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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 12 February 2013

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. In the week that the horse meat crisis has been raging and there has been great public unease and a great adverse impact on our prime agricultural industry, why has there not been a single statement to the House on that issue from any relevant Minister? What will be done to address that deficit?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As you know, the Executive decide which Ministers give statements to the House. It is not the Speaker's role to direct that.

Ministerial Statements

Door-2-Door Transport

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I wish to make a statement on my plans for the urban Door-2-Door scheme.

The urban Door-2-Door scheme is part of the Department's transport programme for people with disabilities. It was first introduced in 1990, and the Door-2-Door element of the programme, which initially operated only in Belfast, was extended across Northern Ireland in 2006 to towns and cities with a population of 10,000 or more, following an independent review of the programme. The aim of the service is to target social exclusion and to provide an urban-based transport service for elderly and disabled people who find it difficult to use mainstream public transport. In 2011-12, over 148,000 passenger trips were undertaken by members of our Door-2-Door service.

In 2006, the Department entered into a contract with Chambers Coach Hire Ltd to provide Door-2-Door transport services in 27 urban areas across Northern Ireland to elderly and disabled people who are members of the scheme. In 2008, the Department entered into further contracts with Disability Action and Bridge Accessible Transport for the delivery of Door-2-Door transport services in Belfast and Londonderry respectively. In late 2010, Chambers Coach Hire experienced financial difficulties that led to the creation of Moneymore Coaches (In Administration) Limited, which took over the contract previously operated by Chambers. This was effectively a single tender action by the Department.

The contracts with Moneymore Coaches (In Administration) and Disability Action were due to expire on 24 May 2011, and the Department, with the assistance of the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate, carried out a tender exercise to

appoint new operators for the services in all areas except for Londonderry, where the contract was not due to expire until September 2011. Preferred bidders were identified through the procurement exercise, and that was communicated in April 2011. However, subsequent legal action resulted in a ruling on 28 February 2012 in favour of the plaintiff, requiring the Department to re-procure the service or withdraw it.

To ensure a continuity of service provision to members while consideration was given to last February's ruling, and to ensure a continuity of service while we reviewed our policy on the provision of Door-2-Door services, the Department has awarded three single tender action contract extensions: to Disability Action to provide services in Belfast; to Bridge Accessible Transport to provide services in Londonderry; and to Moneymore Coaches (In Administration) to provide the services in 27 towns across Northern Ireland. These extensions are due to expire on 31 March 2013.

Work has been completed on reviewing the policy for the Door-2-Door scheme, and a consultation exercise commenced on 22 October 2012. That ended on 14 January 2013, and responses are currently being analysed and assessed. The position on single tender actions means that we now need to address the procurement issue. In the light of the court decision, when we go to the market, it is important that we do so in a way that our specification is clear and concise. We are working closely with colleagues from Central Procurement Directorate and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on developing procurement proposals.

It is clear that some time will be required beyond 31 March 2013 to agree these new ideas, test them and then go to the market with a realistic, value-for-money and workable specification. In the interim, only two options are available for the existing contract extensions: extend the single awards for a further period using the existing providers; or terminate the contracts for all areas until our considerations are complete and a new procurement is finalised.

'Procurement Guidance Note 02/10' gives details on the single tender award process and of the consequences of improper use of single tender awards. Although we are satisfied that the current awards meet this guidance, the single tender award for Moneymore Coaches (In Administration) Limited has effectively been in place since October 2010, that for Disability Action has been in place since May 2011 and

that for Bridge Accessible Transport has been in place since September 2012. Since, as I said earlier, it is clear that some time will be required beyond 31 March 2013 to agree new ideas, test them and then go to the market with a realistic, value-for-money and workable specification, I do not believe it is appropriate to continue to extend the existing single tender awards.

Terminating the contracts for all areas until such times as our considerations are complete and a new procurement is finalised draws a line under the current scheme. It fits readily with the consultation exercise that ended on 14 January, meaning that we will be clearer on the membership criteria, given the changes to the benefit system that will see the introduction of the new personal independence payment. Termination will also allow us more time to update our database and to redesign and arrange printing of new application forms and supporting literature for members, given the possible changes to eligibility criteria and to the passporting benefits.

Given the advantages of this option, I have decided that my Department will end the existing contracts with Bridge Accessible Transport, Disability Action and Moneymore Coaches (In Administration) when the current extensions run out on 31 March 2013. My staff will advise the three organisations of my decision today.

It is obviously important that the up to 2,200 current regular users of the Door-2-Door service are not left without any service for a period. Therefore, although the current Door-2-Door service will end when the current extensions run out on 31 March 2013, I have decided that, to meet the needs of existing users, we will put in place an interim service managed by Disability Action from 1 April 2013. Transport services will be provided or organised by Disability Action and they are likely to draw upon some or all of the rural transport partnerships, other voluntary organisations and, if necessary, other service providers.

Rural community transport partnerships were established in rural areas to help meet the transport needs for members who live in rurally isolated areas and who, due to reduced mobility, cannot access mainstream public transport. The services are a combination of demand-responsive transport for individual members through the Dial-a-Lift scheme and the provision of group transport to organisations that are also members of the partnerships.

The partnerships provide services in some 98% of rural Northern Ireland across seven operational areas. Each partnership is an independent company with its own board of directors. They are charitable organisations and operate on a not-for-profit basis. The partnerships have stimulated the development of community transport provision and make a valuable contribution to public transport accessibility. In 2011-12, the partnerships carried out more than 684,000 passenger trips. I believe that many, if not all, of the partnerships are well placed to assist with the interim service where Disability Action believes that it is appropriate. Existing members of the Door-2-Door schemes may be able to become members of rural transport partnerships and receive services in that way if the partnerships consider that appropriate.

My officials are working with Disability Action and other stakeholders to ensure that the interim service will be fully operational before the Easter break, and scheme members will be kept fully informed of the changes being implemented. The first letter to scheme members is issuing today. It is important to clarify that scheme members will be fully informed of the changes and that the letters are issuing to scheme members, not Members of the House.

The principles of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE) are also being applied to avoid creating unnecessary worry and stress for the existing hard-working staff delivering the Door-2-Door services. From today, steps will be taken to engage with employers and staff to effect transfers quickly and painlessly. In parallel, my officials have set up a project team to move forward the procurement of Door-2-Door services in the future. It is our intention to commence pilot operations later this year and to evaluate the effectiveness of those pilots after a year of operation. Thereafter, we plan to tender for the provision of services that will best meet the needs of our intended service users.

I will finish by making it clear there is absolutely no question of a reduction in budget for the services in the interim or going forward. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we begin questions, I remind Members that questions are on the statement about the Door-2-Door service.

Mr Lynch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann

Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that he emphasises that strong procurement procedures will be followed, particularly in light of the recently published audit report. Is the Minister content that clients of the service will not be inconvenienced by the interim arrangements, and will he indicate whether he will consider extending the service to include other socially excluded categories, such as young people and the unemployed?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development for his question and for his broad support for the measures that I have introduced today.

The bottom line, and it is very important, is that there is no reduction in the budget allocated to this. The resources are being maintained. I hope that, as a result of the changes that I am announcing today, the service can even be improved. I hope that, for those who avail themselves of this important service, there will be little or no disruption to their lives. They will still be able to make contact on the same telephone numbers to arrange available transport. Therefore, this service regulates the current situation, and I hope that, as we go into the future, we can look positively at how we can improve it further.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will the Minister detail why he has chosen Disability Action to deliver the service and not any of the other organisations or, indeed, the Community Transport Association?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Of course, he, like most Members, will have a high regard for Disability Action as an organisation and for its capacity to provide a service. It is a voluntary and a community organisation that has been providing services for disabled people in Northern Ireland for a very long time, predating the Door-2-Door scheme. It is clear to me that its ethos of putting the needs of disabled people to the forefront of its business, and its experience in providing services and dealing with Departments, makes it the organisation best placed to seek co-operation from others. It understands disabled people's transport needs in particular and knows how to make the interim service work.

10.45 am

Before further procurement can be finalised, temporary arrangements with established

voluntary and community organisations is the best option.

Mr Hussey: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. I am pleased to hear him make it clear that there will be no cut whatsoever in the funding for that important service, which, I believe, currently costs in the region of £3 million.

He made a brief reference to telephone numbers. Will he explain how current users will receive telephone contact details for the interim service?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his support for today's announcement. It is important that there be as little disruption to the users as possible. With that in mind, arrangements have been put in place to ensure that the telephone numbers that customers currently use to contact their provider will not change, which will allow them to continue to avail of that important service.

That will give some comfort and minimise any disruption or inconvenience that may be felt. I am confident that Disability Action will be able to deal effectively with the transition. Understandably, there may be teething problems, but I hope that, with the same telephone numbers in place, the users, who are the important people in the process, will feel able to make the necessary arrangements for their transport.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's statement and the energy that he brings to his Department. In the penultimate paragraph, he mentions future pilot schemes. Does he agree that Door-2-Door Transport will become meaningful only when we have proper integrated transport systems, similar to those developed in Britain and the Republic of Ireland? Will he assure the House that before he finishes his term as Minister we will have a scheme up and running?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his always flattering approach.

Mr A Maginness: Fawning.

Mr Kennedy: Yes. I understand his point, which is important. He will know that we are putting a rural transport pilot scheme in place in Dungannon and Cookstown. The link to Door-2-Door is there, but it is not yet complete. We will continue to explore ways in which to bring forward schemes that best suit the needs of the entire community, rural and urban.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his helpful statement. I particularly welcome the pilot projects that he intends to undertake. Will the pilot providers be able to participate in any future tendering process, given the Department of the Environment's (DOE) plans for driver licensing?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. The arrangements that I have announced today are for the interim while we prepare for the new scheme. The new scheme will have to be piloted and tested, and I hope that the operators will have an opportunity to tender.

I will have close discussions with DOE about licensing arrangements. The Member's point is well made, and we will make sure that we are aware of it as we go forward.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement. Can the Minister reassure me that the Door-2-Door scheme in my own constituency of North Down will not suffer as a result of this change? Can he assure me that Disability Action will be able to take on the workload from Moneymore Coaches and Bridge Accessible Transport? Can he also enlighten the House on how the procurement process went so wrong that Moneymore Coaches was able to overturn the decision in court? What was the cost of that to the Department?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for what I think is his support of the measure that I am bringing forward. I was not quite clear about that.

Rather than dwelling on past experiences, I want to take forward the Door-2-Door service: a service whereby people avail themselves of transport facilities to help them in their daily lives. As the Member rightly said, the service is widely used in the north Down area. I am aware of his interest in the Door-2-Door scheme. We are, obviously, entering a period of transition from the old arrangements, ending the single tender actions and giving Disability Action the opportunity to provide this service.

I am confident that Disability Action will do a very good job. Its reputation goes before it. I would be concerned if any Member thought that Disability Action was somehow not capable of providing an efficient and effective service. Yes; there will be teething and transitional problems initially. However, Disability Action and my Department will seek to work through those problems as quickly as possible. We are attempting to ease those as much as possible. The fact that the same telephone numbers are

to be used for people to avail themselves of the service is an important benefit.

I very much hope that the service will continue and go forward. It is absolutely crucial to underline the fact that we are still putting in the same resource. This is not a cut. It is not, as some people predicted, a case of trying to save money. It is about a more effective and efficient service as we go forward and begin to plan for the more permanent arrangements that need to be put in place.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister confirm to the House that the period from the termination of the contracts until the introduction of the full scheme will be as brief as possible to give advantage to the other members?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. It is important that the transition is as seamless as possible, and that is obviously my intention. The current arrangements, which run until the end of March, will continue to be delivered by the current operators. Thereafter, Disability Action, in conjunction with the other providers, will take on the service. I very much hope that it will be seamless and that people will not encounter any serious or significant difficulty in availing themselves of these very necessary services.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his statement. Does the Minister foresee any service or job losses as a result of his announcement? Will he do everything that he can to maintain the current level of service in both areas?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. He raises the very important point of how staff involved in the current operation will fare. We very much want to protect them and encourage the protection of their terms and conditions. We envisage that the new provider, Disability Action, will need to avail itself of the services of drivers and associated staff. We will co-operate with staff fully to ensure that that happens as seamlessly and effortlessly as possible.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement. The Minister knows that I have a long-standing interest in this area. He referred to TUPE. Can he assure me that clients will see pretty much the same faces behind the wheel so that there is no change for them and no disruption in the way that the system operates for clients and drivers?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Indeed, I pay tribute to him for his interest in this particular issue, on which he has made long-standing representations on a constituency basis and otherwise.

It is my strong sense that the same drivers and the same people will be involved in providing these important services. I pay tribute to the drivers and to the staff who have provided the services over the years and will hopefully continue to do so. I very much expect that there will be little or no change in many of the personnel involved in this service.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Minister, I thank you for your statement. The Door-2-Door Transport service continued the practice of taking people to hospital appointments while, in my area and other areas like mine, rural transport was stopped from doing that. Will the new arrangement you have set up carry on the practice of taking people to hospital appointments? Will you look at reinstating that service in rural areas where you have withdrawn it?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. It is important to stress that the Door-2-Door Transport service was never envisaged as being purely a health service transport service. It is important that we realise that it provides a service to members of the community with particular access needs for a range of activities.

I am aware of the issue that he raises on a continual basis. Of course, as we move forward to prepare for the more permanent arrangements, I will look again at that. The initial rationale behind Door-2-Door Transport was not to provide simply a health service transport service. It is more than that, it needs to be more than that and it is important that it continues to be more than that.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he confirm that, under the new delivery of the scheme, there will be no difference in the cost to the service user? Furthermore, what account will the review that is being analysed in relation to the transport provision take of the interdepartmental working group that is looking at health and education transport provision? Is there any scope in that review for providing a much more effective and cost-efficient service?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. Indeed, she makes a very good suggestion. Of course we are already aware of that interdepartmental review, which will, and should, feed into any pilot scheme that we come up with or any new proposal for the permanent arrangements that need to be put in place.

Certainly, as I have clearly indicated today, there is no reduction in the budget for the service. I want to stress and reiterate that. This has the potential to improve the service for the people who use it and perhaps to add to the numbers who use it. I hope that those are the positive outcomes of the announcement today.

Mr Storey: As someone who used public transport this morning to travel to the House, I would not be as commending as the Member for East Londonderry Mr Dallat about the Minister and his operations. The train was excellent, but the bus was atrocious, because I arrived here late.

However, moving on to his statement, is the Minister aware that, under the current regulations, organisations such as the rural community transport partnerships are unable to apply for contracts? That has inhibited them, as partnerships, from growing. Will he look at every possible means of expanding the rural community transport provision and providers to include organisations such as North Coast Community Transport, which provides an invaluable service to my constituency?

11.00 am

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I am genuinely sorry for his transport difficulties this morning, although he is someone who I think missed the bus a long time ago. *[Laughter.]* He makes a good point, and, as we go forward, we will give consideration to how the overall service can best provide rural and urban transport.

Mr P Ramsey: Minister, I am chair of the all-party group on disability, and a number of your colleagues are on that group. You will be aware that this issue is regularly on the agenda. I strongly welcome the statement, particularly in the context of Disability Action taking on the additional work, which it has the capacity to do. Can the Minister assure the House and all those with disabilities across Northern Ireland that a consistent service will be available to all existing users?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member, and I pay tribute to his long-standing interest in the issue. In bringing forward the changes, we do so with the intention that the maximum level of service cannot only be maintained but improved. That is what we seek and what we are about. That is why there is no cut in the budget for this and why we believe it to be an important resource. I very much hope that Disability Action and the operators will have success in not only maintaining services but improving them.

Mr Allister: Is the Minister, in his statement, really announcing a soft landing to end a separate urban door-to-door scheme and bring about its fusion into the rural scheme? Is that really what he is saying? Given the role of Disability Action, has it been engaged on foot of a single tender action?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I have a sense that the Member sees conspiracy in almost every statement, but perhaps that is being overly cynical.

The situation needed to be addressed because the time period for the single tender was to expire at the end of March. It was sensible to review the situation and see how it could work more effectively and efficiently. That is why we have come up with the proposal. Disability Action will now be the main contractor.

It is an interim solution, and it is my intention and that of the Department to use pilot schemes to bring forward a more permanent and equally a more effective and efficient scheme. This interim measure is because of the very real time pressure and deadlines of the end of March. Decisions had to be taken, and the decision that I outlined today is in the best interests of Door-2-Door Transport and community transport generally.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to outline to the Assembly the Executive's decisions for the future of the means-tested education maintenance allowance (EMA).

The EMA scheme was jointly introduced in September 2004 by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education (DE). The main purpose of the scheme is to encourage young people from lower-income backgrounds to remain in post-compulsory education at school or college. EMA supports key Programme for Government priorities to close the gap in educational underachievement between those who are least and most disadvantaged and improve the participation of young people in education. At present, it consists of weekly payments of £30, £20 or £10 depending on household income and bonus payments totalling £300 per annum.

Findings from a recent joint review of EMA had highlighted that the scheme was not as effectively targeted as it could be. Over 60% of students who received EMA indicated that they would have remained in education even if they had not received it. On the other hand, the review identified cases where EMA had made a real difference for retention.

It is important to say that, from the outset, both I and the Minister of Education were committed to the retention of the EMA and were determined that young people from lower-income families would continue to be assisted to stay in education and training. Nevertheless, good governance meant that we had to address the issue concerning how effectively the current scheme was targeted.

At the Executive meeting on 5 July 2012, it was agreed that a public consultation and associated equality impact assessment on the future of the EMA scheme should be undertaken with a view to implementing any agreed changes from the academic year 2013-14. On 30 July 2012, the public consultation was launched, and it ran for 14 weeks until 2 November. It contained five options for the future structure of EMA that had been considered and costed in light of the need to better target the scheme and to find certain financial savings.

A number of key findings emerged from the review and consultation. The majority of respondents wanted EMA retained in some

form and were in favour of a single payment of £30 a week. The current bonus awards of £300 per annum — agreed through the learning agreements that learners sign each year — are recognised by a substantial proportion of stakeholders as improving completion of coursework, timekeeping and behaviour, although these outcomes are not the primary objectives of the scheme. Although a substantial proportion of stakeholders supported the retention of the bonus payments, the majority of respondents agreed that the £300 annual bonus payments ought to be reduced.

A number of options included in the consultation document considered a household income threshold of £16,190 in line with the free school meals criteria. However, it was noted that this threshold was much lower than the current EMA threshold of £22,930 and the EMA thresholds in Scotland and Wales, and it was concluded that a threshold at this level would exclude too many disadvantaged families and young people from the scheme. A number of respondents to the consultation, including the National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI), suggested the addition of a second household income threshold for families with more than one dependent child, in line with the Scottish and Welsh EMA schemes.

I can now advise the Assembly that, taking these various factors into account, the Executive have agreed that the scheme should be better targeted to more effectively support families most in need. To that end, they have determined that the £20 and £10 bands should be withdrawn and be replaced by a single band of £30 a week, payable to children from households with income of £20,500 or less with one dependent child, or £22,500 or less where there are two or more dependent children. The implementation of these changes will result in a 21% improvement of targeting, based on the numbers forecast to be eligible for the scheme in 2014-15, and a 10% improvement on current numbers.

The Executive also considered whether the bonus payments should continue to be payable under the scheme. They noted that around 60% of EMA co-ordinators in the learning centres saw considerable value in the bonuses. They believed that bonuses made a difference to behaviour, timekeeping and completion of coursework and that the removal of the bonuses could potentially have a negative impact on the motivation and performance of learners and could result in an impact on the participation of older learners and, in turn, on retention rates of the scheme.

The responses to the public consultation on the future of EMA demonstrated that there was support for the retention of bonus payments, with almost 70% of respondents stating that bonus payments of at least £100 per annum should be retained. The Education Minister, in particular, is also very keen to retain bonuses as part of the scheme, given the important contribution that bonuses have made in incentivising young people to attend school or college and complete the necessary coursework.

Consequently, the Executive have concluded that bonuses should be retained in the scheme, albeit in a modified form, to ensure successful delivery of the core objectives of the scheme and the wider Executive priorities for tackling disadvantage as articulated in the Programme for Government, including closing the gap in educational achievement and participation rates.

The Executive have, therefore, agreed to continue to include a bonus element in the scheme comprising a £200 annual bonus payable in two tranches. This represents a reduction of £100 in the current £300 annual bonus. I emphasise that no bonuses are payable in similar schemes in Great Britain, so, once again, the Executive have developed a solution to address the differing needs of the population here compared with elsewhere.

The new scheme, excluding bonus payments, will produce savings sufficient to meet the target set by the Executive. The bonus payments are largely being met by a transfer of resources from the Department of Education, with a smaller contribution from my Department. Although the budget and responsibility for the implementation of EMA rest with my Department, it is a cross-cutting issue with the Department of Education, and I am pleased to have reached a very satisfactory conclusion with the Education Minister. I am also grateful for the support of the Executive, and especially the assistance of the Finance Minister, in reaching this conclusion.

That decision now represents an appropriately targeted and financially sustainable way forward on education maintenance allowance, and I commend it to the House.

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I received a briefing from the Minister earlier this morning about this statement, and I conveyed to him then, as I convey to him now, that I am disappointed to have received the statement in this manner. The Committee can find no record

that it received a summary of responses to the consultation, as is normal practice. I am quite sure that the Committee would have wanted to talk about this matter in some detail. It is certainly a matter of public interest, and I am, frankly, shocked that it should be brought to the Assembly as a *fait accompli*.

There are significant questions that we want to ask, which the format of this debate does not permit. However, I have a specific question. The Minister says:

"The implementation of these changes will result in a 21% improvement of targeting".

What does that mean exactly? Does it mean that 21% fewer people will receive EMA support, or how has he arrived at those figures?

When I look at the impact of the changes in the threshold, I find that this will affect hard-pressed families in Northern Ireland. I would like the Minister to tell us how many children and parents will be affected. What saving, because this appears to be a cost-saving exercise, does he seek to make from that?

I conclude by saying to the Minister that this is not the appropriate way to go about making major changes that have financial implications for the people of Northern Ireland. The Committee should have been properly consulted. Had it been, it would have consulted properly and engaged with the Department. I suspect that Committee members present will be extremely disappointed in the way that this has been handled.

Dr Farry: The Chair of the Committee has made a number of points, and I will try to respond to all of them. First, he spoke of procedures. This is an Executive decision that was taken last week at the Executive meeting and which we are reporting to the House today. As such, this is the first opportunity that we have had to report on the Executive's decision. It is appropriate that I come to the Assembly to make this announcement, and we are happy to be here and answer questions on the issue.

The issue is a joint one between my Department and the Department of Education, and we have to formulate a joint position for the two Departments taking the issue forward, in addition to formulating a common position for the Executive. A public consultation ran for 14 weeks in 2012. At no stage did the Committee express any view on that consultation or seek to give its views to the Department.

The Chair of the Committee is probably the last person in the Chamber who wishes to take direction from anyone, least of all those in his party. It is important to acknowledge that the Committee sets its own agenda and seeks information from the Department on issues.

11.15 am

From standing back and observing over the past 18 months, I have been amazed that some of the critically important issues on which the Department sought to engage the Committee have not been picked up by it. We have had to ask several times, although there have been other matters that the Committee has become involved with intensively. I respect its role, but it is for the Committee to set its agenda.

If the Committee wants to have a dialogue with us about setting a forward work programme, we are more than happy to do so. In that light, we are happy for officials to attend the Committee in the near future to give it a full briefing on the outworkings of the consultation and a summary of the responses received. However, I stress that that was a decision for the Executive to take, and we are reporting what was decided.

This is good news for students and young people in Northern Ireland, and we should not forget that. We are announcing a scheme for education maintenance allowance that is better than that in any other jurisdiction in the United Kingdom, and it is important that we bear that in mind. England has abolished EMA entirely and replaced it with a bursary scheme, with expenditure at a third of the previous level. Our scheme is similar to those in Scotland and Wales, but no bonus is available in those jurisdictions. We are continuing to invest in a bigger and better way than other jurisdictions.

We acknowledge that we needed to ensure that the scheme was better targeted. We have identified situations in which it has not made a difference to people's decisions to stay in education. That money could be better employed in supporting young people, as opposed to using it in ineffectively. We have now achieved better targeting of the scheme, with the money going to those who will benefit most from it.

With the additional contributions from the Department of Education, there is only a small reduction in the overall level of EMA expenditure in the Budget. However, those resources will be concentrated in fewer hands. Around a quarter of young people in Northern Ireland receive EMA, and in that quarter we will see a reduction of around 10% in the current

figures. However, if we look ahead to the projection of recipients, there will be a reduction of around 21% in 2014-15. I again stress that this is an investment in young people, and it sits alongside all the other expenditure to support young people.

Mr Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I thank the Minister for bringing the statement to the House. However, I am disappointed that the Committee did not see the responses or anything else prior to it coming before the House, nor had it any opportunity to discuss it further. I listened to the Minister's criticisms, but I would have thought it good practice for the Committee to have seen the responses, as it will have a number of questions to ask when it sits again.

How many students stand to lose out because the £10 and the £20 band thresholds will be done away with?

Dr Farry: I thank the Deputy Chair for his comments. The Committee will receive a summary of the consultation responses in the very near future. We will ensure that that takes place so that the Executive's decision can be further scrutinised in Committee. However, I stress again that we are reporting an Executive decision to the Assembly.

We estimate that, for 2011-12, there were 22,367 recipients of the £30 band, 2,338 recipients of the £20 band and 1,759 recipients of the £10 band. In essence, we are removing around 4,000 from the current range of EMA recipients.

Given the current economic situation, there is obvious upward pressure on numbers receiving EMA. We project that, by 2014-15, about 26,000 people will be eligible to receive the £30 band.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I welcome the announcement, the agreement at Executive level and the certainty that that creates for students. I am also happy to see the Minister give some sort of acknowledgement that the five options that were put forward last July were unacceptable. That was the view of my party when we responded. However, I support the Chair's comments in respect of how this has been handled procedurally. That has been disappointing, and the fact that an urgent oral statement has been made raises questions. This is all based on a flawed review with a small

percentage of respondents that was then presented as the view of the majority of the student population, which is not the case. Will the Minister outline the predicted reduction in the annual EMA budget as a result of this agreement? What efforts have been made by DEL to find those savings elsewhere in the Department? I would also like to know whether the Committee was ever made aware that NUS-USI put in an alternative proposal.

Dr Farry: In respect of the consultation being flawed, I remind Mr Flanagan that it was a joint consultation by my Department and the Department of Education. It was signed up to by two Ministers from two different political parties, and it was endorsed by the Executive. I do not think that the counterproposals from NUS-USI have been reported to the Committee because we have not yet received a summary of responses, but the Minister of Education and I have had meetings with NUS-USI and have engaged with it on its proposals. Equally, as an organisation, it has sought to engage with a wide range of MLAs. So, although that engagement may not have happened with the Committee, I would be surprised if individual Members were not aware of what NUS-USI was seeking to achieve.

In respect of the financing, there was a requirement from the Executive to find certain savings in relation to EMA. All the options in the original consultation paper were costed on that basis. We have ensured that the core of the new EMA scheme is within those parameters. When I say "the core scheme", that is minus the issue of the bonus, which is being funded by a transfer from the Department of Education to my Department's baseline that will be addressed in due course by the Finance Minister. My Department is also making a smaller contribution towards that. The EMA scheme is now financially sustainable. I want to give the message that any uncertainty around EMA is now over, and we will have something that we can stand over in the coming years.

Mrs Overend: From memory of my time on the Committee for Employment and Learning a number of months ago, I recall that the analysis of EMA failed to accurately portray the reasons why it failed certain students. How does the Minister propose to measure its success, going forward? Can the Minister provide the exact cost to the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning and the difference in cost?

Dr Farry: We measure the success or otherwise of the scheme primarily in terms of

the retention of young people in secondary education or further education. A second element is the level of achievement that those students attain due to the support that comes from EMA. There was some inefficiency in the scheme in that the majority of young people indicated that, while EMA was useful, it was not making a difference to their decision to stay in education. To an extent, that will still be with us under a revised scheme. We are not going to fully address that issue no matter how we reorientate the scheme.

The current scheme for EMA costs about £27 million per annum. The revised scheme, short of the issue of the bonus, addresses and identifies savings of about £5 million, which slightly more than meets the recurring pressure of about £4.6 million that the Executive have presented us with. The cost of the £200 bonuses will be £2.1 million in 2013-14 and a recurring cost of £4.1 million thereafter. The Department of Education is paying £1.85 million in 2013-14 and £3.6 million thereafter. My Department is paying £250,000 in 2013-14 and £500,000 recurring.

Mr P Ramsey: I, like other members of the Committee, particularly the Chair and Deputy Chair, want to express my genuine concern. This is the most important subject for families and young people across Northern Ireland. It is hugely disappointing that the Committee — a scrutiny Committee — did not have the opportunity to look at those consultations. The consultation in itself presented a bogus choice between one group and another, and that was part of our submission to the Department.

The Committee has been engaging with this subject matter since the commencement of the consultation. There are very few weeks when we are not talking around the edges of EMA, so I am surprised to hear from you even the criticism of the Committee. If you have something to say to the Committee, you should say it to the Committee and not in the House. I have to say that.

The format does not present us with an opportunity to engage effectively and properly in challenging this. For example, Minister, Include Youth continuously presented a very good case about vulnerable young people in terms of making a special case for them, as is done in Scotland, to bring them in through the EMA. What have you done in those circumstances?

Dr Farry: Mr Ramsey's comments confirm some of my ongoing frustrations with the situation. First of all, the Committee may well

have had an interest in EMA but there has been nothing to stop it seeking information and updates from the Department at any stage. This has been a very live issue over the past six months and longer. We have not received correspondence or requests for information from the Committee on this issue, and we receive a lot of requests for information from the Committee on other matters on an ongoing basis.

Second of all, what we have produced is, actually, a good scheme for Northern Ireland and a better scheme than in other jurisdictions in the rest of the UK. Let us also remember that we are doing a lot of other things to invest in young people. Mr Ramsey referred to the campaign by Include Youth for a form of EMA for those who are on community and voluntary-type schemes supported by the European social fund that have been engaging with the issue of NEETs. There was a debate in the Assembly on that issue many months ago, calling on me to act in that matter. I am disappointed that I am being asked what I have done on that, having announced several months ago as part of the NEETs strategy that we have introduced a training allowance for young people who are on those schemes. So, the proposal from Include Youth has been addressed under a quicker timetable than Include Youth and other organisations asked of the Department. We have done what Mr Ramsey asked months ago, so I am at a loss as to why I have been asked today why I have not done it.

Mr P Ramsey: It is EMA I am talking about.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's statement and his continuing efforts to make sure that young people get the opportunity to further advance themselves. I welcome the fact that a number of students were in the Public Gallery to hear what was being said. How does the new system compare with the proposals from the National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McCarthy for his comments. I stress that we have had a positive engagement with the NUS-USI. The proposals that we have outlined from the Executive are greater in terms of investment than the consultation response from the NUS/USI proposed. So, we have actually gone further as an Executive than the students asked us to in what was, I have to say, the sensible and realistic response that came from NUS-USI. We have followed through on their proposal for the retention of the £30 allowance. We have

taken on board their comments about a split differential threshold for low-income households with one child versus those with two or more children. We have listened to what they had to say about the bonus and gone further than what was proposed. That is why it is important we get the message out that we have continued to invest in young people.

Mr Ramsey made some comments from a sedentary position after I had sat down. He was talking about EMA. What we have announced for young people through the NEETs projects is EMA-equivalent. We may not be branding it as EMA, but it is precisely what was asked of us by the sector by way of a training allowance.

11.30 am

Mr Ross: I share the concern of other Committee members that the Committee was not kept in the loop on this, but I will perhaps buck the trend by being a little more positive about the content of the statement. I do not think that an EMA system in which 60% of recipients of the payment would stay in education anyhow can be considered a good use of public money. Therefore, I think reforms that target the most vulnerable to ensure that they get a payment to stay in education and save the public purse money are a positive development.

I want to point out something that the Minister said in his statement. He said there was a fear that the:

"removal of ... bonuses could potentially have a negative impact on the motivation and performance of learners".

Does the Minister agree that the motivation for young people to stay in education should be to gain a good qualification to secure a job and get on in life, not, primarily, because they get paid to do so?

Dr Farry: I agree with the comments from Mr Ross on the overall design of the scheme and the rationale for students. It is important to recognise that EMA has played a positive role in supporting students from low-income households and enabling them to have the freedom to attend school or college without the same degree of financial worry. It is important to stress, of course, that EMA is not part of the formal welfare system in this country; it is an entirely different type of initiative. That has been, to some extent, the outworkings of that. At the same time, we should seek to avoid a

situation where people, particularly young people, do something only because there is a financial incentive for it, whether that is to engage, through the EMA, or go on work experience when they are unemployed. Finance may well be an important consideration, but it should not be the sole consideration. The more important consideration is that young people understand the importance of education, training and work experience in building their career. It is only through upskilling and experience that young people will be competitive in an increasingly difficult and challenging labour market. I think that most young people understand that and are responding positively to the initiatives that are being put forward by my Department and others.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. I am sure that many students across the North do so too, as it brings some relief, especially considering the bonuses. This remains a vital resource for many of our young people who wish to remain in education, not the motivation for doing so in the first place. When you consider that we have been able to retain EMA and keep university fees frozen at the current level, there can be no doubt that we have the most affordable and supportive arrangements for students of anywhere else on these islands. I especially welcome the contribution from the Education Minister, John O'Dowd, on protecting the bonus payments and ultimately ensuring the success of the scheme for local students. Look at what the Tories wanted to do and have done in England and Wales: abolish the scheme entirely. In Scotland, they have not been able to retain the bonuses. So, today's statement is to be welcomed. How will the Minister monitor the outworkings of the changes to EMA so that they do not negatively impact on the core aim of the scheme?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Hazzard for his comments and the context that he has set. It is important to reflect on that for a moment. Overall, this Executive are investing and doing more for young people on a pro rata basis than any of their counterparts. Mr Hazzard referred to the freezing of tuition fees for local students at local universities. That has already made a clear difference to people choosing the option of higher education. We also have a strategy for widening participation in higher education to ensure that we have a proper, fair, balanced profile of students coming forward and encourage under-represented sections of the community in Northern Ireland to access higher

education. We then have the youth employment scheme, where we also invest more on a pro rata basis than our counterparts elsewhere. From a standing start, we have now created the new budget to invest in NEETs, and a range of programmes have been launched over the past number of months as part of a new NEETs strategy. That includes a training allowance for young people who were previously on the European social fund-supported schemes. What we are doing on EMA, which is a further investment in young people, sits very well within that context. Through this, the scheme will be better targeted, so that the young people most in need of EMA support will continue to receive it, and it is not being withdrawn at all. We are well ahead of our counterparts in that regard.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I thank the Minister for his statement to the House today. I think that members of the Education Committee will certainly view with great interest the scheme as proposed. There are many elements to it. It is interesting that almost 70% of respondents stated that they wanted bonuses retained and that that is actually what the Minister has done, which he informed the House of today. I think that most Members will welcome the fact that the revised scheme does not focus all entitlement for assistance solely on students entitled to free school meals, which is an issue that the Education Committee has looked at on a number of occasions.

Given the Minister's answer to the previous question about what is being done for young people and in light of this scheme and the focus to ensure that we target our resources appropriately, does the Minister now feel that it is time to revisit with the Education Minister an issue that the Education Minister decided to put in the bin, which is a 14-19 policy? That is a key component to assisting schemes such as EMA and others that he has outlined in the House today.

Dr Farry: Again, I thank Mr Storey for his comments. I think that what he is alluding to is that what we are doing on EMA is only one part of a much bigger picture in how we support young people. It is important that we co-ordinate what happens in further education and in our secondary education system.

Yesterday, we announced the apprenticeship and youth training review, which, with respect to my Department's functions, is a further investment in young people. I remain happy to engage with the Education Minister on these issues, be it the more tight, discrete entitlement

framework or a much broader 14-19 strategy. It is important that form follows function and that we ensure that we take a holistic approach to the interests of young people; that they have access to the best courses, no matter where they are provided, and the best teaching and advice, no matter where that is provided; and that we incentivise them to stay on education and engage with it.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's statement and note that he is back in the comfort zone of the Executive.

The Minister will, of course, be aware that far too many people leave school without any basic qualifications and that many of them emigrate to other countries with no skills. Does he agree that it is critical that he engage with the widest possible political spectrum when discussing the future of such people, particularly those who have been failed by the secondary system and desperately need to stay on at school to acquire the skills that will give them the dignity of a career that they will not have with no skills at all.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Dallat for his comments. I am perfectly comfortable where I am.

First of all, it is important to recognise that the Executive have recognised the importance of upskilling across a very broad front. Certainly, within my responsibilities, we have a wide range of schemes and initiatives that seek to address those issues. I responded to Mr Storey by stressing the importance of collaboration and co-operation between my Department and the Department of Education on how we take those issues forward. Although it is not my direct responsibility to respond for the Department of Education, it is important to acknowledge that there are firm and quite challenging targets in the Programme for Government for attainment at GCSE, particularly in maths and English. It is important that we ensure that as many young people as possible are trained in the core competencies and that, in turn, we have a training system that picks up and gives fresh opportunities to young people who, unfortunately, leave school without those basic qualifications.

Mr Allister: The Minister likes to boast that he comes from a party that values, indeed exemplifies, consensus, yet, today, he has belligerently displayed a cat-and-mouse attitude with the Committee and dodged the Chairman's question, which was this: why was there no feedback to the Committee on the outcome of the consultation? He tells us today that he will

provide it now, after the event, without the Committee asking him to provide it. If he can provide it so magnanimously after the event, why did he never think to provide it before the event?

Dr Farry: The tone introduced in response to my statement was not initiated by me, but, if people want to make comments and go off into procedural matters rather than focus on the substance, that is their choice, and I will respond to and address those comments. I believe that I was clear in stating the position earlier, but, for the benefit of Mr Allister, I will state it again. First, this was a matter that went before the Executive; the Executive reached a position last Thursday; and I am here to report today. I would have been here on Monday, but there were issues with the Student Loans Company and implementation that we had to address first. Secondly, this is a joint matter for my Department and the Department of Education, and it was a joint consultation by the two Departments. It is, therefore, a cross-cutting issue for the Executive and between the two Departments. I make a commitment that we will brief the Committee on the responses to the consultation as soon as we can. I am sure that Mr Storey, as Chair of the Education Committee, is equally looking forward to a similar briefing from his Minister on the issue.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the retention of the education maintenance allowance. I am well aware of the real difference that it makes to young people, students and families across Northern Ireland. Despite the political showmanship of Mr Allister, I welcome the fact that, at first glance, the new model appears to reflect quite a number of responses to the public consultation. How will the EMA link with other measures being taken to ensure that all our young people have an equal opportunity to achieve their educational potential? How will these changes be communicated to young people and families across Northern Ireland?

Dr Farry: I thank my colleague for his comments. That is another reason why it is important that we made the statement today. We have given an assurance to young people, particularly those from a low-income household, that they can have surety about the future of EMA. I appreciate that there was some concern in the wider community about the matter.

EMA is part of a much wider suite of policies that we have to support people in education. Again, I highlight what the Executive have done

on tuition fees and our strategy on widening participation. All of that is about encouraging young people to stay in education, to progress in education and to consider a range of flexible pathways through which they can achieve higher skills. As we conclude the debate, it is worth stressing to the House that we need to invest in a major upskilling of the population in Northern Ireland. We know what we have to achieve by 2020 if we are to be internationally competitive, so we need to encourage more and more young people to invest in their skills and their future. Their future is our future.

11.45 am

Executive Committee Business

Water and Sewerage Services
(Amendment) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Danny Kennedy, to move the Consideration Stage of the Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the three clauses for the Question on stand part, followed by the long title.

Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Budget Bill: Second Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 18/11-15] be agreed.

Accelerated passage of the Bill through the Assembly is necessary to ensure Royal Assent as early as possible in March. That provides legal authority for Departments and other public bodies to draw down and spend cash and use the resources in the Bill in 2012-13 to ensure the continuity of public services into 2013-14.

As the House is by now well aware, the preparation of the detailed Estimates and the related Budget Bill under consideration today is a difficult undertaking given the timetable involved. The Bill and the Estimates must reflect the latest financial monitoring position, which was announced to the Assembly on 22 January, and yet the Bill requires Royal Assent before the end of the financial year. It is no easy task to bring the Bill to the Assembly in that small window of opportunity. I am, therefore, grateful that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has confirmed, in line with Standing Order 42, that it is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals in the Bill and is content that the Bill proceed by accelerated passage. I welcome and appreciate the assistance of the Committee in that matter.

Given that today's debate is on the content of the Budget Bill, I shall now briefly outline the purpose of the legislation and draw attention to its main provisions. The debate follows the Bill's First Stage yesterday, which, in turn, followed the debate and approval of the Supply resolutions for the 2012-13 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2013-14 Vote on Account. The purpose of the Bill is to give legislative effect to the 2012-13 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2013-14 Vote on Account, which were laid before the Assembly on 4 February 2012. Copies of the Budget Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members today.

I do not intend to spend time merely repeating the detail that I gave Members yesterday. However, in accordance with the nature of the Second Stage debate envisaged under Standing Order 32 and for the benefit of Members, I will summarise briefly the Bill's main features. Its purpose is to authorise the issue

of £15,459,758,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund in 2012-13. That contains an additional £268,502,000 since the Main Estimates were presented last June. The cash is drawn down on a daily basis as needed from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund, which is managed by my Department on behalf of the Executive.

The Bill also authorises the use of resources totalling £16,572,965,000 by Departments and certain other bodies. That is some £697,463,000 more than was approved in the Main Estimates in June. Members will note that the amounts are detailed in part II of each departmental spring Supplementary Estimate for 2012-13.

In addition, the Bill revises, for 2012-13, the limit on the amount of accruing resources that may be directed by my Department to be used for the purposes in column 1 of schedule 2. That limit includes both operating and non-operating accruing resources — in other words, current and capital receipts — and amounts to £2,270,977,000.

Under section 8 of the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, a direction on the actual use of the accruing resources will be provided by way of a DFP minute that will be laid before the Assembly in March, following Royal Assent to the Bill. Therefore, the Bill not only authorises the use of resources but authorises accruing resources, bringing the resources for use by Departments and other public bodies to almost £19 billion.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I would like to get through the statement, and then there will be opportunities.

The sums to be issued from the Consolidated Fund are to be appropriated by each Department or public body for services as listed in column 1 of schedule 1 to the Bill, while the resources, including accruing resources, are to be used for the purposes specified in column 1 of schedule 2 to the Bill. The amounts now requested for 2012-13 supersede the Vote on Account in the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2012, passed this time last year, and the Main Estimate provision in the Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012, passed by the Assembly in June 2012.

The Bill also authorises a Vote on Account for 2013-14 of cash of £7,136,563,000 and resources of £7,641,877,000 to allow the flow of cash and resources to continue to public services in the early months of 2013-14 until the

Main Estimates and the related Budget Bill are approved in June this year. Again, the cash and resources are to be appropriated and used for the services and purposes set out in column 1 of schedules 3 and 4 respectively.

Finally, clause 5 authorises temporary borrowing by the Department of Finance and Personnel at a ceiling of £3,568,281,000 for 2013-14. That is approximately half of the sum authorised in clause 4(1) for issue out of the Consolidated Fund for 2013-14 and is a normal safeguard for any temporary deficiency arising in the fund. I must stress to the House that clause 5 does not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power, but it enables my Department to run an efficient cash management regime.

In conclusion, there is little more that I can usefully add on the detail of the Budget Bill, but I will be happy to deal with any points of principle or details that Members wish to raise. I will endeavour to answer questions relating to the wider financial environment, as I suspect that Members may not adhere too closely to the nuances of the Bill.

Mr D Bradley (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel):

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím an babhta seo mar Leas-Chathaoirleach an Choiste Airgeadais agus Pearsanra. I dtús báire, ba mhaith liom a rá go gcuireann an Coiste fáilte roimh an Bhille. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I rise as Deputy Chair of the Finance and Personnel Committee to speak on the Bill before us today.

Tugann an Bille atá os ár gcomhair údarás dlíthiúil le haghaidh caiteachais de réir mar atá leagtha amach i Meastacháin Bhreise an earraigh. As we have heard, the Bill provides statutory authority for expenditure, as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates 2012-13. Lena chois sin, clúdaíonn an Bille an Vóta ar Chuntas a thugann cead do Ranna Rialtais airgead agus áiseanna a chaitheamh go luath sa bhliain 2013-14 go dtí go dtéann na Príomh-Mheastacháin faoi vóta sa Tionól i mí Meithimh seo chugainn. The Bill also includes the Vote on Account, which allows Departments to incur expenditure and use resources in the early part of 2013-14 until the Main Estimates are voted on by the Assembly in June.

Standing Order 42(2) states that accelerated passage may be granted for a Budget Bill provided the Committee for Finance and Personnel is satisfied that it has been appropriately consulted on the public

expenditure proposals in the Bill. On 30 January, departmental officials briefed the Committee and took questions on the Budget Bill, including questions on issues relating to a range of Departments. That evidence session represented the culmination of a process of scrutiny by the Committee of public expenditure issues throughout 2012-13, both for DFP as a Department and at a strategic and cross-departmental level. Following those evidence sessions, the Committee was content to grant accelerated passage to the Bill, and the Chairperson wrote to the Speaker to inform him of the Committee's decision.

During yesterday's debate on the SSEs, the Chair mentioned that DFP officials had explained to the Committee the technical changes that were made through in-year monitoring of resource and capital allocations. The Committee also received assurances that limited headroom had been built into the SSEs for the Department of Health and the Department of Justice. The Department of Health was allowed £15 million of headroom, £2 million of which was for dental services and £13 million for front line health and social care services. The Department of Justice was allowed just over £21 million for further resources to be allocated to the early retirement package for prison officers. Furthermore, officials informed the Committee that the SSE for DETI could be subject to change if the First Minister and the deputy First Minister approved spending for the Titanic signature project. The Committee welcomed the assurances from DFP officials that the headroom in both Departments will be monitored to ensure that allocations are used only for the agreed purposes and that any changes in DETI's SSEs will be updated accordingly.

The Committee welcomes the engagement with the Department on those issues during the quarterly monitoring rounds, and Committee members will continue to prioritise that aspect of their work. I also encourage the other Statutory Committees to continue to monitor closely the financial forecasting and expenditure of their respective Departments for the remainder of this year and during the next financial year to help ensure that underspend is minimised and Departments maximise the impact from available resources.

Idir an dá linn, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, ar son an Choiste tacaím leis an Bhille. In the meantime, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

12.00 noon

Mr Weir: I will not be able to indulge in the linguistic rhetoric of the previous Member to speak. I will try to keep my remarks in one language and keep them focused.

As a more recent recruit to the Finance and Personnel Committee — *[Interruption.]* — or perhaps, as indicated, a returnee to the Finance and Personnel Committee, I am a recidivist who has ended up there after years of absence. If not the outgoing Finance Minister, the incoming one will appreciate the film reference to the much-maligned 'The Godfather: Part III', in which Michael Corleone said that every time he thinks that he has got out, they keep dragging him back in. I feel that I have a somewhat similar relationship with the Finance and Personnel Committee.

As a member of the Committee, I welcome the Budget that is before us. It is a Budget for stability, rather than what happened many years ago, when we had Budgets that ping-ponged about from year to year. This is part of a long-term plan. Indeed, the Budget's parameters were largely set even before the Assembly election. I do not doubt that we will hear many worthy calls in today's debate from Members in all parts of the House who would like to see more expenditure in various financial areas. There is no doubt that worthy statements will be made, and I believe that Departments need to be proactive in debating whether their priorities are right. However, we must all accept that we are operating under a level of financial constraint because of the block grant and some of the cutbacks made by the coalition Government. That limits what we would like to do. I am sure that the Finance Minister would like to spend a lot more money on a range of subjects, but he is prudent, obviously, in looking at how we can live within our means.

Despite that, we are still able to commit £1.3 billion in capital investment, which, in these hard-pressed times, is sustaining the construction industry in particular. Sometimes, the role played by government in achieving that is ignored, but it is very productive. As well as creating a sense of stability, the Budget retains its focus. At the start of this term, the Programme for Government reiterated the concentration on the economy as the number one priority, and I believe that this Budget helps the economy. It does so principally by ensuring that the burden on taxpayers and on businesses is kept to a minimum. The Budget reinforces a number of measures, particularly the effective freezing, in real terms, of the regional rate for domestic and non-domestic ratepayers. Since the Assembly was restored

in 2007, we have ensured that the regional rate increase has been kept at zero or, at most, at the level of inflation. So, businesses and citizens throughout Northern Ireland should be able to look forward yet again to a rate rise that is no greater than inflation. I know of the prudent response of a lot of councils, and it is important, at this stage, that they do not take advantage of that by saying, "Well, because there is not a major rise coming from the Executive, we can simply bump up the rates at a local level". That would be highly irresponsible and would convey the wrong attitude to local traders. Fortunately, I am aware of councils that will keep increases at zero or at a very low level this year.

The Budget contains other measures, in particular rates relief for small businesses, which was pioneered by the Finance Minister. The Finance Minister has been able to extend that this year, so another 3,500 businesses will be able to take advantage of it. We have also seen the rates concession that allows empty premises to be rejuvenated for a business. Indeed, that has already helped to stimulate town centres. Again, that is a question of the Executive delivering for people in terms of the rate burden that is upon them. The funding of that has been mentioned, because it does not come at no cost at all. In many ways, the retail levy on large businesses is not punitive but actually tries to rebalance the rates process and create a more level playing field for both small businesses and the large retail units. Despite many of the dire predictions that were issued some time ago, it has not met with the complications that some people predicted.

While I am on the broader issue of rates, I will point out that it is noticeable that, in respect of domestic rates and, indeed, the overall financial burden on people in Northern Ireland, there is, on average, perhaps a difference of more than £500 from the domestic rates that would have been paid under direct rule. Some of those who are calling for a return to direct rule need to bear that in mind. It is about delivering for people on the ground.

I welcome the recent work that has been done on the RPA to find a package that provides proper funding. We need to realise — this feeds into the Budget — that there has been, both from some in the Chamber and some in the wider sector, a false argument about the balance between local government and central government in paying for that. What we should consistently strive to do and what the Budget strives to do is to get the best possible value for money and the biggest bang for our bucks. We

should not look to spend any money unnecessarily.

As well as looking after the broader business sector and ensuring that there is the minimum burden on it, where we can do so, we should be creative in our economics and ensure that we have properly targeted changes for our budgetary position. Recently, the House welcomed the moves that were made on air passenger duty. That has been a focused reduction. It has not cost the Budget an enormous amount of money but could pay high dividends and, indeed, has been concentrated on where it will actually make a difference. Similarly, as the Executive strive on the issue of corporation tax, that could also, in the long run, be a game changer. It is obviously not before us today.

It is important that money is set aside to try to deal with the most vulnerable in our society and those who are at the edges of poverty. For example, in terms of making a real, long-term change on the ground and the impact of the social investment fund, which will actually try to lift areas out of poverty by way of a strategic, long-term plan, I am glad to see that there is a further commitment to that. I am glad to see that groups that, at times, get ignored through funding streams are catered for. So, for example, as regards dormant bank accounts, there is a particular concentration on children and young people and, particularly, on faith groups, which are sometimes restricted in what they can apply for. It is also the case that, as we move ahead with welfare reform — I appreciate that there are mixed views across the Chamber on welfare reform and that the extent to which we have flexibility is limited — there is a commitment by the Executive to try to ameliorate the worst aspects of welfare reform.

I conclude by referring to one particular area, which came up time and time again and found unanimity. One of the barriers to welfare reform and employability in Northern Ireland is the lack of comparable childcare provision and the lack of affordability. Consequently, while we await the wider announcement of a childcare strategy from OFMDFM fairly soon, I am glad to see the commitment to the childcare strategy in the Budget. At the moment, the money that is ring-fenced there is essentially to pump-prime activity by other Departments. Getting a childcare strategy right from a financial point of view can end up being a win-win for the Executive. It will meet the need to bring us into line with other parts of the United Kingdom, and it will free people up, increase their employability and help to lift them out of poverty.

When you scratch beneath the surface, there is much in the Budget Bill to commend it. I welcome Second Stage and look forward to supporting it later.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his opening comments and the Deputy Chair, Dominic Bradley, for outlining the Committee's position, which he did scrupulously, accurately and fairly. My broad intention is not to repeat that but to examine a number of problems. As Peter Weir indicated, our strategic approach over a four-year Budget period allows for a developmental approach and enables a much more strategic perspective to emerge.

If we consider, for instance, that our number one priority for a number of these Budget periods has been to grow and rebalance the economy, there is the issue of missed targets. There is a pressing need — I am not approaching this on the basis that this is Sinn Féin doing what Sinn Féin would do — for the Assembly to look at whether the same inputs will continue to give us the same outputs. If we do not change the inputs, we need to examine what we have been doing and whether we have all the necessary tools.

Clearly, if we expect the public sector economy to lead to a general economic recovery, we will wait for a very long time. My view is that we should first acknowledge the general malaise in international economies. It was certainly not the public sector that caused those problems, and many of the issues in the private sector are beyond the reach of the Assembly. When it comes to the role of the banks in supporting local enterprise, we have to live with the reality that the accountability mechanism does not reside here. The officials and representatives of the major banks whom we met are acutely aware that they are not accountable to the Assembly. They have a public relations responsibility, which they meet, and they bring in their public relations experts to assist them in that task.

It can be frustrating and difficult to get the outcomes that give assurance and hope to existing businesses and to those who are anxious to develop their entrepreneurial skills and instincts and would look for support from the financial sector to identify that all the necessary leverages exist. It is time that the Assembly looked at that because, if we were to examine our Programme for Government targets over successive mandates, we would clearly see that this is an issue that we come up against time and time again. That results in our falling short of our expectations and does not

justify the view that there is an international recession that we can do nothing about.

This is a time when we should be prepared, working with other Administrations, to look at the pros and cons. We should not be deflected from that course by people waving price tags in front of us. Missed or lost opportunities also come with price tags. As an Assembly, we can learn from other assemblies that are looking at taking on more powers. That will have implications for the block grant, and there are cost factors to be examined. However, as we have a track record of missing targets that we set for ourselves, it is incumbent on us to formulate a different approach.

I make an appeal to the Minister. This Budget represents what has been agreed by us, and I do not cavil about that at all; I support it. The Minister and his Department have steered the other Departments to a path that has ensured its faithful application. There may be variations in performance, but the strategy is the right one. Let us agree in advance and then let us devolve, evolve and make amendments through the various processes that we have developed and that I think will stand up to the test.

12.15 pm

It is at the strategic level that we are being challenged. The time has come at least to begin to discuss that strategic level. Discussing ideas and thinking through processes does not cost any money. It is a question of developing new strategies and approaches if we can. Hopefully, that will find more traction in the Assembly, and, as people move forward, we will begin to examine how we can represent our existing private sector and its potential and, in particular, our young people. Can we develop synergies between, say, the policies of DETI and DEL to ensure that we meet the skills gaps in our workforce that are costing us jobs? I hear news announcements about jobs, clients who are being interviewed, trade missions abroad and whatever, and all of that is sound. However, I would like to see more analysis of why particular investments did not occur or were relocated — sometimes not all that far from here — to see what we might do to amend our approach and get a different outcome. That is my response to what I think is an otherwise sound approach. If we continue our progress in job creation with the same inputs, we will unfortunately continue to get the same outputs.

Mr Cree: I was struck by the Minister's opening comments. They bore a striking resemblance

to my own, so I can only assume that he has got it right.

Yesterday, we approved the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account. The existing legislation that gave authority to spend cash and use resources is now out of date. The new Bill needs to be put in place before the end of the financial year. We have just heard Mr McLaughlin talking about the four-year Budget, and this will complete the second year of the Budget for 2011-15. The Main Estimates for the third year will be voted on in June. That is important, because we are now looking at being three quarters of the way through the Budget. As the Member who spoke previously said, targets need to be achieved. There is little time left in the plan to get it right. Therefore, when we get the detail of the Estimates in June, it is important that we have the full figures on all aspects of the Budget and that they are delivered to Committees in time for them to scrutinise them effectively. That does not always happen.

I share the Minister's concern that Departments are returning high levels of reduced requirements and even bids that have been sought in-year. That is still a major problem that needs to be addressed. I repeat what I said yesterday: more care and good management are needed from Departments in handling their budgets, and that really has to start now.

Another serious development is the Audit Office report on Departments' claimed savings. The report is most scathing and casts major doubts on whether savings were achieved at all. Some two thirds of the cases that the Audit Office examined were not efficiency savings. How does the Minister propose to deal with that situation? Those savings were obviously a significant part of our Budget. Does this mean that the figures will have to be reworked? If those are not genuine efficiency savings, that will have an effect on the total Budget envelope.

I wish to share with the House that, in a reply to a recent question, the Minister of Finance advised me that the Education Minister had told him that the Department of Education would not participate in the savings delivery plan monitoring exercises. That is the same Education Minister who has been attempting to block the financial review process. Minister, can you do anything to move those issues forward, or do the Executive need to do something to achieve an adequate solution to that problem? We were assured at St Andrews that no Minister would be allowed to block any

proceedings, yet here are two major issues that we have difficulties with.

Members will be aware of the difficulties caused by the refusal of the application for a European contribution to the Titanic project. Can the Minister assure the House that the same sum has been allocated to specific projects in the Budget, and can he identify those so that we can be assured that the cash resource will not be lost this year? My understanding is that the money can be used only for existing projects in the Budget if we are to save that £18.2 million.

We are told that the Department has built in enough headroom to safeguard against late underspending this year. At the last count, there was an overprovision of £26 million. Perhaps the Minister could update the House on the latest figure.

Later in the debate, my colleagues will highlight other concerns that the Ulster Unionist Party has about other departmental budgets. I make the point again that it is imperative that we are all aware of the issues in the Budget, the knock-on effects and their implications for the remainder of this year. We must be aware of how important that will be when we deal with the Estimates for the Budget for 2013-14 in June of this year.

Mr Dickson: I, too, support the Bill. I am glad to take part in this debate, following yesterday's discussions on the Supply resolution. I will concentrate on some issues concerning the Department for Regional Development, as I am a member of the relevant Committee, and how they relate to the way in which we approach the Budget generally.

The Department for Regional Development is the largest capital-based Department. The major cuts in capital expenditure in this Budget period present DRD with a significant challenge. The scale of that challenge is even more apparent when one considers the Department's remit for securing transport and water infrastructure and the significant investment that both those areas require. I appreciate that, to an extent, we are still recovering from some of the financial decisions taken under direct rule, but we still have not addressed the historical underinvestment as effectively as possible.

I would be one of the first to welcome additional funding for more sustainable forms of transport. Indeed, I was delighted that, through the extra investment announced in the January monitoring round, extra buses would be provided. However, when it comes to the

general principles with which we approach our Budget, it seems that we do not take the need to invest in public transport sufficiently seriously. When, for example, the Committee for Regional Development scrutinised the draft Programme for Government, we were told that, from the Budget figures presented at that time, bus replacement funding was minimal. It was so minimal, in fact, that the funding allocation for the 2013-14 financial year would have paid for half a bus. Why do we make such small allocations to public transport when formulating the initial Budget, leaving the replacement of buses dependent on whether other Departments spend all the money allocated to them?

I understand that we are a car-dependent society. In fact, we are the second most car-dependent society in Europe. Therefore, we need to provide in the Budget for essential road schemes and maintenance. I also understand that the solution to those problems is not always to throw large sums of money at them, and that we need to use other methods at our disposal to change attitudes about the way in which we travel. For example, we need to encourage more active and sustainable travel to schools, which was the topic of a recent debate in the Chamber. It would be equally wrong to claim that there is no impact from the continuing imbalance in our transport budget. We are still missing the targets for investment in public transport set out in DRD policy documents. That should be a major cause of concern. Our approach to the Budget should be to practise what we preach and back up the agreed targets with appropriate action. Why, for example, do we state in policy documents that we should have a 65:35 balance between roads and public transport investment, yet continue to allocate less than 20% to the latter year after year? Perhaps we need to take the targets set out in policy documents more seriously when putting the Budget together.

We cannot continue to live in denial of the way in which we spend our money, and nowhere is that illustrated more clearly than in how we approach the question of Northern Ireland Water. The House has today voted the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill through to the next stage. When it passes, it will commit the Assembly, the Minister and the Budget to hundreds of millions of pounds of expenditure over the next three years, yet we still have not had a proper discussion about the future of Northern Ireland Water. It certainly was the elephant in the room during the Regional Development Committee's examination of the Bill, and, no doubt, other members of the Committee will share my

frustration and discomfort at having to scrutinise such a Bill with absolutely no idea what the Minister is planning and how that will affect future Budgets. We need, at least, to start by having an honest, open and detailed debate on the future of water and how it is financed in Northern Ireland.

In the economic circumstances that we face, it is particularly important that all spending is extensively scrutinised and can be wholly justified. That is not happening with the funding of our water service and infrastructure. To be honest, we are poorly served by our current policy. We have to approach our finances with maturity. It is no good to keep telling the public that we can afford things that we cannot, and we definitely cannot afford to keep diverting hundreds of millions of pounds from other essential services because some do not want to make difficult decisions about the future governance and financing of our water system. I cannot honestly tell my constituents that, when Budgets go by year after year, the current water arrangements are in their best interests, not when £280 million a year or thereabouts is being taken out of hospital and school budgets to pay for it. We need to address the water issue urgently and to put systems in place that are fair and protect the most vulnerable and do not drain resources from the services on which they most depend. To summarise, when it comes to the Budget, issues need to be addressed, and you do not need to look much further than the DRD budget to identify some of those.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon 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 12.27 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that supplementary questions should not be read.

Roads: Review of Public Administration

1. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions have taken place between his Department and the Department of the Environment regarding responsibility for some of the road network being handed over to the new councils under the review of public administration. (AQO 3373/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): No discussions are taking place regarding responsibility for some of the road network being handed over to the new councils under the review of public administration (RPA).

In September 2009, Executive colleagues agreed a revised list of functions that were identified as being appropriate for transfer to local councils. These included pedestrian zone permits; permitting local events to be held on roads; alley gating; and off-street and on-street parking enforcement. In June 2010, the Executive agreed to reframe the timetable for the reform of local government, which would see the functions transfer by 2015. My Department remains committed to the review of public administration and continues to work closely with colleagues in the Department of the Environment to deliver the objective of the local government reform programme.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he aware of any parcels of ground in adopted areas for which no one accepts responsibility?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. To be fair, it is not directly related to the review of public administration. I am aware, of course, that there are substantial portions of ground all over Northern Ireland where ownership is not established. For a Department such as the Department for Regional Development to

assume or to take under its control the ownership of such portions of land would be expensive and would also bring liabilities that we would have to be very careful about managing.

Mr Hussey: Is the Minister still keen for off-street parking to be devolved to local councils? He referred to a thing called RPA, which I am not very keen to see happening at all. Are you keen for off-street parking to be devolved to local councils?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am indeed very keen to see off-street parking. Local government, in whatever shape or form the councils are in, could perform a useful duty and service on behalf of local ratepayers to manage it. It would give councils the authority to decide on thorny issues such as charging, rates of charge and penalty charge notices. I am interested in that, and I will continue to have discussions not only with the Minister of the Environment but with local councils, if they are so minded to engage on that possible transfer.

Mr P Ramsey: In the Minister's initial response, he said that it had been decided that it was appropriate for powers to be devolved in certain areas such as residential parking, alley gating and, possibly, road safety initiatives through traffic calming. Is it not the case that local government can play a meaningful part, in that it is the right place for accountability and the right place to which to devolve those responsibilities, even much earlier than anticipated?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question, and he made a valid point. Issues such as pedestrian zone permits, local events held on roads — presumably aside from parades and other possibly contentious issues — alley gating, off-street and on-street parking could usefully be transferred to local government, where local knowledge would be best employed.

Park-and-ride Facilities: South Antrim

2. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of his recent announcement on the park-and-ride facility at Ballyhenry/Sandyknowes roundabout, whether his Department has considered any further sites in the south Antrim area. (AQO 3374/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's park-and-ride programme board is in the process of finalising

a strategic programme for the delivery of park-and-ride sites between 2013 and 2015. The draft programme includes proposals for two sites in the South Antrim constituency. One proposal is for the construction of a large park-and-ride site at Ballymartin Road, Templepatrick, and the other proposal is to extend the existing park-and-ride site at the Paradise Walk/Antrim Road roundabout.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. What deliberations has the Department for Regional Development had with Invest NI about what I call "the green elephant", which is the Global Point site at Corr's Corner? Since it was purchased, some 130 acres have been lying with absolutely nothing on them for 22 years

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am aware of the Corr's Corner site that he speaks of, and, obviously, some discussions need to be ongoing with other Departments about it. No conclusions have yet been reached, but we will continue to look at it as a potential site. Certainly, we are still in the early stages of its development.

Mr Kinahan: I apologise for giving the Minister a crick in his neck by asking him a question from directly behind him. How many additional park-and-ride spaces have been made available in the past two years? Will he look at other places in south Antrim in time to see whether there are other places where we can have park-and-ride facilities?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I trust him implicitly, even though he is behind me. I am sure that he is behind me all the way.

The good news for the Member and the House is that over 1,000 additional park-and-ride and park-and-share spaces have been provided in the past two years. That is an increase of over one quarter of the total number available. Of course, we continue to look at and to identify sites not only in south Antrim but elsewhere throughout Northern Ireland. We will continue to do so, because park-and-ride and park-and-share facilities have the potential to bring about a modal shift in how people travel, particularly by car. I think that the ability to park and ride and to park and share is increasingly seen as a huge benefit. So, we will continue to look at potential sites, including in the south Antrim area.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas

leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Now that we have him on the subject of park-and-ride facilities, is he aware of the efforts that have been made for the procurement of a park-and-ride site on the A6 at Dungiven?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and for his dogged pursuance of the A6 issue, whether that is for a scheme to improve the road itself or to add park-and-ride facilities. Of course, for such a major scheme, we would seek to explore opportunities for park-and-ride or park-and-share facilities. I am not directly aware of the current situation on the identification of sites at the moment, but I undertake to write to the Member and update him.

Mr Eastwood: I welcome the Minister's commitment to park-and-ride schemes. Further to that, will his Department be supporting park-and-ride schemes in the city of Derry during the 2013 City of Culture celebrations?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I was pleased last week to open a new park-and-ride facility and park-and-share facility at Drumahoe, which serves the city of Londonderry and the wider area. The UK City of Culture year is an opportunity for people to avail of transport arrangements that will benefit Londonderry. In the longer term, I see huge benefits for it. I think that it is a good example of having provided such a facility and of increasing its capacity, and I look forward to continuing to do that.

The Member will also know that, where the UK City of Culture is concerned, I am very pleased to confirm that the rail link between Coleraine and Londonderry will open earlier than expected. I know that Members all through the House will receive that well, particularly those who have constituencies in the north-west. I take particular pride in the achievement of being the Minister who saved, if you like, the rail link between Coleraine and Londonderry and who, hopefully, enhanced the service between Belfast and Londonderry.

Road Signs

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many incidents of defacing road signs have been reported in the last 12 months. (AQO 3375/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can confirm there have been 244 reports of road signs being defaced in the

past 12 months. The majority of damaged signs are identified by Roads Service officials as part of their routine inspections and are prioritised for replacement or repair as necessary. If sufficient evidence is available, Roads Service may seek prosecution of those responsible for carrying out those wanton acts of vandalism. I am sure that you will appreciate the many difficulties in proving a case in this regard, as the courts require substantial and clear evidence before an effective prosecution can be brought.

I am also sure that the Member shares my frustration that my Department has to devote valuable resources, both in expenditure and staff time, to deal with the issue when they could be used much more profitably on other activities, many of which are safety related, that would provide great benefit to the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Sandra Overend.

Mrs Overend: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Apologies; I call Gregory Campbell for a supplementary question.

Mr Campbell: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his reply regarding the 244 cases. Will he undertake to consider — where there have been repeated incidents of vandalism of whatever type, particularly on main routes where tourists or others are unused to the journey — the possibility of replacing the signs with signage located higher to make it more difficult for the offence to be repeated?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. We look, on an ongoing basis, at how best we can protect the existing signs and ensure that they become less easy to attack. However, some people make determined efforts to deface or vandalise signs, and that is very regrettable indeed. I know that that is a concern for many Members, and Londonderry signage seems to be a particular target in the northern and western divisions.

Officials from the northern division advised me that there have been 34 incidents of road sign defacement over the past 12 months in that area. Although we do not keep detailed records of how signs are defaced, we estimate that that vandalism occurs approximately four to six times a year. So, there are serial offenders out there. I wish that they would stop it, and I wish that we could spend the money on other equally

important, or more important, ways to improve road maintenance and generally within the Roads Service budget.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister aware of a proliferation of signs being defaced in the Dunloy, Rasharkin and Portglenone areas of County Antrim?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am not aware of the specific detail. I am happy to learn of any representations that he wishes to make to me.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Will he detail how many incidents of flags flying on road signs or lamp posts have been reported to him and what action he is taking to remove them?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her question. I do not have the specific detail available at this point. However, I am happy to correspond with her. She will recognise that, as with the issue of the defacement of road signs, it is a delicate and, sometimes, difficult matter to police, but we endeavour to seek a way to resolve issues of particular contention.

A5 Road Project

4. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A5 project. (AQO 3376/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Member will be aware that the A5 project is the subject of an ongoing legal challenge that began today and is processing as anticipated.

My Department continues to work closely with the Department of Finance and Personnel regarding future budgets for the A5 and any financial implications arising from the delayed start to the scheme. That co-operation has enabled some internal reprofiling of my Department's budget, which will facilitate the deferral of some of the A5 allocation to when it is required. In addition, at my prompting, the Finance Minister has secured flexibility from Her Majesty's Treasury to carry forward £50 million of reinvestment and reform initiative borrowing power into 2014-15. That additional flexibility is immensely helpful in managing the ongoing delay to the A5 project.

2.15 pm

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his response. What recent discussions has he had with the Dublin Government about funding for the middle section of the A5?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He will remember that the Irish Government had initially agreed to make a very substantial contribution that would have seen the entire project brought forward. That was not possible. They have now agreed to make two payments of £25 million in 2015 and 2016 respectively. Beyond that, they remain committed to the completion of the A5, but they are not yet in a position to make further funding commitments for the period post-2016 in advance of their consideration of the next capital review framework, which is anticipated for 2015.

DRD: Procurement

5. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he has taken to ensure that public procurement within his Department encourages competition and is attractive to local businesses. (AQO 3377/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Recent reviews of our tender processes have helped to remove barriers for smaller businesses wishing to compete for public sector opportunities. Examples include reductions in the levels of experience and financial requirements needed and the use of more standardised tendering documentation. My officials have also streamlined and simplified procedures for tenders below the EU thresholds and reduced the paperwork associated with tendering for those contracts.

To increase the visibility of tendering opportunities, all contracts above £30,000 are advertised on the eSourcing Northern Ireland portal, with construction-related contracts also advertised on the Department's website. All those measures are supported by a programme of meet-the-buyer events, organised or attended by representatives from the respective centres of procurement expertise.

There is close liaison with local industry groups, such as the Construction Employers Federation and the Quarry Products Association, to help provide for a sustainable supply chain. It has been recognised that there can be difficulties for smaller businesses seeking to access large frameworks and term-type contracts. For that reason, in areas of work such as road

maintenance and minor works, contracts have been split into numerous specific work categories. Limitations are imposed on the geographical coverage and the value of the contracts, which, in turn, permits small to medium enterprises to participate directly, thus providing increased competition.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for that fulsome answer. Does he accept that there is a perception among the small business community and small contractors that there is a cartel operating around public procurement and that it is counterproductive to developing and growing small business, particularly in the construction sector, which relates to the Department for Regional Development (DRD)?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. If that is his perception, I hope that it is not the reality of things. I understand the importance of small to medium enterprises getting the opportunity to tender for and attain work contracts from the Department for Regional Development, Roads Service, NI Water and all the agencies under my departmental control. I am keen to hear at first hand examples that he may have, and if he has such examples, we will investigate and interrogate those and satisfy ourselves that it is not the case that we are in any way discriminating against small businesses.

Mr Cree: On supporting local businesses, Minister, will you tell the House how your Department and its arm's-length bodies perform in respect of prompt payment of invoices?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. He raises an important issue, particularly for those in business who are under pressure and so need and seek prompt payment for their work. That is an essential action to support local industry.

Following commitments that the public sector would speed up the payments process, I can confirm that my Department continues to perform exceptionally well against the 10-day and 30-day prompt payment targets. From September to November 2012, DRD released procurement and grant payments totalling £60 million, of which £58.2 million, 97%, was paid within 10 days. In the same period, 8,209 of 8,320 invoices, an impressive 99%, were paid within 30 days. Overall, therefore, the Department continues to perform above the Northern Ireland Civil Service average.

Public Transport

6. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he has taken to encourage integrated public transport involving Translink, community transport groups, health and social care trusts and education and library boards. (AQO 3378/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is working with Translink, the Southern Education and Library Board, the rural community transport partnerships, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and representatives of the health trusts to identify opportunities for improvements to the integration and efficiency of publicly funded transport services. To assess the short-, medium- and long-term changes that are possible, it is proposed to undertake a pilot project in the Dungannon/Cookstown area. It is expected that, after a period of planning, the pilot project will begin later this year, followed by an evaluation, the duration of which has yet to be decided.

Local stakeholders will be involved at key points throughout the project. My Department is also providing funding through the rural transport fund for a pilot Translink bus service from Enniskillen to Altnagelvin Area Hospital. The rural community transport partnerships have been involved in the development of the pilot project.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree that there is an urgent requirement to develop more integrated transport to reduce costs and increase usage?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary, and I agree with his point. In these straitened times, it is important that we are able to do more, even with less in some circumstances. The Member will be aware of my announcement this morning on Door-2-Door Transport, which received a broad welcome in the House. We continue to look at these transport issues and will seek to make progress on them on the understanding that working with other Departments and agencies is surely in the short-, medium- and long-term interests of everybody.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister provide an update on the pilot scheme in mid-Ulster?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary. He will know that a range of

agencies is involved in the Dungannon/Cookstown pilot scheme, including health, education and those related to my Department. We very much hope that rolling out that pilot scheme will assist us in developing Province-wide transport arrangements. I undertake to update the House and members of the Committee for Regional Development on progress.

Mr Storey: Translink receives something like a 30% subsidy from the Department of Education for transport costs. What discussions has he had with the Minister of Education about the performance and efficiency delivery unit report on transport and a more efficient way of ensuring a joined-up approach to its provision, particularly for schools in rural areas? There is a real issue there, and it will be an increasing issue if the Education Minister gets his way on the proposed closure of rural schools.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question, which was asked, I suppose, with his education hat on. It is timely.

I have not had direct discussions with the Education Minister. I do, however, believe that it is in everyone's interests that Departments and Ministers work collectively to address issues. We can do more together and achieve favourable outcomes, particularly in the current economic climate. I will seek to work with Executive colleagues on that.

Public Transport: Door-2-Door Services

Mr Molloy: Question 6. Sorry, question 7.

7. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to combine urban and rural door-to-door services to enable better integration of services and to improve efficiency. (AQO 3379/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I will answer question 7, if that is all right? I know that the Member is perhaps besotted with other issues, but anyway.

The Member will be aware of the statement that I made earlier to the House on the future of the Door-2-Door service. Work has been completed on reviewing the policy for the Door-2-Door scheme, and a consultation exercise commenced on 22 October 2012. The consultation ended on 14 January 2013, and responses are currently being analysed and assessed.

I do not think that it is appropriate to continue to extend the existing single tender awards for the provision of the service. I have therefore decided that my Department will end the existing contracts with the three current operators when the single tender actions run out on 31 March.

It is obviously very important that current regular users of the Door-2-Door service are not left without any service for a period. Therefore, although the current Door-2-Door service will end for now when the extensions run out on 31 March, I have decided that, to meet the needs of existing users, we will put in place an interim service, managed by Disability Action and with services provided by it, other voluntary organisations and, where applicable, other service providers, from 1 April. I stress that the interim service is not, and is not intended to be, the existing Door-2-Door service. My officials are working with Disability Action and other stakeholders to ensure that the interim service will be fully operational before the Easter break. Scheme members will be kept fully informed of the changes being implemented.

In parallel, my officials have set up a project team to move forward the procurement of Door-2-Door-type services in the future. It is our intention to commence pilot operations later this year and to evaluate their effectiveness after a year of operation. Thereafter, we intend to tender for service provision that will best meet the needs of our intended users.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister. I think that he missed his calling earlier.

Will he give us an indication that the current rural transport providers will be considered as part of the new project when it comes into being? Looking further ahead, will the Minister consider whether all the different services that we use should be under one transport management scheme, for schools, health and all the other different structures?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. His final suggestion has, of course, enormous consequences, and yet it is interesting and challenging enough that we should look at it and all other options. The interim arrangements that I announced today will give us an opportunity to look at the entire landscape. I very much hope that we can be innovative in our approach and can utilise and work collectively with the various agencies, Departments, groups and providers out there.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answers. I listened very carefully to what he said. Given that he would be of a mind to encourage the integration of the different transport providers, will he consider setting up an independent transport authority, similar to what happens in the Republic, to maximise competition and give the public the best possible opportunities? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Kennedy: Thank you very much for that supplementary question. I think that mention of integration with the Republic has caused some concern on the Back Benches.

We are very much in the foothills. We are making interim arrangements for the Door-2-Door service, with a view to having a longer-term solution. I am not keen on the creation of additional bodies, which can sometimes be overly bureaucratic and perhaps not represent value for money.

I am prepared, at this stage, to concentrate on improving and maintaining the local services that are in place.

2.30 pm

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that question 11 has been transferred to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. A written answer will be provided.

Farming: Income

1. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the recent publication of provisional figures showing that total income from farming between 2011 and 2012 fell by more than 50%. (AQO 3385/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The magnitude of the fall in farm income is of great concern to me. I have heard the figures described as horrendous, and I absolutely agree with that assessment. The figures confirm just how exceptionally difficult last year was for farmers. I have the utmost respect for how our farmers have faced the extreme challenges of the last wee while.

During 2012, a number of factors converged to put real financial pressure on the industry. On top of poor weather conditions throughout much of the growing season, we had a substantial rise in feed costs and a weakening of the euro, which reduced single farm payment receipts and held back producer prices. Those were very painful events but, unfortunately, world cereal harvests, local weather conditions and exchange rate movements are all factors that fall completely outside our control. The industry had grown in the years preceding 2012, and I believe that the potential for growth still exists despite the major setback for the industry last year. I believe that we should continue our work not just to improve competitiveness but to build an industry that has the strength and resilience to withstand the types of setback recently witnessed.

The 2012 figures clearly demonstrate that we continue to need a strong, well-funded CAP that not only supports farmers but drives competitiveness, without drowning us in red tape. I am fighting for those outcomes in the ongoing CAP reform negotiations. I very much hope that this year will see a marked improvement in the fortunes of the industry and that we can once again turn our attention to the longer-term challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. I will play my part, and I look forward to working with the industry-led Agri-Food Strategy Board in building an industry that is robust, outward-looking, self-reliant and prosperous.

In respect of immediate action, I have announced my intention to bring forward the payment of the 2013 less-favoured area (LFA) scheme. We are making the payments some three weeks earlier than planned. That is a contribution of about £25 million a year to the economy. In addition, we have already begun —

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

Mrs O'Neill: OK. We have also begun administrative checks. We will continue to get things speeded up as quickly as possible to ensure that we get support to farmers.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I know that she cannot change the weather or the feed prices, and I welcome the change to the LFA scheme that she has just mentioned. We need to make sure that people are paid on time and quickly, given that that is one of the only ways for them to get money. What changes will the Minister make to her policies to assist the industry? The increase in

world population has to be one of the ways of increasing what our farmers get from their land.

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that I firmly believe that the change in world population is a plus for our local industry, because we have an opportunity to produce more food and to be a major player in supplying that market. There are opportunities.

Reform of the common agricultural policy will be very important in making sure that we target the supports that need to be in place for particular sectors in the entire agrifood industry. The work of the Agri-Food Strategy Board will also be key in tackling and identifying challenges and allowing us to shape the new programme and tailor supports to those who most need them. The growing world population is a plus for us, and we need to use that to our advantage. I certainly assure the Member that I will do all that I can, through short-, medium- and long-term plans, to support the industry.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Does the Minister accept that there is great anxiety and apprehension in the farming community at the moment? Does she also accept that the new mapping system is proving to be a fiasco for many farmers? Some of them are trying to remedy the discrepancies in the maps, but they have been told that they cannot get an interview at their local office for about another three weeks.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. Again, I assure him that I will do all I can to support farmers. The mapping situation has been discussed many times in the House and, indeed, in Committee. It is important that the maps are got right. I totally accept that it is a two-way process. It is about the Department and the farmers working together. I am not aware of delays in getting an appointment to talk about a map or to explore the issue further at DARD Direct offices, but I am happy to take that on board and ensure that the proper staff are there to help farmers. Obviously, the benefit of having DARD Direct offices is that you can get someone quite easily and quite accessibly, so I am happy to take that on board.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will no doubt be aware that there is a lack of confidence in the agriculture industry, with the horse meat issue —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not relevant to this question.

Mr I McCrea: I am coming to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: If you are not very quickly relevant in your supplementary, we will move on.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Minister accept that within that confidence is the confidence of young people to go into farming, as it is part of their family heritage? What will the Minister do to encourage that?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. He is absolutely right: we need to instil confidence, and we need to have supports in place that attract young people to stay on the farm or come into farming. Again, under the common agricultural policy, there are targeted streams that we can have the flexibility to use. They will look at new entrants into farming and young farmers. So, I think there are avenues there that allow us to support young people. If we are going to have a sustainable farming sector in the future, we need young people to continue to become involved in the industry, and we will do all that we can. I will continue to work with the likes of the young farmers' organisations, which do great work with young farmers. I fund them to do some work, and I will continue to do that. I think that a combination of all of those efforts will attract young people into the farming industry.

Rural White Paper Action Plan

2. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the rural White Paper action plan. (AQO 3386/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In June 2012, I launched the rural White Paper action plan, following close consultation with my ministerial colleagues and a wide range of rural stakeholders. The action plan contains around 90 commitments from across all Departments, relating to a wide range of important rural issues: rural transport, rural broadband, healthcare, education in rural areas, rural tourism, support for rural businesses and measures to tackle poverty and social isolation.

I want to be clear that rural issues are not solely the responsibility of my Department. All Departments have a responsibility to deliver their policies and programmes effectively in rural areas and to honour their commitments detailed in the rural White Paper action plan. Each commitment or action is allocated to a lead Department to take forward, with most actions to be undertaken within a short — one to three years — medium — three to five — or long-term — five to 10 years — timeframe.

Two projects that are already making significant progress and helping rural communities throughout the North are the farm family health checks and maximising access in rural areas (MARA), which are being delivered in conjunction with the Department of Health via the Public Health Agency. The farm family health check programme aims to screen 1,800 rural dwellers at farmers' marts and community venues. To date, I am pleased to say that 38 health checks have taken place, all of which have been very well received. Some 920 rural dwellers have availed themselves of the service, and 40% of attendees have been advised to attend their GP on the basis of the results of the screenings.

The aim of the MARA project is to offer 12,000 rural households a visit from a trained enabler, and that is well under way. One hundred rural enablers have been recruited and trained, and approximately 1,000 initial home visits have been completed, with second visits, where necessary, under way. To date, we have had over 2,880 referrals on a variety of grants, benefits and services.

I have chaired a meeting of the interdepartmental committee on rural policy. That group consists of senior policy officials and is tasked with overseeing the implementation of the rural White Paper.

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

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. How will she ensure that other Departments deliver on their commitments in the action plan?

Mrs O'Neill: I did not quite get to finish the answer, but that is the point that I was coming to.

I oversee the Department's oversee group, which will hold all Departments to account. This is Executive-led. Even though DARD takes responsibility, it is an Executive programme to make sure that we have all Departments taking cognisance of the needs of rural areas. Each action in the rural White Paper is allocated to a lead Department that has responsibility for implementing that action within the time frame specified. The Executive have agreed that all Departments will report to DARD regularly on progress in implementing their respective actions, and DARD will produce and submit an annual progress report to the Executive. I will make sure that that continues to be done. I reiterate the point that this is an Executive commitment. DARD is taking the lead, but it is important to show the wider rural

community that this is the Executive caring about their interests and making sure that they are protected.

Mr Storey: Actions 49, 50 and 51 of the action plan that has been published by the Department have DE as the lead Department. Does the Agriculture Minister use the same definition of a rural school as her counterpart and colleague — that it is 105? If she does, given the vast number of rural schools in the primary sector that fall well below that, particularly in the west of the Province, does she agree that that figure will inevitably lead to the widespread closure of rural schools? In light of the action plan, what is she doing to protect rural schools?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, although DARD is in the lead, it is Executive work. The Member, as Chair of the Education Committee, knows fine well that it is not simply a numbers game. All the other factors need to be taken into account, particularly the fact that a rural school is often the centre of a rural community. When the Education Minister set out the six criteria in the sustainable schools policy, he took into account all those other factors. I will ensure, in my role to support rural communities, that those arguments are always put forward. I am happy to do so, and I have done so in the past for schools in my constituency. The Education Minister has taken account of the wider factors. It should not simply be a numbers game, and that is well accepted.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister indicate the scale of the redrafting of the document following the consultation process? Was she surprised by the critical response from many in the industry who had waited for the plan for many years but then felt badly let down by the totally unimaginative proposals?

Mrs O'Neill: It was important to get it right from the start, which is why it took such a long time to come to fruition. It is still fairly early days in its implementation; all the recommendations are still to be gone through. It was not an attempt simply to bundle up what is already being done by Departments. There was an attempt to get Departments to come on board with additional plans. The Member will be aware that an advisory stakeholder group was in place at the outset to make sure that it fed into a lot of the actions. There was a wide range of interest, and a wide range of groups came forward with ideas. This is an initial step in setting out the Executive's commitment to rural communities. We need to make sure that these are implemented in the short, medium and longer

term. Although there may be some criticisms of the document, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. As I said, it is still early days. We need to see the actions implemented. I assure the House that I will continue to play my role by making sure that other Departments are held to account for what they have promised to deliver.

Rural Economy: Research and Development

3. Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the role of departmental funded research and development in assisting the rural economy. (AQO 3387/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department's vision is of a thriving and sustainable rural economy, community and environment. I recognise the role of research and development in achieving that vision. I also recognise that a broad-ranging research programme is required if we are to succeed. The Department's evidence and innovation strategy sets out the overarching framework for research and development to underpin evidence-based policy and delivery. The outcome of research on the rural economy allows our policymaking to be based on sound scientific evidence and allows DARD to be an advocate in government for the needs of the wider rural community. We want to promote and provide guidance on the issues facing rural communities through rural proofing. I see our research and development programme as a fundamental tool to allow us to do that.

There are three funding strands in the evidence and innovation strategy: the DARD-directed research work programme at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), which has a total budget in excess of £8 million; the industry-led research through the research challenge fund, which this year will support local businesses to the value of £1 million and will enable research to a total value of £2 million to be conducted; and the Department's postgraduate research studentship scheme, which funds eight PhD students each year. In addition, we are committed to increasing the drawdown of European funding in the area of research and development. In the 2013 financial year, we will fund a Horizon 2020 facilitator post based at AFBI to ensure that we are best placed to capitalise fully on the significant EU budget in that area.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for her response, particularly the breakdown of the various themes of the fund. Will she ensure

that there will be maximum drawdown from the fund, specifically to help the agrifood industry? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. The Department participates in the Barroso task force, and I work closely with Executive colleagues to ensure that the agrifood and rural sectors fully capitalise on the available EU funding. To assist those sectors to take advantage of the Horizon 2020 funds, we will also place and fund a facilitator post based at AFBI. I hope to have someone in place by April. That postholder will work closely with the desk officers in Brussels, local research providers and industry to assist with setting up collaborative partnerships and to provide any help necessary to assist in the application process. I hope that that will lead to an increase in our drawdown. There is, obviously, an Executive commitment to draw down additional funds. This post will assist us to do that and make sure that we target it towards the agrifood sector.

2.45 pm

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister outline whether there will be any possibility of an expansion of research and development at the proposed new DARD headquarters at Ballykelly, given the prospects for employment in the catchment areas there, which include Ballymoney, Coleraine, Limavady and Londonderry?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that the headquarters relocation project is on target. I recognise the benefits that it has for employment in the construction industry and in the ongoing servicing of a new building in the area, and I know that it is something that the local people welcome.

As regards research and development, an additional post is not being considered at this stage. It is a great, expansive site that other Departments may look to in the future.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her answer. I welcome the investment in research and development. I am sure that she will agree that it is critical that the projects are properly evaluated. Will she tell the House how, precisely, she intends to evaluate current and future projects?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, a number of projects are ongoing; I outlined three in my initial answer. There will be independent evaluations of each of them. If he would like to receive them, I am happy to provide the Member with any evaluations and research that have been done

to date. Each project will be evaluated to make sure that we get the most out of them that we can and to ensure that they represent value for money. I am happy to provide the Member in writing with the details that I have.

Flooding: South Belfast

4. Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the findings of the Rivers Agency's investigations to identify the exact source of flooding in south Belfast in 2012. (AQO 3388/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The storm on 27 June 2012 generated extreme rainfall in certain localised parts of greater Belfast, including south Belfast. It occurred after days of rainfall that had resulted in saturated ground and high river levels, and it caused flooding to more than 1,300 properties. Rivers Agency staff have been liaising closely with their counterparts in Roads Service and NI Water to identify where infrastructure was overwhelmed by the intensity of the rainfall and to identify what practical measures can be taken to reduce the risks of recurrence.

I am very aware of the distress and hardship caused by flooding and the concerns that house owners have had about obtaining insurance. Rivers Agency can issue a letter of comfort to residents that they could use in negotiations with insurers. That letter would set out the measures that are being taken to reduce flood risk.

As recently as 31 January, I visited the Finaghy area to see at first hand what actions are being taken to reduce any further risk of flooding and to meet residents.

Mr McGimpsey: Will the Minister assure us that the immediate remedial action that is being taken will, in fact, protect residents in the parks off the Lisburn Road, such as Sicily, Priory, Marguerite and Greystown? Can she tell the House when those remedial works are due to be completed and give comfort to the residents, who have suffered repeated flooding?

Mrs O'Neill: There are a number of issues. The incident in June last year involved heavy rainfall, and the impact that it had on residents caused a particular problem for all agencies. Each area is being dealt with on a catchment basis. In some areas, Rivers Agency and NI Water might be involved, and in others, it might be Rivers Agency and DRD. So, a number of things are being taken forward.

I know that Rivers Agency has been dealing with undesignated culverts and that it has been looking to repair some of them. Some grilles have been replaced, particularly in the Orchardville area, and we hope that that will help to alleviate flooding. A lot of minor works around Stockmans Lane have been planned. There is an additional sandbag store at Finaghy Road North. So, a number of measures have been taken forward. No one can give anyone a 100% guarantee on flooding, but we can at least work towards mitigating all the factors that contribute to flooding, which is what we are committed to doing. Rivers Agency is also committed to working with all other partners, because it is key that, in this instance in particular, the whole system was overwhelmed due to the heavy rainfall. So, DRD, Rivers Agency, the council and NI Water all have a role to play.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware that much of the flooding in the Finaghy area was caused by debris in a river at Ladybrook, which, in turn, overflowed — a bridge was choked, and the river overflowed and overwhelmed the area. Will the Minister tell us what remedial works for the short term — I know that she has mentioned some of them — and what capital works for the long term are in place to ensure that this does not happen again?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, a number of pieces of work are ongoing, all on a catchment-by-catchment basis. As I said, in some areas the Rivers Agency might be working with DRD, while in others it might be working with the council. So, a number of pieces of work are being taken forward. It is important that that interagency response to the problems of flooding continues.

The system was overwhelmed in June last year, and, in the longer term, we need to take forward how the system copes. As I said, the Rivers Agency has taken its role forward in cleaning out culverts. It is also looking at the designation of culverts and has provided two new grilles, one of which is in Orchardville in south Belfast. As I said, I met residents and assured them that that would be done very quickly, and, if it is not done now, I would expect it to be done over the next week or so.

A number of works are ongoing. Other minor works are planned for the Stockmans Lane area, and some other culvert work is still to be done. As the Member will be aware, we are working closely with partners who are carrying out a major study on the future plans for the area.

Ms Lo: The Minister mentioned a number of short-term, reactive measures. Would she consider asking the Executive to look at long-term plans and see how we can upgrade the whole sewerage system in Belfast to cope with all the future changes that will be brought about by climate change?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for the question. As I said, NI Water is carrying out a major study in the area, and I think that that will expose all the failings in the present system.

You are absolutely right: flood alleviation is not a short-term initiative. You can do certain things to mitigate the flooding, but we need a longer-term plan to properly tackle major flooding problems. I am happy to have discussions with the Executive when we have the outcome of the major study of the area, and, where the Rivers Agency has a role to play, I will make sure that we are forthright in coming forward and playing our role. However, in the absence of that major study, we do not yet have the detail to go to the Executive with a proposal.

Single Farm Payments

5. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the single farm payment process this year. (AQO 3389/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: At 4 February this year, 90% of single farm payment claims had been finalised. These figures include 910 inspection cases, and that is four times more than this stage last year. This leaves 10% of cases still to be paid. Of these, the inspection cases remaining to be processed represent about a quarter of the remaining claims. The remaining 7.5% of cases cannot be paid immediately for various other reasons.

We are working to clear the remaining inspection cases as quickly as possible and expect that the majority of cases will be finalised by the end of May. Again, this is significantly earlier than last year, but we will continue to invest to improve this further in future years.

Looking to 2013, I am pleased to report that just under 38,000 new farm maps have now issued. As I have explained before, farmers now have an important piece of information. It is a two-way process, and we need to work together to make sure that we get those farm maps right. The 2013 single application forms are based on the new farm maps, so it is crucial that the

maps and the maximum eligible area are as accurate as possible. That will obviously avoid delays in farmers getting their payments later in the year. We aim to issue 2013 single application packs issued to farmers no later than 29 March. We also plan to issue revised maps to farmers who report mapping changes.

I know that many farmers rely on receiving their single farm payment as early as possible, and I want to be able to pay them as early as possible. I am pleased to note that an early assessment of the first year of using the control with remote sensing approach to undertake on-the-spot checks in 2012 indicates that it has the potential to speed up our single farm payment control processes and payments. I will explore how we can learn from our experiences in 2012 to extend the use of control with remote sensing in 2013 and in future years.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for a detailed response. Can any other help be given to farmers to help them with their 2013 claims?

Mrs O'Neill: As I explained earlier, all DARD Direct offices will be open during the single application period to provide general advice and support to farmers in making and receipting their application. Earlier, a Member raised concerns about delays around that and in getting appointments, and I am happy to take that further and explore it.

In general, farmers can go into in DARD Direct offices and make general enquiries about their maps, entitlements, handling inspection findings and measurement of ineligible areas. They can secure amendments to maps, which will also be accepted through that period at our local offices for farmers who need to make changes. So, although farmers will once again be able to access their maps online through map viewer, this year, an additional new feature means that not only can they view the maps but they will be able to measure ineligible features, which will support them in filling out their application form. However, I again stress that this is a two-way process: I encourage farmers, when they receive their map, to get in touch with the Department and make sure that together we get this right. That, in turn, will speed up future payments.

Mr Irwin: Given that they will soon receive their 2013 IACS forms, farmers are deeply concerned over the level of inaccuracies in their new maps. Yesterday, one farmer who contacted me had 30 fields missing from his farm maps and another had 35 fields missing. In light of the unacceptably high level of

mapping errors, does the Minister agree that the delivery of the maps has been diabolical, and will she update the House on how errors that cause such concern have arisen in the delivery of the maps?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not agree with the "diabolical" statement, but I assure the Member that the first two batches of maps went out and were received very positively by farmers. Now that we have had the final batch of maps sent out, we have had some positive feedback but farmers have also contacted me with concerns around missing fields. I have that under investigation, but it initially looks like it is not the result of incorrect mapping but of a systems issue. So it is something that I hope can be resolved very quickly, and my Department is working on that. I do not agree with "diabolical", but I agree that getting the maps right is a two-way process. I take seriously my role in what DARD produces, and the farmers will take their role seriously in getting it right.

Mr Rogers: Following on from the previous Member's question about farm maps, I also have lots of problems in south Down with farmers coming to me with map problems. Minister, how can the aerial photograph accommodate the hollows and the hills that we have in our land in south Down? That seems to be a major problem. I have farmers whose entitlements are reduced every year but their farm has not changed.

Mrs O'Neill: That, again, comes back to the two-way process. Those maps will not capture everything. They are an improvement on what was previously issued, and we have been improving them year on year. When I talk about a two-way process, I am actually asking a farmer to take the map that they have, walk their land and identify what is not on the map, what needs to be on it and let us get it right once and for all. That is the important message that we need to get out. As I said, it definitely has to be a two-way process. DARD is not going to have 100% accurate maps, and we will get to that stage only if we work in partnership.

Mr McNarry: On that, will the Minister explain to this layman what to say, when confronted on the issue of maps by his local farmers, about how fields go missing? Will she also explain what advice I can give to farmers about how they retrieve those fields?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to provide the Member with the guidance that we issue to farmers, which shows you how to look for ineligible features. It is things such as that that make

fields appear to be missing. It comes back to the same statement: if we work in partnership, we can get maps to a very high standard. However, I am happy to share with the Member the guidance that issued. It is in quite simple language and is easy to understand. It is important that the Member familiarises himself with it for when he deals with farmers. It would, I am sure, be helpful to you and to the farmer.

Rural Development Programme

6. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the current rural development programme. (AQO 3390/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The rural development programme, with a budget of £500 million, aims to improve the economic, social and environmental conditions in rural areas throughout the North of Ireland. It brings together a wide range of support for the farming, forestry and primary processing sectors, rural enterprise, business development, diversification and rural tourism. Across farm, forestry and food businesses, improving competitiveness is encouraged through a number of measures and complementary schemes that provide support, facilitate restructuring, encourage development and foster innovation. For example, the Focus Farms programme has enabled approximately 13,000 farmers to learn, share experiences and solve common problems through discussion, farm walks and demonstrations. The Farm Family Options programme has encouraged 3,000 farm family members to increase their skills and awareness, with financial benchmarking support provided on almost 1,800 farming enterprises. To build on that, the farm modernisation programme provides capital support for the modernisation and improvement of production techniques on farm businesses.

Over 2,900 farmers have already benefited, with letters of support to a further 2,500 farmers currently being issued under tranche 3. It continues to have a very positive effect on farm businesses. In addition, beyond the farm gate, the agricultural and forestry processing and marketing grant scheme has provided some £18 million investment to 78 agrifood businesses.

3.00 pm

The programme also funds farmers who manage their land for positive environmental benefit. My Department manages and delivers measures that support new woodland creation

and the sustainable management of existing woodland. Agrienvironment schemes are funded by an average of £25 million each year, and, in return, 12,100 farmers are undertaking positive environmental actions that enhance our countryside. In addition, the less-favoured area compensatory scheme, which is claimed annually by some 13,500 farm businesses, results in a further £25 million entering the rural economy.

The rural development programme is making a very positive contribution and raising the quality of life in rural areas. We have over 1,300 projects being supported with grant aid of £24.9 million, which has levered in match funding of £17.1 million.

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

Mrs O'Neill: It is all very positive.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 18/11-15] be agreed. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Buchanan: In contributing to the Budget debate, I do so primarily as Deputy Chairperson of the Employment and Learning Committee — a Committee that is probably on borrowed time, but is nonetheless doing important work in areas key to our economic future. We can be in no doubt that we continue to face a very tight and challenging financial and economic environment, with little real sign of national or international recovery. In such circumstances, it is the duty of each of us to explore how best we can manage the cuts and pressures, while still doing our best to deliver high-quality services.

Lord Bannside, the former leader of my party, used to say that money talks, but the only thing that it says is "goodbye". I know that we are all aware of that nowadays, but there are people in our community who feel it very acutely and struggle to put bread on the table. It is vital that we give priority to helping those who are most vulnerable and in greatest need.

Given that we are a devolved region of the UK that is dependent on the block grant, the Budget shows the excellent job that the Finance Minister has done in allocating resources across the Departments. He deserves praise for the constructive way in which he has redistributed and reallocated resources on the basis of the various monitoring rounds and Budget realignment, rather than the continual grumbling so often levelled against him around the Chamber. We can never have enough resources. We would always like more, but we must live in the real world.

The economy is, quite rightly, at the centre of the Programme for Government, and the Department for Employment and Learning plays a key role in that. I mentioned those who struggle to make ends meet. One of the major areas of concern, one of the major problems facing our society and, indeed, one of the most serious effects of the economic downturn is growing unemployment. The figures are far too high, especially among our young people. That simply has to be tackled, and tackled robustly.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. He will no doubt remember the statement made by the Minister for Employment and Learning this morning, in which he did his best to get all young people into training, apprenticeships, etc. Does the Member not agree that it would be a criminal offence to consider doing away with such an important Department at this time?

Mr Buchanan: That will be up for discussion when the time comes.

The deployment of resources into schemes and initiatives aimed at the creation of jobs will not be a waste. If we get that right, it will be an investment that will lay the foundation of an economic recovery — a recovery that will stand a much greater chance of being robust and long-lasting. A key driver of a dynamic and substantive economic recovery is a properly educated and skilled local workforce. That is recognised by the Executive, and I especially welcome the jobs and economy initiative announced by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in November 2012. As my colleague the First Minister said at the time, the initiative:

"will provide a significant boost to the economy in Northern Ireland and provide employment, particularly for our young people and those who have been out of work for long periods."

The Executive have set aside £80 million for the initiative over the next three financial years. It is reassuring that the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) will receive £1 million in 2012-13, £14 million in 2013-14 and £15 million in 2014-15 to fund a range of key schemes designed to tackle unemployment and create a workforce with the sorts of skills and education qualifications that employers are looking for today.

I do not intend to speak in detail about those schemes, but I support the Steps to Work programme. We will now be able to fund schemes in the programme that are targeted at those who are aged between 18 and 24 and those at the other end of the scale, aged 50 and over. People in those two categories find it hard to get steady employment.

First Start is targeted at those young people who have been out of work for at least 26 weeks and aims to provide them with a minimum of six months' employment in the private or public sector. That provides them with a good opportunity to add to their CV, thus

helping increase their chances of getting more permanent work.

For those aged 50 and over who are out of work and find it almost impossible to get back into the workplace, the Step Ahead 50+ project will give 1,100 people in that age group a chance of temporary work in the community and voluntary sector. Again, that opportunity will hopefully enable people to get valuable experience to add to their CV.

It has often been said that if we are to attract the right sort of direct investment and encourage local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurs to take risks and grow their businesses, a key ingredient must surely be the availability of a well-educated and skilled workforce. That is where higher and further education plays a vital role.

Additional funding has also ensured increased enrolments for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) courses and other directly relevant courses at our local universities. That is the sort of forward thinking that we need. I commend the Minister for Employment and Learning for pursuing the matter. Linked to that are the 150 additional fully funded PhD places in areas of economic relevance.

However, if we are to get the best value out of the extra funding at higher education level, we need to ensure that the right sorts of high-value-added jobs are available for students when they graduate or become PhDs. Therefore, I encourage the Minister for Employment and Learning and my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Minister Foster, to work closely on that particular issue.

I turn now to a final DEL-related issue, which is that of apprenticeships. The Minister made a helpful statement in the House yesterday, in which he announced a major review of apprenticeships and youth training.

It is vital that the review leave no stone unturned. There are problems that need to be considered and addressed. Some would-be apprentices can lack incentive and motivation, and they can also lack appropriate education standards. However, there are many other young people who are keen to avail themselves of any opportunity to learn a trade or develop a skill. I am sure that we all know of young people who are totally frustrated and will eagerly grasp any work-related opportunity.

Yesterday, the Minister referred to a "gold standard". That is what we all aspire to, and we do not want to allow red tape to get in the way. Employers who would be prepared to take on apprentices ought not to be hampered by bureaucracy, regulation or, indeed, overzealous employment law.

I will move on to other issues outside the employment and learning sphere. First, I welcome the level of capital investment that has gone into the health service in the western area. I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to consider in future monitoring rounds putting money into bringing forward the second phase of the Omagh hospital. As we know, the Omagh hospital was to be a single development. It was then broken down into two different phases so that the first phase could be got under way. The second phase is to be the mental health facility. I ask the Minister to look at that. It is important that that phase is brought forward in tandem with the first phase of development that is already under way.

In education, it is important that the Lisanelly land in Omagh is developed for the education campus. Unfortunately, progress seems to be very slow at the minute. School builds in the western area, especially Omagh, are of a very poor standard and need to be upgraded. Think back to a few months ago when Arvalee School was burned, requiring a newbuild on the Lisanelly site. We need to get work on that education campus moved on a lot more quickly. I ask the Minister to keep that in mind if there is any spare money in his Department.

I welcome the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's (DETI) commitment of £28.6 million for the proposed gasworks in the west. That will be of extreme benefit to businesses there. I know of a number of businesses that are looking forward to tapping into that for their own benefit. I ask for that, too, to be kept on the radar.

I could go on and speak about many other issues in my constituency, but I will leave it at that. I welcome and support the Budget Bill that is before the House today.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the Budget Bill. I will, hopefully, make some constructive remarks that may well be taken on board.

As each of us is all too aware, the economy in this part of Ireland is in free fall. Private enterprise is slowly melting away, and jobs are being lost at a phenomenal rate across each of our six counties. The figures that the

Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) released most recently estimate that 24,945 people emigrated from the North of Ireland between the middle of 2010 and the middle of 2011. That equates to 1.4% of our total population emigrating in one year, or around 500 people leaving this state every week. Things have not got much better since those figures were calculated.

We cannot simply sit back and expect macroeconomic conditions to reverse themselves. We need to continue to take a proactive approach to address the crisis that we find ourselves in as a result of global economic factors. We need to invest the money that we are allocated in a strategic and thought-out manner to ensure that we not only achieve the challenging targets set out in the Programme for Government but so that we have a direct impact on the quality of life of all of our citizens.

It is clear that the Executive are doing their best to grow the private sector and rebalance our economy, despite the fiscal limitations facing them. Since the Assembly was first established, the primary objective has consistently been to grow the private sector and rebalance the economy. That target has not yet been achieved, and we really must ask ourselves why. What barriers are there to our achieving that objective?

In my view, there needs to be a debate around the fiscal levers that we have. To date, any attempts to start that debate have been countered with a reference to an overestimated deficit between what we contribute in taxes and what we receive to run our Administration. That price tag is always thrown out and the case for greater fiscal powers dismissed. However, little or no assessment has been made of the potential benefits. It costs nothing to have a rational debate on such a matter. We are prepared to engage in that debate. We are prepared to listen to the views of other parties and those in the community who are interested in this area. However, we would also like the debate to be sensible and approached with an open mind.

There is no doubt that our local economy has massive potential. However, that potential is being seriously hampered by the lack of an ability to control our own fiscal affairs. Decisions taken by a Government in Westminster have serious implications for us here. Not only are decisions taken that have serious implications for us, which we have no say in, but we have a complete lack of information on the levels of revenue and expenditure coming into and out of the North.

We need to see much more work done to promote greater economic planning across this island in a joined-up manner. We need to move to a position where we consider the economic realities of this island as a whole. For example, when public services are being mapped out, it needs to be done in a way that benefits citizens on both sides of the border, delivers the best possible public services for all of our people and provides maximum value for money.

3.15 pm

The border continues to act as a barrier to economic development which stifles the economic potential of all of Ireland, but particularly those along the border corridor. In my own county of Fermanagh, a number of proposals have been put forward to achieve these objectives in areas like health, education, local government and economic development. One of those proposals is a submission made by a group in north-west Fermanagh to work with Coláiste Cholmcille in Ballyshannon to deliver education to that part of the border corridor where a school is threatened with closure as a result of low enrolment numbers. Such proposals need only a fair hearing, but they also need the support of both Governments on this island to make them happen.

We are halfway through the current budgetary period. It is a good time to assess where we have come from, where we are now and where we are going. If we did that in a serious way, we would see that we have failed to achieve the principal objective that we set ourselves. So, we need to look at alternatives to growing the private sector and rebalancing the economy, and that needs to be done in a sustainable way. We need to assess new ways of maximising the potential of the whole of this island. We cannot simply continue on this path without reviewing our progress and analysing all the options that are open to us. The game-changer is further fiscal powers. We are happy to participate in a sensible debate in that area. Is anyone here opposed to such a discussion? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr D McIlveen: I support the Budget Bill. So far, the debate has been enlightening in many ways. It was particularly enlightening to find out for the first time that my Chief Whip is a fan of 'The Godfather', which concerns me slightly: never mind horse meat, I am starting to worry about horses' heads if my voting record does not improve greatly. In all seriousness, this has been very useful. At this time of the year, it is always good to take stock of what has been

happening and what the plans are for the future.

The Deputy Chair of the Committee for Finance and Personnel summed up well where the Committee is with the Budget Bill. We are not unmindful of the fact that certain Departments are experiencing unforeseen challenges. Look at the Department of Health: obviously, Transforming Your Care is putting quite a financial burden on it and will continue to do so. Obviously, the events in the past six months from a Justice point of view have put pressure on the PSNI, and the retiring prison officers' scheme has also brought a financial burden. So, we are not unmindful of the fact that there are challenges out there. As Mr Flanagan indicated, the economy and how we rebalance the economy within Northern Ireland must continue to be the focus of any Budget that we have.

I also cannot miss the opportunity, as I did in the Committee, to have a go at the European bureaucrats who have brought this predicament upon us in relation to the Titanic signature project. Let us hope that that is an issue that can be ironed out in the coming days.

What a Budget like this highlights is that each Department has a unique responsibility for balancing their books and making sure that public money is being spent in the best possible way. I am sorry that Mr McCarthy has left us, because I struggle with the argument for clinging on to Departments just for the sake of it. Listening to certain representatives, particularly in the Alliance Party, you would think that if the Department for Employment and Learning was wound up every university, every apprenticeship scheme and every possible support mechanism out there for getting people into work would disappear with it.

Nothing could be further from the truth: all we are doing is looking at where the functions can be transferred to that takes away from a burdensome, over-bureaucratic, over-expensive and unnecessary Department. That is where this whole process is going. It is about efficiencies. If we and the private sector are sending out a message to the public that we all have to do things more efficiently, we cannot be hypocritical and say that we will not be more efficient in the way in which we do things. Those are the challenges, and the line that the Alliance Party has taken is very disappointing because it shows a complete detachment from the reality of what the public expect and want in that they want this place to run in a much more efficient way.

I also take a particular interest in Mr Flanagan's comments on greater fiscal responsibility. Of course I agree with that, and I still strongly advocate the devolution of corporation tax to the Assembly. However, with that power comes responsibility, and when we see Sinn Féin's approach in Belfast City Council over the proposed reduction in rates to help struggling businesses through this difficult time, perhaps the jury is still out on devolving that fiscal responsibility. That said, Departments cannot blame the Minister of Finance and Personnel for all their shortcomings and struggles, and there has to be a continued focus on how we make our Budget go that little bit further.

Reform of the public sector has to be one way to do that. Unfortunately, we now find ourselves in a position across the United Kingdom whereby the public sector is shrinking, and the financial rewards of being in the public sector are shrinking to the point at which trainees in some police forces in England get smaller salaries than trainees in a leading fast food restaurant. That is an example of the way in which the public sector is having to stretch its budgets further and further, which will, for the foreseeable future, continue to be the case. Northern Ireland will have to face up to that because while 23.5% of jobs in Scotland are in the public sector, here it is nearly 30%. That obviously has a knock-on effect at subcontractor level, which can then have a ripple effect. Our dependence on the public sector is excessive, so we have to continue to work with the private sector and try to incentivise it as much as possible to encourage further investment in business and create jobs.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr D McIlveen: Yes, I will.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Thank you very much. I will be very brief. You referenced the size of the public sector vis-à-vis other regions. Does the Member not agree that the public sector here does, in fact, compare favourably, particularly in its efficiency, with other regions and that the issue that distinguishes us here is that the private sector is floundering and is too small?

Mr D McIlveen: I agree to an extent with what the Member said, but I am not sure that I agree with the way he said it. We have to accept that, if the public sector is to shrink, which is something that I am keen to explore, we have to make sure that it shrinks at the same rate as the private sector grows because the jobs that

will have to be moved from one sector to another would have to be found elsewhere. Therefore, we have to continue along the road of incentivisation and decide how we encourage that direct investment in Northern Ireland.

We are not in a position economically in which any of us should give ourselves a pat on the back. That said, we have to accept the benefits that devolution has brought. Regular trade missions, for example, go out on behalf of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to encourage businesses to come and invest in Northern Ireland and to have their UK base here. We cannot ignore the fact that Belfast and Northern Ireland are considered the second most favourable location for foreign direct investment, being second only to the City of London. That is an incredible achievement in a relatively short period of time of devolution.

So, we have to accept that we are making progress, and, obviously, there are still huge economic challenges out there that we cannot ignore. However, I believe that this devolved Assembly's work has to be ongoing, it has to continue to face up to those challenges and it certainly has to continue to deliver. I pay tribute to Invest Northern Ireland under the leadership of Alastair Hamilton, as it now has a proven track record of encouraging businesses to invest in Northern Ireland. I think that it is right and proper that we do that.

Moving on to talk about the Department for Social Development's (DSD) budget, I will be parochial on this subject. I certainly appreciate the investment that has come to Ballymena through the Minister for Social Development for, first, social housing at St Patrick's Barracks. That was long needed and is very welcome. We are looking forward to seeing the Fold Housing Association under the support of the Department for Social Development get this project fully under way so that the housing shortage in the Ballymena area can be dealt with.

Secondly, we are also very encouraged by the £4 million investment that will go into the Ballymena area to try to regenerate the approaches into the town. That is very welcome, and we look forward to welcoming Minister McCausland after inviting him to come to Ballymena to launch that particular scheme. We left that with him. We told him that he was very welcome to come to Ballymena any time that he wants, as long as he makes the same announcement for more money to come into the town. It has been very much needed, and,

hopefully, that money will be well spent on generating more business and getting more custom to come in from across the Province as we look to tidying up the town in that area.

I support the Bill in its entirety. The weight of expectation of how the money will be spent is probably on the Minister of Finance and Personnel's shoulders. However, my point is that it should not be solely on his shoulders — the mantle has been passed to each Department. You have your budget, so you need to go out and spend that money as effectively as possible. We welcome that 22 schools have received a collective spend of around £220 million. That was a very positive announcement, and we hope that similar announcements will come from the Department of Education. That is where the Committee is with that issue. I commend this Budget to the House.

Mrs Overend: As we heard, this stage of the budgetary process is important, as it gives legislative effect to the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account, which the Assembly debated yesterday. Despite voting against the 2011-15 four-year Budget, my party is content to let this stage pass so that Departments' ability to draw down resources is not jeopardised.

As my party's spokesperson in this area, I will take this opportunity to look specifically at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's budget. The Minister will be aware that a significant proportion of the DETI budget is transferred to the economic development agency, Invest NI, for the purposes of growing our economy. That is one of the most essential tasks that any government-linked body carries out, and, allied with the organisation's significant spend, it is clearly important that it demonstrates strong performance in economic development.

To give some perspective on the vast figures that are involved, Invest NI's net provision in 2012-13 was just under £144 million. In short, we need more clarity so that we can reach a conclusion on the job that Invest NI is doing.

I would like to see clearly defined the numbers of jobs and the amounts of investment promised at the outset and those which actually materialised. Further to that, I would also like more certainty around the extent to which jobs created are counterbalanced by jobs lost, as well as more specific data on job quality. Only then will we have a true picture of the performance of that agency. It is once again disappointing that Invest NI has once again

registered a substantial reduced requirement of over £20 million. We must look at the budget flexibility open to it in order to address that.

3.30 pm

Tourism, as a key driver of the economy, must also demonstrate a strong return on money invested by government. I would be the first to admit that much good work has taken place in this area, and I give credit where it is due. I think particularly of the successes: the new Titanic Belfast building, the Irish Open and the preparations for the UK City of Culture. However, when we consider that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) received over £25 million, Tourism Ireland over £15 million and InterTradeIreland over £3 million — as well as £470,000 under the vague heading of "development of tourism" — it is clear that we should expect results.

The Minister will agree that some of the statistics did not bear out the successes for which we had initially hoped, and I think specifically of the disappointing drop in the numbers of visitors from Great Britain, which are down 15% on last year. That is despite the not-insignificant budgets provided to NITB and Tourism Ireland for the NI 2012 campaign. I hope that we can learn from some of the mistakes and have a successful World Police and Fire Games and UK City of Culture year, and the imminent publication of a long-overdue tourism action plan will, I hope, help in that regard. However, I would prefer it if the plan were fully costed.

I am sure that the Minister will agree that Northern Ireland-specific economic research is fundamentally important as we seek to implement policies to make best use of our economic potential, and that is the next area of the DETI budget that I wish to deal with.

The area of economic development policy and research was given just under £15 million in 2012-13, and I would welcome clarification on how that is broken down. The work of the economic advisory group is important in this regard, but I ask the Minister whether we are drawing on enough expertise that is independent of government. In making this point, I think specifically of the merger involving the Northern Ireland Research Centre and the loss of experience as a consequence.

On the specific point of childcare, I believe that the provision of affordable and effective childcare is an economic driver, and I welcome the fancy words used to recognise its importance. However, I must say that I am

disappointed that there is yet another delay in launching a childcare strategy, and I seek assurances that the finance will be dedicated to addressing this real issue.

I conclude by reiterating what many in this House said today and yesterday: the budgetary process needs more clarity. It is disjointed and does not have the necessary transparency to provide proper scrutiny. I know that the Minister shares my frustrations, as he has said as much in the past, and it really is time that the review of the financial process was fully implemented.

Mrs McKevitt: I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Budget Bill. It is so important for all of us in this House to understand the impact that our budgetary decisions have on families, individuals, communities, organisations, charities, sports clubs, companies and farmers, etc, at a time when money is scarce. It is critical that the health and safety, education, housing need, job prospects and well-being of all our citizens are prioritised. However, there is also a duty on us to ensure that due proportionality gives a fair distribution of finances across all Departments, so that services can be delivered equally.

I am neither a financial guru nor an economist, but I have enough understanding to know that, behind every plus and minus sign on the Budget sheet, there is a story to be told. I have some real concerns about underspending in a number of Departments. Millions of pounds planned to be spent in this financial year will be returned for a variety of reasons, be it procurement procedures, poor planning or inefficiency within Departments. The bottom line is that a number of planned projects will not now happen.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Member for giving way. We talked yesterday about the number of underspends in different Departments. If you look at OFMDFM, you will see that no money has been spent to date through the strategic investment fund, there is no childcare action plan and many of the regeneration sites are still behind schedule. Does the Member agree that those underspends are not so much about financial good management in the Department but more about bad administration by government? More and more projects are not delivered because that money is being sent back to the centre.

Mrs McKevitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree with him. With better

planning in the future, those projects could be delivered.

I register my concern about the amount of money that is being spent by each Department on services provided by consultants, particularly when we hear about the refusal of European funds for projects such as the Peace Bridge and the Titanic Quarter.

As a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I welcome the overall £7 million increase to the Department. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has the smallest budget of all Departments — less than 1% of the overall Budget — yet it has such an important role to play in the provision of and access to our arts, culture, leisure and sports. I will continue to argue that that Department is worthy of a bigger share of our Budget. Imagine, Minister, if your home budget limited your leisure, sport, art and tourism spend to less than 1%. My colleague Dominic Bradley reckons that you could not afford to go to the cinema if that were the case.

On the brighter side, the additional money for the arts and Northern Ireland Screen are very welcome and will go some way to alleviate the difficulties in those areas. The small lift to the World Police and Fire Games is also welcome, but the news that Ravenhill is unavailable for the games is more than disappointing. This is the premier flagship project of 2013, and it is important that we get it right. That first impression will last.

With competitors and visitors already making travel arrangements for the games, it is critical that venues are tied down quickly. With Ravenhill and Casement Park ruled out for the opening ceremony, I am delighted that the organising committee is taking a serious look at the generous offer made by Newry and Mourne District Council to consider Pairc Esler in Newry. Hopefully, this preferred opening ceremony venue will be announced in a couple of weeks. I hope that the revenue from the games will come to fruition and enhance the investment made by the House.

Mr Gardiner: On 10 February, the Minister of Finance and Personnel said:

"Despite the reduction in the Public Expenditure available we are continuing to make the Health Service a key priority and providing a better Budget settlement than in either Scotland or Wales."

I welcome that, and I thank the Minister personally for the interest that he is taking in the health service in Northern Ireland.

Can he define exactly how the settlement here is better than that in Scotland and Wales, and why is England excluded from the list? Is it better funded than Northern Ireland, or is it on a pro rata basis? Is he comparing like with like? Is it possible to compare an area as small as Northern Ireland with a population of 1.8 million to an area the size of Scotland, which has a population of 5.2 million — nearly three times as large? Surely, there are economies of scale possible in a large area like Scotland that are, quite simply, impossible here in the small area of Northern Ireland. So, is it not bound to be the case that the health service budgetary settlement here, which might look better, has always got to be better pro rata if we are to offer the full range of health services in a small province where economics of scale are impossible compared to Scotland?

I say that because any Finance Minister is going to have to fund any Health Minister here better on a pro rata basis than some other areas simply because of the lack of economies of scale.

The Minister said:

"even in the most difficult financial situation, the Executive have agreed to afford a degree of protection to the health budget."

I welcome that. He went on to say:

"That is why we have ring-fenced and put in place full protection for the health element of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) budget. Indeed, when factoring in the efficiency targets and service reductions that will apply in other UK regions, I would suggest that the Health Service in Northern Ireland has received the most beneficial settlement anywhere in the UK." [Official Report, Bound Volume 59, p180, col 2].

Will the Minister define exactly how far he has gone to meet the Health Minister's requirements for the health elements in his Budget? What level of efficiencies is he looking for from the Health Minister, and has he suggested where those efficiencies might be achieved? The Minister also said in his recent statement:

"As a result of our investment, many key projects will be able to proceed over the Budget period. They include the new police

and Fire and Rescue Service training centre, the Altnagelvin Area Hospital radiotherapy centre, and the sports stadiums and water and sewerage network upgrades." [Official Report, Bound Volume 59, p181, col 1].

I note that only one of the infrastructure schemes that he mentioned is health related, and that is Altnagelvin Hospital's radiotherapy centre.

Will the Minister define how much each of the investments that he mentioned will cost? The Minister speaks of capital projects being taken forward over the next four years, with spending in that area being well above the long-term trend. How much is health getting as a percentage of the total infrastructure investment by the Executive? How does the cash investment in health compare with the cash being spent on sports stadiums, for example? I look forward to the Minister's response, and I hope that it is worthwhile.

Mr McCallister: We must be coming to the end of the Budget debate if I am being called to speak. Today's debate has raised some interesting points. I would like to build on some of the issues that colleagues brought up. Mr Cree and Mrs Overend said that we need to look again at how we reform the Budget process, keep movement going and bring more transparency. I know that it has been a long-standing hobby horse of Mr Cree, and I am sure that he will continue to raise it with the Minister here and at Committee.

Mrs Overend talked about other economic drivers. There has been disappointment in the tourism industry, and it is important to draw Members' attention to the fact that 2012 was to be Our Time Our Place. Despite a huge marketing plan, the numbers did not stack up. There was a very difficult period in December, but, even much earlier in the year, we just did not break through into some of those markets. There were some successes, and Mrs Overend mentioned the success of the Titanic project.

I would like to draw the Minister's attention to some of the issues that have come up. Will he comment on where we are on the equal pay claim and the £30 million increase? How will he resolve that, and what changes will it make to the Budget? He also outlines in the Bill the superannuation and other allowances that relate to expenditure on pensions, lump sums, tax and gratuities in the Civil Service pension scheme. That is shown in the Budget as a decrease of over £234 million in the net cash requirement. I understand that this has

occurred mostly through the movement of working capital. I would appreciate a slightly more detailed explanation from the Minister on that specific issue.

There is an element of European funding coming into DFP, and the Budget shows that with reference to EU Peace programmes, EU community initiatives and the European regional development fund. Will the Minister outline how that sits alongside the Programme for Government commitments to increase the drawdown of European funds by 20% and whether his Department is maximising the European funding available to it? His colleague Mr McIlveen seemed to be laying the blame for the Titanic centre funding at the door of Europe. It is fair to say that the jury is probably still out on who is responsible.

3.45 pm

Given the size of the education budget, we need to have more clarity in education. We constantly hear from colleagues who sit on the Committee for Education about the difficulties that they have in getting that clarity. I would be interested to know whether the Minister of Finance and Personnel thinks it acceptable that the Minister of Education has not shared his savings delivery plan like other Departments. Transparency is needed, and there is no good reason for the secrecy from that Department.

Will the Minister of Finance and Personnel assure the House that he will speak with the Minister of Education and deal with him at Executive level to see how we can bring more transparency to this? It is difficult and frustrating for a Committee to try to scrutinise and hold a Department to account when it is not given the relevant information.

I have a couple of concerns about the budgeting for the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). The use of consultants has cost some £870,000. If we break that figure down, we can look at some examples of spending: £45,000 on ESA delivery models and location options; £65,000 on an assignment to find an ESA programme manager; and over £12,000 to determine the terms and conditions of ESA directors. The question must be asked whether all of that is absolutely necessary.

We are led to believe that ESA is about driving efficiencies and saving money. However, in his response to an Assembly question from my colleague Danny Kinahan, the Minister said that he has not budgeted for the new organisation. Therefore, as things stand, we do not know whether it will save money. However, I offer

this to the Finance Minister: if an organisation employs over 60,000 people, it is unlikely to be cheap. With an organisation of such sheer size and scale, is it not time, when the legislation is progressing through the House, that we started to look at budgets and at what the scale of such an organisation is likely to be?

Mr Flanagan spoke about cross-border co-operation. I do not think that anyone ever stood in the way of that which made sense, whether that be building a road or — I see that Minister Poots is in the Chamber — looking at how we deliver cardiac services for children. Everyone in the House has been proactive about that.

Even if we do not agree on the exact subvention from Westminster, we know that it is very large. We can debate whether it is £8 billion, £9 billion or £10 billion, but it is huge. Whether the Minister continues to campaign for and champion tax-varying powers, I imagine, knowing him and his party's philosophy, that tax-varying powers are unlikely to mean a reduction for anyone. They are likely to be tax-raising powers.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Certainly.

Mr Hamilton: Thank you. Will the Member agree that, given the fiscal deficit that he mentioned, regardless of whether one disputes its size, taxes in Northern Ireland would by definition have to go up to meet at least the current standard of public services that people have come to expect?

Mr McCallister: I certainly agree with that. You cannot continue to argue that you want even higher levels of spending and expect that, if you devolve tax-varying powers, taxes are going to be reduced. Without being too unkind, there is a slight air of fantasy from the Member and Sinn Féin on that.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. He said that the deficit — or subvention, as he called it — is £8 billion or £9 billion or £10 billion, but we do not have a figure at all. We have an overestimated figure that nobody can stand over; a figure that is based on flawed estimates and that contains figures that, by the Treasury's own admission, are not overseen by either the Executive or the British Secretary of State. That figure tells us very little. It is not based on fact; it is based on estimates. We need to properly debate the fiscal arrangements that we have. The British Government need to give us accurate figures. Placing a price tag up

front in the debate is not helpful. When talking about a potential deficit, we need to have proper figures.

I return to the Member's comments about taxation policy. Any taxation policy, if we did have greater fiscal powers here, would not simply be dictated by Sinn Féin. It would have to be done with the collective agreement of the Executive.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Member for that intervention. Given the fact that he is not able to give even his estimate of the figure, does he at least accept that, however accurate the estimate is, it is a large figure? I gave the example, which he quoted, of £8 billion, £9 billion or £10 billion. Maybe the Minister can give his best guess when he is summing up the debate. However, the figure is substantial, and that is what we have to get across. I do not have an issue with it being a substantial figure. I think that, living in the United Kingdom, we have a collective duty to help worse-off regions in our nation. Northern Ireland happens to be a worse-off part of the UK, so it is right and proper that we get some help from our friends across the rest of the country.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Go ahead, Mitchel.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Always glad to help, John. Thank you very much for giving way. Do you agree that an argument over estimates is, by itself, very unlikely to give us a definitive answer? Our call, which we think most parties that want definitive answers would support, is to give us the information and let us make our own minds up.

Mr McCallister: I notice that Sinn Féin has not given us a definitive answer yet. Perhaps its Members should get the number crunchers behind the scenes in Sinn Féin to try to come up with a definitive answer. Does he accept that the figure is very large indeed, and that we are very fortunate to be part of the UK and have that subvention and support from the rest of the country?

Mr Rogers: I welcome the Second Stage of the Budget Bill, which presents an opportunity to offer my opinion on some aspects of the planned spending. I have listened to the Minister. Today is not about lambasting the Minister, and I promise him that the purpose of my comments is purely to reflect on whether we have got our priorities right and, perhaps, to

influence how, in the future, we allocate scarce public resources.

As a former teacher, I note with satisfaction that the Youth Service is getting an additional £755,000 to promote the personal and social development of children and young people, and assist them in gaining the knowledge, skills and experience to reach their full potential as valued individuals. Through community relations measures for young people, that will encourage the development of mutual understanding and promote recognition of and respect for cultural diversity. I welcome that, and hope that the additional money will help in focusing on the need to generate genuine understanding of the need to respect difference and encourage diversity. Recent events on the streets of Northern Ireland remind us that much needs to be done to bring an end to the mistrust, lack of self-esteem and inability of many young people to engage positively with others from a different background.

The total Youth Service budget of over £37 million is money that I hope is used in the most effective way and shared fairly across the North, particularly in rural areas, where opportunities for engagement are limited. In rural areas, we do not have peace walls, but I remind Members that peace walls do not have to be made of concrete or corrugated metal. They can exist in the minds of people, and that is equally sad.

I would like to focus on a few issues in education and highlight the fact that sound financial planning for education and raising standards are inextricably linked. The original idea behind ESA was commendable: reduce bureaucracy and deliver more resource to the classroom. As a school leader back in those days, I was encouraged by that, but like many others today, I have severe reservations.

Really what I am saying is that it causes me great concern that the Department has not yet got an up-to-date business case, and ESA could be up and running in a few months. I do not think that that would be acceptable if I were looking for a business loan. Although you are not responsible, Minister, how will your Department address that issue? Because, in two months' time, we will be in the next financial year.

School maintenance and newbuilds: there are major issues with school maintenance, with a £200 million backlog, and there is a list of promised newbuilds still waiting to cut the first sod. What a boost that would be to our construction industry, if only it could be

prioritised. That, in turn, would increase the spending power of the shopper and help us to reinvigorate our local economy.

In response to a question for written answer a few weeks ago, I was astounded to hear that over 270 primary schools have class sizes of 30 and that 17 schools have class sizes of 35. There are major issues here that need to be addressed if we are really serious about raising standards and giving our young teachers some worthwhile employment.

Our teachers do fantastic work, but meeting the needs of 30 or more children with diverse learning needs requires special attention. Many of our classrooms cannot even physically accommodate such classes. I was delighted to attend an event in Stranmillis last week with other colleagues from the Assembly and to meet many young people. We really need a scheme where our newly qualified teachers are guaranteed a year's employment to complete their early professional development.

I question the scheme by OFMDFM to employ 200 teachers to promote one-to-one support for literacy and numeracy schemes. That seems like a good idea, but is it a one-off or an integral part of some strategy to raise standards? Is it sound financial planning, or planning on the hoof?

As we move forward, sound financial planning will be integral to raising standards. Our school leaders are expected to have a school development plan that is closely linked to a three-year financial plan. If there is a change to common formula funding, that will affect a school's budget. How can school leaders plan ahead if we continue to have the seasonal adjustment that the education sector experiences? ESA could be that opportunity, but where is the up-to-date business case? I will move on.

I was surprised to learn that over £15 million has been cut from the Department for Regional Development's budget. That concerns me, as less money is being provided for high-quality water and sewerage services. I am aware that many small sewerage plants in rural areas need to be replaced or upgraded in order to comply with European legislation, and I worry that we may arrive at a situation where we incur infraction penalties.

Again, in the same Department, remaining with environmental issues, I note that there is no provision for future plans for the electrification of our rail network. Yes, I acknowledge that much work has been done in recent times —

and I am particularly pleased that refurbishment work on the Belfast-Derry railway line is ahead of schedule. That is good news, but our rolling stock on the Belfast-Dublin railway line needs replenished.

In recent years, there has been considerable progress in reducing death on our roads. I am mindful of the young police constable who lost her life at the weekend, and other families who have lost loved ones in recent times. However, the overall reduction in death on the roads is major and welcome. The additional £6 million for the Department of the Environment, which I hope will be invested in infrastructure designed to reduce further death on our roads, is welcome.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the Audit Office. I welcome the good news that no change is proposed to its budget of over £8 million. I also welcome the Minister's undertaking to acknowledge the independence of the Audit Office in carrying out its statutory role and the fact that he considers the Audit Office's role to be well-defined by statute and not to require any further attention by his Department in providing clarity. I accept that, and I feel that I can now relax in the knowledge that the Audit Office will be free to carry out its vital work without any interference, other than from the Audit Committee, which has sole responsibility for agreeing its budget.

4.00 pm

I note the reduction in the budget of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and surmise that it is not related to the fact that substantial money was returned by that organisation in recent times. In recent weeks, I have had the privilege of attending the opening of a new fire station at Rathfriland. I know that many other fire stations around the North need similar facilities. I look forward to that.

Two months ago, the Assembly passed a motion on the Narrow Water bridge. After that debate, the Minister assured me that a decision would be made once his officials had scrutinised all the necessary documents. I know that they have been working closely with the other parties involved in the application. I say this to the Minister: south Down — in fact, Northern Ireland — cannot afford to lose a £20 million project for an Executive input of less than £2 million. Our construction and tourism industries need that action.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the DARD budget today. The DARD

budget is the budget that, perhaps, has the greatest impact on our major economic industry: the agrifood industry. High above the Senate Chamber, there are three images depicting Northern Ireland's three greatest industries: shipbuilding; the textile industry; and agriculture. Of those three, agriculture is our sole remaining major local industry. It is, therefore, beholden on the House to ensure that our farmers and the wider industry receive every possible support. Just like all businesses operating to a budget, Departments are not and should not be immune to budgetary constraints on their activities. That is what makes the DARD budget so critical to the Northern Ireland economy as a whole.

Looking back at the past year, the focus of the DARD budget should have been to achieve the maximum economic return for this industry and for our economy as a whole. Last year was a tough year for farmers. I believe that everyone in the House can agree on that point. It was a year in which the farmers deserved greater support and assistance from the Department, the primary aim of which should be to support the future of the industry. However, the Agriculture Minister has said that she hopes that next year will be better for farmers. I am sure that the Finance Minister would agree that Ministers should strategically plan their budgets to deliver help, not hope. A Minister who was confident in their future planning and the direction of their Department in the past and into the future would never offer mere hope. That suggests misdirected priorities and wasted resources. Farmers, their families and all those employed directly and indirectly in the industry will not thank the Minister and her Department for the consequences of failing to plan strategically, something that is suggested by the significantly reduced net and cash requirements for the 2012-13 budget.

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

More recently, the Agriculture Minister has told us that she is showing leadership, as she moved ahead of her Department in making the decision to relocate her headquarters to Ballykelly. During the past year, however, farmers have been calling on the Minister to step forward and take decisive action to deliver help on the issues that are important on each and every farm in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Finance Minister, given his keen interest in agriculture, will share their concerns, as I list their issues: slurry spreading; fairer pricing; rising feed prices; rising rural crime; rising energy costs; and, of course, the potential long-term damage of the horse meat scandal. An issue that is critical to the future of the

industry is the forging of strong links among all elements of the food production chain.

Within last year's budget, the Minister had a duty to address all those points in detail, but the performance has been poor, at best. For far too long, successive Ministers have failed in their responsibility and duty to work towards returning profitability and stability to the industry, an industry that, during that period and to this day, continues to offer reduced returns for harder work. Despite all the money and resources received, DARD has continually failed to come up with the goods. That cannot go on indefinitely with no end in sight.

One major area of concern is the continued failure of the Rivers Agency to stem the tide of flooding. Despite a significant increase in resources for the Rivers Agency and flood protection, DARD is still broadly failing to tackle flooding. Does the Finance Minister agree that, in 2012, it is wholly unacceptable for people living in Northern Ireland to continue to have their life disrupted and put on hold because of flooding? The Agriculture Minister has failed to get a grip on the issue despite increased resources. A fundamental review of the Rivers Agency and effective increased funding may well be required to help to plan for the future. Solutions are urgently needed, but DARD does not appear to be in a position to offer them. Minister, that must change.

Another area in which increased resources in the Budget appear to have offered little in the way of positive results is the significant increase of £4 million to the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI). The Minister continues to receive expensive research results or, in the case of the County Down biosecurity study, continues to wait for expensive research results. Yet, she fails to act on the advice received. The Minister must listen to the expert advice that she is paying dearly for from her budget. There are countless examples of where the breadth of knowledge of AFBI is continually ignored in favour of Department dogma. The increase in research funding is to be expected from a Department that likes to research an issue to death without taking any action whatsoever to resolve the problem. The too-long-debated issue of bovine TB is only one of many examples.

As we look in detail at the DARD budget and its future priorities, we must never forget the family budgets in farms across Northern Ireland. Provisional figures released by DARD show that the total income from farming in Northern Ireland is down by 52.2% in real terms, from £290 million in 2011 to £143 million in 2012.

The situation is not helped by an Agriculture Department that, over the past year and looking to the future, shows a cavalier indifference to the plight of the farmer. That will have a devastating effect on farmers and their families all across Northern Ireland. Although the Agriculture Minister confirms her concern and disappointment, she must share responsibility for the drastic drop in farm incomes. Despite a relatively healthy budget allocation, the Minister's Department continues to take action that only heaps added pressure on an industry already at breaking point. Does the Finance Minister agree that support and action are urgently needed, not further prevarication, expensive research, misdirected priorities and silence? The Agriculture Minister must look outside the walls of her Department and visit farms, farmers and their families.

One area that continues to perform well across the Budget period is the healthy enrolment numbers at the CAFRE campuses, which are at an all-time high. That proves that more and more people want to learn about farming. They are studying to enter the industry, which is healthy and is to be warmly welcomed. It is, therefore, all the more important that DARD prioritise support for our farms to enable them to modernise, grow and provide the future for young farmers and their families. The investment in their future through CAFRE must not be in vain or there will be no industry left for them once they finish their education. DARD has a responsibility and duty to direct its efforts and resources to ensuring that we have an industry that is ready and available to young farmers to take up the reins when their time comes.

Sadly, news of falling farm income shows that successive Ministers and the Department have resolutely failed. My fear is that the news of falling incomes will not act as a magnet but will actively deflect people from choosing farming as a career in the first place. During the Budget period, DARD missed the opportunity to help an industry in which statistics now prove that incomes are falling. The Minister must review her priorities and look again at the real world of farming across Northern Ireland. Farmers wanted a change in direction from a Department that has a track record of continually feeding the bureaucratic machine. They are calling for help to sustain the future of their industry. For far too long their calls have gone unanswered.

I hope that the Finance Minister will commit to doing all in his power to ensure that DARD meets its basic requirements on the headquarters relocation. I would welcome your

assurance, Minister, that you will ensure the continued pursuit of good budgetary planning as opposed to ideologically and politically driven decisions. I look forward to June's debate, in which we will all have the opportunity to scrutinise and debate the issues of the headquarters in detail. That debate will surely provide much animation in the House.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Budget today, and I urge the Finance Minister to closely monitor the Department of Agriculture, if we are to avoid future falls in farming incomes across Northern Ireland. We must never allow our one remaining major industry to go the same way as shipbuilding and the textile industry. The House owes that to Northern Ireland.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. At the outset, I take the opportunity to apologise to the Minister and to other Members who have taken part in the debate for not being here earlier. I was dealing with issues that have probably been in the media all day today. I just want to apologise genuinely to the Minister. Budgets are a big issue, and, if we are serious about getting things right, we need to ensure that money is spent properly and goes to Departments so that they can plan ahead and deal with relevant issues. I am aware that other Members have raised issues on the Budget, especially the budget allocated to health. So, I want to take the opportunity to address the House on some points as the Chair of that Committee, and I thank the Minister for giving us the opportunity to take part in the debate today.

I acknowledge that health and the Department of Health receive a substantial amount of money. It gets a substantial allocation in the Budget round, and I take it on board that the Health Department is entitled, through the monitoring rounds, to access additional money at that time. That is to be welcomed. We need to balance that — this is not about starting another debate — with the question of whether it is enough, given the issues that the health service faces. I know that there have been issues of efficiency and efficiency savings in all Departments, but that is especially the case with health and social services and the number of trusts etc. So, to streamline the money that is going into the health and social care budget, we need to ensure that the majority if not all of it is spent on front line services. We need to ensure that, by the time that that money goes through the system, each pound that is being allocated to front line services is not diluted.

Looking to 2013-14, the Committee is well aware that the Health Department is facing a difficult year. As other Members have said, there will be budget pressures. A number of weeks ago, we heard from officials on this matter, and we were able to probe some of the details and figures that they gave us. The Committee still has some questions, because we are still waiting for figures coming from the Department so that we can compare them with figures on other issues. So, it was a concern for the Committee, but we are doing our job as a Committee and are scrutinising and ensuring that the Health Department spends the money properly.

"Transforming Your Care" is the new buzzword, and we all hear it. It is the new buzzword, especially in the health sector, and we are told that it will radically change the way in which health services are approached and delivered over the next number of years. The vision of Transforming Your Care needs to be welcomed. I do not think that anybody could argue against that vision, but there are genuine concerns out there that some parts of Transforming Your Care can dilute services and allow for the privatisation of some services. We need to raise those issues. As I said, no one could argue against the vision of Transforming Your Care, and, if we get it right, it can work.

4.15 pm

We talk about a collective, joined-up approach from Departments on some of the issues, but one of the issues that struck me was the Minister of Social Development's acceptance and admission, when answering a question a number of weeks ago in the House, that he is failing in his duty to build the amount of supported living accommodation that he committed to building under the Bamford recommendations. That is not the Health Department's issue; it is an issue for the Department for Social Development, but the Department of Health has to pick it up.

The Committee was told that the transitional funding for implementing Transforming Your Care had not yet been identified for 2013-14. So, we are talking about Transforming Your Care taking us forward over the next few years, yet the transitional funding to do that has not been identified. That is a concern.

Minister, there is also the matter of pay freezes. I know that this is probably on your radar and that you and others will probably have raised it. The pay freeze will be lifted, and we need to ensure that more money is found for salaries.

Day and daily, we hear about new drugs and vaccines becoming available, and the Department will want to look carefully at them and their affordability. Not a day goes by without somebody facing the issue of how, whatever illness they have, they can access the drugs. Money then becomes the issue. Credit where credit is due, in fairness, a number of months ago the Minister of Health was able to find money to allow people to access some of the drugs associated with cancers. The world changes, access to drugs changes, new vaccines come on the market, and then there is another battle. If we are serious about the health of our people, we need to ensure that they can access some of those drugs and vaccines on a daily basis. There are difficult decisions ahead for the Department on how it chooses to spend its budget in 2013-14.

From the conversations that we have had in Committee, I assume that the Department will put pressure on the health and social care trusts to spend a greater proportion of their budget on health promotion and disease prevention. The out-turn figures for 2011-12 were put before the Committee a few weeks ago, and we were disappointed to learn that the trust spend on health promotion had dropped from 1.6% in 2008-09 to 1.4% in 2011-12. That takes me back to my point about investing for health, Transforming Your Care, health promotion, early intervention and tackling health inequalities. The money being spent by trusts on health promotion will drop next year. We need to have a common-sense approach, rather than saying one thing in one document and something else in another.

Suicide is a curse on all our communities, and it knows no boundaries. Suicide affects every home and every constituency, and it saddens me to say that it is probably the biggest killer. The rates for those who succeed in taking their own life have increased 100% over the past 10 years. Something is wrong. I have talked about Transforming Your Care, health promotion and the trust spend going down. What surprises me is that, while the suicide rate is increasing, the spend on mental health services by trusts has fallen from 7.5% of their overall budget to 7% over the past four years. Currently, it is around £227 million a year. I cannot balance that. Suicide is one of the biggest killers and is increasing, yet the spend on mental health by trusts is falling. For the record, Bamford recommended that the budget for mental health be increased to £400 million, yet we spend £227 million on mental health issues. So we would like to see the 2013-14 spending plans move towards that goal.

More generally, the Committee hopes that the Department will be able to sort out its own finances for 2013-14 as soon as possible, so that we can look at that. We hope to see those plans early in the new financial year and, in fairness, I am hopeful that that will be the case. However, if we are serious about it, it needs to be recognised that tackling health inequalities is not just a health issue. If we are talking about getting in there with early intervention, we need to be serious about tackling areas of social need. We need to be serious about getting into areas of high health inequalities. We need to ensure that we have proper education, resources, access to services and investment because, at the end of the day, they will benefit health.

Who knows? It may be that, 10 years from now, we will not need the substantial budget that we have for health because we are getting in there to intervene at an early age. It is important that, in looking at the Budget, we do not go into our own silo and try to get money for this or that Department. I say on behalf of the Health Committee that, if we are serious about tackling the whole issue of health, including health inequalities, health promotion, early intervention and prevention, every Department needs to play its part.

Mr Wilson: I first thank the Members who remain in the Chamber. Quite clearly, after raising their points, many Members were dead keen to get a response to them — maybe by remote control or something, I do not know — but they seem to have deserted the place. Maybe they will read Hansard tomorrow. Anyhow, I thank Members for their contributions today. Some were relevant, some not so relevant, and some were fairly predictable. People would like to see lots more money spent, but there were not too many ideas about where we would save that money. That, I suppose, is the nature of these debates. I thank all the Members who took part in the debate and the Committee for accepting that the Bill should go through by accelerated passage. Mr Bradley accepted on behalf of the Committee that it had had the opportunity to scrutinise the Bill. Of course, officials have always been and always will be helpful in pursuing issues that the Committee wishes to raise because of the shortened nature of our debate on the Bill as a result of the legislative timetable.

Members raised a number of issues, and I will try to cover as many of them as possible. First, a number talked about the importance of Budget planning. We are in the third year of a four-year Budget. It showed a degree of

maturity by the Executive and Assembly that we agreed a four-year Budget. We outlined the hard choices and put those to the public. We did not try to hide behind an approach of saying, "Well, we will tell you what it is like this year, and, at the end of this year, you will find out what it will be like next year". Rather, we put those choices to the public. Furthermore, this place gets an awful lot of criticism from journalists who say that we do not do our job properly, we are not mature, we cannot deal with hard issues and we are afraid and walk away from difficult things. We put this four-year Budget to the public before an election, and we are now rolling it out. We are coming into the third year of it now. This will probably not be the kind of thing that resonates too much with critics of this place, but other Administrations across the United Kingdom did not do what we have done. They dodged the issue of what lay beyond the election by giving one-year Budgets and then telling people what the consequences would be after the election. We set our stall out, which was the right thing to do. It gives certainty to Departments and enables them to plan for the longer term. Of course, the danger always was that, if the situation changed, some of the Budget data and decisions might be out of date. Again, we dealt with that through in-year monitoring and, of course, the review of the Budget for the past two years, where we looked at what had happened for the first two years, saw where there had been consistent pressures on some budgets, consistent underspends in others and made the necessary adjustments. I know that some people did not like that.

Mr Rogers is not here, but he referred to the Audit Office, which did not like the outcome of that process. However, if it consistently underspends — especially as it is the office that talks about good budgetary practice, always points the finger when there is not good budgetary practice and always tries to nit-pick where it perceives that mistakes have been made — it really cannot complain when we apply to its budget the very principles that it would want applied to Departments. It was not an attack, as I said. I just wanted to get that off my chest at the start before I ran out of steam. It is worth noting that nobody should be exempt from good budgetary practice, the review of budgets and ensuring that public resources are well spent, whether the amounts are small or large. Members who referred to good planning raised some important points.

Mr Weir raised the issue of capital spend and mentioned that, despite the recession, in 2012-13, we spent £1.3 billion. Again, it is worth noting that, as a result of some of the work

done by the Budget review group and members of various Committees — I know that Mr McLaughlin was a big proponent of this — we found additional resources. Even with a 40% cut in our capital budget, we have been able to retain spending at that kind of level. It is down from the £1.6 billion spent in the previous year, but it is a high level of spend. Let us remember what it means to the Northern Ireland economy. Some 54% of work in the construction industry — that is up from 32% — is now a result of money spent by the Assembly and Departments in Northern Ireland. The construction industry faces difficult times, but it would have faced even more difficult times had it not been for the capital resources that we put into projects across Northern Ireland. It is worth remembering the impact of decisions that we make here on the general economy.

Of course, there has been some delay in spending on capital projects this year. Spending on the A5 has been delayed as a result of judicial reviews, and that probably accounts for a reduction of over £50 million. I do not want to get on my hobby horse — I have stacks of hobby horses to get through today anyhow —

Mr Hamilton: Do not talk about horses.

Mr Wilson: Talking about horses today may be a bit dangerous.

Judicial reviews and legal challenges by the very people who claim that they want the Executive to do something to stimulate the economy often lead to delays in expenditure when we need to get that expenditure into the economy. I raise this time and time again with many of the private sector bodies that come to see me. They talk about the impact that the Executive can have on stimulating the economy. Yet, very often, some of their members are the very people who, when unsuccessful in a tender, do their best to challenge that tender and delay the spend that we want to get out into the economy to ensure that more jobs are created and more people employed.

4.30 pm

Mr Weir also raised the issue of the dormant accounts scheme and asked for an update on it. I am disappointed that the scheme is not up and running. It would be an important addition to the money that is available for many organisations in the voluntary and social economy sectors.

We will expect to receive a 2.8% share of the money that is in the dormant accounts scheme. That will amount to £1.3 million currently and another £1.9 million this year. We have not been able to spend it, one of the reasons being that it still rests with the Executive. Sinn Féin may have some difficulties with the scheme, but I hope that those can be cleared up so that the money can be made available to the organisations that would benefit from it.

Mr McLaughlin mentioned the devolution of additional fiscal powers and the way in which that could help future Budgets. He raised the issue yesterday as well, and I know that it is a theme to which he and his party will keep coming back.

There is a political element here on both sides. Of course Sinn Féin wants greater independence from the rest of the United Kingdom, even ignoring the economic impact that that would have. As a unionist, I do not want to see that economic independence. Therefore, we need to find some common ground, and we have done that in the Assembly.

The issues should be judged not on unionist or nationalist ideological grounds but on whether there is a clear case for the devolution of additional powers. That case would have to include the impact that those powers would have on the ability of the Assembly and the Executive to do things, the costs that would be involved and the benefits that would stem from it. Only on that basis should we then make the judgement as to whether we seek the devolution of those powers.

We did it in the case of air passenger duty. There were good reasons for that, and, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, I supported it. We are seeking it for corporation tax, which will be a challenge, but, on balance, it seems that the arguments are that it would be a good thing for the economy.

On other occasions we have sought exemptions from some of the tax regimes that apply in the rest of the United Kingdom. I know that this will not please the Green Party too much, but the fact that we are now exempt from the carbon tax, provided that it is not seen to go against state rules, will please electricity consumers all over Northern Ireland. That was a good call by the Executive. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I lobbied hard for that, and it was accepted by Westminster. There are other green taxes, such as the aggregates levy, that are damaging to our economy. Unfortunately, because of an

EU ruling, we have to fight for that exemption to be maintained in Northern Ireland.

Therefore, there are occasions when it is the right thing to do, but the idea that we should break free of the existing fiscal restraints for ideological reasons is not the right way forward.

Mr McLaughlin also said that we need to look at strategies to grow the private sector. There is ongoing work to be done over the next number of months and years, and I hope that the Committee for Finance and Personnel will play a role, along with other Committees that need to do so as well.

As the situation changes and as the economic circumstances change, of course we have to look at our strategies. We have to ask whether they are working as well as they should and could be, and whether there are different things that we can do. First, no one has a monopoly on knowledge on this. Secondly, just because you have done something in the past does not mean that you should keep on doing it into the future. Thirdly, we have to look at the changing contexts and decide what can be done. I look forward to the work that can be done in the future on those cross-cutting strategies.

Mr Cree raised the issue of the Audit Office. I think that I have dealt with part of that.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes; I will.

Mr D Bradley: The Audit Office produced a report entitled 'Department of Finance and Personnel — Collaborative Procurement and Aggregated Demand' in which it stated that a potential £100 million saving for the Northern Ireland taxpayer is not being realised because government agencies are not collaborating in procurement and that, in fact, only around 4% of the potential is being realised. That is a reference to the way that things were done. The Minister has just said that the way that things were done in the past is not necessarily the way that they should be done in the future. Does he agree that, given that report and its proposals, we should change the way that things were done in the past and realise that potential £100 million of savings, which we could badly do with?

Mr Wilson: I am glad that the Member raised that point. It illustrates one of the cautions that we should have about auditors, accountants and the Audit Office, who sometimes sit behind

the desk with the blinds drawn, ignoring the reality of the outside world.

The Member should think about what he has just said and some of the things that he has identified himself with in the past as a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee. I have a report from the Finance and Personnel Committee — and I am very sympathetic to many of the recommendations in it — that stated that we should be tailoring our purchasing to try to help Northern Ireland firms and ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland get the biggest possible share of public expenditure in Northern Ireland because that helps the local economy.

Collaborative tendering brings advantages in money saved. However, do not forget who will be the first to complain once we get into collaborative tendering, making tenders larger and putting out more complicated tenders. Representatives of industry in Northern Ireland sometimes come to me and say, "Why do you not break tenders up so that small firms can benefit from them? More small firms, which may not have the financial wherewithal to go for a large tender, could then bid for smaller tenders." I hope that the Member sees the tension there. In fact, as far as I can remember, he was actually a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee when the report on procurement came to the Assembly and was debated. He cannot ask, on one hand, whether I will abide by what the Audit Office states in its report on collaborative tendering — yes, there will be savings, although I do not know whether those will amount to £100 million — and, on the other hand, say, "By the way, we want procurement within the EU rules to be designed in such a way that benefits small firms in Northern Ireland."

I am glad that he raised that point, because I think that it shows the tension that there sometimes is between one section of government and this Assembly, and even the tension in what Assembly Members often ask for.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes; I am quite happy to give way.

Mr D Bradley: I have listened to what the Minister said. However, according to that report, the total potential savings were somewhere in the region of £140 million. I think that around £38 million of savings are now being realised. The extent of the total potential savings allows for the type of compromise that

can be found between having larger contracts and ensuring that smaller firms in Northern Ireland benefit from procurement.

Mr Wilson: I do not know how you will get those savings. What the Audit Office is thinking about there is, for example, when we order desks to order them in one job lot. If a Department or part of a Department decides to order desks, you will maybe find that only three or four local suppliers will apply for it because it is a small order. If we put out an order for all of the desks required across the public service in Northern Ireland, you could be absolutely sure that, first of all, some of the small suppliers could not actually handle such a tender, but secondly that tenderers from right across Europe would be in on it. That is where the difficulty lies. If we want to make savings on procurement, that is dead on. However, on the other hand, do not then be coming to this Assembly and complaining that there is a small supplier in your constituency who used to be able to get into government as a big customer but is now locked out. I get that all the time. That is the tension that there is there. We have probably strayed a little, but I was misled — sorry, waylaid — by the Member. *[Laughter.]* The Member misled himself, but he waylaid me and I moved away from the central purpose of the debate.

Mr Cree also raised the issue of the Titanic project and the £18 million, as did a number of people. There is no danger, if we do as the ETI Minister has asked us, of losing the £18 million of European money that was going to be used as part of the payment for the Titanic signature project. We do not know, and we will only find out by testing it in court, but if the Titanic signature project was no longer eligible for the £18 million and we ran out of time in finding some other use for that £18 million, then, and only then, would we lose the money.

That is why I support the ETI Minister, who spotted the problem. She is convinced — and look at all of the advice that was given to DETI: it looks convincing — that the way in which the procurement was done falls within EU rules. However, why would we risk losing the £18 million by simply waiting until we have explored all of the investigations on that particular issue when the easy way out is to simply say, "That £18 million is available. It can be used by other Government Departments"? We simply take money from the Budget which would have been used by other Departments, use it for the Titanic signature project and let other Departments bid for the £18 million. All you have done there is move the money about, and you have not lost it. That will not cost us any

more. The only time it will cost us money is if we run out of time to spend the money. Then that £18 million would go back to Europe.

Mr Cree: That money can be used for existing approved contracts in the Budget. That is why I wondered whether you could identify the projects. So, obviously, if the money is switched to those particular headings, it means that the £18 million would be used up and the £18 million that those projects were looking for would be free for other purposes. Is that right? Is there a time frame on that?

Mr Wilson: The Member has got it exactly right. The only time frame is that Europe requires that the money be spent within the next two years. So, the time frame is about finding the projects that are available that can spend the £18 million before 2015, and there are plenty of such projects, as the Member said. What we simply do is use European money to fund those projects and take £18 million from them and make it available to DETI.

He also asked about headroom. The total headroom that we have looked for is £36.6 million. We have to specify to Treasury where, if we underspent that money, it would go to. We have specified that £21.6 million would go to the Department of Justice (DOJ) and £15 million would go to Health. That assumes that there is going to be underspend identified between now and the end of the financial year. If no underspend is identified, the headroom will not be used. The budget will be closely monitored in the final stages of the financial year to ensure that, if that money is available, it is used for that purpose.

4.45 pm

Mr Dickson raised two basic issues: how we spend our money in DRD on roads versus public transport; and Northern Ireland Water. I was not quite sure whether he wants more money to be spent on public transport — of course, the result would be less money spent on roads — because he also acknowledged that we are a car-owning society and are very reliant on cars. Indeed, like me, he campaigned very hard for significant expenditure on roads in his constituency. I would love to be able to claim sole responsibility for the fact that nearly £300 million will be spent on roads in east Antrim. Unfortunately, I cannot claim that, even though some other Members have claimed that they had a big responsibility for it. He is not here at the moment. I was not quite clear whether he wants less money spent on roads.

There is still a roads infrastructure problem, and we have spent significant amounts of money on public transport, such as the allocation of £12.5 million for bus replacement. Indeed, there will be some benefit to our constituency in so far as some of the work on those vehicles will be carried out there. There is £1.9 million for improvements on the railway line, and, in east Antrim, we not only have new rolling stock, which has improved the service greatly, but significant investment in railway stations and in encouraging people to use the railways. He and I recently attended the St Brides Street car park in Carrickfergus, where the park-and-ride scheme has been extended to try to get people, even if they want to use their car to get from home to the town centre, to at least get onto the train to get into Belfast after that. We have also committed £4 million to concessionary fares to encourage elderly people. So, we have sought to get that balance, and I hope that he recognises that.

Mr Dickson also raised the issue of Northern Ireland Water, and I thought that he was very clever in doing that. I know what he is getting at, and I suspect that all Members in this Assembly know what he is getting at, but he never made any commitment to it. I will give some examples of the language that was used. He said that we have just had the Minister in with a Bill about Northern Ireland Water. The Member is, of course, very unhappy about that and would like it to be changed. However, the Minister was only in here for about two minutes because, as he made clear, there were no amendments to the Bill. I would have thought that, if the Member and his party were keen to see changes, they would table some amendments. He said that we have to approach the issue with maturity and that there are difficult decisions on governance and finance. It is all very good, but is the bottom line that the Alliance Party is saying, "The decision not to charge people for water is wrong, and we want to introduce water charges"? It is not about simply governance or maturity but about whether or not we get money, if not from government sources then from the public.

Mr Dickson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way because the Member will maybe tell me what he wants.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister. You are absolutely right: there was no amendment to the water Bill because it was unamendable. That was checked out, and you will read my

comments on the Bill in the Committee report, where I laid down my views very clearly. We are missing an opportunity, and if I did not say that the Assembly has to face up to the reality of charging for water for domestic customers in a fair, open and transparent way, I am quite happy to say so now.

Mr Wilson: I appreciate the Member's candour. It is a brave thing to say. He is right that we need to debate the issue. I suspect that not too many Members would have taken the stance that he has taken, which I know will not be popular with some people. Nevertheless, there are big issues coming down the road with infrastructure, including EU directives on how we deal with flooding and the fact that the Treasury is now saying that we have to make up our minds about whether NI Water will be a government body or an arm's-length body.

Mr Buchanan raised issues about the Department for Employment and Learning. He is quite right about the importance of money being made available for training. In selling Northern Ireland abroad, one of our main selling points is our people. We have to sell the skills and work ethic of our people and their ability to help employers who come here to operate a profitable business.

It is for that reason that, on top of the money that Department for Employment and Learning received in the Budget at the start of the period, two significant allocations were made to tackle unemployment during the period that we are discussing today. Those were given early in the year so that schemes could be put in place during 2012-13. There was £8 million for the Steps to Work programme and £5.8 million for the youth unemployment scheme, which again shows commitment. In addition, there was money for people who want to do PhDs, so it was also directed at the top end of the market.

Mr Buchanan also spoke about funding for various projects, including the Omagh hospital and the Lisanelly education campus. The Education Minister and the Health Minister will have to decide on those issues in future budget allocations.

The Member mentioned the gas infrastructure and welcomed the additional money that will now be made available to take the gas pipeline to the west. If we are going to deal with energy costs and fuel poverty, there has to be an expansion of the gas pipeline across Northern Ireland.

Public utilities and such single producers have to be regulated, and that topic might be worthy

of a debate in the Assembly at some time. The role of the regulator has not been helpful in decisions about rolling out and getting investment in the infrastructure that is required across Northern Ireland. No matter whether we are talking about gas, electricity or water, I find it difficult to understand how the regulator can be so out of touch on some issues. The very fact that he referred Phoenix Natural Gas to the Competition Commission and got knocked back on so many things tells me that serious issues about the role of the regulator need to be discussed. I make that point because it does and will have a significant impact on our ability to attract investment.

Many Members talked about private investment, and if decisions are sometimes incomprehensible and certainly not explained by the regulator, which then impact on the ability of private utilities, albeit monopolies, to raise money and increase the infrastructure in Northern Ireland, we will all be the poorer for it. Some Members may want to take up the issue and debate it in the Assembly. I will give way to the Member. I thought that he was pointing at someone behind me.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I was not going to start a panto show there, by calling out, "He's behind you."

I presume that the Minister refers to the recent dispute between the Utility Regulator and Phoenix Gas over its price determination. The Minister questions the decision that the regulator took, which was that it will negatively impact on future investment into the gas industry. However, the truth is that the gas industry here is very well, and very heavily, regulated. It is run so well that there is a guaranteed return for investors who want to come into the gas market. The gas market is not new here any more; it has been here since 1996, so it is fairly well established. If someone wants to come in and invest in it, they will get a substantial return.

On that one issue of the price determination between the Utility Regulator and Phoenix Gas, the decision by the Competition Commission is completely independent of any arm of government here. We have no authority over it at all. That decision actually returned a net saving of £19 million for consumers, compared with the proposal put forward by Phoenix Gas. So I think that we are very —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Flanagan: I am just finishing —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am very mindful that the Minister told us yesterday to stick to the subject under discussion. I remind all Members to return to the subject of the Bill.

Mr Wilson: I was only responding to the points that were raised by some of the Members. All I can say in response to the Member is that the Competition Commission certainly found that the decision by the Utility Regulator was wrong on many counts and, indeed, that it was not in the public interest. The Member may talk about the returns on gas and the savings to consumers, but there are no savings to consumers who do not have access to gas. Many people in the west of the Province — people in his own constituency — will be very surprised to hear him say that he would prefer that they do not have access to gas and will have to rely on oil and other expensive forms of heating. The Member may want to reflect on the intervention that he has made, or maybe the case is that he does not really care whether his constituents have a choice of fuel in the west of the Province.

That really brings me on to some of the other stuff that Mr Flanagan talked about. If he has got it wrong on gas, I can tell you that he has got even more wrong when it comes to the fiscal position of Northern Ireland. I really do wonder who writes the kind of stuff that he came out with in the Assembly today. He referred to this "overestimated" deficit that we live with. Having said that it was overestimated, and even after he was challenged by the Member for South Down, he still could not tell us what the overestimation was, how it occurred or the extent of the problem that he had identified.

However, I have to say that he should perhaps talk to some of the Members of his own party. They have asked 60 questions about this issue in the Assembly. Mr Flanagan has asked one Assembly question on it. Despite all the answers that have been given, no one in Sinn Féin, as far as I am aware, has yet challenged the methodology as to how the fiscal deficit has been estimated. And it is an estimate. In all the answers that I have given on this issue, I have made it clear that it is an estimate. By very necessity, it has to be an estimate. However, the methodology which is used is accepted by the Office of National Statistics. You would imagine that if anyone wanted to challenge it, it would be the Scottish Executive, but they accept it. If they thought they were having the wool pulled over their eyes, they would not accept it. Do not forget that they are going to have a real referendum on independence, not the kind of pseudo-

referendum that Sinn Féin is talking about. Sinn Féin crosses its fingers behind its back and hopes that the Secretary of State never agrees to it, because the 65% of the people in Northern Ireland who have declared themselves in favour of the Union would give Sinn Féin its answer.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Minister has just exhausted my patience. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wilson: I am actually dealing with the fiscal deficit, which was raised. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: You could have fooled me, Minister.

5.00 pm

Mr Wilson: It is related. The Scottish Executive have not questioned the methodology of how the fiscal deficit has been worked out. If it is overestimated and if it is overestimated by a certain amount, let us know and let us hear what is wrong with the methodology. As a result of using wrong methodology, by how much is the estimate out? Is the deficit much smaller than has been shown? There will have to be an awful lot of mistakes made to eliminate a deficit of £10.5 billion, which was identified in 2010-11, the year for which it was finalised.

Of course, Mr Flanagan has a political point to make here. It is an inconvenient truth that we are dependent on the rest of the United Kingdom. He says that we have to break away from these decisions that are made at Westminster. Well, the decisions that are made at Westminster actually ensure that we are £10.5 billion better off than we would be if decisions were not made at Westminster. Maybe he should remember that. It has an impact. It has an impact on the amount of money that we have for health. Of course, Sinn Féin does not worry about whether we have a health service any longer. They are all rich enough now to pay for it. They go to private clinics, and not just clinics in the United Kingdom; they head off to private clinics in America.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, I insist that you stick to the Bill, and you are not to go back to Cuba again.

Mr Wilson: I point out, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it is all related to the fact that we get a subvention from Westminster, and that subvention helps to pay for services that,

fortunately, some of the richer Members of Sinn Féin do not have to pay for any longer. Therefore, they do not give a stuff about the fiscal deficit because they can afford to pay it out of their own pocket.

Mr McCallister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Certainly, yes. I hope that it is a helpful intervention.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister. Does he agree that, even if we all went private and did not need to spend anything on health, we would still have a huge subvention from Westminster?

Mr Wilson: The Member is absolutely right. We spend over £4 billion on health. Even if we could pay for that out of our own pocket, we would still have a fiscal deficit, as the Member has pointed out — his maths are very good — of nearly £6 billion. That is the point.

The other thing that Mr Flanagan raised — again, it was related tangentially to the Budget — was that we needed to look at how we did our trade. I wrote it down:

"The border is a barrier to trade."

I do not know; he is certainly up the left on the fiscal deficit, but the border being a barrier to trade? Has he never heard of our membership of the EU, the single European market or the fact that we can trade all across Europe without barriers? There may be a geographical or a political barrier, but the single European market means that there can be trade between countries. We cannot put barriers up because of a border. If we are going to have a rational debate about the Budget, the way forward and the improvements in our economy, at least we should try to stick to the facts, for goodness' sake, before we go down the route that he has gone down.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: He wants to try to redeem himself on this. Mr Deputy Speaker, if I give way for an intervention here and he leads me down another path, I hope that you will give me an opportunity to answer. You will not? Then I will not let him in on an intervention.

I come to the points that Mrs Overend made about the performance of Invest Northern Ireland. She said that we needed more clarity on Invest Northern Ireland, asked why it had reduced requirements and said that it needed

greater budget flexibility. Let us have some clarity on Invest Northern Ireland. In 2011-12, the money in the Invest Northern Ireland budget supported investment commitments of £450 million by local and foreign-owned businesses. Over 6,500 new jobs were promoted: 1,700 in locally owned companies, 1,100 in externally owned companies and a further 1,300 through locally focused new business starts. Over 2,000 local companies were supported in one way or another to expand, secure investments etc. Overall, those figures translated into real benefits for a large number of Invest NI clients and widened our business base.

Members want clarity about what was done with the money. Of course, some of it was returned. I am just a bit disturbed about the call that Mrs Overend and other Members made for DETI to have greater flexibility to use such underspends. There is an agreed procedure in the Assembly when a Department cannot spend money on the purpose for which the Assembly voted it. This is the important point: we as Assembly Members listen to what Ministers say, the Executive present their priorities and budgets are voted on that basis. Members ought to think more when they talk about budget flexibility. Do they really want a situation in which a Minister bids for money, does not spend it and then decides, without any reference to the Assembly, to spend it on something different? That is what budget flexibility of that nature means. There is a proper way of dealing with an underspend. If a Minister cannot spend money on the purpose for which it was voted, it comes back here as a reduced requirement. The reduced requirements are presented to the Assembly, and it is decided how the money will be spent. It may even go back to the same Department for a different purpose, but at least the Assembly is informed, which is important given the calls for transparency.

There is a worrying trend among Ministers — I have mentioned some of them in the Assembly in the past — who want to have autonomy over their budget. That really means that, once they have the money in their hand, they can thumb their nose at Members of the Assembly. That, to me, is not a way of ensuring budgetary transparency and accountability. I was glad that the Member raised the issue because it gave me an opportunity to make the point, which I believe is very important. It has implications for Members who are not Ministers but who want and should have a say in how budgets are used.

Mrs McKeivitt raised issues about money that was sent back to the centre. She gave the

impression that it was wasted, squandered or not used in a way that was effective. I remind her that there will be occasions when Ministers have to return money. That is the purpose of monitoring rounds. My gripe is when they leave it deliberately to the last minute. Sometimes, Ministers cannot afford to do otherwise because they do not know until the last minute that the money will not be used. If money is returned early, it can be put into schemes. If you look at what happened with the returned money this year, you will see that it was not squandered in any way. Some of it went into helping co-ownership, which aided the construction industry and allowed first-time buyers to get into the market. A lot of it went into health, which enabled waiting lists to be tackled and new drugs to be financed. I do not think that anyone would suggest that that was squandering the money in any way. Some of it went into road maintenance, and, since we all drive along roads and get complaints from constituents about potholes and so on, road maintenance is important. Some of it went into schools maintenance so that schools can have defects dealt with. This might be partly my responsibility because I talked about Ministers returning money and the difficulties that that causes. It causes difficulty only if it is unanticipated and left to the last minute. That is why we have to keep a number of projects on hold where money can go into them quickly. It is the kind of issue that the media sometimes love to pick up on: when money comes back, it is sometimes squandered just to get rid of it. It was not squandered. It was spent on good projects that we can all stand over.

Mr Gardiner raised a large number of questions about the health service and whether we were as generous to the health budget as we claimed. We protected the health budget at the start of this four-year period more than it was protected in any other part of the United Kingdom and more than any other budget in Northern Ireland was protected. It was one of the few budgets to have a real terms increase. Even in England, on top of the protection that the Government said that they were giving the health budget, they then had to find £20 billion worth of efficiency savings, which is causing the problems that we see in the headlines all the time.

We not only protected the health budget but gave the Minister flexibility to move money within it — the sort of flexibility that I said I would prefer Ministers not to have. The Health Minister had that flexibility because we realised that, given the pressures, he should have the ability to move any savings around during the four-year period. Last year, of course, we

made additional in-year allocations to the health budget. This year alone, £33 million was given in resource DEL and £15 million in capital DEL. Over the four years, the resource DEL for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will increase by 8.3%, which is well above the rate of inflation and a real increase.

Mr Gardiner raised issues concerning the capital spend. I cannot give him a comparison, but he spoke about a number of projects. If I give him the figures, perhaps he can do the comparisons himself; I do not have all the figures to hand. He asked how the capital spend for the Department of Health compared with, for example, the capital spend proposed for stadia. The capital spend last year was £321.7 million. This year, it will be £223.5 million, and, in the final year, it will be £200.3 million. If the Member takes some of the projects that he listed, he can compare capital spend in health with some of the capital spend for other Departments.

The Member also asked what additional money was given for capital spend. In-year capital bids that were met this year include £4 million for the Belfast Trust site, which was on top of the available capital; £8 million for service infrastructure; and £4 million for other smaller capital projects, such as the car park extension at the Ulster Hospital. I hope that that answers some of the Member's questions.

Mr Rogers asked whether we had our priorities right, but I had some difficulty with the rest of his speech. Asking whether we have our priorities right was a legitimate question to ask, but getting your priorities right means that maybe you are not spending as much on one thing but too much on something else. That is what priorities are all about. After asking the question, we then got a catalogue about the money spent on the ESA, classrooms, the number of schools, school builds, the size of classes and the fact that we needed to ensure that all newly qualified teachers got at least a year's experience. Those might be the priorities of Mr Rogers — as a former teacher, I can understand why he would have them — but, if those are the priorities, what are the lesser priorities? I did not hear anything about that. If Members are going to raise those kinds of issues, that needs to be addressed.

5.15 pm

The Member also queried the scheme announced by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which is to be delivered by the Department of Education.

Under that scheme, 200 newly qualified teachers would be employed to help youngsters who are struggling; for example, when a teacher makes an assessment that a pupil due to get D in their GCSEs could, with a wee bit of additional help, be pushed up to a C. That is a good scheme to address educational underachievement. It ticks one of the boxes that Mr Rogers raised, namely whether we can find jobs for newly qualified teachers and give them the opportunity to get a bit of experience. I do not think that he should write that scheme off. My one regret is that, having announced the scheme in October or November, the Department of Education still has not even advertised for those teachers. It is one thing for us to have great policies and schemes, but, if we are slow to introduce them, maybe we have to ask questions. Maybe that is an issue that people will raise with the Education Minister.

I have dealt with the issue of the Northern Ireland Office.

Mrs Dobson raised the issue of the DARD headquarters relocation. An announcement has, of course, been made about that. It is my view that the matter is cross-cutting and, therefore, requires Executive approval. For clarification, all we have at the minute is a specific site that has been referred to the Executive. To date, the only decision we have to make is to consider whether Ballykelly is a suitable site. A lot of work is still required on the relocation and the costs that would be incurred. That includes asset transfer, office estate impacts and potential staffing consequences. Those need to be fully identified for the Executive to make a final decision and consider funding, because considerable funding will be required. I understand that a business case is being worked on at the moment.

The Member raised other issues about the performance of the Agriculture Minister. I really do not want to get into a spat between two female Members of the Assembly, because I do not think I would win. I will stay out of the differences that she has with the Agriculture Minister. I am not usually circumspect, but I will be on this occasion. That is the wisest choice.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to hear that I will conclude the debate on the Budget Bill. We are now at the close of the Second Reading, including Budget provisions for the early months of 2013-14. I commend the work of the Assembly and the formation of the Bill. I ask the Assembly to support it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 18/11-15] be agreed.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Care Homes: South Antrim

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Kinahan: I am pleased to be able to put forward this topic. I will certainly not take 15 minutes, probably more like 10. I thank the Minister and colleagues from South Antrim for being here.

I am pleased to raise the matter, as I am sure that it is not just pertinent to South Antrim. The issue in South Antrim has been raised with me three times in the past six months. I will not name the areas today, nor will I name the companies involved, as I do not think that that is necessary to make the points that I need to make. If necessary, I will speak to the Department or the Minister afterwards, if he wishes to know more pertinent information.

In South Antrim, as I said, there are three cases of long-established housing developments where typical families of all ages and in all forms and guises have thrived together and where one of the houses has now been bought or sold or is in the process of being bought or sold to become a care home. You might ask, "What is wrong with that?". Initially, nothing.

The Bamford proposals recommended that we should not keep people in institutions other than when we really have to. In South Antrim, we have a hospital that was, until recently, home to some 200 people with severe learning disabilities or similar conditions, and, in order to follow Bamford, we have seen nearly all being moved into new institutional homes. I congratulate all those involved in pursuing what has to be the right thing to do.

Many of us listened to much opposition from families who saw their loved ones being split up from their colleagues of many, many years and from the routines and habitual comforts of their institutionalised home. Moving them to new homes, to supported living in everyday residential areas where they can be part of everyday society and, where possible, go for

walks in the park, go shopping, go to the cinema or go to church — doing what any of us can do — is the Bamford way forward. Time will tell if that is right, but it has to be worth trying.

When those ideas were put forward in the Chamber on previous occasions, I asked whether we had really thought them through. Our excellent health service and all those involved in looking after those with severe learning disabilities have certainly thought through how they look after their family. I think that it is nicer to call them "family". What we have not thought through is how this rehoming will work on the ground with everyone else. That is how it should fit. That is why I brought forward this debate today.

Before we reach the crux of the debate, I just want to remind you that each member of that family being rehomed is someone's brother, sister, mother or father. Each is a loving person who has dignity and the right to as comfortable a life as we can give them. Each has feelings and emotions and the right to joy and fun and to live their life to the full, as much as any of the rest of us. So, I ask everyone to keep that in mind as the debate goes on.

I have set the scene; now I want to move into two scenarios. First, we have a residential area, as I have said, of families — all with their own lives, problems and enjoyments. The partnership from the health service, working with the housing association, decides that that housing development is ideal. It is a good quality housing development. It is in a large cul-de-sac; it is where quiet family life exists; and there is no through traffic. Each house has a garden, front and back, a pavement, and probably fulfils most families' idyll.

The housing association wants to find exactly that. It wants to find a suitable house for sale of that idyllic type, preferably in an area where its family has close ties, close links to the community and a chance of building on that idyll with the community, which also looks at the same ideal, and which, in time, we might think and hope, will adopt that new family.

However, at the moment, consultation is not compulsory, and guidelines on how to communicate with the residents have not been perfected. In this scenario, a short, reasonably blunt letter is sent to some of the houses near to where the house chosen for purchase is — where they are planning to buy and to put the new family in place. In that letter, they state that they wish to purchase the house and to

place in it two people with learning disabilities in supported living.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Clarke: Does the Member accept that the biggest problem is not necessarily the consultation and making people aware of the idea of supported living, but the fears, some unfounded, about that, which others raise? We have read that people believe that the individuals could be sex offenders. There are different suggestions. I think that that has caused more fear than the consultation process. In support of what the trust has done, it has made people aware and consulted them beforehand, but others are indicating what types of people could possibly live in these areas, and that causes more fear than the consultation process.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Member for his comments. I partially agree with them, but, if he lets me finish the speech, he will hear that I am moving into those sorts of points.

The consultation was the right way to proceed, and I congratulate them for doing it, but much more was needed to be said. Sadly, all the letters did was raise concerns, and we have just heard some typical concerns. Not everyone understands what learning disabilities are nor what supported housing means. When only a very few were notified, it meant that for some, not all, the rumour mill ran wild, and, of course, it became most active.

If you then looked at the housing association's website, you would see that it provides accommodation to support people with complex needs, which, of course, opens it up even more. If you carried on looking at the website, you would see that it talks about individual houses, bungalows and group settings. What does it mean by a group setting? Does that mean that many more are going to be moved in? If you read on, you will see that it states that it requires accommodation that can be specifically adapted. What sort of adaptations are we talking about? Is that going to change the whole house? Further on, the website states that it is possible that there will be a site office. Before we have really thought about it, a lot of things start happening, and people get more and more concerned.

It takes time to arrange these meetings. At the first meeting, we discovered that it was for people with severe learning disabilities and that

there was going to be 24-hour care. Rather than placating the fears, it did the opposite. At that meeting, we also discovered that it was a 10-week consultation and that there were only six weeks left. Sadly, that meeting caused more concerns to be raised. At the second meeting, with further residents, we had an excellent and thorough briefing from the health trust and the association. It allowed many matters to be clarified, but, at the same time, the rumour mill kept going and more and more concerns came out and one fed off the other.

The question I am asking the Minister today is this: could we look at a proper PR campaign, local or national, that shows the benefits of Bamford, the excellence of the housing associations and their staff, and the need to give these families a chance of a family life, as far as is possible, with their new neighbours?

5.30 pm

I also ask the Minister to set up guidelines using known expertise on how to consult so that everyone in the area is involved over a much longer time before decisions are made. That will mean that residents do not feel that it is a done deal and that everyone understands the intentions and reasons for such a purchase. I ask for a longer and more careful consultation period and a good PR exercise.

In the second scenario, a house is bought or privately rented in a similar residential area to the first scenario, but there is no consultation. High green wire fences are put up at the front and back, secure, ugly doors and access facilities are installed, and two severely autistic people are moved in to be cared for and to become part of the family.

The neighbours, however, knew nothing until it had all happened. Cars were parked all over the place causing congestion, and bin lorries could not get in. The same sort of issues arose, and everyone in the area became concerned. Most MLAs in the constituency and the local MP became involved.

Again, I ask for proper PR. I also ask for more consultation, because in that case there were no guidelines to state that there should be consultation. I hesitate to ask for more guidelines and rules because in many cases we have too many, but now that this has started to happen everywhere, we must think about putting guidelines in place. It is good to know that, apparently, only 31 of those 200 people need to be found homes and families. Not all those cases have resulted in problems similar to the ones that I am talking about today.

Purchasing a home is one of the most important investments in family life, and the sense of security that that brings should be sacrosanct. At one meeting, an estate agent said that he would definitely mark a house down in value if it were situated beside a care home. How sad it is that such a generalisation can be made. That makes my call for a PR campaign all the more important.

If there is consultation on guidelines, the Minister needs to have discussions with the Environment Minister and the Social Development Minister to link to planning guidelines and DSD funding. If this Adjournment debate is to achieve anything, it is that those two things happen, we have proper guidelines, and everyone can learn to live together properly.

Mr Girvan: I thank my colleague for securing the debate this evening. I want to explore why we have adopted the care in the community approach.

As the Bamford report states, this is the proper way in which to deal with people. They should not be kept in hospitals or institutions but should be integrated into a community, sometimes into the community that they came from. They are the vulnerable people, not the communities into which they are moving.

I attended one meeting. I think that people should be proud that their area was chosen as a safe environment for vulnerable people who feel that the community will be there to protect them. I understand that consultation takes place only when a housing association is involved in the purchase of a property. Housing associations get public money to purchase a property, so they must consult. Private landlords in other areas have offered their properties to a health trust, and it has located people in those properties without using the consultation process. Residents find out only after the event.

I appreciate that my colleague Mr Kinahan mentioned another facility and that fences were put up round it. I feel that this is the wrong approach. I believe that it does not allow independent living. This is not a residential home; it is their home, and it is going to be their home in the community, and I think that we need to focus on that. They will be part of the community, and they will play an active role in the community, visiting the shops, leisure centres and facilities. We need to say that that is part of it.

Unfortunately, when fences start to go up, the house ceases to be an ordinary residence in a development; it starts taking on a different stance from neighbouring houses. I appreciate that we have lived through a history in which some properties had large fences round them for security reasons. We happen to have one in Carnmoney in which an MP lived. He ended up with large fences round his house, and there were cameras. You would have thought that he lived in a barracks. I hope that those days are gone

From a security and health point of view, we have to realise that Muckamore Abbey — and I am happy to mention it — is being wound down and that only those for whom it is safe to go back into the community will be put into the community; others for whom it is not safe, will not. In light of that, this has taken a long time. It has been a desire for 20 years to bring people back to living in communities, and it is only in recent times that we have started to make inroads in that direction. A number of people in the abbey should not be there. They have the right to live in a community and be supported.

I appreciate that there is fear in communities about what is happening. A certain message went out in Ballyclare, and, unfortunately, it created a problem. Those who fuelled it did not do anything to make it any easier for us to progress the matter. There are areas in which I have heard people say that it is fantastic; they know that the property is well maintained, that the garden is probably in better order than their own — and they are living next door — and that they are good neighbours. If there were problems, those would be dealt with.

I really feel that this is something that we need to consider. It is about social inclusion, and the issue is about how the consultation is carried out. I believe, from the DSD's perspective and having to engage in that process, that sending out a general letter is not the way to do it. We knew that people with learning difficulties would be housed there, and that it was going to be their home. They would be tenants, just like anybody else who rents a property. The issue has to be dealt with properly, and the consultation needs to say exactly what this is: it is a home for those with learning difficulties or severe learning difficulties. That is the sector that we are dealing with.

Assurances were given to people that this is the only type of person who would be in that home. It would not be a case of rotation; it would be a steady group of people who would have the house as their home for the long term. People would not be moving in and out. I think that

there was a fear in the community that there would be one group one week and another group the next. These people need to be supported in the community.

I appreciate that the Northern Trust is involved, which is key in this matter. It is vital that we bring it to these sorts of engagements. We need to ensure that the consultation says exactly what this is, so that there will not be any ambiguity or opportunity for the rumour mill to start and for the rumour to go out into the community about what this might be and cause fear.

I cannot say whether these facilities will or will not be detrimental to the value of adjacent properties, but my impression is that they should not, if they are managed correctly. It is all down to ensuring that the management of these facilities is correct.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Deputy Speaker.

I have to say that I had some concerns about this being the subject of an Adjournment debate, because I do not suppose that we are going to be in the situation of discussing the wider policy issues on a constituency-by-constituency basis. I also have some concerns that there was certain heavy-handedness, even by some of the elected representatives, in dealing with the concerns. These are very sensitive matters.

I am a staunch supporter of the care in the community process, and I want to say that to the Minister. It is progressive, it is clinically sound and it has been proven to be so. I visited Muckamore Abbey within days of being elected to represent South Antrim, and I commend the progress that has been made. Mistakes were made, and I am conscious that they were perhaps made in an anxiety to respond to the pressure to get care in the community outcomes for some of the long-stay patients, who, quite clearly and with the necessary support and opportunities to be skilled, would get to the point where they could be full members of our community. They always had that potential, but that was not always encouraged or recognised.

My sense of it is that, at times, elected representatives have to hold their nerve. In any set of circumstances, there is always the potential for a rumour mill. It might be a careless remark or people who set out for entirely selfish not-in-my-back-yard motivations. There are all of those opinions, and I think that

we have to take them into account. We cannot legislate those emotions at a local level out of existence. The housing authority and the trust should engage with the local community in an open fashion and give commitments that are seen to be delivered.

An example was cited about putting up fences. I think that a founding principle should be that whatever accommodation and location is chosen should look absolutely the same as any of the properties in the vicinity. There should be nothing whatsoever to mark it out as distinct or separate, because any differences will invite more negative or reactionary responses.

There is a facility for elected representatives. South Antrim leads the way in this, and at a cross-community, cross-party level, people are prepared to come together privately to deal with issues and try to identify solutions away from the headlines. We should continue that practice and commend it to other constituents. Rather than running to newspapers or holding public meetings, unless you are quite certain that people have all the information and that no more strident voices are going to run away with the issue, we will do justice to the individuals who need to be supported by us on this journey.

I strongly commend the Minister for the work and the progress that has been made in the delivery of commitments that were given several mandates ago. I urge him to keep up that good work, especially with the support of the MLAs in this constituency. It has been used as a pathfinder. Likewise, let us hope that the housing association involved and the trust meet their responsibilities. Let us attempt to ensure that we do not pander to the lowest common denominator on this issue, otherwise we will never solve this problem or do justice to long-stay patients.

Mr Ford: Although I want to speak as Mitchel McLaughlin just has about justice for a number of individuals in our community, I should emphasise that I am not speaking as the Minister of Justice, but as a constituency MLA. I should also probably declare an interest, although it is a bit out of date, as a former social worker. Indeed, at one stage, I failed to get a job with what was then the Northern Board doing rehabilitation work in Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

5.45 pm

There is a fundamental issue here. I regret missing the first few minutes of Mr Kinahan's

speech, but I heard him speak about the rights of individuals, which is fundamentally what this issue is about. Antrim has been host for many years to a significant number of people who have moved out of long-stay hospital accommodation, whether that was in Holywell Hospital or Muckamore Abbey Hospital. That process has happened across the town, mostly in Housing Executive estates. We have now reached the position where, for a number of reasons, housing associations and the trust have looked into some private housing, particularly the benefits of a large bungalow, perhaps for people who are less mobile than would have to be the case for them to live in a three-bedroom Housing Executive semi with a staircase. The real question that arises is this: what are the rights of individuals to a normal family life in those circumstances?

I have had contact with immediate neighbours of people who were, I think, quoted in the first example. There is strong acceptance that Antrim has provided a hospitable home for many people moving out of long-stay care, and those neighbours wish to continue to provide that hospitable care and a good neighbourly atmosphere. We need to look at how these issues are handled to ensure that we do not hype up concerns and fears that do not exist. Sadly, in my time as an MLA, I have also assisted some of my former colleagues in looking at the issue of the location of a children's home, where certain people did not want such a home in their area. In my other capacity as Minister of Justice, I know the difficulty finding somewhere to serve as a hostel in which sex offenders and other offenders can be managed successfully in making the transition to the community. However, it is surely incumbent on all of us, as public representatives, to ensure that we do not add to fears. We must recognise, as Mr Kinahan highlighted, the rights of individuals, which means that people do not necessarily have a veto over what happens in their area. The notion that we somehow have to take a different attitude to private housing estates, rather than Housing Executive estates, seems contrary to saying that we provide the best and most appropriate facilities for those with particular needs.

If there is an issue with, for example, car parking, it should be addressed as such; it should not be addressed as an issue of concern for those who live in particular units. I am pleased that Antrim is a well-mixed and sharing town compared with many other large towns in Northern Ireland. I am proud to represent it as somewhere in which people with mental health problems and learning disabilities have been

welcomed into the wider community. The important thing is that we continue to ensure that that remains the atmosphere for those with particular and different needs and that we continue to meet those needs.

Mr Clarke: It was interesting to listen to Mitchel McLaughlin's comments and find myself agreeing with most of what he said.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Examine your conscience.

Mr Girvan: Dangerous ground.

Mr Clarke: Obliterate that from Hansard. I would not want that to be publicly recorded. *[Laughter.]* All joking aside, his comments about people grabbing headlines and raising fears were well made. That has been the danger with this application from the outset. I probably come at this with a slightly different view on how the trust has identified residential areas — whether it is the trust or DSD that looks at houses in multiple occupation to suit housing demand. I believe that a good model and good example for the trust to look at in Antrim is located beside Enkalon, where a unit has been made to accommodate people with learning difficulties. Staffing economies can also be found there. We have what looks like a residential development, and more should be done to build on that example.

As has been said, we have hosted Holywell too long. I hasten to say that there are residents there who have wanted out for years. Danny organised a meeting for us with the trust a couple of weeks ago, at which it said that some of those people had been waiting to get out for almost 20 years. It is a travesty that people have been stuck in a location for 20 years longer than they should have just because they have learning difficulties. They went in there for short-term treatment, have had their treatment and should have been back out to socialise with the wider public. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. I commend the Minister and his Department for the work that has been done to address that. That said, I still think that more effort should go into determining locations. We do not want to change the character of areas, but people should not be socially excluded from communities. That is important. The point was made by an official from the trust that we could be looking at someone who has family or relatives in the general area and that we should try to house that person in an area with familiar surroundings. That point was well made.

On the other side of the coin, many of us who have been representatives of the area for a few years have been lobbied by families who want to keep their relatives parked there, which is a travesty. They have been dependent on the facility that their loved ones have been in for too long. It is unfortunate that some would prefer for them to stay there, as opposed to allowing them enjoy a normal life outside in the community, given that the medical profession believes that they can integrate.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: I will.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank him for mentioning that. What I discovered there was interesting, although I know that it does not cover every circumstance: when parents are ageing, they are thinking about what would happen if they were to die. They then argue the case for retaining the long-stay at Muckamore, as opposed to, for them, the risk of staying in the community. I found that to be a major factor for that particular parents' group.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate the point that you make. The parents are bound to be ageing, given the time that some of the people have been in the facility. However, given that it has been an unknown quantum for so long, it should give peace of mind to the parents of the people who have been stopped there for so long to hear that we are going to resettle them in the community, with the package and the support that they need so that, when the parents pass on, they will do so knowing that their loved ones will be in a better place than the environment in which they have been living.

Danny made an interesting point about the consultation. I suppose that we can say that consultation is for consultation's sake. When can you consult enough? It is interesting that the organisations that wish to purchase the homes for the purpose did consult. We could have private landlords deciding to buy up houses in residential areas and changing them to multiple occupancy, regardless of the need, with no consultation. We are in the fortunate position that the organisations that are making accommodation to settle those people in residential areas have consulted and made the communities aware of their action plans.

As I said in my intervention to Danny, the fear generated and the spin that some people have put on the plan to create the monster that people think is going to happen has been

disastrous. I think of the correspondence that I have had. People have even put in writing to us what they believe will happen. The only reason that they got that idea is that somebody put it out there in the first instance. That has been disastrous for the people who need resettled. Bear in mind that, when the plan pans out, those people will be settled in our community, and they will have a stigma before they even arrive. That is unfortunate, given what we heard from the departmental officials last week or the week before. None of the people they are talking about resettling in the community has any of the background that has been suggested. It is unfortunate that we are stigmatising individuals before we can even get them settled in the community. They are ordinary people who have had difficulties and have stayed too long in an institution. We need to get them settled back into the community, where they belong, but the very fact that that stigma has been attached to them is a travesty.

Hopefully the Minister will take on board some of the points that have been raised today and not only focus on residential areas but look at a model where we can have units like Oriel, I think it is called, in Antrim, opposite where the army barracks was, where they have made more accommodation. In blocks of accommodation like that, you can use the staff much more widely, but, at the same time, it gives residents the impression that they are living in a residential area, close to the town and facilities and away from the institution.

Mr Ford: I thank the Member for giving way. I entirely take his point about Oriel Lodge, but part of the issue is that we should also ensure that those who move from Muckamore Abbey Hospital to the likes of Oriel Lodge are also able to move on to more normal housing when they are able to do so.

Mr Clarke: Yes. I would never take away from that. I am making the point now because, if there are some people who are deemed to be worse than others, a choice may have to be made between Oriel Lodge-type accommodation or residential accommodation. However, people going into residential accommodation should not need 24-hour care and support when they get to that stage. That is one of the concerns that have been reflected in correspondence that I have received from some individuals. They deem those people to be worse because they need 24-hour care, without knowing the background of the individuals concerned. I hope that the public get the message that they have nothing to fear from these individuals, who need out of the institution.

Ms Brown: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue, and I congratulate the Member on securing the debate. I speak as a Member for South Antrim, which is home to Muckamore Abbey Hospital, and as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

It is interesting and somewhat disturbing that, when this debate was first secured and meetings took place to discuss the issues that were to be raised, there was an alarming and worrying perception of what was meant by the proposal to rehome patients. Some of the concerns raised ranged from worries about the impact on property values to fears that convicted sex offenders would be moved into their neighbourhood, putting whole communities at risk. I mention that not to criticise those in the community — I understand their views — but to highlight the difficulties faced by all who have had to manage this transition and, in particular, the challenges faced by individual patients who are, perhaps, living through the most trying times of their already troubled life as they face major change. I would like to use the time allowed to me to speak on behalf of those vulnerable people, who need our support.

I would like to simply pose this question: what does it say about us, as a society, if vulnerable individuals are labelled and unintentionally victimised by others who, sadly, have little or no understanding of the true situation or the policies behind it? I am a great believer in community spirit, no more so than in recent weeks, when I praised the people of Antrim for coming together to promote suicide awareness. In that instance, I called for a joined-up approach, asking the Department to harness the goodwill and energy that exists and turn it into something that benefits the whole community. Sadly, in this instance, I believe that the challenge to the Department is to work harder to encourage goodwill and properly explain the policy in an attempt to alleviate the fears and misconceptions that exist. I know that officials have attended meetings and I welcome that, but more must be done.

We have heard much talk in recent days about a shared future for Northern Ireland, and that conversation has tended to focus on rights and identity. However, we also need a shared future for health and social issues. The individuals whom we are talking about today are real people with real families and real lives. In the past, they have been sent to institutions where, for whatever reason, they have become forgotten and regarded as out of sight and, literally, out of mind. The House has a responsibility to those who are now coming

forward after years of societal neglect. They are part of our society and should be entitled to feel part of our community. As some of the most vulnerable people in our care, they deserve not just compassion but representation in the House and in the policies that we promote.

I support the further development of care in the community for those with special needs. For too many years, those with learning disabilities were locked away in institutions. That was primarily because we, as a society, took pity on them, believing that that was the best form of care that we could offer. That, however, is no longer the case. Today, there is no reason why those with learning disabilities should not be offered the opportunity to lead a normal life. They no longer need our pity; they need our support. It is surely right that individuals are permitted to lead an independent life through supported living, rather than being marginalised.

Unfortunately, the legacy of hospitalising those with special needs has been far too many people being treated as inpatients. On average, those in hospital have been there for around 20 years. That is a staggering statistic, and, despite a policy to see them returned to the community to pursue an independently led life, around 250 individuals remain in care. I fully accept that this is an incredibly difficult situation, with many challenges and conflicting pressures. Each individual has different needs, and there is no easy solution. Therefore, we must implement a system that primarily caters for the needs of those at the heart of this issue, namely the patients or clients themselves. Some people will need to be placed in shared accommodation, as we have heard already, with a carer present but that option might not be applicable in every case. Whatever the circumstance, it is important that the individuals themselves are able to determine which arrangement is best for them.

This society has undergone so much change in recent years. However, all too often, we still see evident the stigmas associated with mental health and learning difficulties, and that must change. We must target some of the resources available at educating and promoting awareness of these matters if we are to see real change in attitudes. I urge the Minister and his officials to look at that as a matter of priority.

6.00 pm

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I have a speech,

but I do not intend to use it. I will just respond to the issues that have been raised.

First of all, I am disappointed that the debate has come before the House. It reflects a regressive and backward approach that I do not want to be associated with in any way, shape or form. A society is judged on how it treats its weakest and most vulnerable. A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Romania. In that society, many youngsters with learning difficulties were institutionalised and abandoned. I visited some of those facilities, and I found an appalling situation. We associate that with the Ceausescu regime in Romania. In Northern Ireland, we have had long-stay institutions, and they are nothing like what was in Romania. However, I do not want our people, our community and our loved ones with learning disabilities to be put in long-stay institutions. I want them to be part of our community.

When I go into local shops and restaurants where learning disabled people are employed, I am more inclined to go back to those facilities, because I recognise that they recognise that those people are part of our community and need our support, and they are giving them jobs. I go up to the cinema and see a fellow who I am very friendly with cleaning there. He lives in his own accommodation, and he has a learning disability. You know what? That is really good. I do not want a society in which we put people away in institutions. I want a society where we value, care for, love and show affection to people who have a learning disability.

I hear the suggestion, "We do not want these people living in our area because they could be sex offenders". There are more people with a learning disability who have been the victim of sexual abuse than the other way around. I hear, "We do not want these mentally ill dangerous people". Again, people with a learning disability or, indeed, a disability of any kind are far more vulnerable and likely to be attacked than the other way around. Recently we had that case in Lisburn, where young Scott Vineer, an autistic lad, was beaten to a pulp and left for days. Thankfully, Scott continues to make progress, albeit slowly. He is headed in the right direction after that brutal attack by so-called normal people. I do not want to be associated with that. I do not want to be associated with people who say that this will have a negative impact on house prices and that surely cheaper housing could be obtained with public money. I want our learning disabled community to be a fully integrated part of our community, where people who have a learning

disability can be cherished and we can share our space, facilities and community with them.

I accept that, in all of this, we have a job of work to properly inform communities when these things happen. We have a number of learning disabled facilities in Lisburn. We have some wider communities where there is greater support and larger numbers of groups together. We also have individual bungalows and residential care homes. There is a cocktail of facilities and a mixture available, and that should be the case right across Northern Ireland.

Let me say this: you cannot choose your neighbours. I suspect that, in these instances, people will find that the learning disabled community are good neighbours. There is a far greater potential for much more difficult neighbours who will hold noisy parties and have cars leaving late at night, taxis calling and all that goes with that than people will get with any learning disabled neighbours that they might have.

I thank all those who took part in the debate. What has been said has been largely constructive. I will take on board issues that were raised, particular the issue of ensuring that homes are the same as every other home and that stupidly large fences are not put up. I often see six-foot fences around people's homes. That does not seem to be unreasonable, where it is appropriate, but I do not see any need whatsoever for putting up ridiculous things because someone happens to be autistic. I want to see things done appropriately and properly.

I will fully conform with what Bamford has requested and recommended. He has brought expert views to the table. I will drive the Bamford review forward and ensure that people from the learning disabled community have the opportunity to fully integrate into society. I have passed Muckamore on the school bus when out on school trips and heard stupid comments being made by young people who did not know any better. It is regrettable that we have adults today making stupid comments when they should know better.

Adjourned at 6.06 pm.

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

The content of this ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Agriculture and Rural Development

Public Right of Pedestrian Access to DARD Forestry Land and New Forestry Land By-laws

Published at 12.00 noon on Tuesday 12 February 2013

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Fáilte romhaimh.

I wish to advise Assembly members that from St Patrick's Day, 17 March, the public will be granted a public right of pedestrian access to DARD forestry land.

Section 31 of the Forestry Act (NI) 2010 provides, subject to byelaws, for public right of pedestrian access. The Forestry (2010 Act) (Commencement No.2) Order (NI) 2013 will bring this section into force, along with The Forestry Land Byelaws (NI) 2013.

There is much to enjoy. There are over 100 Forest Service properties that provide way-marked woodland walks. Pedestrians will have access to most of the 76,000ha of forestry land managed by the Forest Service. This land contains conifer and broadleaved plantations and natural woodlands and open space. Some of the lands are specially protected as nature reserves and historic landscapes, and the public right extends to most of these areas.

This is undoubtedly an important step under the Forestry Act (NI) 2010. The public right of pedestrian access encapsulates in law our Assembly's endorsement of our vision to promote the wider recreational and social use of the Department's forest lands. Public access to open space is a valuable resource, it gives us opportunities for tourism, for sport, it helps us to take exercise and look after our health, and reminds us of our rural environment and heritage. The public right of pedestrian access will complement local government policies on recreation and access to the countryside.

The public right of pedestrian access applies only to DARD forestry land. This land is managed by the Forest Service. I wish to make it clear that privately owned woodlands are not affected by the Order and the Byelaws. Similarly, where the Forest Service occupies land under conditions which restrict public access agreed with the original landowner then the new legislation has no effect.

Understandably, the public right of pedestrian access will not extend to any building or structure on forestry land, or to any facility for which a charge is payable. It will also be subject to certain restrictions as set out in The Forestry Land Byelaws (NI) 2013.

When we consulted on the Byelaws in 2011 there was very significant public and cross-departmental interest, reflecting the wide use of forests for passive and active recreation, and the legal rights by third parties to use forestry land. The clear wish of many was that the form of the legislation should be simple, that the byelaws should not be drafted to cover every eventuality; and that DARD should recognise that visitors to forests are prepared to act responsibly, and to take responsibility for their own safety.

Of course, some limitations are needed, to allow the Department to intervene when people behave irresponsibly, to protect the forests from damage and disease, and to provide for public safety when forestry operations create a hazard for the public. However, I am now confident that these Byelaws strike an excellent balance between personal freedom and legal restrictions. I am grateful to the wide range of stakeholders who responded to our consultation and who helped me achieve this balanced outcome.

The public will now be able to exercise their public right of pedestrian access day or night unless the forest is closed for one of the reasons allowed in the byelaws. Dogs must be kept under control, and in core recreational areas this will mean that they need to be kept on a lead. The Byelaws recognise that some behaviour is likely to create annoyance to other

forest visitors, they provide examples of unacceptable behaviour, and they allow forestry officials to remove people whose behaviour is unacceptable.

We value our public forests and the opportunity they give for informal access to open countryside. This legislation is an important step in moving the permissive access to Forest Service lands and the first Forest Parks that we have enjoyed since the 1950's, to a legal right to be enjoyed responsibly by everybody. My Statement will be available on the DARD website in due course.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh.



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