



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for the Environment

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Driver and Vehicle Agency Job Losses:  
Departmental Briefing

20 March 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for the Environment

### Driver and Vehicle Agency Job Losses: Departmental Briefing

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Ms Anna Lo (Chairperson)  
Mrs Pam Cameron (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Cathal Boylan  
Mr Colum Eastwood  
Mr Alban Maginness  
Mr Ian McCrea  
Mr Barry McElduff  
Mr Ian Milne  
Lord Morrow  
Mr Peter Weir

**Witnesses:**

Mr Trevor Evans	Department of the Environment
Mr Dennis Walsh	Department of the Environment
Mr Paul Duffy	Driver and Vehicle Agency

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Paul Duffy, the chief executive of the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA); Trevor Evans, its deputy chief executive; and Dennis Walsh. It was very sad news.

**Mr Paul Duffy (Driver and Vehicle Agency):** Yes, Chair, it was bitterly disappointing, not only the decision but the way that it was delivered to us. It came out of the blue, we had to react very quickly and, unfortunately, the impact on staff has been significant, as you would expect. They have been greatly distressed and were particularly so on the day of the announcement. They feel very let down, given the excellent service that they have been providing for quite a number of years.

The Committee has a copy of the timeline of events and notifications leading up to the announcement. The Committee will be aware of the Minister's anger at the timing of the announcement. He was informed by officials when he landed in the USA in the early hours of Thursday. The Committee will also be aware that the decision will lead to the centralisation in Swansea of all vehicle registration and licensing services from July 2014. As a consequence, it will lead to the closure of all our vehicle licensing offices across Northern Ireland.

From July to December, there will, naturally, be a winding down of the service. During that period, we will need to seek to find alternative work or redeployment opportunities for staff affected by the decision. The Minister has written to Executive colleagues seeking their assistance in identifying alternative work. We have had some initial engagement with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) on the operational implications of the decision because we need to understand how this will impact on customers. We have had discussions with our DFP colleagues about what we can do

across the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) to provide redeployment opportunities for staff. Most importantly, we will have a series of meetings at each of the local offices to engage with staff, try to address some of their concerns and try to clarify what the decision means for them.

**The Chairperson:** Is a voluntary redundancy scheme being offered to staff?

**Mr Duffy:** A number of options are open to us. The first thing that we want to do is try to find alternative work for staff. The next option will be to look at redeployment opportunities within the wider NICS. That will be challenging, given that some of the staff are in quite remote local offices where there are not an awful lot of other public sector jobs. Voluntary redundancy options may have to come to the table once we have exhausted all those other options.

**The Chairperson:** The majority of the staff in Coleraine, are they not?

**Mr Duffy:** Yes, we have over 240 staff in Coleraine, but we have other staff at local offices.

**The Chairperson:** Yes. I am sure that it will be difficult to absorb those 240 staff in a nearby area.

**Mr Duffy:** The vast majority are junior members of staff. They are not mobile grades. A lot of them are part-time and have caring responsibilities in the local area. In the past, a lot of the staff did not go for promotion opportunities because they did not want to travel outside Coleraine because of their responsibilities there. It will be very challenging to try to find them redeployment opportunities. That is why our first focus has to be on trying to find work to put into Coleraine rather than finding work for staff to move to.

**The Chairperson:** Yes. It is just too difficult for people with families and children in school to have to uproot.

**Mr Duffy:** Very much so. There are instances in which a husband, wife and daughter work in one office. It has a big impact on families. As I said, the challenge will be getting other Departments to work with us to identify work that can be moved to Coleraine, preferably from the likes of Belfast; it would be much easier than to redeploy staff within Belfast.

**The Chairperson:** Absolutely. What other public offices can they move to in Coleraine?

**Mr Duffy:** In DOE, we also have the Planning Service in County Hall. There are some Environment Agency posts, but you also have Roads Service. There is a very limited number of vacancies in those areas. They would certainly not be able to support the number of staff we need to find work for.

**Lord Morrow:** Paul, you said that this came out of the blue. Did it?

**Mr Duffy:** Yes. We had quite a bit of one-way engagement with DVLA for a number of months seeking notification of when we could expect a decision. On every occasion, we were told that the decision was with Ministers in Whitehall. That was as much as we knew. We became aware of the decision only late on the Wednesday afternoon before the announcement.

**Lord Morrow:** But, Paul, you always knew that a decision was coming.

**Mr Duffy:** Yes.

**Lord Morrow:** It was just that you were not sure whether it was going to arrive on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday or Friday, but it was going to come.

**Mr Duffy:** Or whether it would arrive in January, February or March.

**Lord Morrow:** So, there was an inevitability about it, was there not?

**Mr Duffy:** There was, yes.

**Lord Morrow:** What is the total number of staff now going to be deployed elsewhere?

**Mr Trevor Evans (Department of the Environment):** When we talk about staff numbers, it gets a bit complicated because we have so many different working patterns. There is an awful lot of part-time work. Because we knew that a decision was coming, we did not fill all posts with permanent staff over the last wee while. We are losing the funding for 309 posts. That is when you add up all the arms and legs that DVLA pays for. However, in terms of people, which is perhaps more important now, there are 267 permanent staff, whether part-time or full-time, who will now be surplus because of the DVLA decision. Two hundred and seven of those people are in Coleraine.

**Lord Morrow:** Trevor, 267 permanent staff —

**Mr Evans:** Yes.

**Lord Morrow:** How many of those are full-time and part-time? Do you have that figure?

**Mr Evans:** Approximately 73% are female, and about 20% are part-time.

**Lord Morrow:** What do you mean that 73% are female?

**Mr Evans:** I put in the 73% female only because it is a fact of life that females are often the primary carer. We are conscious that getting female staff sorted out with redeployment is a special challenge. The age profile of our staff is also quite young. A lot of them have young children to get out to school in the morning. To be perfectly honest, the feasibility of setting off at 6.30 am to go to Belfast for a job if you are a young mother with young children —

**The Chairperson:** It is not worth it.

**Mr Evans:** That is why we are very conscious of that figure. Seventy-three per cent are female, mainly young female.

**Mr Weir:** Did you say that 20% are part-time?

**Mr Evans:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** Are 20% of all staff part-time?

**Mr Evans:** Yes.

**Lord Morrow:** Where are the rest of the redundancies?

**Mr Evans:** We have eight local offices, one of which is in Coleraine. The other seven locations with staff are Armagh, with eight permanent people —

**Lord Morrow:** Are those all going?

**Mr Evans:** Yes. Everything is going on the vehicle licensing side: Ballymena, with six permanent people; Belfast, with 24; Downpatrick, with six; Enniskillen, with four; Londonderry, with six; and Omagh, with six.

**Lord Morrow:** Paul, realistically, how many of those 309 people can jobs be found for in the Civil Service or within the system?

**Mr Dennis Walsh (Department of the Environment):** I am the senior HR business partner for DVA and work in DOE personnel. Our aim is to try to find all of them posts. On Monday, we are meeting the cross-departmental redeployment group, which has all the personnel officers from all the Departments. We will take stock of what vacancies exist and what vacancies will arise in the short term to see how many of those would be suitable alternative posts for the staff. We are also going to be engaging with each member of staff to ask them to complete a preferences return, on which they will indicate where they would be prepared to be relocated to and identify the personal circumstances that impact on them, such as disabilities, exceptional welfare circumstances and where they live. We will then have to determine what we regard to be within reasonable daily travelling distance for them.

After that, we will take stock of what redeployment opportunities there are and whether we need to move to any other measure, which might include some sort of voluntary release scheme.

**Lord Morrow:** Dennis, can you explain the intricacies here between Civil Service staff and other staff? Are these Civil Service staff that we are talking about here?

**Mr Walsh:** Yes. We are talking only about the permanent staff who are employed by the Civil Service. The contracts of temporary staff, who might comprise agency workers or casual employees on limited contracts, can be terminated with a reasonably short period of notice. They do not have to be redeployed. All our measures are for the permanent civil servants.

**Lord Morrow:** How confident are you of accommodating all the people who are affected and want to be redeployed?

**Mr Walsh:** The Civil Service has an underlying level of vacancies. The issue will be the personal circumstances of each individual. If we were talking about Belfast only, I would be saying that there was no problem and that we would find posts for all 267 people because the vacancies would be deemed to be within reasonable daily travelling distance. Given the relatively small numbers outside of Coleraine, and some of those offices being close to Belfast, they would, hopefully, be easier to redeploy. With regard to Coleraine, it will depend on whether Belfast is deemed to be within reasonable daily travelling distance for any of those staff. We will have a clearer picture shortly. Once we have the preferences exercise completed, we will know what the personal circumstances of staff are. Once we have met the other Departments, we will be able to gauge the vacancy level. Within our Department, we have vacancies that we have not filled. We are holding them until we have carried out the preferences exercise, and, hopefully, we will have a stock of redeployment opportunities available. Unfortunately, I cannot be any more specific.

**Mr A Maginness:** Thank you for that detailed report. Mr Evans just spoke about the profile of many of the workers. It seems that it will be extremely difficult to try to redeploy young women who have family responsibilities. It might be extremely difficult. Of course, you might encounter similar difficulties if a person is a carer and looking after an elderly relative or somebody like that. How do you make an assessment, in the task that is before you, about redeploying people? Is it on a scale of one to 10?

**Mr Walsh:** The idea of the preferences exercise is to find out whether staff have particular personal circumstances that restricts their mobility over and above what their contractual obligations are in respect of movement. If somebody has a disability, they will fill in a questionnaire, and we will refer that to the Occupational Health Service. We will rely on the advice from the Occupational Health Service about whether that disability restricts that individual's mobility. If somebody has exceptional welfare reasons, such as caring responsibilities, as you mentioned, they will also fill in a separate questionnaire that will go to NICS welfare support services where staff will assess whether that restricts their mobility.

Once we identify those categories — they are the priority categories for redeployment in a surplus situation — we will seek to identify posts for those individuals who meet the restrictions. All the other staff will then be assessed against their mobility obligations. For example, full-time staff at EOII level and above are mobile and would therefore be expected to take a post anywhere in the Civil Service. We will, of course, work to try to make sure that that is as close to their home as possible. All other staff at the junior grades of administrative officer and administrative assistant and all part-time reduced-hours staff are non-mobile and are only obliged under their contract to travel anywhere within reasonable daily travelling distance. That is the decision we will make on each individual case.

Obviously, as part of that, the issue will be whether Belfast is within reasonable daily travelling distance for any of those staff. That will have to be determined as part of the assessment, because, although they work in Coleraine, it also takes into account where they live. Coleraine to Belfast is probably about 60 miles, but they may not live that sort of distance away. It will be difficult and difficult decisions will have to be made.

**Mr A Maginness:** I assumed that, if they were working in Coleraine, they would live fairly near to Coleraine, but you are saying that that might not be the position.

**Mr Walsh:** They might not. We have to gauge that and ascertain exactly where they live, what distance they currently travel to work and how they get there, because that will be a factor. If

somebody lives north of Coleraine on the coast, for example, they might already travel 10 miles to get to Coleraine. Then, if you have to add the journey to Belfast, it is about whether that becomes unreasonable. Under the Civil Service code, we are required to do everything to prevent redundancies of any nature, definitely compulsory redundancies. The redeployment consideration and the distance that staff would be reasonably expected to travel need to be justified in the circumstances that we are in, in which staff could potentially be facing redundancy.

**Mr A Maginness:** The staff are employees of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, although they were doing a job for, essentially, the British Civil Service, if I can put it that way. I am not quite sure, but I will put it this way. The money for the posts has been withdrawn as a result of that ministerial decision in Whitehall. Does that create a compulsory redundancy situation or not? If it is a compulsory redundancy situation, it might be helpful in certain circumstances, depending on the individual, but it seems to me that it may not be a compulsory redundancy situation.

**Mr Walsh:** No, compulsory redundancy is the last resort. Before we get to that, we would look at some voluntary arrangements.

**Mr A Maginness:** Can I just stop you there for a minute? I am a civil servant working in Coleraine for the DVA. The money for my post has been withdrawn, but my employment still remains with the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Therefore, I cannot be compulsorily made redundant. That is the point I am trying to make. It is a different situation.

**Mr Walsh:** Yes. The post has become surplus; it is no longer required. The individual is not surplus. We have jobs for the individual. If we are saying that we have vacancies in Belfast, the issue is whether we deem that to be reasonable and suitable alternative employment. If we get to the stage where we have posts but do not accept that they are reasonable alternative employment, we are heading down the route of compulsory redundancy, although not necessarily of the individuals. If we had a redundancy scheme, it might be for all staff in DOE or all staff in the given areas. That is the sort of detail that will have to be considered. The ultimate measure to address the situation that you are alluding to is that we could end up with staff who have no work, no money, no funding — what do we do with them? The measures we are taking now are, in many ways, the first step to stop us from getting to a situation where we will feel compelled to go to compulsory.

**Mr A Maginness:** If it is not a compulsory redundancy situation, and I assume it is not, could it be a voluntary redundancy situation?

**Mr Walsh:** Yes, if we conclude that we cannot redeploy the staff. Plan A at the moment is to get jobs to come to this. The redeployment is if that does not deliver sufficient or any numbers. We then look at the redeployment issue. We are maybe focusing on Coleraine because that is where the bulk of staff are and, no doubt, where the problem will be. We know that there are vacancies around the system for the Belfast office staff and other satellite local offices.

However, if we get to that stage, we would be going for voluntary first of all, and not necessarily for these staff. We might widen it enough so that we could create more convenient and suitable redeployment opportunities. Under the new compensation scheme that comes in on 1 April, the voluntary terms are more attractive than the compulsory terms. We are required to go the voluntary route before the compulsory route.

At this point of time, however, our full focus is on finding permanent or even temporary posts for these staff to be redeployed into, just to allow natural wastage and churn of staff to come to our aid as well.

**Mr Boylan:** Thank you very much for your presentation. I am bitterly disappointed. We had a good debate about this in the Chamber and were hoping that the decision could be overturned. I want to share with the staff, because I know what it is like to be sitting facing redundancy. I am sure that there is a lot of worry and uncertainty about upping sticks and moving. Most people have mortgages and young families and everything else. Certainly our thoughts are with them at the minute.

Other members asked about certain areas. I have to ask about my own area, because the likes of Armagh is totally reliant on public sector jobs — there is no doubt about it. There is not a lot of private industry there. We have faced redundancies in the health service recently, and moves to Craigavon and everything else. In terms of the likes of Armagh city, there are eight jobs. Can you touch a wee bit on Armagh for me, please? I have concerns in relation to that area. Obviously, I am concerned about all the jobs, but have you any detail on those?

**Mr Duffy:** We will go through the same process as with Coleraine and all the other local offices. There will be the engagement that Dennis has set out, and we will be looking for redeployment opportunities within Armagh or as close as possible to Armagh for individual members of staff.

**Mr Boylan:** I understand, Paul, but in the light of all the conversation we have had, for someone to leave Armagh and travel, even to Belfast, is a good enough distance, especially if it is a young mother with a couple of kids — to travel that distance, get them ready in the morning and get them up and out. I know what it is like travelling up myself, so I have concerns. Obviously, you have mentioned all the other areas. For most of these areas, travelling to Belfast would be concerning.

**Mr Walsh:** The aim of the redeployment measures is to identify posts as close to their current home or office as possible. If that is closer to home or more convenient to get in Belfast, that is what we will do. That is the way we will be looking at all the posts in local offices. Because of this decision, the jobs are going. We now need to look at individual staff. That is why we are going round, meeting all the staff and explaining the measure to them. That is the importance of the preference exercise, so that we can understand from each and every one of them their personal circumstances.

**Mr Boylan:** Dennis, this has been sitting there for a long time. We knew that a decision was going to be made, and obviously we hoped that it would be a positive decision. It is a negative one. Surely some plans were being made in the interim period, just in case. I know that you are saying you are going out to the process. You have to actually deal with the process now. You certainly might have had an idea just in case.

**Mr Walsh:** In the Department, we took certain measures in that posts in DVA were not being filled unless it was business-critical to fill them. As I said, we do recognise that there is an underlying vacancy level that exists in the service, and we know that there are substantial numbers of vacancies in the grades affected at present. We just do not know at this stage where they are and in which Departments they are. We also had the difficulty that the fight was being fought around saving the jobs and the work, and we were conscious of trying not to do anything that seemed to show that we already were taking inevitable steps because we were going to lose that decision.

**Mr Duffy:** As Dennis said, in the Department and in DVA, we proactively took a decision not to fill any vacancies unless it was completely necessary, to try to create that capacity in our Department. Just two days ago, in the bulletin of vacancies, we noticed that there was a post in Enniskillen. We have talked to the Department concerned to see whether it will now fill it only on a temporary basis and hold that post for us. Because the situation in terms of when vacancies emerge is continually changing, we will now react as quickly as possible as and when they appear.

**Mr Boylan:** Finally, this will have a major impact on the local economy in Coleraine. I do not know whether this is about trying to create a service or about saving money. Has the Department talked to DFP about the overall funding package and to see how we could shore that up? Clearly, we are paying for that service, and it is going into the Treasury, and whatever amount is coming back to us in the block. Have there been any discussions on how we will try to recover that through this new service? Is there an indication that that will come back?

**Mr Duffy:** No, there is not. What will simply happen is that the funding that goes for delivering the service here at the moment will be absorbed back into the Treasury, and the Department for Transport (DfT) will make savings in the costs that it has incurred in terms of paying us for the staff to deliver that service.

**Mrs Cameron:** Thank you for your attendance today, and I appreciate why you were not able to be with us last week when the announcement was being made. I think that it was right that you were with the staff and were helping them to cope with what I am sure was a huge shock to those staff members, as it certainly was to us as a Committee. Most of my questions have been asked to do with the breakdown of the staff and the amount of female employees and the amount with caring responsibilities. I also wanted to touch on the redundancy, but that has been covered as well. Have you any indication so far of employees seeking voluntary redundancy? Have you any indication that people are flagging up that, if that were available, they would be interested? If so, what sort of percentage of the affected staff is that?

**Mr Walsh:** We are going round meeting the staff and explaining to them what measures we are taking now and what we are planning to do in the preference exercise. It has been asked whether this is a

redundancy situation, and we are saying — and the situation is — that there no plans to run any sort of a voluntary or compulsory redundancy scheme. However, it has not been ruled out. It has to be there, and it has to be a possibility, given the potential difficulties of finding suitable alternative posts. Apart from it being raised by staff who want to know whether it is a possibility, we are certainly not going straight to that. Once we have completed the preference exercise and once we have met the other Departments and got the details of the current vacancy levels, we will be in a better position to say whether or not we think this will actually resolve the problem. Always at the back of that is whether there are any jobs coming into the affected areas that will reduce the numbers to be redeployed.

**Mr Duffy:** The first solution that we have to fully exhaust is trying to find work from other Departments to move to somewhere like Coleraine because, without a doubt, the redeployment of that level of staff will be a major challenge. As you know, our Minister has written to Executive colleagues to start that engagement. We need to have that engagement with other Departments.

**The Chairperson:** Does it have to be within the Civil Service? There is a large campus of the University of Ulster in Coleraine.

**Mr Duffy:** Well, they are different employers with different terms and conditions, so it has to be the NICS.

**The Chairperson:** OK, but, if you have a voluntary redundancy scheme, people may think that they could try the university for local jobs. What is a reasonable distance for staff to travel if they have to be redeployed?

**Mr Walsh:** It has not been defined. Unfortunately, it has never been defined, because the travelling distance for two staff who work in the same building could be completely different when you take into account where they travel from to get to that location and what their personal circumstances are. However, at an overarching level, a decision will have to be made on whether or not Belfast is, under any circumstances, deemed to be reasonable for staff in Coleraine. Even that decision might be influenced by whether we are talking about a wide range of vacancies being available to staff or whether we have exhausted all means of reducing the surplus and are now into compulsory transfer of staff to a particular location. The reason for the preference exercise is to ascertain each individual's personal circumstances.

**The Chairperson:** To me, it seems very unreasonable to have to travel from Coleraine to Belfast to work every day. I would not dream of doing it myself.

**Mr Walsh:** If we are in the context of a compulsory redundancy scheme, that hard decision will have to be made. We may be saying that, if we have no other jobs, we are now into compulsory redundancy or that, yes, we have jobs and they are in Belfast. That is why I said that a tough decision might have to be made. Everything that we are doing is to prevent that and reduce the distance that staff will have to travel. Certainly, for staff in Coleraine, we will be looking for posts that are not in Belfast and are closer to their homes.

**Mr Eastwood:** Thanks for coming. I do not envy your position. You have been put in a very difficult position by the British Government because of this ridiculous decision. It is very good to hear you say that you will try to find work to put into Coleraine. I look forward to hearing what kind of conversations you are having with other Departments on that. As somebody has been trying to get a lot more government work into Derry for the last while, I know that your conversations will not be that easy. Is that a government policy, or is it unique to DOE to try, if jobs go, to replace them with government jobs? I have not seen much evidence of that in other situations.

**Mr Duffy:** Given the unique circumstances of what this decision has led to, particularly in Coleraine, we see this as the most sensible solution to try to address the issue in the first instance. As you say, we will need the cooperation of Departments to achieve it. We cannot deliver it on our own. We need a lot of goodwill from Departments in terms of willingness to move functions to Coleraine and perhaps then having to do a redeployment exercise themselves within Belfast.

**Mr Eastwood:** There are six staff from Derry. I do not know how you measure reasonable distance, but I do not think that it is reasonable for people to have to travel five days a week to Belfast from Derry — although it happens. You only have to see the queue for the 5.45 am bus every morning.



I have another question. Yesterday, the Chancellor made an announcement about the enterprise zone. Had the Department any knowledge of that? It seemed to nearly be a case of, "We will take these 300 jobs but we will give you an enterprise zone".

**Mr Duffy:** Certainly I had no notice of it.

**Mr Eastwood:** It would be interesting to hear if any other Departments had notice of it, because, to be honest, 300 jobs is a very serious issue. However, if we are going to look at enterprise zones in Northern Ireland, I do not know if Coleraine is the place to start, but we should look at it. I think that that announcement is very strange, but I wish you all the best.

You talked about permanent staff and everything else, and that is the most important, but there are agency staff there as well. How many are there?

**Mr Evans:** At this minute, we have 72 casuals, most of whom are agency staff and some of whom are directly recruited casuals.

**Mr Eastwood:** Part of the problem for a lot of those people is that they have been agency staff for, maybe, the past three or four years. I have been round different Departments, and I have seen that that is another issue that we need to look at. We need to be mindful, when we are talking about this, that those people are losing their jobs as well.

**Mr Duffy:** Yes, and we are equally mindful of the very good service that they have delivered to motorists when they have been in post.

**Mr McElduff:** I find that letter very disturbing. The departmental Assembly liaison officer has briefed us on the timeline of attempted phone calls and failed communication between DfT and DOE. It reminds us of the degree of contempt that has been shown towards the Department of the Environment and locals by Stephen Hammond and his permanent secretary — all these missed phone calls, and could not honour phone calls, and stuff like that, the day before. That is a salutary lesson about attitudes, and it tells me that we should be trying to get DVA powers to the Assembly. My question is around the six jobs in Omagh, specifically. I want to add value to what has been said. Can Dennis or any of the team tell us about the prospects for jobs in Omagh? There are a fair number of public sector jobs in Omagh. Maybe those six could be absorbed locally.

**Mr Walsh:** Unfortunately, we do not have the details. We are asking for the information from the other Departments, and then we will introduce measures. Part of the arrangements that we are speaking to other Departments about is introducing measures so that they do not recruit, promote or even transfer staff until the surplus staff in DVA are considered. Those arrangements have to be put in place. At the moment, Departments can decide which posts to fill and the method used to fill them. We now need to control that. Once we have the detail, we will have a better idea of the possibility of redeployment in Omagh. The other side of that is the other locations that will be deemed to be within reasonable travelling distance. Certainly, they will fall short of Belfast, for example, and there are a number of other towns, with other Departments, that would be within reasonable travelling distance of the staff in Omagh. We accept that it is critical that we size the redeployment prospects as soon as we can so that we can decide whether any other action is required.

**Mr McElduff:** I press on the team the need for them to do their best to absorb those permanent posts within the Omagh area, because it is a relatively small number, and there is a good distribution of Departments and public sector jobs in Omagh. Maybe it could work on this occasion.

**Mr Milne:** Thanks for your presentation. I share the concerns and worries of all of the members who have spoken. In light of the proposed relocation of DARD offices to Ballykelly, are you actively working with DARD, for example, on timescales? Does that fit in with the end of the year, etc? Would that not absorb a large portion of the workforce?

**Mr Duffy:** We have had initial conversations with DARD on the timing, but the challenge with the DARD proposal is the staffing mix. Its proposals would not address the number of junior grades that we have. That conversation has already started with DARD and with a few other Departments.

**Mr Milne:** Yes. We have Orchard House up there, and we hear constantly of delays in the single farm payment and whatnot, which may be due to a shortage of staff. Surely that is another avenue that needs to be explored.

**Mr Walsh:** Certainly, from our perspective, while in the first place we will try to find permanent posts for staff, if there are temporary posts as well, that gives us a bit of breathing space. The time frames for the overall proposed DARD move are not going to be consistent. Our problem is now. By the end of this year, we will have to have resolved the DVA surplus. The DARD plans are in the longer term. We have spoken to it, and we will engage with it. We will look to see whether there is any scope for jobs to be located sooner rather than later.

**Mr Milne:** Thank you. The way the Minister and the Department have been treated by Whitehall is despicable.

**The Chairperson:** The consultation was really a bit of a smokescreen. It was a delaying tactic. In a way, it raised false hopes for people.

**Mr Evans:** The Committee might be interested to know that 73% of the people who responded to the consultation completely opposed centralisation.

**The Chairperson:** I am sure.

**Mr Evans:** One hundred per cent of the public representatives who responded rejected it. The decision was still made, as you say, in spite of the consultation.

**The Chairperson:** It is a massive blow to the area of Coleraine, socially and economically. It is heartbreaking. As others have said, you have a difficult job on your hands.

**Mr Boylan:** I wish you well in that regard. I hope that you can get jobs for all the people who require them. I was away last week. Funny enough, when I heard about this matter, I phoned and said, "What about asking about devolving the powers for the DVA?". Was that discussed at all over the past period? Can you speak about that issue?

**Mr Duffy:** Our focus over the past period has been on retaining the jobs. We always felt that the decision was imminent. The devolution of vehicle licensing powers would require primary legislation and would take many years to put in place. That would not address the issue that we face today. That is why our focus has been on how to resolve the issue before the end of this year.

**Mr Boylan:** There has been a lot of support in the Committee and the previous one to retain the jobs, as you know. It is sad that it has turned out this way. Pass on our thoughts to all the employees. We are very supportive. Hopefully, you will be able to gain jobs wherever possible for people or redeploy them.

**The Chairperson:** Keep us in the loop. If there is anything that the Committee can do, please let us know. Perhaps we can write to the Ministers or the Executive. We will be very happy to support you. Thank you very much.