accommodation; assessing the impact of the benefit changes on councils' capacity — that is the local authority which has charge of housing — to meet the 2012 homelessness commitment; proportion of shared private rented accommodation occupied

by students; and a breakdown of individual constituencies' housing benefit claims related to passport benefits. I hear no mention of that detail today.

This Assembly, on a nod and a wink, is expected to charge this Bill through, accepting it as it is, without the full details and without full and rigorous scrutiny, before we even move to the equality implications, as my colleague Mr McDevitt outlined earlier. And this is happening in a society that has been charged with equality issues and equality problems since the inception of the state.

There are a number of issues. As I said, most of my remarks on the Bill relate to housing. Currently in Northern Ireland, housing benefit is paid directly to social landlords at the request of the claimant. Social landlords, in this instance, refers to any landlord who rents to tenants who are in receipt of housing benefit. We need to know how many people will be affected by the issues around the underoccupancy penalties. What is the average amount that tenants will have to make up in NIHE and housing association properties? Has an impact assessment been carried out to determine what the measure will mean and where it should be directed to mitigate and manage the changes? Are the levels of segregation in social housing in the North a factor in disproportionate impacts on tenants who will need to find smaller properties?

We will come to this in more detail, but there is a failure to exempt disabled people — I am talking especially about people with profound mental health issues. They are being forced into situations in which, financially, they will not be able to live in their home if it has two or three bedrooms and has extra capacity, à la Tory welfare reform. Forcing people with profound mental health issues into a situation in which they will be worse off financially will lead to increased anxieties. I do not mind saying that I have had a number of people on to me already; they are worried about where they are going to get the money from, because they have to rely on ESA, as it currently is, and a wee bit of a top-up from DLA. They are afraid because their one place of solace is their home. Many of them, because of the nature of their mental health problems, cannot live with other people; they prefer to have the solace of their home. The increase in anxiety that the financial stress brings, before we even move on to what is brought about by the changes in DLA, will, unfortunately, result in one thing: they will go back to institutional care. That is a very major issue that we must look at in the Assembly. Aside from the help and treatment of that

person as they move to recovery, this will not only inhibit recovery but will be retrograde for them as they seek to cope with their mental health issues.

Another issue that has been drawn my attention — the Department is aware of this — is where an access-to-children issue arises for parents. Perhaps the parents live in separate homes. People could, by the inevitability of the legislation, be forced into shared accommodation. Parental access for the mother and father will be crucial in that regard. The forced shared environment into which those children may come could contain people with criminal records. That creates major issues around childcare and around where the thrust of the Bill is going.

The SDLP supports the retention of the current system of payments to social landlords. It allows tenants who believe that they are financially capable to have the money paid directly to them, and those who worry about budgeting can have the safety net of having the payment paid directly to their landlord. Although housing benefit allows for that choice, the majority of social tenants who are housed by the Housing Executive are bound by the tenancy contract to have whatever rent that is being paid by housing benefit to be paid directly to the Housing Executive. The intention is to protect not only the wishes of tenants in Northern Ireland but the needs and sustainability of the likes of the Housing Executive, housing associations and, indeed, good private landlords. In the North, 75% of housing benefit payments are made directly to landlords; in England, 80% of housing benefit payments are paid to claimants. We operate very different systems.

During Question Time, the Minister said that the benefit of devolution is that we can look at things, pick out the good, learn from others and make sure that we do it right. This is certainly one case of, if it ain't broke, why fix it? If it can be enhanced, that is well and good. However, changing it to what is being proposed or suggested would create a plethora of problems. It would not only add to debt problems for tenants but cause arrears problems for the various social and private landlords.

According to the National Housing Federation, nine out of ten social housing residents want their housing benefit paid directly to landlords. The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations believes that it is only fair on claimants and on housing associations that claimants can elect to have housing benefit paid directly. The continuation of that system

would help to ease the huge fears across the housing sector that the reform has the potential to lead to an increase in homelessness. Among housing associations, homelessness charities and across the advice sector, worries are mounting on that issue in particular. Those organisations are anxious that the removal of the option to allow direct payments will lead to a massive increase in rent arrears, along with the associated increase in court actions, evictions and homelessness. That impact is a very real and imminent prospect and could lead to very serious consequences for society as a whole.

Welfare reform proposes an overhaul of housing benefit when we are struggling with a housing crisis in this region. The removal of almost guaranteed rents paid directly from the housing benefit stream will also hit how financial institutions and capital markets perceive the sector. Currently, reliable rental income assists housing associations in particular to borrow from financial institutions, thereby contributing to the development of more social rented homes at less cost to the Department and the taxpayer. It is well known and established that, because of the economic crisis that we are working our way through, the need for social renting is particularly, and unfortunately, on the increase, as more and more people lose their homes through lack of income.

I will turn now to the provision for a nominated person. Paying housing benefit directly to tenants as part of a single household benefit would not only cause budgeting problems for families but could lead to family breakdowns. Numerous issues surround the payment of universal credit, with, perhaps, the usual rent being paid by two members of the household directly to the landlord. Under universal credit as drafted, a non-responsible family member could be the individual in receipt of universal credit, and they may not make rental payments as well as others. There is also the issue of the nominated person having an addiction or health problem. All those concerns will directly impact on how rents could be paid, or not paid, as we, potentially, view these changes in isolation from one other. We cannot hide behind parity as an excuse; our hands are not particularly tied in this case.

The clauses on housing costs provide for regulations that specify the basis of the amount to be paid. However, the Bill does not provide for benefit entitlement to be related to actual rents in the local housing market. That means that there is the potential for a future disconnect between the housing cost calculated as part of universal credit and the actual rents. I suggest

that the Bill should include provision for annual reviews to ensure a strong correlation between the housing costs in universal credit and actual rents in Northern Ireland. That will ensure that, where necessary, housing cost provision can be amended. In particular, it will ensure that the lowest thirtieth percentile of proprietors in the private rented sector are affordable.

#### 7.45 pm

Some Members have dwelt to some degree on the fact that we have different circumstances in the North. Housing benefit requirements are different here from anywhere else in England, Scotland or Wales, and, given that the majority of claimants in Northern Ireland have never had to budget for rent payments on any basis, it would be much more difficult for individuals and families to adjust to the universal credit system as a whole. The Consumer Council has noted that people in Northern Ireland are less financially capable than their counterparts in the UK. According to its research, people here require more support and training in order to learn the skills needed to manage financial affairs.

Another issue raised is that of Post Office accounts and the problems of reliance on direct debits. It has been widely reported that more than 15% of local authority tenants and 13% of housing association tenants do not have bank accounts, thus making it extremely difficult for tenants to make payments to landlords directly and on time, if they were even to get there. Post Office accounts do not allow for outward payments. Therefore, a tenant would have to withdraw their benefit and take it directly to the landlord. In responding to these issues, at the end of September, DWP called on financial organisations to make the Government aware of what products are available to assist claimants in budgeting and in making these payments. Although we welcome those attempts to assist with budgeting skills, it simply is not fair to expect individuals to change from using the institutions they have grown used to and trusted with their finances over a long period, whether post offices or banks, to move to another bank or suitable financial institution, especially given the current reputation of the banking system.

Wearing another hat, I say that representatives from the Ulster Bank will be before the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee on Thursday. Members know what problems there have been. Imagine what would happen if tenants had to pay rent from their banks and a crash such as that occurred. Think how that would impact not only on landlords — social



and private — but on people's financial affairs. Increasingly within the private sector, landlords are reluctant to consent to leases that do not have direct debits or standing orders as payment methods; that is yet another obstacle to housing benefit claimants. This will no doubt add to the increased burden on the Housing Executive to house those unable to find accommodation in the private sector, as — I pointed this out earlier — lists grow longer if housing benefit tenants cannot meet the requirements posed by the private sector.

On the issue of flexibility as regards overall welfare reform, Lord Freud has acknowledged that, although we are bound to operate a closely aligned social security system, if a case can be made for having individual circumstances for the North, we will have the opportunity to avail ourselves of those flexibilities. I look forward to hearing and seeing what those flexibilities might be. The SDLP feels strongly that the retention of direct payments is one area in which that flexibility should be exercised, and I heard the Minister acknowledge that.

There will need to be changes in the operating system for universal credit. However, one advantage is that we have an IT system that already allows for direct payments. In fact, it allows for both and is based on choice. We also have concerns about the timing of payments of universal credit as a whole, namely the fact that individuals will struggle to adapt from weekly or fortnightly payments to monthly payments. This issue is much wider than that of the payment of housing benefits, which some of my colleagues will cover.

In reference to the Social Market Foundation's (SMF) report of September 2012, while the DWP — I nearly said DUP, there. Freudian slip. *[Interruption.]* I am just checking that you are all awake.

While DWP continues to uphold universal credit as some sort of back-to-work scheme that can only result in the betterment of society, the reality is that people will struggle to adapt to monthly payments. As the Social Market Foundation reported, only half of those earning under £10,000 are paid through monthly pay packets.

It would be useful to look at the number of people in Northern Ireland who are paid monthly. If we did, I think that we would conclude that, similar to the SMF, there is little evidence that moving to monthly payments would help to prepare claimants for going to work.

Although the retention of the current IT system to allow the direct payments of housing benefits to social landlords will not solve the anticipated problems that are associated with universal credit, it would represent one step towards a more stable and supportive system.

We need to look at underoccupancy in a lot of detail. Tenants would see their housing benefit payment reduced by 14% of their rent for underoccupancy by one bedroom and by 25% for underoccupancy by two or more bedrooms. Indeed, all working-age claimants who are deemed to have one spare bedroom will be affected. As I pointed out — it is important to emphasise this — that will include separated parents who share the care of their children and who may have been allocated an extra bedroom in their housing arrangement to reflect that situation, which is the natural and most pragmatic thing to do. Benefit rules will mean that there must be a designated main carer for children who receives the child benefit, and the secondary carer will have to pay for the child's bedroom out of their universal credit payment. That could be between 5% and 10% of their weekly income. It will also affect couples who choose to use their spare bedroom when recovering from an illness or operation; foster-carers, because foster-children are not counted as part of the household for benefit purposes; parents whose children visit but are not part of the household; families with disabled children; and disabled people, including those living in adapted or specially designed properties.

Again, the house itself can be the focal point of the recovery for many disabled people, especially mentally disabled people. Indeed, we heard the Minister of Health speak earlier about how the thrust of healthcare will be to reduce the number of people who are in hospitals by moving them into community care, making that part of their recovery package. I have seen figures for the likes of Holywell Hospital. These housing benefit proposals will work against that. They will work against vulnerable people on their pathway to recovery. As they hope to move into the community and to move home, the first thing that they will be hit with is a financial penalty that is a consequence of the reforms. It is crucial that the Assembly takes note of that and, more importantly, that it does something about it.

Based on the current average rent of £58·76, a tenant who receives full housing benefit but who is underoccupying by one bedroom would see their housing benefit reduced by about £8·25 a week. A tenant who is underoccupying by two or more bedrooms would see a reduction of about £14·70 a week. If their

housing benefit is cut, a tenant will, inevitably, have to pay the landlord the difference between the housing benefit that is received and the rent, or else they can get out. That would put people back in homelessness or back on the streets. I really do not think that that is where we want to go.

Given the vast changes to the system and the severe shortage of social housing stock to which underoccupying families can transfer, the SDLP feels that the Welfare Reform Bill would force people into an impossible position. The reality is that, when individuals cannot make ends meet, there will be forced evictions and increased homelessness. Coupled with the absence of direct payments, we feel that these provisions will mean that we are heading for disaster. More and more people who are being forced out of homes that are too large for their needs will turn to the private sector, where the traditionally higher rents will not prove to be an answer. They will fall deeper into debt until they can no longer pay, and then they will be out on the streets through evictions.

The Government have said that discretionary payments are there to help with the transition and that direct house swaps and transfers will be available. However, we still do not know how many discretionary payments will be available or how often they will be made, and, given the small stock of one bedroom and two bedroom homes across the sector, it is extremely difficult to believe that transfers will be a viable option for the majority of people.

The Housing Rights Service has recommended to the Minister a number of changes to the Welfare Reform Bill to avoid an adverse differential impact on any particular groups here. It is concerned that the universal benefit cap will have a differential adverse effect on families with dependants, particularly larger families with several children, who require larger accommodation. Some 21% of our children live in persistent child poverty, and almost 10%, or 40,000 children, in severe child poverty. There is a serious concern that the cap could drive those children deeper into poverty and potentially into homelessness.

With a limited supply of smaller social housing units, particularly in high-demand areas and rural locations, the Housing Rights Service has called for the introduction of greater options and incentives for current under-occupiers to downsize and for discretion to be permitted to allow for circumstances in which occupiers are able to access suitably sized accommodation. The HRS also recorded its objection to the policy of uprating local housing allowance by

the consumer price index (CPI). It argued that that measure would shrink the 30% of the market that is currently available to claimants in the private rented sector. It predicts that the policy will increase hardship, could lead to home loss, and that landlords could be less prepared to accept benefit claimants as tenants, given the security of income that they might not see.

In conclusion, as I said earlier, the SDLP is not opposed to the reform of the welfare system, but that reform must be appropriate and fair to all. We do not believe that the Bill in its current form is either appropriate or fair. I outlined the scale of detail that the Scottish devolved Assembly has gone into to make sure that, whatever it introduced, it was well informed and was not contributing further to disadvantage, homelessness and even increasing hardship for the people that it represents. I trust that the Assembly will adopt a similar course.

**Ms Brown:** I also rise as a member of a Social Development Committee to support the Bill at Second Stage. I reject the amendment and support the passage of the Bill in order to meet the deadline of April 2013, the time at which the Bill and its contents are due to come into place. It is vital that the Bill be allowed to pass on to the next stage, where it can be looked at in greater detail in Committee.

We have all heard the arguments about how Northern Ireland is a special case and how, as a legacy of the Troubles, we need special treatment. Of course, in certain circumstances, that is a valid argument, but I do not believe that welfare reform necessarily falls into that category, even though there are those in receipt of benefits as a result of incidents in the past.

Welfare reform is necessary because the system needs fixed. The parties opposite are not the only ones that have concerns about the Bill, even if they did not express those at the Executive. The place to address those concerns is through further discussions and scrutiny in Committee. We are all aware that people want the Assembly to take decisions, offer leadership and make Northern Ireland a better place. To do that, we must deal with difficult issues that impact on real people and real families. That is why we are here — not to ignore the vulnerable and needy, but to ensure that fairness and compassion are shown to those who are in need. That is how we will be judged as an Assembly and as a society.

It is wrong to use derogatory language about benefit claimants and apply that with a broad brush to all who claim. We do that far too often

in Northern Ireland. We label people and make generalised statements as if they were fact, without taking time to discover the reality of what lies behind a headline or statistic. People who claim benefits are, by and large, real people with genuine needs. Many would much rather be fit, well and in work. They do not choose to be ill, unemployed or dependent on the state. However, sadly, there are those people who see benefits as a lifestyle choice. Can anyone say that it is wrong to challenge that? Is there anyone who seriously believes that keeping families and individuals contained in an endless cycle of benefits without any aspiration towards work or responsibility is a real solution?

Yesterday, the House debated the economy and jobs. Is it really credible to believe that, although all parties in the House agree that more has to be done on job creation, we can tolerate those who refuse to work and choose to remain on benefits instead?

**8.00 pm**

*The report of the remainder of this day's sitting will be published on Wednesday 10 October 2012.*







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Published by Authority of the Northern Ireland Assembly,  
Belfast: The Stationery Office

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ISSN 1463-7162

Daily Editions: Single copies £5, Annual subscriptions £325  
Bound Volumes of Debates are issued periodically during the session: Single copies: £90

Printed in Northern Ireland by The Stationery Office Limited  
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ISBN 978-0-339-50572-8



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