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Weir, Peter (North Down)
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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 13 February 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Mr Andrew Allen

Mr Speaker: Order. Martina Anderson has sought leave to make a statement on the death of Andrew Allen, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call Ms Anderson to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I will then call Members from the other parties, as agreed with the party Whips. Those Members will also have up to three minutes in which to speak. As Members know, the convention is that there will be no opportunity for interventions or questions on the matter. I certainly will not take any points of order until the matter is dealt with. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. On behalf of Sinn Féin, I extend our deepest condolences to Andrew Allen's extended family and friends. I visited the home yesterday evening, and the deep sense of hurt and pain that the Allen family are feeling was very clear. They are a very respected family, originally from the Top of the Hill area in Derry, and they are known by many. There is a lot of hurt and pain because of what happened not just among the relatives and friends but across the society of Derry and Donegal.

There has been a lot of speculation as to why and by whom Andrew Allen was murdered. I will not add to that speculation at all except to say that the silence of those who murdered Andrew speaks volumes. People in Derry and across Donegal have spoken in a united voice in condemnation of what has happened. Their rejection of those who murdered Andrew Allen has been heard by many. If people have any information, they should hand it to the gardaí and speak directly to them or to any other relevant authority for that matter.

There is a duty and a responsibility on all of us in the Chamber but especially those from the Foyle constituency. Many of us have stood together, shoulder to shoulder, to speak with a united voice in order to advance peace and the political process in which we are involved. I will say now what we said back then: an attack on anyone is an attack on us all, and an attack anywhere in our city is an attack on all the people who live there. If we want to go forward in advancing peace and the political process, we should speak in that tone about Andrew Allen's family, his parents and the circumstances surrounding his death. I think that the people in our city want to see us united in our condemnation. All of us must continue to that end. The self-appointed vigilantes, whose murderous actions only served to undermine the fabric of our community, must be condemned by all of us with one voice.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member of the time.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Campbell: I join in the universal condemnation, not just in the House but across Londonderry and Northern Ireland as a whole, of the brutal murder of Andrew Allen. He was murdered in the Irish Republic but was, as stated, originally a resident of the Top of the Hill area in Londonderry. The vicious killers who carried out his murder at the weekend speak for no one. However, as we have said repeatedly and on many occasions, the fact that such people speak for no one does not stop them killing people. Their actions reap universal condemnation, which is right, proper and appropriate, but that universal condemnation, in and of itself, does not bring them to justice. The only thing that will bring the killers to justice is the evidence that the police and, in this case, the guards in the Republic can accumulate in order to bring a case against them and get convictions in a court of law. That is what we need to see.

Everyone who can give information should do so, be they people who were in the area at the time, political representatives or anyone else. This type of activity has no place in our society in 2012, just as it had no place during any period of the past century, be it the 1970s, 1980s or 1990s. Hopefully, this will be the last occasion on which we have to do this. We support totally the family and express our condolences to them.

Mr Hussey: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I express our sincere sympathy to the Allen family following this tragic murder in Buncrana in County Donegal last Thursday. It is hard to imagine how anybody could go up to somebody's house and carry out a murder in the way that this murder was carried out. What type of people are we dealing with? Are they dissident republicans? What are they? Nothing can justify it, nothing at all. To anybody who believes that what those people did was right I say that it was not right. Gregory Campbell made the point that we do not want to stand here again in the future to condemn such actions.

Our sympathy must be with the Allen family. Mr Allen was a young man, 24 years old, with two children. His whole life was ahead of him, but some individual took that life away. The only justice is through a court of law, and, hopefully, the people responsible will be brought before a court of law. Anyone who has any information will hopefully provide that either to the Police Service of Northern Ireland or to the Garda Síochána. I wish them well in their endeavours. However, at this time, we must condemn the murderers. At this time, our thoughts must be with the family of this young man. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I send our sincere sympathy to the people of Londonderry and to the family who have lost this young man.

Mr Durkan: It is with great sorrow that I rise on behalf of the SDLP to condemn the cold and brutal murder of a young man from my city that was carried out last Thursday night in Donegal. By acting as judge, jury and executioner, those responsible have left two young children without a father and have robbed the Allen family of a son, a brother and an uncle. To the family, we offer our deepest sympathies at this sad and traumatic time.

I have just spoken with my colleague Pat Ramsey, who is on his way here from Mr Allen's funeral. Fr McFaul, who concelebrated the Mass,

described this tragic death as meaningless. Who could say anything more about it than that? This vigilantism does not work. It has never worked. The sorrow on the streets of Derry over the past couple of days is almost matched by the anger. Andrew's mother is imploring his friends to forgo retribution. People must put their faith in the justice system, and it is our duty to give them a justice system in which they can have faith.

Acts such as this perpetuate a cycle of violence and victims, and I call on all those involved in such acts to stop now and to put an end to the suffering caused by expulsions, beatings and executions — sorry, murders. Actions such as those are beyond justification and beneath contempt. It is right that we come together in the House to condemn such terrorism. We must stay together to combat it because, together, we can defeat this terrorism.

Mr Dickson: I rise on my own behalf and that of the Alliance Party to express disgust at the actions of the dark and sinister thugs behind this brutal and callous murder. Our thoughts and condolences are with the family of Andrew Allen, whose life was cruelly ended. This barbaric murder has sent shock waves through the whole community. Those behind it have nothing to offer but pain and distress. As others said, they must be brought to justice. I encourage anyone with information to give it to the guards or to the PSNI. The community has nothing but contempt for those who carried out this brutal act.

Mr Allister: I readily join in expressing condolences to the Allen family. Murder is murder, no matter who is murdered or by whom. This is yet another foul murder in a litany of what pass as vigilante murders over the years. On this occasion, we are told that the perpetrators may fly the flag of convenience of Republican Action Against Drugs but really represent someone else. Be that as it may, that pattern is sadly familiar to us in this Province. Over the years, many have been murdered under such flags of convenience. The predecessor to this particular title was, of course, Direct Action Against Drugs, which was widely recognised as a flag of convenience for the Provisional IRA. As we think today of the murder of Andrew Allen, we should also think of the murders by those who claim to be Direct Action Against Drugs: Micky Mooney; Tony Kane; Francis Rice; Paul Devine; Francis Collins; Christopher Johnston; Martin McCrory; Ian Lyons; John Paul Devlin; Brendan

Campbell; Brendan Fegan; Paul Downey; Patrick Quinn; Christopher O’Kane; Paul Daly; and Matthew Burns. All were murdered in similar fashion under that particular flag of convenience.

Ms Anderson commented that the silence of the perpetrators speaks volumes. The silence of those associated with whichever flag of convenience in those murders also spoke volumes, and I join the call that we appeal for information and evidence, not only in the murder of Andrew Allen but in the murders of the other men, whose murders have gone unanswered through the justice system. It behoves everyone, particularly those who bring cases such as this to the House, to ensure that all is done by those whom they control to solve other murders as well.

12.15 pm

Assembly Business

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Dickson: I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 13 February 2012.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 13 February 2012.

Mr Speaker: As the motion has been agreed, today’s sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm, if required.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion on Statutory Committee membership will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Ms Sue Ramsey be appointed as a member of the Committee on Procedures; and that Ms Michelle Gildernew be appointed as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. — [Ms J McCann.]

Public Petition: Indigenous Fish Species

Mr Speaker: Mr Robin Swann has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak about the petition.

Mr Swann: I present this petition on behalf of everyone who has an interest in the future of the indigenous fish population in our waters and on behalf of the individuals who actively gathered the petition’s 5,246 signatures. It is now apparent that the indigenous fish stocks of our rivers and waterways are quickly reaching a point at which their stocks are no longer sustainable. It is important to strike an appropriate balance between the conservation of fish stocks and the fishing industry and to acknowledge that a thriving recreational angling

estate has the potential to be a major tourism revenue stream for Northern Ireland. It is a sad fact that there are cases in which indigenous fish species such as dollaghan, pike and salmon are being exploited to the point at which stocks are no longer sustainable, and they are being exploited by legal and illegal practices.

We have rivers with confirmed salmon counts that show that all of them are well below their conservation limits. In fact, some of them are 50% below their conservation limits, where the killing of fish continues. We have confirmation of thousands of yards of illegal nets being seized in Lough Neagh containing tens of thousands of dead fish every year. We have nets off our north coast that breach the EU habitats directive. The Minister has stated:

“the continued commercial exploitation of wild ... salmon and killing of salmon caught by rod and line in the DCAL jurisdiction is currently untenable. Authorising such exploitation would be inconsistent with the Departments obligations under the EC Habitats Directive and with NASCO guidelines. This could lead to significant infraction fines being imposed by the EC.” — [Official Report, Vol 71, No 2, pWMS1, col 2].

Those are the Minister's words, not mine. Not only is there a moral requirement to take action but there is a significant financial one.

The Minister made a call for clubs to go catch-and-release voluntarily, and many have heeded her request. However, some are still waiting to see whether she will issue the licence for the nets off the north coast. There is a large dedicated body of individuals who are passionate about the survival of indigenous fish, which is why they have contributed thousands of voluntary man hours and millions of pounds to conservation and environmental projects the length and breadth of our water systems.

I hope that, in the short time that I have, I have highlighted some of the main concerns behind the petition and raised the profile of the issue, which will be developed further in an Ulster Unionist Party-sponsored debate in the coming weeks. In conclusion, on behalf of individual anglers, angling clubs, the No to Nets campaign, the Maine Enhancement Partnership and many more interested representative groups, I present the petition to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in partnership with other relevant Departments to tackle the problem with consultation and including the key stakeholders

to ensure that our rivers and waterways can return to the glory days, when anglers can cross from riverbank to riverbank stepping on the backs of fish and every angler can boast of catching a fish this big and then release it.

Mr Swann moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and send a copy to the Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Public Petition: Car Parking, College Park Avenue, Belfast

Mr Speaker: Mr Conall McDevitt has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have to up to three minutes to speak about the petition.

Mr McDevitt: The petition that I wish to present before the House is on behalf of the residents of College Park Avenue in Belfast. Colleagues may know College Park Avenue, which is one of the streets on the edge of the Holylands between that area and Queen's University, and it is one of the few streets in the area that remains sustainable. It is a street with families and some elderly people. It has welcomed new members of our community and is determined to survive as a residential centre in the middle of the university district. However, to do so, it needs to be able to operate and live as a street.

I am sure that many in the House will share the frustration that I have felt, as a city representative, in securing residential parking schemes, which are simple schemes to allow residents to get preferential parking on the street where they live. One barrier that is often put up against a successful application for a residential parking scheme is inability to secure a sufficient level of residents' support. That, of course, can be very difficult in streets with a large number of homes of multiple occupancy. The petition that I will present this morning on behalf of the residents of College Park Avenue is a unanimous petition signed by every resident. It asks the Minister for Regional Development and the Department for Regional Development please to expedite a residents' parking scheme in their street. It is a simple ask, but it is quite an important one. If those householders, ratepayers and families do not have access to a basic parking space within a reasonable distance of their front door, the viability of their street will continue to be threatened. It would be a great tragedy if College Park Avenue, like so many other streets in that part of our city, were to end up falling into the hands of speculators whose only intent is to turn the street into flat land. Mr Speaker, I thank the House for its indulgence, and I am happy to present you with the public petition on behalf of the residents of College Park Avenue.

Mr McDevitt moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister for Regional Development and send a copy to the Chair of the Committee for Regional Development.

Executive Committee Business

Spring Supplementary Estimates 2011-12 and Vote on Account 2012-13

Mr Speaker: The next two motions relate to the Supply resolution, and, as usual, I propose to conduct a single debate on both motions. I shall call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to move the first motion, and the debate on both motions will then begin. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. I will then call the Minister to move the second motion, before putting the Question on it.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for the debate. The Minister will have up to 60 minutes to allocate at his discretion to proposing and making a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

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

That this Assembly approves that a total sum not exceeding £15,244,040,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2012 and that total resources not exceeding £16,220,944,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2012 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(c) and 2(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2011-12 that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £6,987,469,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern

Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2013 and that resources not exceeding £7,451,346,000 be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2013 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Vote on Account 2012-13 document that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Today's debate is an important step in the legislative process that governs our finances. The debate covers the final spending plans for 2011-12 and the first year of the Executive's 2011-15 Budget. In the first Supply motion before the House, I seek the Assembly's approval for the Executive's final spending plans for 2011-12 as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates that were laid before the House on 6 February. Through the second motion, I request interim resources and funding for the first few months of 2012-13 in the form of a Vote on Account. I request the levels of supply set out in the motions under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which provides for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make recommendations to the Assembly leading to cash appropriations from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund.

The amounts that I ask the House to vote in supply for 2011-12 are substantial: over £15 billion of cash, over £16 billion of resources and over £2 billion of accruing resources for spend and use by Departments and other public bodies in Northern Ireland. The first Supply motion sums up the spring Supplementary Estimates that are before us today for approval. I will take the opportunity to remind Members that the spring Supplementary Estimates reflect all the in-year changes made since the Main Estimates were approved by the Assembly last June; that is, they reflect the DEL changes agreed in the June, October and January monitoring rounds,

as well as AME funding that has been agreed by the Treasury since the approval of the 2011 and 2012 Main Estimates last June.

Before going into some of the detail of the spending plans for 2011-12, I want to make some important points. Over the next few weeks, we will progress a significant tranche of business through the House relating to Supply resolutions, Budget Bills etc. They are important legislation, but it is important that Members appreciate that this is not a new Budget in terms of financial allocations by the Executive. The four-year Budget was set in March last year, and that still holds. The legislative process today and over the next few weeks simply gives form to the Budget agreement for the financial year 2011-12. There have, of course, been changes to the allocations in this financial year that have been driven by the monitoring round process, and the spring Supplementary Estimates are the finalisation of those changes in legislation.

I hope that Members will not use this opportunity, as has happened in recent years, to seek a debate on the fundamentals of the Budget-setting process. *[Interruption.]* As the Member to my right has said, that is probably a vain hope. Nevertheless, I have put it on record so that, should Members err or veer off the path, they have not done so without some warning from me and without some attempt from me to make sure that they do not wander in that way.

As I said in the January monitoring statement last month, I have been rather surprised by the level of resources surrendered by Departments as part of the monitoring round system. Although that may reflect robust action taken by Departments to control expenditure, it also raises the possibility that the Budget 2011-15 allocations to some Departments represented either an overestimation of need or an underestimation of the capacity for savings. It is in that context that I will now undertake a review of departmental budgets for 2013-14 and 2014-15.

Today's debate is not about that Budget process. We all know that the Supply resolution debate has been hijacked in a similar manner in the past, so, in order to head off some of the inevitable questions on the Budget going forward, with your permission, Mr Speaker, I will outline that process. Perhaps that will allow Members to

then concentrate on the business at hand — 2011-12 — for the remainder of the debate.

12.30 pm

It is envisaged that the starting point of the review process will be a robust assessment of the departmental performance in 2011-12 based on the quantum of reduced requirements surrendered and the level of underspend. The level of underspend will be based on the provisional outturn position as will be reported by Departments in May. It will be important to assess the scale of reduced requirements or underspend against the opening position, and, more importantly, the reasons that drove that surrender of resources.

My officials will also have a series of bilateral discussions with Departments to ascertain their future pressures. Those will be considered in the context of the new draft Programme for Government, and I will then advise Executive colleagues of the outcome of that review. Let me make it clear that it will be a review at the margins of each departmental budget allocation and not an opportunity to invite universal bid submissions. Having made this clarification, I will turn to the detail of today's business.

This financial year has been one of the most difficult in recent memory for the citizens of Northern Ireland. The economic outlook meant that local unemployment increased and the UK spending review constrained our public spending. The Assembly had to make difficult decisions about the allocation of that funding to best protect its citizens.

The expenditure plans for 2011-12 were finally agreed by the Assembly in March 2011 in the Budget for 2011-15. That Budget was the first for many years to provide Northern Ireland with a reduction in the overall departmental expenditure limit when compared with previous years. However, Members will remember the actions of the Executive in attempting to mitigate the impact of those reductions. Additional receipt-based funding was generated and resources were diverted to capital where the reduction was the greatest.

We began the financial year 2011-12 with an over-commitment. An additional £30 million in capital and £30 million in current expenditure was handed out to Departments, with the expectation that the Executive would be able to recoup that through reduced

requirements during the course of the year through the monitoring rounds. I can confirm that this approach not only allowed additional funding to be appropriately planned for, but it was effectively managed through the three monitoring rounds. In addition to eliminating this planned over-commitment, the Executive were able to allocate further funding throughout the year to high-priority emerging issues.

I will take a moment to look at the overall spending picture in 2011-12. As regards current expenditure, Departments surrendered £65.7 million in non-ringfenced resource departmental expenditure limit for redistribution in the three monitoring rounds. That compares with the equivalent reduced requirements of £54.9 million, £80.9 million and £126.8 million for the preceding years. This year was the first one in which we had a reduction in departmental expenditure limit, and I think that shows why there has been some surprise expressed at the level of money that came back to the centre.

Northern Ireland also received £28.4 million of resource as a result of Barnett consequentials from Her Majesty's Treasury. Taking into account the Executive's social funds, funding to manage the over-commitment, and ringfenced resources, the Executive were able to allocate £117 million to emerging issues in 2011-12. On the capital side, Departments gave back £48.2 million for redistribution during in-year monitoring. The management of the over-commitment and additional allocations from HM Treasury meant that the Executive were able to meet the capital pressures of £40 million in 2011-12.

I will address the detail of those current and capital allocations. In difficult economic times, you can tell the priorities of a Government by where they redirect their available funding. In 2011-12, the Executive allocated over 80% of additional current expenditure funding to education, health, social development and employment and learning, reflecting our strong emphasis on protecting the vulnerable, while aiming to educate and equip the emerging workforce.

Specifically, we allocated £10 million to schools' end-year flexibility to ensure that they have access to their reserves and can plan appropriately; £10 million to the Department of Education for the maintenance of the schools estate; £12.7 million to the Department for Employment and Learning's Steps to Work programme; £3.7

million to employment services for those with a disability; £25 million to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for a range of measures, including specialist medicine; £22 million to the Department for Social Development from the social protection fund to redistribute to eligible persons; and £15 million to the Department for Regional Development for a range of areas, including roads repairs and street lighting improvements.

On the capital side, the Executive allocated £3 million to the Titanic public realm and buildings in preparation for this important centenary year; £5 million to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for health trust equipment; and £11 million to the Department for Regional Development for structural improvements to the roads network and the replacement of buses for the transport network. I see that the Member from the Green Party is not here, but I am sure that he would have been very happy to hear that. Indeed, spend on the structural maintenance of the roads network will be over £111 million this year, which will be the highest figure ever recorded. Some £13 million has been allocated to the Department for Social Development for co-ownership and first-time buyer initiatives to help people to get on to the property ladder, and £4 million has been allocated for thermal improvements to Housing Executive homes, allowing those on low incomes to save on fuel and electricity bills.

Those are some of the notable departmental expenditure limit allocations in the monitoring round. However, as I have said in the past, Members must not forget that, in addition, provision was made in the annually managed expenditure exercises and the spring Supplementary Estimates in 2011-12 for, among other things, £2.9 billion of non-contributory, income-related social security benefits to the most vulnerable. That funding goes some way to protect the most vulnerable and provides mainly for expenditure on disability benefits, income support, pension credit, jobseeker's allowance and housing benefits.

Before leaving the detail of the spring Supplementary Estimates, I want to inform the House that the additional headroom built into them is over and above the January monitoring position. As the SSEs and the Budget Bill are the final statutory ceilings on spending plans for 2011-12, it is prudent to include headroom for three specific items of expenditure that could

crystallise prior to the end of the financial year. The common agricultural policy disallowance, Invest Northern Ireland capital and payment from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) for the Irish Open golf tournament are uncertain in their timing but require additional cover should it become necessary to make payments before April.

No doubt, Members will be aware of obligations to the EU in respect of the CAP. In regard to DETI headroom, it was thought prudent to provide additional legislative cover for some Invest Northern Ireland capital projects that may materialise this financial year, but they are by no means certain. Some Members will be more aware than others of the efforts of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to bring the prestigious Irish Open to Portrush. Should it be necessary to incur expenditure this year, headroom has been incorporated into the DETI Estimate to allow for that.

It is crucial to emphasise to the House that such headroom has been included on the condition that the resources must be used only for the agreed purpose, effectively ring-fencing those areas that I have outlined. I am sure that Members will endorse the actions taken, which will ensure that we meet our obligations to the EU, assist local businesses and develop tourist potential through the Irish Open.

I turn now from the 2011-12 financial year to the 2012-13 financial year. The second motion before the Assembly today seeks approval for the issue of a cash and resource Vote on Account to ensure the continuation of services into the financial year. The amount of cash and resources proposed are in advance of 45% of the final 2011-12 provision and have no direct correlation to Budget allocations for 2012-13. That advance is necessary to enable services to continue into the first part of 2011-12, until the Main Estimates reflecting the second year of the Budget 2011-15 are prepared and presented to the Assembly for approval.

I commend to Members the 2011-12 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2012-13 Vote on Account and Supply motions tabled. I look forward to a relevant debate on those issues. At the end of today's debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account, I will endeavour to deal with any of the points that have been raised, and, of course, I hope that all the points raised will be relative to

the discussion that we will have had. If they are irrelevant, they may get answered, or they may not; it depends.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta. On behalf of the Committee, I will try to be as relevant as I possibly can. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks.

At our meetings on 1 February and 8 February, the Committee for Finance for Personnel took evidence from DFP officials on the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2011-12 and the Vote on Account for 2012-13. I thank the departmental officials for their assistance in that regard, particularly since that was the first occasion on which the new Committee was required to scrutinise these routine but complex matters.

As the Minister outlined, the spring Supplementary Estimates, the Vote on Account and the associated Budget Bill give the Departments the authority to spend. They also set controlled limits for Departments to which they can be held to account by the Assembly. The Committee has approved accelerated passage for the Budget Bill, which will be introduced by the Minister later today. I have written to you, a Cheann Comhairle, to provide confirmation of that.

The opening Budget position for 2011-12 was set out in the Executive's 2011-15 Budget, which was agreed on 9 March 2011, during the previous Assembly mandate. The spring Supplementary Estimates reflect the changes that have been made to that opening Budget position as a result of the monitoring rounds in June, October and January. Additionally, as the Minister said, some headroom has been built in to facilitate any additional allocations that may be made in respect of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The DFP briefing paper provided to the Committee stated that that headroom had been included on the strict DFP condition that, should the spending not materialise, DFP virement approval would not be given later to cover excess spending in any other area.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel has actively scrutinised the monitoring rounds throughout the 2011-12 financial year. The Committee has received timely briefings on the Department's position prior to each monitoring

round, followed up by written responses to queries raised. In addition, following the Minister's statement in plenary session on the outcome of each monitoring round, the Committee was briefed by DFP officials responsible for central finance on the strategic and cross-cutting issues relating to public expenditure.

During the evidence session on 8 February, DFP officials confirmed that they had been surprised at the level of reduced requirements declared during this financial year. Although the officials stated that some of that, such as the reduced requirements for Invest NI, had been unavoidable, they considered that it was indicative of some positive efforts to reduce administrative expenditure within Departments.

Members also heard that it is not possible to reallocate some of the easements, as they apply to ring-fenced areas of spend, such as depreciation. In that regard, the Committee notes the proactive action that has been taken in light of the level of reduced requirements to consider the Budget allocations for the past two years of the Budget period.

The reconciliation between the Main Estimates budget position and the SSE budget position was also discussed, with the departmental officials providing explanations for allocations, easements and technical adjustments where possible. Although it was useful in assisting the Committee's consideration of that matter, the discussion served to highlight a weakness in the SSE process. As the SSEs were laid only on 6 February, Committees will not have had sufficient opportunity in advance of today's debate to scrutinise their departmental SSE position and how it differs from the Main Estimates provision.

12.45 pm

Although, as we heard, the SSEs essentially reflect the changes that are made through the monitoring rounds, the read-across is not necessarily apparent or easy to follow. In the case of DFP, for example, the reconciliation showed a technical adjustment in excess of £6.2 million capital for which no detailed explanations had been given during the monitoring rounds. Perhaps the need to provide the other Committees with sufficient time and opportunity for scrutiny of departmental SSEs is an issue that the Minister and his officials can give consideration to as part of the reforms proposed in the review of the financial process.

As part of that review, the Committee noted that the Audit Office intends to further discuss the presentation of the Estimates with DFP. I do not wish to go into any detail on that, as Members will be aware that there is a debate later today on the Committee's response to that review. The Committee asked that consideration also be given to improving the resource accounts to provide better read-across between published financial documents, enhance transparency and better facilitate Assembly scrutiny.

I will turn briefly to the motion on the Vote on Account for 2012-13. That is a practical measure that provides interim resources at approximately 45% of the 2011-12 provision. It enables Departments to ensure that public services continue during the early part of the financial year until the Main Estimates for 2012-13 and the associated Budget Bill are debated before the summer.

On behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I support both motions.

Mr Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute briefly to this important debate. As each of us brings a range of political and constituency matters to the Floor of the Assembly, there can be a feeling of *déjà vu* about the annual debates on the Supplementary Estimates and the Budget. That is especially so in recent years as we continue to face economic recession and financial instability. The simple reality is that the block grant, which is the cake that we have been given by Westminster, is too small. The Finance Minister is doing an excellent job of carving up that cake in very difficult circumstances, even though each Department feels that it has not been given its fair share and is complaining that it is suffering from undernourishment.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I know that we are all aware that the future of the Department for Employment and Learning is the subject of consultation. That is putting it mildly. Whatever happens to the Department and the Committee, I place on record my appreciation of the hard work that the Minister and his officials have done and continue to do, even though I do not always agree with the Minister on a number of issues. However, the simple reality is that we have too many Departments. Given the times

that we live in, it is more vital than ever that we reduce the cost and burden of government.

I am confident that DEL's remit and responsibility and the policies and strategies that it devised and developed can be effectively integrated into the Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, we must ensure that there is no slippage or loss of focus. Therefore, there must be a determination by both Departments to ensure that they work closely together. There can be no room for a silo mentality; there must be a joined-up governmental approach. We have already seen the evidence of interdepartmental approaches, such as the Pathways to Success strategy, which is a clear example of the potential of that sort of co-operation and joined-up approach.

The work that DEL has been doing is critical to economic growth. The key drivers for a dynamic and substantive economic recovery are a properly educated and skilled local workforce, as well as inward investment, which will secure long-term, high-value jobs for that workforce. One of the key drivers in that regard is the further education sector. I make a plea that there be no reductions to the budget of that sector. Youth unemployment is rising across the UK, and the number of unemployed young people is at its highest for over 15 years. The consequences of that are very worrying indeed. We must take whatever action we can to train and educate our young people in a focused and targeted way. If we fail to do that, it will put an increasing strain on the public purse and we could well lose many of our young people, who would be forced to leave Ulster in search of work abroad. I am sure that nearly every Member in the Chamber today can testify to the fact that, already, many young people from their constituency are leaving the shores of Ulster, going especially to Australia, where they can find work. The consequences of that for us include the increased alienation of young people from society, which is very dangerous for society as a whole.

Young people often get a bad name, but from what I see and hear, most of them are keen to learn, keen to be trained and keen to get into work. I heard recently of a young lad who approached the owner of a tyre and exhaust centre in search of work. When the owner told him that he had no vacancies at present, the young chap said that he would work for nothing, just simply to gain skills and experience. That is typical of many of our young people today, and

why we have an obligation to ensure that they are properly trained and skilled to get into the workplace.

We must reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training, known as NEETs, to an absolute minimum. That is a critical issue. Just a week ago, in this Chamber, we debated NEETs and the education maintenance allowance (EMA); two key areas in which a great deal of valuable work has been done by the Employment and Learning Committee. I referred earlier to the need for a cross-cutting approach, and it is a pity that no meaningful action has yet been taken to move forward and implement the NEETs strategy, which was considered at length by the previous Employment and Learning Committee. I urge the Minister for Employment and Learning to speed up that process in that vital area.

I also have a number of concerns about the EMA. When I spoke in the debate last week, I mentioned that payment of the EMA can be made only to participants in the Department's Training for Success programme and not to the hard-to-reach young people in pre-vocational training as organised by Include Youth. Today, I want to reiterate what I said last week: we need to address that anomaly on equality grounds. The Minister argues that he needs more money to make the EMA work. With respect to the Minister for Employment and Learning, it is more important to ensure that we target existing resources in a focused and carefully managed way, giving priority to those who need them most, rather than continually seeking to fill up the pot with extra money and missing the real target of those who are in need.

Mr Speaker, I want to take a moment now to turn briefly to some key concerns in my constituency of West Tyrone. I would like some reassurance from my colleague the Health Minister about the new acute mental health centre that is to form part of the second phase of the Omagh area hospital plans. Concerns have recently been expressed that the new acute facility might well be located in the new hospital in Enniskillen and taken away from Omagh. It is important to get some clarity on that issue. I urge the Minister —

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member of the Minister's warning about going outside the Supply resolution motion and the Vote on Account. All Members, I am sure, have

important issues that they will want to raise. I understand that. However, I am concerned that we might be widening out the debate to the point at which we will have every Member raising an issue from their constituency. That is not what this debate is about. I am warning the House and the Member.

Mr Buchanan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will bear that in mind. *[Laughter.]* I was coming to the point at which I was going to press the Minister to bring forward the moneys for the capital works to bring that second phase forward as quickly as possible.

Moving from health to education, we do have a problem with schools. Again, I urge the Minister to ensure that the capital moneys can be found to bring forward the development of our schools in Omagh. I want to mention Omagh High School on the Floor of the House today, because it has been deteriorating for years —

Mr Speaker: Order. I am really trying to give Members some latitude in the debate on the two motions before the House. However, Members need to, as far as possible, link whatever they are saying to the two motions before us. I have heard nothing thus far from the Member that links what he is saying to the two motions. I know that he is talking about important issues in his constituency, but the issue is how he links what he is saying to the two motions.

Mr Buchanan: Thank you again, Mr Speaker. I will bring my remarks to a close.

Obviously, this is not in keeping with what the Speaker wants to hear. Nevertheless, finally, I turn to the long-running saga of the A5.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is really tempting fate. This will apply to all Members. I keep saying to the House, especially to the Member who has the Floor at the moment, that I understand that these are important issues, and I am not trying to make light of them. However, I am trying to guide the House to the two motions before it this afternoon and their effect. The issue is how Members deal with the topics that they raise and how they link them to the two motions. That is what this is all about. I am happy for the Member to continue but, once again, I implore him to link what he is saying to the two motions.

Mr Buchanan: OK, Mr Speaker. I will take on board what you have said and bring my remarks to a close.

We must accelerate our capital build programmes across Northern Ireland wherever possible. That will be a much-needed shot in the arm for the construction industry: it will create jobs, improve our infrastructure, be an investment in our economy and reap great dividends. I know that the Finance Minister and the Executive are committed to that, and I encourage them to continue to think strategically.

Mr Cree: I was pleased to see the latitude that you gave the previous Member who spoke, Mr Speaker. *[Laughter.]* I hope that that was a precedent.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the two Supply resolutions, which, as you indicated, will be debated together. I also thank the Finance Minister for outlining some of the detail involved and for the work that the Department has undoubtedly put into compiling these statistics. In particular, the spring Supplementary Estimates contain a lot of figures, and I am sure that it was no easy task to collate the information.

The Finance Committee has considered these issues in the past few weeks. The Chairman of the Committee touched on that, so I will not go into specifics on the work of the Committee in that regard.

As you know, Budgets set spending plans. However, they do not give Ministers and their Departments legislative authority to spend cash and use resources. That legislative authority is gained through the approval of departmental Estimates by the Assembly and the subsequent passing of the Budget Bill. That is why it is important to take this process forward without jeopardising the ability of Departments to provide vital services to the people of Northern Ireland.

I turn to the two motions before us. The first Supply resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of the Executive's final spending plans for 2011-12, as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates that were laid before the Assembly on 6 February. The second resolution requests interim resources and funding for the first few months of 2012-13 in the form of a Vote on Account. The spring Supplementary Estimates are largely technical and are there, essentially, to tidy up the loose ends that have been dealt

with in the in-year monitoring rounds. They also obtain Assembly approval and final spending plans for this year.

1.00 pm

I want to mention a few issues that arose during the monitoring rounds that were particularly concerning. Invest Northern Ireland twice handed back substantial amounts of money to the Executive, amounting to £39.1 million. Job creation is key to economic recovery in Northern Ireland, and we must ensure that Invest Northern Ireland works to its full potential. As well as that, during the last monitoring round in January, all bids were met and money was still unallocated. That is not ideal, and all Departments must improve their financial accounting to prevent that occurring again.

The Vote on Account today is needed to ensure that the flow of cash continues to Departments, and it authorises spending of around 45% of the Budget, as the Minister confirmed. It has been said before in the House — I will reiterate it — that it is not an ideal situation that we vote through an authorisation to spend almost half the Budget when we do not have the necessary details of that Budget to scrutinise effectively. However, the Chairman of the Committee referred to the review, which we will talk about later, and that will, I hope and sincerely believe, correct that situation. Nevertheless, we are stuck with a procedure and must adhere to it. We will, perhaps, look in more detail at this anomaly in the later debate on the review of the financial process in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: That was a fine example of a Member very much keeping to the two motions before the House. I would hope that the Member has set an example.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo ar Mheastacháin Fhorlíontacha an earraigh agus ar an Vóta ar Chuntas.

I am happy to participate in this debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates and Vote on Account. I will try, as far as possible, not to do what will become known as a Tom Buchanan.

Debates on budgetary matters are always important, but I suppose they take on added significance during straitened financial times such as we are in. We are struggling with huge

cutbacks of almost £4 billion over the four-year period. Those cuts required and still require extremely careful management of the public purse to ensure that the best possible benefit and value is gained from every pound spent by Departments and all public agencies and every possible efficiency achieved without detriment to front line services.

The spring Supplementary Estimates are, as we heard, a tidying-up of the finances from the previous financial year. For that reason, some may view them as a mere formality. However, there are important trends in them to be noticed, interpreted and responded to. The Vote on Account resolution, as Mr Cree pointed out, is a mechanism that provides almost bridge finance between the two financial years until the Budget Bill reaches its Final Stage.

Many will recall the angst around the formulation of the four-year Budget leading up to the devolution of policing and justice powers. Indeed, there was a collective sigh of relief when the Finance Minister came to the House with a draft Budget in December 2010 and made a statement. At that time, there was no Programme for Government, and the Minister thought that it was fine to proceed on the basis of the former Programme for Government. Earlier in this financial year, I heard him say on the radio that there was no need for a Programme for Government because the Budget itself was the Programme for Government. Yet, as they say, on mature reflection, after he saw the extent of the underspend thrown up during the in-year monitoring exercises, I think he decided that there was a need for alignment of departmental spending to the new Programme for Government, and he has initiated a review on that basis. Gradually, the horse was taken out from behind the cart and led round to where it should have been from the beginning. Therefore, strategic policy strategies will drive financial allocation, not the other way round. Indeed, we could use many metaphors for the role of the Programme for Government. The best one is that it is a road map that should lead public spending in the direction in which it needs to go in order to best serve the needs of the people of Northern Ireland.

After one year of the Budget, it is clear that we need the direction of a Programme for Government. If we look more closely at the reconciliation of departmental expenditure limits from the Main Estimates to the spring

Supplementary Estimates for 2011-12, we see that the amount of easements is outstanding, as the Minister said. It stands at around £140 million on the resource side and £50 million on the capital side. We could be kind and say that those easements are the result of careful financial planning and greater efficiencies. However, we have to ask whether they are; we simply do not know at this stage. As I said, the extent of easements was such as to lead the Minister to initiate a review of departmental spending over the last two years of the Budget. Indeed, he would have done so for the coming year had it not already been too late to get the necessary information. At a time of economic hardship, Departments should not miscalculate to that extent. Can we say that that is prudent financial management? It remains to be seen.

If we look in more detail at the changes that came about as a result of in-year monitoring, we see that DETI surrendered £18 million in resource and £35.5 million in capital, a total of £53.5 million. Given that the Programme for Government's main priority is the economy, one has to ask why the Department that is mainly charged with delivering that commitment cannot spend its allocation. We need to ask what changes need to be made to ensure that that resource is of full benefit to the growth and the support of the economy.

During his January monitoring statement, the Minister mentioned that the Department of Education had handed back £10.5 million, which amounted to a miscalculation of the drawdown expected from the budget exchange scheme. Although, thankfully, that resource is not lost to schools, questions must arise about financial planning in a Department that is currently under huge financial pressure. Indeed, the Minister's own Department surrendered almost one quarter of its capital allocation. Perhaps, the Minister would care to comment on that later. One also wonders what his view is of the eventual £8.5 million overspend on the establishment of Account NI, which was highlighted in the media last week.

There is no doubt that my party colleagues will want to be more detailed about the figures for the Departments that they scrutinise. I will leave that work to them. I cast my mind back once again to the beginning of the budgetary period, when the Minister told us that the asset management unit would be charged with disposing of £100 million of assets spread over

the four years of the budgetary period. The first tranche of that was £10 million in the current financial year. However, to date, only £1.3 million of that £10 million has been realised. Unit officials tell us that they hope to realise another £4 million or £5 million before the end of the current financial year. That sounds very much like wishful thinking. Realising £1.3 million over 11 months and hoping for £5 million in the final month is a little difficult to accept. Even if that degree of success could be achieved, it would still be well off the £10 million mark for the year. I wonder what the Minister's assessment is of that performance. If only £1.3 million can be realised in the first year of the budgetary period, what chance is there of realising £100 million over the four years? How will that impact on the Budget? On the basis of the asset management unit's record to date, one would have to question its effectiveness. We should consider that businesspeople have told us that it is nigh impossible to buy land from Land and Property Services, even when that land has the potential to create jobs and generate additional rates income through retail development. By the time the valuations are returned to the asset management unit from LPS, the market has decreased and lands are overpriced. Perhaps the Minister would like to comment on that issue.

The Minister said that he had allowed for headroom of around £38 million to cover CAP fines, £2.5 million for the Tourist Board for the Irish Open and a further £5.6 million for capital projects that will be undertaken by Invest NI. I welcome his assurance that, should the spending not materialise, approval will not be given to cover excess spending in other areas.

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

Mr D Bradley: Yes, Mr Speaker. The Vote on Account indicates a Budget that is little more than a continuation of what we have had.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr D Bradley: However, I will have an opportunity to contribute further on that subject tomorrow. Thank you.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motions tabled by the Minister. Noting the inconvenient scheduling of last year's corresponding debate, I am certain that the Minister will take great delight in knowing that

Valentine's night will once again be his own to enjoy, as he, no doubt, turns his interest to personnel of a different variety.

As suggested by other Members, the consideration of these codependent motions in the House is, traditionally, a technical, tidying-up exercise, and one could be forgiven for thinking that there is little need to debate or oppose them. Of course, the reality is that any opposition to the motions would translate into a shortage of funds for each Department as they enter the next financial year. On those grounds, Members would be hard pushed to justify such opposition. However, what we can and should consider carefully during the debate are the finer details and the bigger picture for the local economy, using the Estimates and the impending Budget Bill as our basis.

Since June of last year, the Committee for Finance and Personnel has engaged with the Department in reviewing and assessing the evolution of departmental spending plans, as they altered in each monitoring round and settled finally to give us the figures that we have in front of us today. I know that Members and Chairs from respective Committees will put their individual case for the greater financial needs of one Department over another. Therefore, I will keep my specific comments to the biggest proposed changes, which lie in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Justice and the Department of Education.

As the Minister stated, additional headroom has been built in to allow for specific issues. Allowances have been made for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for additional resources to account for the common agricultural policy needs in the event of potential decisions that may extend from the European Commission on disallowances. Further headroom has been provisionally allocated to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment because of the welcome addition of events such as the Irish Open to the 2012 calendar year. That event already promises to be significant and will doubtless bring great opportunities for additional tourism and increased spending throughout Northern Ireland. In respect of the report and in considering the aforementioned Departments and their associated requirements and Estimates, the pervasive concern for Members should be the need for airtight accountability across the board and a clear and identifiable range of priority areas that reflect where need is greatest. The

pre-emptive allowances for capital projects and the Irish Open in the DETI Estimates highlight the reflective and proactive nature that we should seek to ingrain in the allocation of all departmental spending. A more cohesive approach that prioritises areas based on need and supports areas that show economic potential will make for a more efficient and, ultimately, a more effective system of government.

1.15 pm

Traditionally, Northern Ireland's budgetary position is levied on us at the discretion of the Westminster Government, and so we are hamstrung in what we can realistically hope to secure on a year-to-year basis. You cannot find gold in a coal mine, however, and, rather than cry foul and vilify those who control the purse strings in the current economic climate, we must rise to the challenge set before us and seek to mitigate the reductions through supporting revenue-generating enterprises and efficiency savings.

Going forward, it is imperative that we shift the balance of services, altering how funds are apportioned, specifically towards early intervention and prevention measures. A change in the balance of resources into programmes that seek to prevent problems from emerging or to intervene at an early stage could produce a wealth of savings, avoiding the need for greater resource spending after problems fully develop. Currently, the funding of the former tends to be optional, while the funding of the latter tends to be statutory. An enhanced focus on preventative measures can ensure savings across a range of public spending areas, including health and justice, which are the two Departments with the greatest additional requirements in the Estimates presented today.

Many of the most pressing challenges facing Northern Ireland, as well as the opportunities awaiting us, do not fall into departmental silos. Therefore, we need much better co-operation still between Departments to make sure that we can grow the economy more effectively and maximise efficiencies and the value of public services. As I have said before in the Chamber, technology is already in place to allow the sharing of information securely across Departments, yet we appear to choose not to use it to its full capacity. Perhaps sharing such information could more effectively assist Departments in coming up with efficiency

options as well as solutions to the financial costs of our divided society. At a time when we are trying to grow the economy, the resources wasted on the cost of division are still a massive millstone round our neck. Residential segregation continues to create considerable inefficiencies for the housing sector, along with significant costs associated with the underdevelopment of blighted or segregated land. We also need to promote more shared services on a North/South basis. That need not be about politics but about good finance and economics. The North/South Ministerial Council already exists, but progress on the North/South Parliamentary Forum would also be beneficial, as it would act as another opportunity to benchmark with neighbouring jurisdictions. That is not about political grandstanding but about practical issues.

As a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I have been involved in discussions over the level of detail provided during the whole budgetary process and whether it allows sufficient time for adequate scrutiny. I know that I will get the opportunity to speak on that issue later today, so for now I will bring my comments to a close and support the motions.

Mr Girvan: I support both motions. I always think that finance has a wonderful way of making what should be a simple process extremely difficult. Maybe that is the wrong way to start off, but we are here to counteract the doomsday scenario that was predicted last year. We had a similar debate in the Chamber in which Members told us that we would be unable to pay wages and all sorts of problems were ahead. I am glad to say that we are still here this year and that wages have been paid and money has been passed back from Departments. We have identified savings through three monitoring rounds, and Northern Ireland is still moving forward, which is important.

There are issues about the amounts of money that have been handed back by Departments. I appreciate that there are all sorts of reasons for that, but I take exception to some of the comments that have been made about why certain Departments have had to hand money back. We have had difficulty with getting the go-ahead for some capital projects, and one Department blames another. The Department of the Environment's delays in making planning decisions has been a key issue when it comes to underspend by DETI.

Mr A Maginness: In relation to the point about Departments or agencies within them handing back money, I think particularly about Invest Northern Ireland handing back well over £40 million. I am not condemning Invest Northern Ireland, but that situation raises serious questions. We have to scope out what is going wrong and why it is happening. Otherwise, we will not have a proper system of budgeting and scrutinising spending. That is the question that I would like the Member to address.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I appreciate exactly where he is coming from. I understand that Invest NI had a number of key projects in the pipeline. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, money was handed back to give us an opportunity to make use of it elsewhere. So, that has been a very helpful approach.

How we bring forward the spend that each Department is allocated is a debate that has to take place within Departments. I know that the Finance Minister spoke about including a certain amount of headroom to allow things to move forward for certain projects that could have major spend, and we do not know exactly how much that may be. Those were outlined. However, I believe that some Departments have engaged in creating a certain amount of headroom within their own budget. I come from a local government background, and I know exactly how some departments end up with a certain amount of money to, as they call it, play with and do other things. Unfortunately, I do not think that that happens only in local government; central government has a similar process in some areas. So, that is something that needs looked at.

Arm's-length bodies were commented on. Additional controls need to be put in place to ensure that the overall Budget truly reflects what arm's-length bodies actually bring back to the table.

To allow us to move ahead with the spring Supplementary Estimates 2011-12, the process has been good. We are allowed to carry forward £60 million, I think, of underspend to next year. I am glad to see that the tight fiscal controls that have been put in place are bearing fruit, and we are seeing benefits from that through the amounts that are going back. We have seen the change from the £128 million a few years ago, which would be totally lost to the Northern

Ireland economy today were it not for this process. It is great that we have done a body of work to reduce the amount that we hand back.

It is important that we have this debate to discuss the 2012-13 forward spend. If it is not agreed, a difficulty could arise, and we would end up in the doomsday scenario. So, we need the spend to allow us to move forward for next year. On that basis, it is prudent that we make the representation for the extra 45% of the Estimates for 2011-12 to be used for next year's spend.

I know that the debate on the detail of where we believe certain moneys should be spent will take place tomorrow. I know that, at that stage, each and every one of us will have our pet subject — A5 included, Tom. It is important that we highlight exactly where, we feel, the money should be spent and deal with it on a local basis. Considering that we have gone through a recession and deep hardship for our economy, we have achieved quite a bit. There have been efficiencies, the sky has not fallen, and we are still here.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his outline. I support both motions.

A number of Members addressed the issue that obviously concerns Members across the Chamber, and I will address the reduced requirements. Last week, officials attending the Committee for Finance and Personnel told us that they were somewhat surprised. In the context of being able to acknowledge tighter financial management and cost projections, they indicated that, setting aside Invest NI, which was caused by external global economic circumstances that we can all recognise, reduced administration costs would possibly be a partial explanation. Nevertheless, I am concerned that we are getting reduced requirements in the last quarter, as, in some instances, reallocating and spending the money within the required time frame is a significant challenge. Perhaps the Minister could confirm that the reduced requirements were for legitimate reasons, as, due to the time constraints, it was not possible for the other scrutiny Committees to get into the detail of them with their Departments. If they are down to continued progress, discipline and good financial management, that should be welcomed as a positive and flagged up. If there are issues

that are more akin to the particular challenges facing Invest NI, we also need to know about those. I am keen to hear the Minister's comments on that.

In relation to DEL and the review of Invest NI's functions in the current economic climate, I think that, as an Assembly, we can afford to be strategic and to start thinking about the type of economy that we would like to see here post recovery. We should take that approach when realigning DEL's functions and considering Invest NI's efforts in what are very difficult — you might say impossible — economic circumstances. Such circumstances may not always apply, and hopefully, they will not always apply. So, perhaps in the here and now and for the limited time going forward — certainly, coming out of this four-year Budget period — we could refocus on developing the capacity, skills and expertise that would enable agencies such as Invest NI to attract investment here. It is difficult to be confident that there will be any major investment decisions in the present climate. I know that Invest NI will continue to do its best, and we have some very good people in the field. However, this is a challenge that confounds many other economies, and I have to admit that we are very small players in that particular circumstance.

The review of the Budget processes that the Minister announced goes some way towards addressing concerns. I am comfortable with a four-year Budget period and with mapping out expenditure on a more strategic basis, so I will defend that. However, in changing and deteriorating economic circumstances, Members will get anxious and might attempt to argue the case for an annual Budget process. I do not think that that is a sustainable argument, but we should provide the scope to review the plans and projections, see what stands up and see what will be deliverable and what has to be amended. There is nothing wrong with being agile and responsive to changing circumstances.

I hope that the Minister will be able to give some comfort that, in the review of the Budget processes, we will try to build in a better opportunity for scrutiny Committees to do what is, in fact, their statutory function. It is not an add-on, and it is not an optional issue. The fact is that they do not have sufficient time. I accept absolutely that that is almost a legacy issue. It is not manipulation; it is the way it is. The Finance Committee gets good, timely

explanations, and those of us who are members of that Committee are in a position to say with some confidence and competence that we have been briefed on the issues. However, many other Committees struggle to get the detail that they seek, and that is not a good way for us to do business. I hope that we will be able to continue to address and refine the process. Having said that, I support both motions.

Mr Humphrey: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak from these Benches in support of both motions. When I listened to the Minister, I heard him mention a surrender of £65.7 million of non-ring-fenced money out of the three monitoring rounds, which was redirected. In 2011-12, there was a supply of £15 billion cash, £16 billion in resource and £2 billion accruing resources, totalling £33 billion.

It is important to stress, as the Minister did, that those are in-year changes. This is not a new Budget, and it is important for us to remember that. Whether a change results from an over-estimation of need or an underestimation of savings, it is clear that it is essential to redirect money to where the need is.

1.30 pm

There are emerging issues in the fluid financial situation that prevails in the world today, and a regional government such as ours has to be responsive to that. As I said previously in the House, the Business Secretary said that the economic situation that prevails in the United Kingdom is equivalent to this country being at war, yet some Members question issues with foreign direct investment and the failure of projects to be taken forward. I welcome the fact that 80% of the redirected money went to education, health, employment and learning and social development. That included £2.9 billion for non-contributory benefits, which are hugely important to the society that exists in Northern Ireland.

Ideally, it would be right and correct if the Programme for Government and the Budget were to run concurrently, but there needs to be flexibility and an understanding that the financial situation that prevails is very difficult. That is why we on these Benches have been so proud of the performance of the Minister in response to so many in the private sector and the public sector, not least the 'Belfast Telegraph'.

It is right that Ministers should be aspirational, but given the economic situation in the United

Kingdom, Europe and, indeed, throughout the wider globe, it is understandable that policies and projects may not come to fruition or be achievable or deliverable. Mr Buchanan mentioned the A5, and that project was not deliverable because the money was not there from the Republic of Ireland Government. Mr Girvan mentioned DETI's targets for foreign direct investment. The reason why the money from DETI had to be redirected was nothing to do with the Government here; it was because the businesses that would bring foreign direct investment and much-needed meaningful employment to this part of the United Kingdom did not have the finance at their end to come here. No matter how many times that is stated in this House, it seems never, ever to penetrate.

Last week, I listened intently to finance officials at the Committee for Finance and Personnel. From the £10 billion block grant given to the Northern Ireland Executive, our Finance Minister surrendered only £1 million in capital funding. That is the envy of Scotland and Wales. To the mirth and laughter of the Committee — I mean this in the best way — I welcomed our Minister's having a "No Surrender" policy. Efficiencies have been driven by Ministers, civil servants and, to its credit, PEDU, which has gone into Departments and striven to make efficiencies. More of that work needs to be done. Some Departments have gone right down to the purchase of pens in saving money for the Northern Ireland Exchequer. That is prudent and responsible government. Regional government has to be responsible, and we have seen that recently in how the Rates (Amendment) Bill was welcomed by the private sector, including small businesses, chambers of commerce, the Pubs of Ulster and city centre management across Northern Ireland.

Monitoring rounds ensured the refocusing of £8 million into double glazing for Housing Executive houses. That will benefit people who deal with the effects of the poverty trap weekly, and it is essential. That is government delivering. The Minister also mentioned that £10 million from end-year flexibility (EYF) will go to schools to assist them in their future planning and maintenance. I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors at Springhill Primary School, and the £500,000 that we got was essential. The truth is that we need to look at how we will build business confidence, build confidence across government and ensure that government in Northern Ireland is being seen

to deliver. The way to do that is to ensure that, when the money comes back to the centre through monitoring rounds, it is redirected to build the capacity in government to ensure that we deliver for the people who sent us to this place. The Irish Open will come here, and that is an example of the responsiveness of our Government.

Tourism is absolutely vital to the Northern Ireland economy, and I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. Somewhere in the region of 15,000 people are employed in the tourism and hospitality sector in Belfast. When visitors come to the city — 7.5 million of them a year, of which 1.5 million of are out-of-state visitors who stay overnight — they spend £455 million on the city's economy, but the other important thing, which is less measurable, is that they help to deal with the perceptual and reputational problem for Northern Ireland's capital city over the years of the Troubles. That is invaluable to those who will go into the world and sell Northern Ireland as a place to visit, stay and do business. I support the motions.

Mr Kinahan: I am pleased to support the motions, and I echo Mr Humphrey's comments on supporting and promoting Northern Ireland. We should all be doing that.

However, as the Ulster Unionist environment spokesman, I will raise one or two points of concern. Is the Minister related to Charles Perrault, who wrote Cinderella? As you know, the character of the Fairy Godmother can come up with everything with a wave of the wand. I congratulate the Minister on finding money in many areas where it is needed, but I wonder if we will need some other waves of the wand in the future. The £120 million for education caught us all out, but we welcome it. We need, and we may have found, £70 million for Compton, and £41.5 million is needed for the freeze in fees.

I could go on, but I want to raise the points about the environment aspects that seem to be overlooked. I hope that, as things are worked out through these Supplementary Estimates and money is made available, money can be found for other matters. There is nothing at the moment to finance the green new deal, which needed £4 million, and I am concerned that it is falling off the list and that the two major parties maybe do not want to push it. We also need finance for the marine plans, river management,

fly-tipping and many other issues that were due to be financed by the carrier bag tax, which does not come in for a year.

However, the big wave of the wand that I want to see, Minister, is on the review of public administration (RPA) and planning and the mass of things that we have passed to councils. At the moment, those need money as the councils are under-resourced —

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member that we are straying into areas that are outside the two motions before us. *[Interruption.]* Order. There will be an opportunity at the Second Stage of the Budget Bill tomorrow to raise all these issues. I am trying to lead and guide the House on what the two motions are about this afternoon. I know that Members have their pet subjects, and that is understandable. However, I say to the Member: let us get back to the two motions that are on the Floor this afternoon. There will be an opportunity tomorrow and further down the road to raise all those other issues.

Mr Kinahan: I thought that it was relevant to today because it is about how money is spent. Various areas were not getting their money, and it concerns me that we have waste but no money. It also concerns me that, if we go back to the Cinderella side of life, the two big ugly sisters of RPA and planning will come back and bite the Minister. I support the motions.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to address the House as Chair of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and I apologise to the Minister for not being here for the full debate. I have to nip out this afternoon as well, because I have a meeting with your colleague to talk about health.

I have a couple of points to make on behalf of the Committee. Given our financial situation, the Committee welcomes the fact that the Department will break even this year and be able to balance the books, because the Committee was told last June that the Department was £177 million short. Based on some of the information that came out last year, the Department has obviously worked hard to find places in which savings can be made, for which it should be commended.

The Committee has had concerns about the Department's approach to in-year monitoring rounds. The Minister did not make any bids in the June monitoring round, and the Committee was disappointed by that, as we felt that there was a chance to secure funding for the likes of Home-Start and the Music Therapy Trust, which are under threat of having to stop providing vital services. In the October monitoring round, the Minister did make bids, but he would not tell the Committee what those bids were. We asked to see copies of the bids but were told that they amounted to confidential correspondence between the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. As a result, the Committee found out what the Minister had bid for only when the outcome of the monitoring round had been announced. That was disappointing — indeed, it was disrespectful, to say the least. However, in fairness to the Minister, we spoke to him, and he assured us that that will not happen again.

The Committee was pleased that the Department received money out of the October monitoring round: £15 million for the Invest to Save scheme; £5 million for specialist drugs; and £5 million capital for equipment for the trusts and for ICT. We understand that the Department did not make any bids in the January monitoring round because it would not have been able to spend the money in time if it were to get any that time round. Although the Committee accepts that there are practical hurdles to overcome to being able to spend money at short notice, we think that people need to start thinking a bit more creatively so that we do not end up losing out on money that could be spent on vital services. Those are just some of the points that the Committee wishes to make at this time. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr McDonnell: We are here to debate the Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account associated with the Executive's current Budget. Let me be clear on the SDLP's position: the current Budget is flawed, as is the Budget process. We have routinely and consistently demonstrated that in Assembly debates and in our voting record. However, given that the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account are, in effect, a tidying-up of the finances for the current financial year, we will not vote in any way that leaves public services unfunded at the start of the next financial year. Come tomorrow, however, we will again

demonstrate our consistency in standing up for front line services and will vote against the current Budget and its damaging and devastating cuts. The SDLP has in the past been unfairly accused of being unco-operative in the Budget process. In fact, we have played a full and active part in all Budget debates, Committee scrutiny processes and Executive Budget subcommittee meetings and have even published two papers on budgetary issues: 'New Priorities in Difficult Times' and 'Partnership and Economic Recovery'. Those papers contain our constructive ideas, which we attempted to have included in the Budget process.

We believe that we have co-operated at every stage. However, co-operation does not mean that we should put aside our principles and vote for something that we know to be damaging — damaging to front line services in our schools and hospitals and damaging to local families.

Mr Givan: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. In stating that the SDLP will oppose the Budget tomorrow, will the Member follow through on that consistent, principled position and withdraw the party from the Executive?

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Member resumes the Floor, I must say that we are almost on to debating the Budget. That is not what the two motions are about.

I am trying to guide Members. The two motions are specifically on the Supply resolution and the Vote on Account; the debate is certainly not on the Budget. I have continually said to Members that there will be an opportunity tomorrow and beyond to talk about the issues that they seem to want to talk about today. I am trying to get Members back on track: the Budget is for a separate debate.

1.45 pm

Dr McDonnell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I make no apology for the SDLP playing an active part in the Budget scrutiny process in a way that ensures that we represent and protect the needs of our voters and the wider community. As you rightly said, there will be opportunities over the next two days to demonstrate good co-operation and to contribute positively to the budgetary process by highlighting changes that we believe could and should be made.

There is a strong sense of déjà vu today. When the financial crisis first hit local businesses and

families, the Executive had already settled on a three-year Budget. Despite representations from us and others, the Minister and the leading Executive parties decided that a three-year Budget had been created and that, no matter how the world changed in the meantime, it could not be fundamentally altered. Except for a few tweaks here and there, that Budget lasted until last year. It did very little to alleviate the distress of many vulnerable people or to prevent a large number of businesses going bankrupt, but it did serve the short-term political needs of the two main parties.

At the start of this year and the new process, we are again hopeful that, as the Executive develops a new Budget, they take the opportunity to include as many of our proposals as possible. Unfortunately, deficiencies remain, and we will debate the Budget Bill tomorrow.

The Northern Ireland Executive have very few levers with which to transform the local economy and set it on a path that will stimulate growth and generate jobs. The one lever that the Executive do have is public expenditure in key strategic areas. That is why our budgeting process generally —

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not want to stop Dr Alasdair McDonnell, and I know that he is on to the Budget, but I am trying to guide and lead the House. The Budget is a separate issue and separate motion. We will debate the Second Stage of the Budget Bill tomorrow. Once again, I say to the whole House that there will be an opportunity to discuss some of the issues that have already been raised in the House, and most of the issues that Dr Alasdair McDonnell has raised this afternoon, tomorrow at the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. I appreciate where the Member is coming from, but we are trying to debate the two motions that are before the House this afternoon.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will restrict further comment until tomorrow afternoon —

Mr Wilson: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Dr McDonnell: The two issues are separate but, at the same time, a little intertwined, and it is very difficult to discuss one without the other. The past three years are relevant to the years going forward, but I respect your ruling and

am quite happy to leave budgetary stuff until tomorrow. The main point is that we have to get on with the current resolutions and to ensure that money is in place to sustain government running forward over the next few months. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your consideration.

Mr Campbell: I apologise to the Minister for not being in my place earlier. Having listened to and watched the debate, I think that some Members should just take an early break and come back tomorrow. That might shorten the day's proceedings quite a bit.

The Minister of Finance can be commended on a number of issues. It is a difficult task to try to ensure that the books are balanced. The current climate — that is, the economic climate, before he goes off on a green climate issue — does not lend itself to balancing the books, given what has happened in recent months. One would hope that, as the Departments begin the process over the next few months of trying to ensure whatever expenditure has been given to them, they will be able to balance their books. A number of schemes have been outlined in various departmental assessments, which can not only help the people whom we all represent but help to resurrect and revitalise the local economy. For example, the Minister for Social Development is considering the double-glazing of various Housing Executive properties. Hopefully, that scheme can be speeded up considerably because it will bring significant benefit to those tenants. It will also ensure that the local building and construction industry will get an injection of funds. I am glad to note that there has been £4 million earmarked for thermal improvements to Housing Executive homes.

Mr A Maginness: Where did you get that from?

Mr Campbell: I will give way if the Member wishes to ask a question. *[Laughter.]*

Mr A Maginness: I was just wondering how the Member was suddenly inspired with that figure of £4 million? Was it anything to do with the Minister's notes? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for asking how I am far-sighted enough to be able to see and assess that just at the drop of a hat. I am glad that he drew that to the Assembly's attention; now everyone can see the knowledge and far-sightedness that I have. *[Laughter.]*

We are also aware of Department for Regional Development (DRD) matters, and the Regional Development Minister is trying to improve our roads infrastructure and upgrade minor roads. We all have issues in our constituencies. Hopefully, those can be addressed in order to assist motorists, the haulage industry, and those who work in the industry of relaying and tarmacking roads. Thankfully, more than £111 million is going to be allocated there.

Mr A Maginness: That is amazing.

Mr Campbell: I am glad the honourable Member for North Belfast again acknowledges my far-sightedness; I am happy to concede to that, but, in all due modesty, I must say that it just came to me in a flash. *[Laughter.]*

Various Departments need to knuckle down on other issues. The wider public wants to see the Assembly knuckling down and getting on with the business. We have a lot to do, so let us get there and ensure that we help people who are hard-pressed and who are facing very difficult times, whether in their homes, schools, hospitals or roads. We are now more able to tackle those areas than we were several months ago because of the prudence of the Finance Minister. I will not adopt the cliché that was adopted about a famous previous Chancellor when he spoke about prudence so much that people thought there was an affair going on at 11 Downing Street. However, the Minister of Finance here has shown due prudence, and we should acknowledge that. We should knuckle down and get on with business.

Mr Irwin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate as Deputy Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. It is widely recognised that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has proportionately the smallest budget; nevertheless, the Committee has undertaken a robust and active scrutiny role throughout the 2011-12 budgetary year. It recognises that even small changes in the baseline can have a disproportionate effect, not just on major capital projects, but also on smaller projects designed to deliver across the spectrum of culture, arts, libraries and sports.

Since May 2011 —

Mr McCarthy: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way, but I cannot sit here and listen

to what he has just said. How does that square with the fact that the arts are in dire straits at the moment, as they have been refused funding to the tune of £500,000? How is that going to liven up the arts that we want to promote in Northern Ireland?

Mr Irwin: Does the Member want to take that money from health or from some other Department?

Since May 2011, the Department has briefed the Committee on the management of its annual budget. Sessions were held with departmental officials in June, October and December, during which the Committee was updated on a range of adjustments that affected spending profiles in advance of each monitoring round. On all occasions, the Committee robustly challenged the Department to explain its reasons for making bids and surrendering resources.

During December, the Committee was made aware that the Department was handing back around £2.5 million to the Department of Finance and Personnel. The bulk of that £2.5 million is as a consequence of a delay in the construction of the 50-metre pool in Bangor, which was caused by damage to materials while in transit. That delay left DCAL with a total underspend of £2.25 million. DCAL was able to identify seven projects that could benefit from that underspend and allocated money to those projects. However, a total easement of £1.8 million remains. The Committee is disappointed that more projects were not able to benefit from that easement at this time.

Furthermore, the Committee expressed concern that 50% of the Ulster-Scots academy ministerial advisory group's budget was surrendered, and it sought assurances from DCAL that that will not be repeated in future years. The Committee will keep a watching brief on the matter over the remainder of the mandate and will shortly receive a briefing from DCAL and the ministerial advisory group on an update on progress of the work of the group.

The Committee is acutely aware of the financial challenges facing DCAL, particularly coming into the new financial year. There are already pressures on its budget: £2.5 million resulting from the delay in the construction of the pool; and the additional fund of £2.4 million provided to Libraries NI to relieve the pressure of reducing library opening hours following an

effective lobby from local community groups and the Committee.

The Committee is also aware that a business case has been finalised from the UK City of Culture company for additional funds. Given the Executive's commitment to the project, as outlined under the draft Programme for Government, the Committee will expect that available financial support is provided across government.

Members of the Committee also expressed concern that DCAL is using the fund for regional stadiums as a way of balancing its books, as, on two occasions, DCAL has internally realigned money allocated to the project to manage internal pressures. The Department has assured the Committee that funds will be available for the regional stadiums, particularly in light of the Executive's substantial investment of £110 million and their commitment to the project under the draft Programme for Government. However, it is clear that the year ahead will present significant challenges. Indeed, the Committee was told by DCAL officials that slippage is under pressure, and, unlike other years, the Department cannot assume that there will be a given percentage of slippage. Therefore, the Committee feels that its concerns are justified and wishes to flag that up early and avoid unnecessary budgetary pressures in year four of the regional stadium project. The Committee is closely monitoring that large capital project to ensure that targets are met and slippage is avoided. It has made a start in that regard and has already heard from DCAL and the three governing bodies of football, rugby and Gaelic games on progress towards regional stadium development in 2015.

It is extremely important that scrutiny of the Budget remains a top priority of the Committee, given that 85% of DCAL's budget is managed by its arm's-length bodies. The Committee will seek to reassure itself that the Department is managing its budget effectively and driving forward much needed efficiencies.

The Committee calls for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that the money required by DCAL to manage its financial pressures is made available to ensure that the impact that sport, culture, the creative industries and libraries make to our local communities, to our health, to the economy and to tourism is not undervalued during this

mandate. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Lyttle: I support the motions and welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter. In the current economic climate, all Departments must seek to ensure that budgets are used as effectively as possible for the public good and in order to make efficiency savings. Mr Irwin challenged my colleague to say how those savings would be met, and the business sector, for one, has consistently called on the House to recognise how duplication in the provision of goods and services limits economic growth and efficiencies. As the Minister has often been reminded by my party, a report commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) estimated that the cost of division and duplication in public service is over £1 billion.

In light of the £4 billion budgetary reductions, it is surprising that the Minister has not required more from Departments to tackle that waste. It is astonishing that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have failed to spend £1.2 million that was allocated for improving community arrangements.

2.00 pm

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. He refers, as he does frequently, to the cost of division being £1 billion. In doing that, he also referred to the £4 billion cut that we are faced with over the next four years. Does he not feel just an eensy-weensy bit of regret about the part that his party played in the coalition with the Liberal Democrats, which implemented the £4 billion cut in the first place?

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention and the opportunity to clarify, again, that my party has no role in that coalition. Indeed, I objected to that level of budgetary reduction.

I am more interested in the resolution and the failure of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to spend the £1.2 million that was allocated to improving community relations in Northern Ireland. It could have helped to facilitate some of those efficiencies.

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, I remind the House not to go outside the two motions that are before us. I am allowing all Members some latitude. I can understand that they

need latitude, but let us try to keep to the two motions before the House this afternoon.

Mr Lyttle: If we are serious about the better use of public funds, it is imperative that duplication and segregation are tackled. Proposals by the Minister for Employment and Learning for increased sharing and integration in the teacher training system saw the House split along familiar lines. That was a missed opportunity to rationalise public service spend.

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

In conclusion, it is clear that if we are to sustain a high level of public services and enable economic growth, we need a sea change in the way in which we spend public money in Northern Ireland. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide some details on what action is being taken centrally to ensure that Departments reduce spend on duplicated services and invest in a way that promotes a shared and better future for Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: Taking into account the Minister's opening comments about being brief and the Speaker's directions, I will raise a number of concerns and points as the Ulster Unionist Party's spokesman on culture, arts and leisure. My comments follow on from those of the Deputy Chairman, who spoke earlier.

I am fully aware that the Department operates with nearly 85% of its budget allocated to arm's-length bodies. I would like clarification on the finance allocated to them and, in some cases, the Department's budget, which, as Mr Irwin said, is under the scrutiny of the Committee.

Among the easements and moves that we have seen to date is the £342,000 taken from the regional sports stadia and moved to the live side screen planned for Londonderry. Another £100,000 was taken out of the sports stadia money to buy a weed cutter required by fisheries. I have raised a number of times my concern that we seem continually to use the pot of money assigned to regional stadia as a slush fund for other activities in the Department. That is because of the slowness to act on the stadia desired by the GAA, IFA and rugby football. I am moving slightly off subject, but we are concerned that the sole sports stadium budget is a six-year package. Given that there is already slippage, we are concerned that there is no guarantee that, post-2015, the money will be available to fund those stadia. In the monitoring rounds,

finance is already being used to sustain other projects. Some £225,000 was also taken out of the stadia budget because of the shortfall in the receipt generated when the old Public Records Office building was not sold. In light of a recent announcement that the building has still not been sold, or that the sale has fallen through, a concern has been raised, under the DCAL and DFP budgets, about how that will have a knock-on effect into future monitoring rounds.

When my colleague, who is sitting to my right, spoke earlier about the arts, I was not exactly sure where he was going or what finance he was referring to. However, as we drive forward, I am concerned about the creative industries and the recent announcement of DSD's withdrawal of the Laganside Events Grant, which will be effective from 31 March. As the spokesman for culture, arts and leisure, that concerns me. That money has already benefited activities such as the Open House Festival, the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, the Festival of Fools and the Culture Night. I am concerned that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will be challenged to find ways to mitigate the negative effect that this will have on arts and culture in Belfast, and that her budget will be put under pressure, especially in the next monitoring round, to ensure that those things happen.

Concerns about the funding of libraries has been raised a number of times in the House. In the past year, we have seen the potential closure of some rural libraries. We have also seen a proposed reduction in the opening hours of rural libraries. Suddenly, like a lot of other Sinn Féin and DUP Ministers, the Sinn Féin Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure was able to produce £2.36 million, with which she was able to offset some of the reduced hours. If money can be found like that, we should now be declaring how much is out there that could be utilised in the budgets that are under pressure.

In conclusion, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank you for your indulgence, it was announced recently that the construction of the Bangor Olympic-sized swimming pool, which was meant to be fit and ready for the Olympic training teams, will be delayed due to an incident in Amsterdam. I do not expect the Finance Minister to be aware of any incidents in Amsterdam. *[Laughter]* However, one of the major construction beams being used, due to the size of the span, has been damaged in Amsterdam, which will have a knock-on effect

on the entire project. I am concerned as to how those easements and moneys will be moved forward in the spring Supplementary Estimates to ensure that they are not lost and that development in the sports, culture and arts industries will still go forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has thanked me for issuing indulgences. I do not issue indulgences.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I am sure that you will be as gracious to me as the Speaker has been to everybody else.

I am pleased to speak in my role as Chairperson of the Justice Committee. The Committee regularly scrutinises the Department of Justice's budget and receives detailed information on the monitoring rounds and savings delivery plans. The Committee pays particular attention to the likely impact on the delivery of front line services when considering the Budget plans and allocations.

The main pressure faced by the Department of Justice in this financial year relates to legal aid expenditure. In October, a pressure of £14.5 million was forecast, and that had increased to £18.2 million in the December monitoring round. The Department has funded that pressure from a range of easements identified by other spending areas. The cost of legal aid continues to far exceed the budget allocated for it. As part of the devolution financial package, an additional £39 million of HM Treasury reserve funding was provided for legal aid and other court pressure. However, £36.2 million has already been used, leaving a balance of only £2.8 million additional funding that can be accessed in 2012-13. Therefore, it is imperative that the cost of legal aid is brought within budget as soon as possible, otherwise the impact on other spending areas in the Department of Justice will be unsustainable. The Committee has supported the Minister in making changes to legal aid fees that will reduce the overall cost, and that should start to impact during the next financial year.

However, further changes to reduce legal aid costs are also being considered, and I contend that much more needs to be done to reduce the expenditure on legal aid. Not only are the sums of money being spent on legal aid far in excess of what Northern Ireland can afford, there is a disparity between where the legal aid is being funded, in that defendants are benefiting on a

ratio of around 2:1. Therefore, it is very clear to everyone that there is not equality of arms for the Public Prosecution Service — for the state — in taking forward cases. The amount of money spent on legal aid is clearly to the benefit of the defendants, and we are all concerned that there should be equality of arms. Therefore, we will continue to raise the issue of the reform of legal aid in the Committee, and the Minister needs to continue to provide proposals for its reformation.

Also, there is the prison reform programme. All members agree that our prisons cost too much to run and that the outcomes to wider society are not justifying the amount of money that is being spent. That is an area that the Committee and the Department have to look at as part of the ongoing monitoring rounds within the Budget.

The Department's budget remains ring-fenced for the 2011-12 to 2014-15 period. That does not mean that the budget is protected. The Department received the direct Barnett consequential arisings from changes in the funding levels of the Home Office and Ministry of Justice as a result of a UK spending review settlement for Whitehall Departments. That resulted in a 6.2% reduction in the departmental expenditure limit baseline. Taking into account the effect of inflation, the real term impact is significantly greater than the £82 million that is being taken off the Department of Justice.

Overall, the Department of Justice remains on course to achieve its delivery of the 2011-12 in-year savings target of £36 million. However, there are worrying indications that, in some areas, there is already an impact on front line services, despite the Department's aim, supported by the Committee, to protect front line services as far as possible. A number of areas in which that has been highlighted to the Committee include the Probation Board, the Police Ombudsman's office, the Policing Board, the Youth Justice Agency and the Criminal Justice Inspection. They have difficulties in delivering the savings and have highlighted the impact that those savings could have.

A key concern that I wish to highlight is the impact on the Probation Board. There is an increasing move towards more people doing community service. The Probation Board is already facing a rise in caseloads, with an increase of 15% in community service orders and a 9% increase in the number of offenders

under supervision. There has also been a 66% increase in the number of dangerous offenders coming under the remit of the Probation Board. The board has consistently highlighted the impact that achieving what is being asked of it in the savings plan would have on front line services and staff numbers. The most recent information available indicates that staffing levels have been reduced, resulting in slower throughput for community service and waiting lists for sex offender and domestic violence programmes. Therefore, although the Committee recognises and welcomes the Department's commitment to fund many of the board's pressures that have been highlighted through the monitoring round process, it is a concern for the Committee and something that we will be scrutinising in the future financial year.

Another key priority for the Department is protecting front line policing. A high proportion of the budget from the Department goes to the PSNI, accounting for almost 65%. To that end, the Chief Constable will attend the Justice Committee meeting this Thursday to discuss his budget and initiatives to reduce costs while ensuring that front line services are protected. That meeting with the Chief Constable will be a first for the Committee since the devolution of policing has taken place. It is a welcome opportunity for the Justice Committee to scrutinise the Chief Constable and how the PSNI is delivering its budget.

I support the Supply resolution for 2011-12 and the 2012-13 Vote on Account.

Mrs Overend: I am speaking today in my role as enterprise, trade and investment spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party. As we have heard many times today, the two motions that we are debating, the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account, are largely technical and fulfil the purpose of authorising additional resources. They also enable Departments to continue to function into the incoming year. I note the Minister's opening remarks regarding the rationale of the debate today, and I will try to keep my comments in line.

I have a few issues that I would like to highlight. First, as my colleague mentioned, is the specific issue of Invest Northern Ireland handing back money twice to the Department of Finance and Personnel. That amounted to a combined total of £39.1-million, with £21.6 million being returned in January and £17.5 million returned

the previous year. As that occurred within the context of the in-year monitoring rounds, I am sure that the Speaker will be happy for me to expand on that.

It has been outlined that the economy is the number one priority of the Executive, and it is right and proper that adequate significance is given to that area. However, action is more meaningful than words, and if we are to be successful in rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy, we must work to grow the private sector. Invest Northern Ireland has a vital role to play in that rebalancing process. However, it must work to its full capacity, and handing back such a substantial amount of money in the current economic climate cannot be justified. The Finance Minister intimated at the time that that money would still be used for job creation. I ask for clarification as regards the specific projects or initiatives to which the £31.9 million has been reallocated.

2.15 pm

The Enterprise Minister must work to improve the confidence of companies to make major investments while ensuring that there is no negative perception of Invest Northern Ireland in the business sector. I have a keen interest in supporting our local businesses, and I wonder whether the Enterprise Minister and Invest Northern Ireland should examine some sort of plan B for that finance.

Tourism is central to boosting our economy. Last year, there were some very disturbing figures that showed that the number of tourists visiting Northern Ireland dropped by 300,000 in one year. I am pleased that the recent figures are more encouraging, but continued investment is necessary, and I will be able to deal with that area in more detail in the Budget discussions in June.

This morning, the Finance Minister mentioned headroom being given to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for capital investment funds. Given that the Irish Open golf tournament is taking place in the north-west of Northern Ireland this year, that type of flexibility is welcome.

Finally, I am concerned by the proposed dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning. We must keep a close eye on the issue, including the reallocation of the Department's responsibilities and the supposed reduction in bureaucracy and how those work

out. I will be watching that area with keen interest. I am keen for clarification on the figures for the dissolution of that Department and how that will work out. I am also keen that the dissolution proves to be an example of better joined-up government in Northern Ireland.

Ms Ritchie: As Members and the Minister said, this debate comes largely as a result of the very technical spring Supplementary Estimates. In so authorising the expenditure, the Minister has clearly missed a trick by not referring to other means of levering in further expenditure to invest not only in the local economy but in other sectors that could bring benefit and much improvement to the lives of the people of Northern Ireland, an issue in which he has a particular interest.

For the SDLP, that is the whole purpose of devolution. Last week, the Minister said he is not interested in other forms of devolution. Surely, Minister, other forms of devolution could include the devolution of tax-raising and tax-varying powers, such as landfill tax, motor tax and corporation tax. So, I was a little surprised to hear you say that you did not believe in or want any other forms of devolution and that you thought that there were enough because you are a unionist.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: No; I will continue with my train of thought.

Does that mean that you are putting party political interest ahead of the needs of the wider community in Northern Ireland? Your remarks were all the more disappointing and surprising because they clearly contrast with the position of your party colleague, the First Minister, who wants more forms of devolution. Perhaps, as the Minister of Finance and Personnel, you could clarify the official position of the Northern Ireland Executive, your position as Minister of Finance and Personnel and the position of the DUP

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: No; I wish to continue. I will give way in a little minute.

Why would a Finance Minister in Northern Ireland not want to ensure that we had greater financial control, further ability and capacity to have those tax-varying powers and to set, collect and invest those taxes back into the economy, our health service and the benefits

for the people of Northern Ireland? Why would the current Finance Minister be putting party or maybe personal political preferences ahead of the greater good of the wider population in Northern Ireland?

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: I am quite happy to give way. No doubt he will be able to elucidate that matter.

Mr Wilson: I would, except it is totally irrelevant to the debate. Mr Deputy Speaker, I would have thought that after nearly three minutes of an irrelevant speech, which is 30% of the Member's time, you would have drawn to her attention that we are talking not about tax-raising powers or additional levers but about the money that was allocated for 2011-12. The debate is simply about authorising the additional money that went into departmental budgets as a result of monitoring rounds, Barnett consequentials, etc. We are discussing that money, not the devolution of corporation tax or any other taxes. Maybe, Mr Deputy Speaker, you would get your former party leader in line on the debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Member has taken the lesson from the Minister and will stick to the debate.

Ms Ritchie: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. So, we now hear that the Minister of Finance is very happy to administer Northern Ireland on behalf of the British Government based only on the actual resources that he is given. Therefore, he is not prepared to look at other possible resources that could make the debate much wider while staying within those necessary parameters.

Mr Hamilton: Mr Deputy Speaker, given that you are indulging this conversation, can I ask the Member whether, if she is talking about increasing resources, she will outline for the House and, more importantly, the people and businesses of Northern Ireland what taxes she and her party propose to put up?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I encourage the Member to stay within the guidelines of the debate and not to be encouraged by others to move outside them.

Ms Ritchie: Mr Deputy Speaker, you know full well that I would not be encouraged whatsoever to go outside the confines of the debate. However, it is important to consider those matters when you are discussing the spring

Supplementary Estimates, which reflect the changes that have occurred in departmental expenditure, and the Vote on Account, which makes provision for a proportion of next year's proposed Budget to be allocated so that the Departments can execute their responsibilities.

It is also important for us, as Members of this august Assembly, to reflect on the possibilities of extending the revenue potential for the people of Northern Ireland. I believe that that is our obligation as elected representatives. Therefore, the Minister of Finance's assertion that he does not want any other forms of devolution because, he says, he is a unionist makes me wonder what exactly is going on in that ministerial working group on rebalancing the economy and the possible devolution of corporation tax.

It could also help us to mitigate the harmful effects of welfare reform that are coming down the line. I am sure that he would want to join us in doing that so that we are able to have greater benefit for the citizens. Why would we not want greater financial control? Why would we not want more devolution? We want more devolution because we believe that we have the confidence, and I am sure that the Minister of Finance —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Member will not be surprised to know that my indulgences are all gone. Please get back to the debate.

Ms Ritchie: I am sure that the Minister of Finance would agree, as would you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we want the ability to raise taxes to ensure that we have a better story to tell about the spring Supplementary Estimates. We also want to be able to raise taxes to ensure that we have more money on the Vote on Account so that we have a greater amount available to enable Departments to execute their responsibilities, whether that is health provision for the wider citizens, getting tourism revenue, job creation, employment provision, improving roads infrastructure or implementing major new roads schemes.

That is what we are about: providing a better way of life for the people of Northern Ireland. We must be prepared, irrespective of our political affiliations or identities, to be able to cater for the needs of the wider population in Northern Ireland, which are now much more acute as a result of the economic downturn. I hope that the Minister will give cautious heed to those

words and be able to report to the Assembly in due course on the ministerial working group on corporation tax and on all possible means of raising revenue in Northern Ireland, so that we can implement all possible programmes throughout the spectrum, whether they be for health, education, the economy, job creation, tourism or children and young people, that improve lives.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes it ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Social Care

1. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline how he plans to address the shortfall in social care provision. (AQO 1270/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I recognise that the social care system of support is coming under increasing pressure because of a range of factors, including demographic pressures, increasing service user expectations and a challenging financial climate. That is why I intend to reform adult social care to ensure that resources are used to maximum effect, with care provided at the right time and in the right place. To that end, I will shortly write to my Executive colleagues to set out a three-stage process of reform to begin in the spring.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the actions that he has taken so far in this area. Does the Minister acknowledge that as health trusts now fund only critical care, many older people who would previously have received some form of care now face the prospect of developing more serious health issues? As a result, more older people are being forced into hospitals than would previously have been the case. Is that the best use of social care?

Mr Poots: I am not sure that there is any empirical evidence to support that. In December 2011, there were 204 patients waiting in hospital for longer than the 48-hour target for a care package in the community, and that compares favourably with other parts of the United Kingdom. However, we should not be complacent about that. The Compton review identified that that was not the way in which we wanted to go and that we should try to keep people out of hospitals. We are looking at taking measures to enable that to happen and at how we can better support people in their own homes and provide them with the appropriate care.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is important that we have a focused view on and approach to the provision of social care. Does the Minister accept that different criteria are used in different trusts and even in some districts within trusts to decide what level of social care is provided, whether that is community care or care for the elderly?

Mr Poots: Yes, I do. That is one of the reasons why we are looking at a three-stage process of reform, subject to Executive approval. The first stage will be to bring forward a discussion document in which we will highlight the current challenges and seek to build a consensus for change while setting out a high-level vision for the future of adult social care in Northern Ireland. The second stage will be to move to a proposals document that will set out a range of potential options for change. The final stage will be a strategy for adult social care that will set out the agreed future direction and a fair and sustainable funding model for the future of adult social care in Northern Ireland.

Ms P Bradley: The Minister has touched on what I wanted to ask. What consideration will be given to existing practice in Great Britain during the current review of social care?

Mr Poots: We will look at good practice wherever it happens to be. We have just concluded the Compton review, and we had the expertise of Chris Ham from the King's Fund and Dr Ian Rutter, who brought with him a great deal of experience of how things are done in other parts of Great Britain. We will take advice from areas where good qualitative work is being done so that we can make real improvements in Northern Ireland. Ultimately, the goal must be to keep people out of hospital and to provide the appropriate care that will allow that to happen. Nobody wants to end up in a nursing home or a hospital. People would much prefer to be in their own home, and we need to support them in that.

Ms Ritchie: In light of the outworkings of the Compton review, which emphasised the possible provision of services by the community and voluntary sector, will the Minister indicate what discussions he has had with other agencies and Departments about providing better quality social care throughout Northern Ireland and particularly in rural areas?

Mr Poots: I have regularly met people from the community sector, in particular from organisations that specialise in mental health

and learning disability care, who are very keen to assist us in reaching our goals and achieving our vision. The Compton report clearly set out the need to move people out of long-stay mental health facilities into more community-based facilities. I support that, and we will need to work very closely with such organisations to achieve it in the not-too-distant future.

Residential Nursing Homes

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what contingency plans his Department has put in place to provide nursing care for elderly people who are living in residential homes that fail to meet the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority's standards. (AQO 1271/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is not my Department's policy to provide residential nursing care in homes that are not nursing homes. An investigation into a residential home in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area is still under way. Although there are contingency arrangements to cover a range of potential situations, they are constantly under review. Where homes fail to comply with regulations, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) has a number of enforcement tools available to it. However, the main aim is to bring the service back up to standard, and inspection reports will highlight what improvements are required. The home must respond to those reports with a quality improvement plan that explains how it will meet those requirements.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you very much, Minister, for your reply. You will be aware that there are a number of families, carers and relatives who are put under severe stress. We have residential homes and we have nursing homes, but if there is no nursing support going into the residential homes, those who are in the residential homes who need nursing support, in turn, are cast out or pushed aside, and there may be no nursing home available. For many years, Minister, although I would not attribute it to you or to the Department today, this has been a contentious point around the health service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Dr McDonnell: Minister, I would appreciate it if you could tell us whether there is any support that your Department can give to people who fall between two stools.

Mr Poots: First, where a home fails to comply with regulations, the RQIA has a number of enforcement tools available to it. However, the main aim is to bring that service to a standard, and the inspection reports will highlight what improvements are required. Importantly, the Member raises the issue of what happens if an individual is moved beyond residential care and needs nursing care. There is a course of work to be done in that instance to ensure that the appropriate nursing care is needed.

I can think of one particular facility in the Foyle constituency, which has seven patients who require nursing care. There are nine nursing home places available in that constituency, but those may not all be suitable for the people who need to move on from residential care, and there needs to be a degree of support to ensure that that is in place until that movement takes place.

Ms Lewis: What potential is there for international collaboration in the remote telemonitoring of patients in their own homes and the use of other technology?

Mr Poots: Telemonitoring will greatly assist us in ensuring that people can stay in their own homes. The Transforming Your Care report identified that there are 4,000 people in residential care, but that is not the future direction in which we are headed. We want people to receive residential care in their own homes. Telemonitoring is particularly effective in dealing with people who have illnesses such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma and diabetes, and it can greatly reduce the number of hospital visits or admissions for such patients. By monitoring individuals' key health points, the relevant professional support can be brought in quickly to ensure that people are treated early, very often before they realise that they have a serious illness coming on. That ensures that the individual has a much better prospect of remaining in their own home.

Mr Kinahan: The personal social services research unit showed that between four hours and 20 hours per individual member of staff were needed to relocate an elderly person to another care home. Has the Minister costed this and built it into budgets or has he created an emergency team to carry out that work?

Mr Poots: Obviously, it is something that goes on all the time. Given that my Department is responsible for health and social services, we are at a much greater advantage than, for

example, people in other jurisdictions and, indeed, those in other parts of the United Kingdom. In Great Britain, the councils happen to be responsible for social services, and that creates many problems, particularly when cuts are coming from Westminster and many councils respond with cuts to social services, which ensure that people stay in hospital much longer. In Northern Ireland, we can respond much more quickly. We have one system, and it is far more expensive to keep people in hospital than in a care facility. Indeed, the former is generally not as good an outcome. So, we want to move people on quickly, and it is incumbent upon the trusts to ensure that that happens.

Private Clinics

3. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much his Department has spent on referring patients to private clinics in the past three years. (AQO 1272/11-15)

Mr Poots: The five health and social care trusts spent £60 million in 2008-09, £57.5 million in 2009-2010, and £24.7 million in 2010-11 on independent sector provision in the health service. Supplementing healthcare capacity through the use of the independent sector is used as a short-term measure to deliver improvements in waiting times. The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) grants approval for such expenditure to ensure that patients do not have to endure unacceptable waits.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. How do we ensure that good follow-up of private operations takes place? What are we doing to build capacity to avoid the need for independent providers?

Mr Poots: Contracts for follow-ups are agreed with the HSCB in the first instance. Pre-contract quality assurance checks are carried out. Those contracts require providers to deliver minimum quality outcomes, as defined by the Independent Health Care Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005, which also require them to have complaints procedures in place.

The Member asked about the capacity within health and social care to avoid having to send patients to the independent sector in future. One of the specialties that consistently encounters problems is orthopaedics. The HSCB has invited recurrent bids from trusts to

help to bridge the gap between elective supply and demand for that specialty. It anticipated that around £5 million will be committed recurrently within the next two years, subject to the trusts' ability to recruit additional consultants and other specialist staff, which will greatly help us to reduce our requirement for the private sector. It should also, at the same time, ensure that people's treatment and care paths are provided more speedily and in a more structured way.

Mr McCallister: Does the Minister have a figure in his head as to the optimum level of private sector involvement, which would get the balance between doing it in-house and not building a huge backlog of patients?

Mr Poots: I do not think that there is necessarily an optimum level as regards the money spent on this. What is optimum is that people receive the appropriate care at the right time. For example, we have close to 1,500 people who require cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland each year. We provide around 1,000 of those operations and have to buy in the rest. I would have thought that we would have been better operating closer to capacity, not exceeding it. So, I think that we should be heading, in general, for at least 85% to 90% of our requirement, and perhaps looking at buying in services thereafter. Once we go over that, we are probably running at an excessive cost. Certainly, we should be aspiring to get as close to it as possible.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister say how much the Department has spent on referring patients for treatment in other jurisdictions within the same three-year time frame?

2.45 pm

Mr Poots: I am less inclined to lose too much sleep over those issues. What is important to me is that people receive the appropriate care in a timely way. We need to ensure that we challenge those areas in which we are weak and not using the capacity. I had discussions with folks on the cardiac side, and I know that progress is being made there, and I believe that there will be considerable progress in future years.

Work is being done to carry out more orthopaedic work in Northern Ireland. That is very important, but there will always be a requirement to use other providers. It is important that when we use other providers, we

achieve good value for money from their work, we ensure that they provide a quality service for the individuals who receive care and we get to a point in Northern Ireland at which people do not have to wait for inordinate periods to receive the surgery that they need to recover from something that is quite serious or has a hugely negative impact on their quality of life.

Alcohol and Drug Misuse

4. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans for tackling the misuse of alcohol, especially underage drinking and binge drinking. (AQO 1273/11-15)

11. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans to tackle the adverse impact on our society arising from drug and alcohol misuse. (AQO 1280/11-15)

Mr Poots: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will take questions 4 and 11 together.

On 26 January 2012, I launched the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs Phase 2, which is a cross-sectoral strategy to reduce the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse. Approximately £8 million is allocated to its implementation each year, and additional funding is provided through the mental health budget for the provision of treatment and support services. The new strategic direction (NSD) seeks to direct action across five pillars: prevention and early intervention; harm reduction; treatment and support; law and criminal justice; and monitoring, evaluation and research. A specific priority is to address underage and young people's drinking. I am particularly concerned about how some alcohol is priced, promoted and marketed, and NSD phase 2 raises those issues. Therefore, my Department has been working closely with the Department for Social Development, which led a joint consultation on the principle of introducing minimum unit pricing in Northern Ireland. Following a consultation, we are looking at commissioning research to model the likely impact of that in Northern Ireland, which will help to inform our future decisions. However, minimum unit pricing is only one part of our approach, and it is important that we take a range of actions to address alcohol misuse across the population.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister will be aware that, last week, the Minister for Social Development was moving towards banning drinks promotions, which are mainly targeted at young people. Will the Minister continue to work with the Minister for Social Development to apply a minimum cost to a unit of alcohol to discourage underage drinking?

Mr Poots: The Minister for Social Development and I are working very closely together. I have also had conversations with the Minister of Justice and other Ministers, because alcohol misuse is so prevalent in our society and crosses so many boundaries. The Minister for Social Development and I are leading research, with the support of DSD, and it is important that we get to a point at which we can present proposals.

It will be of great interest to the House that I have also engaged very closely with Róisín Shortall and Minister Reilly in the Irish Government. They are also keen to introduce minimum pricing for alcohol and to do so at a similar time as we introduce it here in Northern Ireland. That is completely rational, as it will ensure that we do not have a situation in which alcohol is very cheap on one side of the border or the other, as people would take the opportunities that that presented. So we are all working quite closely together on that issue because we cannot afford to be spending £250 million on the health service or £900 million annually to address the abuse of alcohol.

Mr Craig: Is the Minister aware of any research that links substance abuse, including alcohol and drugs, with suicide?

Mr Poots: A considerable amount of work has been done by various organisations. Substance abuse is thought to be a major factor in youth suicide, and research from America has shown that one in three young people was intoxicated at the time of their suicide attempt. Alcohol and drugs can affect people's thinking and reasoning ability, and they can act as a depressant. They decrease people's inhibitions, increasing the likelihood of depressed young people attempting to take their own life. That reinforces my determination to push ahead with those activities that seek to educate young people about the risks of substance misuse. The Public Health Agency, for example, has piloted four one-stop shop drop-in services for young

people, which provide information, education, signposting and referrals. The services recognise that substance misuse is often one outcome of a range of underlying issues. Therefore, those services also cover suicide and self-harm, mental health and well-being, sexual health, relationship issues, resilience and coping with school and employment. Those pilot projects have now been evaluated, and consideration is being given to rolling them out across Northern Ireland.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister for Social Development in respect of shops that sell alcohol putting their names on bags?

Mr Poots: We are looking at a range of measures and, in particular, we have talked about social impact bonds being applied to shops that sell alcohol. Very often, social impact bonds are applied to pubs, and pubs are sometimes considerably less responsible for the cause of the problems than many shops. People who own pubs, for example, say that they have serious problems with people arriving at their premises already heavily intoxicated from cheap alcohol that they obtained elsewhere. Going after shops that sell alcohol has to be done sensibly and rationally. They provide a service to people who want to have a drink, and we are not concerned about that. We are concerned about people who abuse drink, and minimum pricing, social impact bonds and the Member's suggestion of labelling bags are all things that we can do to seek to improve the situation.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his answers to a very important issue. Minister, you mentioned general costs. Do you have any details on the cost to the health service of alcohol abuse by young people specifically, and are there any particular black spots?

Mr Poots: I do not have details for young people specifically. The cost of alcohol to the Northern Ireland economy is around £900 million, and when drugs are included, it is over £1 billion. The cost is £250 million to the health service directly, and it is considerably more to my colleague the Minister of Justice. We need to work with the community to explain that it is not about making life miserable for people but is about dealing with a problem in our community. A number of years ago, we took a strong position on secondary smoke and second-hand

smoking. Problems arise as a result of second-hand drinking, such as violence from people drinking and people who take up a lot of space in our health system, thus displacing others. Those problems are far more significant, so it is incumbent on us to take steps to ensure that people are not discriminated against because of the current way in which people abuse alcohol and expect others to pick up the tab.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's comments and, in particular, his proactive response and that of his Executive colleagues. Every one of us knows the awfulness that alcohol brings to an individual, a family and a community.

Does the Minister believe that the current budgetary allocation for the strategic plan against alcohol and drugs is enough to meet the target that the Department set?

Mr Poots: We have set aside £8 million to kick the plan off, and I believe that that is useful. We have a challenge in competing with the slick marketing of the organisations that are involved in selling alcohol. This is not in my Department's control, and we need to talk to those who do have control of it, but we need to get to the point in the future where we have equal time with those who are advertising alcohol so that we can point out the detrimental aspects of abusing it. That would be a game changer and would significantly challenge people's thoughts on the matter, because although it can all look very glamorous in the adverts, it is not so glamorous when somebody is lying in the gutter being sick, when someone who is abusive comes home and beats their wife and children, or when young people end up in brawls and fights that hospitalise many of them. Those issues need to be highlighted. It is not glamorous that 355 people now have an incurable disease called cirrhosis of the liver. So, we need to challenge people about those things and make them aware of the dangers.

Community Health Services

5. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional services could be provided in the community, rather than in hospitals, in the future. (AQO 1274/11-15)

Mr Poots: The new model for the delivery of health and social care services set out

in 'Transforming Your Care' will encourage a significant shift from the provision of services in hospitals to provision in the community, GP surgeries and closer to home, where it is safe and effective to do so. The distinction in where services can and should be delivered is important, as, for too long, we have relied on the belief that certain services should be provided in a hospital setting. The new model challenges us to develop services around the needs of patients and to separate the institution providing the service from the care and treatment that the patients need.

Under that model of care, service providers should regard home as the hub and should ensure that people can be cared for at home, including at the end of their life. Where specialist hospital care is required, it will be available, and patients will be discharged into the care of local services as soon as their health and care needs permit.

The types of services that could be provided in the community include health and well-being advice; optometry; dentistry; antenatal and postnatal care; access to therapy and rehabilitation; diagnostics; outpatients; and 24/7 urgent care, including GP, mental health crisis response and minor procedures.

Local commissioning groups (LCGs) will be tasked with translating the proposals in 'Transforming Your Care' into more detailed population plans that will set out the specific changes to be taken forward in their respective areas so that local needs can be met while taking account of the principles and criteria set out in the review. In developing population plans, LCGs will engage with local communities, councils, health and social care trusts and others to ensure the full representation of views in the development of the plans.

Mr Ross: The Minister will know that the fuel payment initiative has assisted many cancer sufferers in the local community. What information can he provide on the uptake of the cancer payment so far?

Mr Poots: The scheme is being initiated by and will operate through GP practices, which will identify the patients from their cancer registers. GPs have been asked to write to each eligible patient to seek their consent for the Business Services Organisation (BSO) to use their personal information to enable a payment to be made to them if they so desire. There

are 353 GP practices in total. To date, we have been advised by the BSO that 220 claim forms were submitted by GP practices by 3 February for payment of the allowance that is available to carry out the work. Those will be paid in February 2012. Further claim forms have been received by the BSO but have not been actioned as yet. So, by 8 February, approximately 4,500 claim forms had been submitted by eligible cancer patients for the payment, which I am sure will be greatly received.

3.00 pm

Justice

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 7 and 14 have been withdrawn. They require written answers.

Criminal Justice: Time Limits

1. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Justice to outline his plans to implement the recommendation contained in the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland report 'Avoidable Delay: A Progress Report' to introduce statutory time limits for criminal cases. (AQO 1285/11-15)

9. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the recommendation, contained in the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland report 'Avoidable Delay: A Progress Report', to introduce statutory time limits for criminal cases. (AQO 1293/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall answer questions 1 and 9 together.

As Members will know, on Monday of last week, I announced that I would be introducing statutory time limits within the lifetime of this Assembly and that those time limits would apply to cases in the youth court. I made the announcement after careful consideration of the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) report on delay, which was published on 24 January 2012.

Dr Maguire's report provides a useful, independent and objective perspective on the longstanding problem of delay. I am grateful to him and his team for their work in producing the report. Indeed, I continue to be grateful for their ongoing support and advice in that critical and difficult area.

CJINI found that, although criminal justice agencies have made strenuous efforts to improve timeliness of criminal cases, not enough has been achieved. It concluded that the time had come for more fundamental change.

As I previously announced to the House, I have asked the Criminal Justice Board (CJB) to develop detailed proposals on how statutory time limits should work in Northern Ireland. In doing so, I was clear that, although statutory time limits must be underpinned by effective penalties, adequate safeguards must also be in place to protect the interest of victims and to ensure that offenders cannot unfairly escape justice.

The introduction of statutory time limits will fundamentally reshape the justice system in Northern Ireland. I am in no doubt about the challenge that that represents, but it is a challenge that must be met if we are to deliver a faster, fairer justice system.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his answer. He previously said that he was opposed to statutory time limits because the system was not ready. What has changed, and if the system is now ready, why do we need statutory time limits at all, given that England and Wales have reformed without introducing them?

Mr Ford: I made it clear on previous occasions that I did not believe that the system was in a fit state for statutory time limits. Indeed, I do not believe that the system would be fit for statutory time limits at this stage. That is why I have talked about a two- to three-year process in the period of this Assembly to introduce statutory time limits for the youth court. However, what is absolutely clear is that the efforts that have been made by different agencies across the justice system have not yet produced the step change that this society needs, and that is why I believe that statutory time limits now need to be considered.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will have heard families of victims involved in recent cases express their views about the added anguish that unavoidable delays bring. Can he do all in his power to ensure that the measure be implemented as quickly as possible?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr Bradley's question. Part of the point of statutory time limits is to make things better for victims, not worse. Delay means that victims suffer considerably. What we need

to do is ensure that we do not try to introduce statutory time limits until the system is ready for them. That is why I talk about a lead-in time of perhaps a couple of years. However, I am fully aware of the effect that delay has on victims, and one of my priorities in recent months has been to address that concern.

Mr Dickson: Minister, you have assured the House that it will take some time before you can introduce statutory time limits, and then perhaps only in the youth court in the first instance. Can you assure the House that you will be taking all practical steps to speed up the process in the meantime?

Mr Ford: I can assure the House of that. The announcement that I made last week followed detailed consideration at the CJB, and that followed intensive negotiations among the different agencies and examination over a couple of years of what was possible.

The introduction of statutory time limits is not an alternative to the necessary work that is being done; rather, it is to reinforce the necessary work that is being done and has to be done by all the criminal justice system's agencies.

Maghaberry Prison: Colin Bell

2. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the length of time it took the PSNI to investigate the death of Colin Bell in HMP Maghaberry on 31 July 2008. (AQO 1286/11-15)

Mr Ford: The timing of the police investigation is a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB). The matter is subject to a criminal investigation and an industrial tribunal, so I cannot comment further. I caution Members against making further comment as well.

Mr Spratt: I am not surprised at the brevity of the Minister's answer.

Given that the unfortunate incident took place in August 2008 and that the Prison Ombudsman carried out an investigation and reported in January 2009, does it not concern that Minister that it took PSNI CID until November 2011 to investigate? Does that not indicate that CID is not fit for purpose? Will the Minister ask Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary to carry out a thematic inspection?

Mr Ford: I can say only what I said in answer to the substantive question. Mr Spratt has colleagues who serve on the Policing Board, and that is where the Chief Constable should be held to account.

Mr Eastwood: What lessons have the Prison Service learnt from that report and from other reports?

Mr Ford: Mr Eastwood makes a fair point, but he is certainly aware of much of the discussion that has happened around the prison reforms, the reports that have been convened and the action that has been taken. I am absolutely certain that lessons were learned from the tragic death of Colin Bell. It is clear that that was one of those defining moments that helped shape some of the reforms that are now under way. Members may question the length of time over which that has happened, but all that we are doing in the current strategic efficiency and effectiveness programme is designed to ensure that we provide the best possible care for vulnerable prisoners, alongside providing constructive activity to reform prisoners in general. From that, we have seen improvement in the training of prison staff and in working methods, and I trust that that will be a legacy.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given what the Minister said about the case at the outset, is he satisfied that the recommendations made after the death of Colin Bell have now been implemented?

Mr Ford: In so far as I can say that in the context of the overall prison reforms, yes, I do believe that lessons have been learnt and recommendations are being carried out. However, we must acknowledge that there are many vulnerable prisoners, not just in this jurisdiction but in every jurisdiction in these islands, and, with limited resources, there are major difficulties in managing vulnerable prisoners. We have seen very positive work done, for example, with the opening of the Donard Centre at Maghaberry prison, but there is no doubt that we need to continue to focus our work to ensure that we protect those vulnerable prisoners at risk of self-harm.

Mrs Overend: Unfortunately, self-harm is often a way of life for prisoners, and its effects on staff and the prisoners themselves are profound. Will the Minister provide us with some detail about what he is doing to reduce the culture of self-

harm and to support prison officers who must deal with the consequences?

Mr Ford: As I just said, one of the key issues is the provision of care in the Donard suite at Maghaberry jail. It provides care to those who are most vulnerable, including, in particular, those who are vulnerable and at risk of self-harm. If one looks at the prison population overall, it is clear that a significant number of prisoners have mental health issues and personality disorders. It will always be an issue to which attention needs to be paid. Similarly, it is an issue of good management practice to support staff in best practice and in dealing with the difficult issues that they have to face.

Office of the Police Ombudsman: Interim Chief Executive

3. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the role his Department had in appointing an interim chief executive to the Office of the Police Ombudsman with responsibility for the operation of investigations into the conduct of police officers. (AQO 1287/11-15)

5. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the independent legal guidance or opinion which is claimed by the Police Ombudsman to have advised that the appointment of an interim chief executive was a legal requirement. (AQO 1289/11-15)

Mr Ford: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 5 together.

The Police Ombudsman approached my Department in November 2011 to ask for assistance in identifying an interim chief executive. The request was made at a time when the ombudsman envisaged leaving office at the end of January 2012 and when neither the chief executive nor senior director of investigations posts was filled substantively. Although there was, and is, no legal requirement for an interim chief executive to be appointed, I agree that it was a sensible step to ensure stability and reduce risk during an undefined period in which there will be no fully functioning ombudsman.

My Department sought assistance from the head of the Civil Service and the Department of Finance and Personnel. When a potential secondee had been identified, my Department put the ombudsman in touch with the individual.

It is also worth reminding Members that my Department played a similar role in assisting the Policing Board to identify an interim chief executive at a time when the board was facing significant change. I believe that that step has been highly beneficial to the Policing Board, and I hope that the Office of the Police Ombudsman will benefit similarly from that arrangement. I am unaware of any independent legal guidance or opinion advising that the appointment of an interim chief executive was a legal requirement; neither am I aware that the Police Ombudsman has said that his decision to appoint an interim chief executive was informed by legal advice.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. At this stage, I am sure that the special relationship between the Department and the outgoing Police Ombudsman is very well known. On what date was the business case for this new post of interim chief executive approved by the Minister's Department? Does the Minister recognise the widespread concern that the integral role played by his Department in the creation of this position and the appointment to it is further evidence of the interference of his Department in the independence of the Office of the Police Ombudsman?

Mr Ford: No; I absolutely do not recognise any suggestion of interference. The ombudsman requested the assistance of the Department of Justice, and the Department quite properly sought the assistance of the head of the Civil Service and the Department of Finance and Personnel in identifying a suitable candidate and put that candidate in touch with the ombudsman. So a vacancy was filled, and no business case was required. That does not constitute interference by the Department; it constitutes assistance.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Give that the Minister's Department has had sight of legal advice from the Attorney General and alternative legal advice relied upon by the outgoing Police Ombudsman, will the Minister explain the difference between them? Will he also explain to the Assembly which legal advice his Department is relying on in relation to the current operational arrangements for the discharge of responsibilities within the Office of the Police Ombudsman?

Mr Ford: I have had sight of two sorts of legal advice, and I am not relying on either, since the issue of the appointment of an interim chief executive and the arrangements for filling the post until a substantive ombudsman is appointed were arrangements for the ombudsman, not for my Department. He acted in accordance with the advice that he received.

Mr Kinahan: It seems inconsistent that the Minister's Department has a role in appointing the chief executive but does not have a role in appointing the Police Ombudsman. Is the Minister looking at a way of clarifying that so it can be more firmly set for the future?

Mr Ford: The legislation is quite clear: the appointment of the ombudsman is the responsibility of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The only role that my Department had was in assisting the ombudsman, who was seeking a secondee as an interim chief executive. We have no role in appointing a chief executive substantively.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister indicate to the House whether he is in support of the call by the current ombudsman to increase the powers of investigation, in particular, the power or the right to question retired police officers?

Mr Ford: Mr Byrne raises a very valid point. It is, however, an issue that is now out for public consultation, and it would be a foolish Minister who would put proposals out for public consultation and then declare his opinion on them while that consultation is proceeding.

Mr Allister: Would the Justice Minister like to take the opportunity to repudiate the suggestion from the outgoing ombudsman in his call for an amnesty for historic crimes and agree that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Allister: — that would be an unbearable imposition on innocent victims —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Minister does not have to answer that question if he does not wish to, because it is not relevant.

Maghaberry Prison: Illegal Drugs

4. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Justice whether, in the past two years, any illegal drugs have been discovered during searches of prisoners in Roe House, Maghaberry prison. (AQO 1288/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prison Service takes the problem of illicit drugs and substance abuse seriously. The three elements of addressing the problem are: reduction in demand through education; reduction in harm through treatment; and reduction in supply through searching and drugs testing. Searching is essential in all prisons to maintain security and protect the safety of prisoners, staff and visitors. It acts as a deterrent, detects and recovers illicit substances and disrupts the movement and supply of drugs and other contraband. In the past two years, there have been eight finds of illicit drugs in Roe House, all of which were in Roe 1 and 2.

3.15 pm

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will be aware that there is zero tolerance to drugs by inmates in Roe 3 and 4. There have been no finds of illegal drugs in Roe 3 and 4, so why has such emphasis been placed on the need for full-body searching for drugs of prisoners in Roe 3 and 4, even for internal movements in the prison? Surely that is gratuitous.

Mr Ford: I do not think that it is gratuitous. Indeed, there has been a reduction in the amount of searching in respect of internal movements in Maghaberry prison by separated prisoners, whether from Roe House or Bush House. However, various types of contraband are found in different parts of the prison, including Roe House, and that is why in all parts of Maghaberry, as in all other prison establishments in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the United Kingdom, full-body searching is carried out on entering and leaving.

Members will be aware that I have talked about seeking an alternative, but I suspect that I might annoy another Member if I go too far down that line at this point.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. In relation to the latter part of the Minister's comments, is it now time to implement recommendation 8 of Anne Owers report, if one of the three legs of trying to suppress the entry of drugs into any prison in the North is that we get a technological replacement to full-body and strip searching?

Mr Ford: I am at a slight loss, since I fear that I am about to intrude on another Member's question, which follows shortly afterwards.

However, I believe that we are carrying out what is necessary under that section of the report from Dame Anne Owers and her team, but I am not sure whether I should necessarily intrude on another Member's question by answering that in detail at this stage.

Mr B McCrea: Is the Minister aware that drugs are common currency in prisons and that many of our prisoners enter taking soft drugs but end up using hard drugs because they are more difficult to detect? If so, what is he planning to do about it?

Mr Ford: The Prison Service here, like the Prison Service elsewhere, seeks to take action to counteract the smuggling of drugs of any kind. The Member makes a valid point about the ease of detection of some drugs compared to others, but that does not mean that we should let down our guard. It means that we should address the serious issue of those who are vulnerable to drug use and the problems that it creates for them, whether in their life in prison or outside it.

Mr Givan: Does the Minister agree that the abuse of prescription drugs is a major problem in our Prison Service? Will he undertake to work with the Health Minister to ascertain the level of abuse in the administration of prescription drugs?

Mr Ford: I take Mr Givan's point that there is a problem with a wide range of drugs. I am not sure whether prescription drugs in particular are more of a problem than illicit drugs, but the responsibility for dealing with prescription drugs lies with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which provides healthcare services to the Prison Service. I am convinced that the Prison Service will continue to work for the South Eastern Trust in dealing with such problems.

Television Licences: Non-payment

6. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Justice how many people were convicted and prosecuted for the non-payment of television licence fees in each of the last three years. (AQO 1290/11-15)

Fine Default

11. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the work being carried out to reduce the impact of the high level of fine default on the justice system. (AQO 1295/11-15)

Mr Ford: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 11 together, since the answers cover closely related issues. In 2009, a total of 4,906 television licensing cases were prosecuted at court, 3,821 of which led to convictions; in 2010, there were 5,126 prosecutions, with 3,752 convictions; and in 2011, there were 4,905 prosecutions, with 3,415 convictions. On average, about 150 people a year end up in prison following non-payment of a fine for television licence evasion.

I recently published proposals designed fundamentally to reform how the justice system deals with fine defaulters. My proposals include the development of a civilian fines enforcement service; greater use of community-based penalties as alternatives to custody; and new powers to allow for deductions from income in appropriate circumstances.

A number of important initiatives are already under way. A fine collection scheme has been operating since 2009 to remind those approaching their fine payment deadline of the consequences of default. That has resulted in a 29% reduction in the number of warrants needing to be issued and over £3 million in fine receipts.

Greater use of community penalties is also under way. The supervised activity order is now in place in Newry court, and the first two SAOs were made in the past fortnight. SAOs are an alternative to prison for fine default, and a person subject to one will undertake a set number of hours of work in the community instead.

As regards the specific issue of imprisonment for non-payment of TV licence fines, TV licensing is a reserved matter. I have written to the Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to explore the potential for enforcement to be dealt with by way of civil action as opposed to a criminal prosecution.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his response. I appreciate that TV licensing is a reserved matter, but he has indicated that he has been in correspondence with the Minister responsible. Can he ensure that communication and information on the concern that many people in parts of Northern Ireland have about some areas being unfairly and unduly targeted, at the exclusion of or in deference to other areas that are not being targeted for TV

licensing evasion, will go back to TV licensing, to ensure that there is an even spread across Northern Ireland and that everyone everywhere who evades TV licence fees is equally targeted to ensure that the conviction rate drops correspondingly across the Province?

Mr Ford: As somebody who does not go out with a TV licence detector van, I am not sure that I can answer the question as to exactly what areas are targeted or not targeted. I can only say that, going by the number of prosecutions, it appears that significant action is being taken by the TV licensing authorities. The precise geographical areas in which they operate are their decisions, not mine.

Mrs Cochrane: It is staggering that some 30% of all receptions into our prisons in 2009-10 were for fine default. Presumably, that means that 30% of all receptions into prisons were for only a few days. Can the Minister tell us what proactive steps are being taken to reduce the number of those defaults and, thus, reduce the impact of fine defaults?

Mr Ford: Close on 10% of that 30% was for the non-payment of TV licence default fines. We have to be careful and say that people do not go to prison for not having a TV licence. They go for not paying the fine. It is a very significant figure.

Fine default generally needs to be addressed, and that is why we have announced various proposals. In my answer, I referred to the supervised activity orders, which can result in somebody being given a significant number of hours of community service, for example. The minimum number of hours of activity is 10 and the maximum is 100 for fines of up to £500. That is a significant penalty as an alternative to non-payment of a fine, and certainly more significant than the number of people going to prison.

We also have a number of other options under way with regard to improving the information that is given on defendants' means to pay fines and improving the forms that are provided and the guidance that is given to courts. As I said earlier, we have been operating the fine collection scheme, which has resulted in a 29% reduction in the number of fine warrants issued. I believe that we have shown a degree of activity in that area, but it is also clear that some of the other proposals being made at the moment in the consultation, such as the attachment of earnings, may well have a further part to play.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister gave percentages, and a high percentage of them are women who go to prison for the non-payment of TV licence fines. A lot of those women have young children. Does the Minister feel that it is time that that process stopped and that women who have children and have committed a first offence should not be sent to prison for non-payment of a TV licence fine?

Mr Ford: I certainly appreciate Ms McCann's question. My understanding is that of those 150 television licence defaulters who end up in prison every year, roughly 50 of them are women. That is a very significant proportion, in relation to the total number of women in prison. I need to be careful about second-guessing the decisions of judges. However, we are seeking to provide alternatives to fine defaulters going to prison at the same time as looking at decriminalising the issue altogether and having TV licence default dealt with by civil means, as applies for other utilities. Without questioning the decisions taken by individual district judges, what the Department is putting forward should have the potential to significantly reduce the number of women in particular who go to court for TV licence fine default. Ms McCann correctly highlighted the issue that arises when those women are mothers of young children.

Mr Swann: Does the Minister agree that a viable and more pragmatic alternative to custody for people who default on TV licences and end up with fines would be to use the Probation Board, as it would be more capable? I encourage the Minister to go out with the TV detector vans to see what areas of the country they cover.

Mr Ford: I have been out and about with certain operational agencies that relate to the Department of Justice. However, I think that TV licensing would be overstepping the mark slightly. Mr Swann is correct in highlighting the issue of finding better ways of dealing with fine default. Whether that is through the Probation Board's operation of supervised activity orders, the restraint of wages, or whatever, we need to find something that is more creative and likely to be better for the offender and society than sending people to prison for a few days.

Prisons: Full-body Searches

8. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on his Department's efforts to find

a technical replacement for full-body searching of prisoners, as outlined in recommendation 8 of the review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service. (AQO 1292/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I previously advised the Assembly, I recently received the Prison Service report on the use of full-body imaging scanners and am considering its findings and recommendations with a view to determining whether there is scope to conduct a pilot of alternative search technologies in the Northern Ireland Prison Service. In addition, I intend to visit Portlaoise Prison to look at its search measures.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. I had every confidence that he would reach my question. Does he agree that a technical replacement for full-body searching, or strip-searching, would be less degrading and humiliating for prisoners and would lead to more rehabilitation and less alienation?

Mr Ford: Mr Brady makes a very serious point, and I agree entirely that a technological solution as an alternative to full-body searching would provide greater dignity for prisoners and prison staff. That said, unless we have the appropriate technology, we cannot move in that direction. However, I have already informed the House that I am keeping in touch with developments at Holme House Prison in England, which is piloting the possibility of licensing for a particular form of search technology. If it is possible to provide an alternative that enhances security and dignity at the same time, I assure the House that the Prison Service will be up for taking that action.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's announcement that he intends to visit Portlaoise Prison, which, as the Minister will be aware, uses a model of searching techniques that receives almost no complaints. It is a hugely emotive matter. An SDLP delegation visited the prison recently and addressed some of those concerns. Alasdair McDonnell referred to internal searches when people are moved between their cells in Roe House and the prison play area —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question please.

Mr P Ramsey: Why is it necessary for those searches to continue when people move only 20 yards and are accompanied by heavily armed staff in riot gear?

Mr Ford: Searching is carried out internally on the basis of a security assessment. I cannot answer for every individual decision. However, I repeat the key point about the Prison Service's efforts to find an alternative. I am going to Portlaoise Prison because some Members believe that it has in place better systems that are not currently available to us; other Members have expressed doubts about that. Therefore, I have decided to visit Portlaoise Prison in person.

3.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Spring Supplementary Estimates 2011-12 and Vote on Account 2012-13

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a total sum not exceeding £15,244,040,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2012 and that total resources, not exceeding £16,220,944,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2012 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(c) and 2(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2011-12 that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £6,987,469,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2013 and that resources not exceeding £7,451,346,000 be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern

Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2013 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Vote on Account 2012-13 document that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I welcome the opportunity to outline the Environment Committee's views on the motions. The Department of the Environment's (DOE) budget is not a large one compared with that of some other Departments, but that does not make it any less important.

The Committee gave its support to DOE's proposed budget at the start of the year and welcomed the general direction of expenditure and priorities. However, it was concerned that £4 million worth of environmental protection work was dependent on the income from the single-use carrier bag levy. Stakeholders who were happy with the levy in principle told the Committee that they were concerned about the contradictory message of important environmental work being dependent on a levy that, if it works, will be less and less lucrative. I agree. It really does seem perverse that the more successful the levy is in changing behaviour, the lower DOE's income will be.

Ms Ritchie: Does Ms Lo agree that given the importance of the debate, it is essential that the Minister is present? Perhaps, Mr Deputy Speaker, you can advise us why the Minister is not present and when he will be.

Ms Lo: Thank you. I agree. I had not actually noticed that the Minister is not here. Shall we pause to wait for him to arrive?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, we can continue. I do not know where the Minister is but I am absolutely confident that he will return to his place.

Ms Lo: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Delays in other areas of work have resulted in DOE giving money back during the year. Lack of progress in local government reform is one such example, and the Committee is constantly urging for that to be progressed.

Staffing difficulties in planning continue to concern us. When income from planning application fees drops, as it has continued to do, the impact falls directly on staff. The Committee welcomed the redeployment of 102 administrative staff to other parts of the

Civil Service, and in response to the reduced income last year, it supported the temporary transfer of professional planners to other Civil Service Departments. However, it was disappointing to subsequently see planning targets deteriorate and to hear that remaining staff had disproportionately high workloads. Planning officials who are out on loan to other Departments are due to return gradually this coming year. I hope that we will see the impact of that in improved targets, but I also hope that any pressures placed on the Department's existing budget as a result will be carefully managed. The Committee recently had an opportunity to see DOE's planning workforce model. I hope that that will help it to plan and to manage its planning staff more effectively.

More recently, our concerns focused on the easings proposed by DOE in the January monitoring round. Having become familiar with pressures on its budget as planning fees decline, it seemed incongruous to us that the Department should be in a position to hand back £3.3 million. Some of those easements have arisen as a result of slippages in projects, but a significant amount is due to delays in recruitment and the deferred return of some staff on loan. Of DOE's budget, 54% is for staff costs, so fluctuations in income have a significant impact on people, as we have already seen in planning.

The Committee notes that funds surrendered in January are likely to be needed in due course, and it urges the Finance Minister to ensure that those funds are made available to DOE when required.

In closing, the Committee has largely been supportive of the Department's bids and surrenders during the past year. However, in considering the Vote on Account, the Committee stresses the importance of making sure that the necessary funds are made available to DOE so that it can continue to deliver effective planning functions.

On behalf of the Committee, I support the motions.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I note that the Minister is back in his place. I am sure that he is taking all the issues on board. I am confident that he was taking them on board even when he was not in the Chamber.

I will make a number of comments as Chairperson of the Committee. In-year, the Committee was briefed by the Department on its monitoring round returns and proposals, which underwent significant scrutiny. In July 2011, the Committee was briefed by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Department on the qualification of its resource accounts for 2010-11. The report by the Comptroller and Auditor General identified three key areas of concern.

The first issue highlighted concerned weaknesses in sponsor control arrangements for directly funded bodies. The Audit Office identified deficiencies and inconsistencies in its arrangements for funding certain directly funded groups and verifying their spending. The Department commissioned an internal audit review of the area to establish in some detail the weaknesses. That audit found a number of issues that were exactly the same as the ones that the Audit Office had identified. Those included weaknesses in the approval process. The contents of letters of offer to the groups were sometimes not as precise as they could have been. There was a lack of checking when grants had been paid. The internal audit made a number of recommendations, the majority of which the Department accepted and implemented.

The second element of the qualification concerned irregular consultancy spending. The Comptroller and Auditor General identified three instances in which business cases should have been submitted to DFP but were not. DFP did not give retrospective approval when that was applied for. The Committee was assured by the departmental accounting officer that the Department sought to strengthen its internal control procedures for the approval requirements for business cases.

The third element of the qualification was a breach of approval granted by DFP for spending on the Maze/Long Kesh remediation phase 2 project. The Department had sought and obtained approval for spending up to £3.5 million. However, the Department was unable to tender at that amount, and the contract was awarded at £4.9 million. Again, DFP refused retrospective approval for the uplift, which meant that the whole amount was deemed to be irregular.

At the briefing, the Committee was assured by the departmental accounting officer that appropriate action had been taken to remedy

the concerns and that processes had been put in place to prevent those issues arising in future. In answer to questions from Members about whether the Department had responded appropriately to remedy deficiencies, the Comptroller and Auditor General assured the Committee that the Department had responded positively to all its points.

The Committee agreed to request a mid-year update, which was provided in November by the departmental accounting officer and dealt with the progress that the Department had made to improve processes and to ensure that necessary approvals are in place when required. The Committee will continue to monitor that closely and receive regular briefings on governance issues.

The Committee has taken a particular interest in the Department's capital projects and understands the importance of maintaining momentum in regenerating sites to attract investment and to provide jobs for local areas. It visited a number of the sites to look at the progress made and to hear further about the plans for the coming Budget period.

In September 2011, the Department took control of the Shackleton Barracks site, and the Committee was briefed on the decision of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in November. Obviously, there was a ministerial direction in that case, much of which surrounded the estimated costs for clearing the area. The running costs of the Shackleton site, and in particular the ongoing cost of pumping water at the site, is an issue of interest, and the Committee has agreed to visit the site later this month. It has asked the Department to provide the maintenance costs for all the transferred sites.

Although OFMDFM has a relatively small budget compared with other Departments, it plays a key role in the delivery of cross-cutting priorities, such as children and young people, social exclusion, good relations and tackling poverty. It is the people and families affected by those cross-cutting priorities who are feeling the effects of the economic downturn most. That is evidenced by the latest child poverty figures in Northern Ireland, which show that 28% of children are growing up in poverty. That has increased by 3% and the figure for the whole of the UK is 20%. Therefore, it is crucial that spending is targeted effectively and that the Executive deliver services in an efficient

and effective manner. It is on those important strategic issues that the Committee provides scrutiny of OFMDFM.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you. Last week, during Question Time, Minister Wilson rubbished claims that welfare reform would take money out of the Northern Ireland economy. Looking at the spring Supplementary Estimates, with respect to DSD, one can already see stark evidence that the Minister's complacency is unfounded.

We have a £15 million reduction in disability benefits, a £20 million reduction in pension credit and a £28 million reduction in income support, jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance (ESA), and that is before some of the more draconian aspects of welfare reform have been even introduced. I do not want to get into an argument over parity, but there is a glaring need for greater resources to be allocated to some sort of discretionary and sustainable fund to ameliorate the impact of welfare reform on those most in need. I welcome the fact that money was directed to winter fuel payments through the social protection fund, but we need something more sustainable.

Although I recognise the need for all Departments to reduce expenditure, I note the dramatic reduction of around £9 million in allocation for social security administration and I would love to know how that was realised. It is to be welcomed that they realised it but what impact will it have on not only the service but on the morale of staff as we enter a period of unprecedented upheaval in the system and an expected massive increase in appeals.

Looking at the Estimate for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I welcome the additional resources that have been allocated to the Department, provided they are used wisely. I have a slight concern that the request for resources A-1, entitled "Policy Development, Hospital, Community Health and Personal Social Services and Family Health Services", is a bit wide-ranging. We would like to see a more detailed breakdown of the reduction of £638 million within that section.

A lot of re-allocation in the Department's budget, as well as, hopefully, new money, will be required to ensure that the transition from our current model of healthcare to that envisaged by Compton is as smooth as possible. I

wonder whether the projected £1 million in savings that we are told that the business service transformation programme will realise is incorporated into those figures. I urge a bit of caution around that. In the rush to get this through by the end of this year, people are being asked to make decisions on their futures and to consider voluntary redundancy without any concrete proposals in front of them. I would like to see that rolled through to next year.

Mr Allister: One thing that has surprised me in coming to the House is that whereas we have a very defined budgetary process and framework, within it there is a remarkable degree of laxity in that it appears possible, despite what the House may have approved from time to time, to move money to destinations not anticipated from destinations where, we were told, it was all required.

Of course, a degree of flexibility is necessary. In even this debate, however, there is an issue that focuses attention on that, in that we have gone through three monitoring rounds during this year. The House was never asked to approve them. It was never asked to vote on them. Now, almost at the end of the financial year, it is given that opportunity retrospectively, to such worth as that is because, of course, the process is de facto concluded. Therefore, it surprises me that budgetary arrangements are such that that degree of flexibility can go on in the monitoring process without requiring any assent from the House whatsoever.

3.45 pm

If one picks up the booklet, one does not have to go very far into it before beginning to see the level of indiscipline in spending. It struck me most, perhaps, as I turned through it and came to page 6 to see, in respect of resources for OFMDFM, that although we set a figure of £82 million for that Department, it has, in fact, spent £104 million. There is not much point in our saying that its budget is £82 million if that can, at a stroke, be increased by 25%. That is the sort of thing that surprises me with regard to the indiscipline and lack of clarity in the budgetary arrangements.

The Minister said of the monitoring round that he was surprised by the level of surrender. Those are my sentiments entirely. In many fields, I am surprised by the level of surrender. For a moment, I almost empathised with the Minister in that regard. Then I remembered the

political party that he represents. I realised that I should not be surprised at all. He is surprised by the level of surrender in the monitoring round. Yes; it is quite phenomenal that in the previous monitoring round, we were told that Departments were in a climate in which austerity was the order of the day. Things were tough. No one in government, public bodies or arm's-length bodies could make ends meet. You name them, they were all struggling to make ends meet.

Lo and behold, there is £40 million that they cannot spend. They cannot even think of ways to spend it because they can make bids to the value only of £20 million. Therefore, I share the Minister's surprise about the level of surrender in that regard. It underscores my point about the lack of certainty and foresight in the budgetary arrangements.

Of course, what do we do now? Well, for next year's Supply resolution, we say, "Never mind how wrong you got it in the past: we will give you a down payment of 45% to keep you going from now until the Budget Bill goes through the House properly. Not that you need worry about that actually setting definitive parameters; it will not." We have a wonderful knack of finding money down the back of the sofa or wherever. We will do so again. Therefore, I must say to the Minister that for all his stern words that we hear from time to time about the level of austerity and the need for prudence, when you look retrospectively at how things have progressed, that is not always borne out.

There are, of course, some particulars on which I want to comment. I have commented on the fact that OFMDFM seems to be a law unto itself when it comes to spend. In these austere times, all Departments can still find remarkable sums of money. Answers to recent questions indicated that they can find £5 million to spend on their spin doctors. We are told that education and health are under huge pressure. However, to find £5 million for spin doctors is no problem.

I turn to the hospitality budget. Invest NI, which, as Mrs Overend said, had to hand back £39 million, has spent £2 million on hospitality since devolution was restored. Recently, it spent £200-plus a plate when it took people to listen to Van Morrison. It spent more than £4,000 in one night.

Are we seriously meant to tell our constituents that times are hard and that their school may

have to close or that their hospital may not be able to retain its full range of acute services when, since 2007, we can find £5 million for spin doctors, £2 million for hospitality in Invest NI and £750,000 for hospitality in OFMDFM?

If that is not good enough, we also have a marvellous equality industry, on which we can spend endless sums of money. Looking at the figures in the document, we discover that £10 million was transferred from OFMDFM to the equality industry, £8 million to community relations, and £6.5 million to the Equality Commission; yet the Commission for Victims and Survivors must make do with £1.1 million. It is that sort of thing that undercuts the credibility of much of what is said in the House on occasions.

That is without coming to the extravagant North/South bodies; they are also a bottomless pit of expenditure that provide very little return. Some £100 million a year is spent on those predominantly useless bodies. They are part of that special species that is the political architecture and, therefore, must be cosseted and sustained at all costs. One wonders where the prudence and austerity are that we are told about.

The Minister told us today that to help to deal with the shortfalls, an additional receipt-based programme had been established. However, he did not tell us how it is going. Will the Minister give us an update on how much has been raised through that programme as opposed to how much they thought it would raise? I would be interested to hear. The Minister also told us that additional headroom has been built in, but he did not tell us how much. Perhaps he will tell us in his winding-up speech. Can the Minister give us any assurance that, in the year ahead, we will begin to tackle the squander on some of the issues that I have mentioned and that we will not compound it by going for political projects such as the A5 in a reinvigorated or rejigged form? We must have sensible, rational and necessary expenditure on our roads rather than the political agenda that has driven some of it to date. If the Minister could address some of those issues, it would be useful. Thank you.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I thank Members for their contributions today. Some were relevant. Indeed, Mr Cree, a Member for North Down, was given a glowing report card and was told that his speech

was exemplary. On the other hand, the leader and the former leader of the SDLP seemed to have a contagion that stopped them being at all relevant. Perhaps they should have taken the advice of Mr Bradley when he said that we did not want people doing “a Tom Buchanan”. At least Tom Buchanan’s speech was three quarters relevant; the speeches by Mr Bradley’s party leader and former party leader were 100% irrelevant. Perhaps he should have a quiet word in their ear.

I now turn to Members’ points. First, I acknowledge the confirmation by the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mr Conor Murphy, of the role that the Committee played, the consultation on the spending plans, which is reflected in the motions, and the fact that it is content for the Budget Bill to proceed under accelerated passage. However, I will address a number of points that Mr Murphy raised.

As did other Members, he talked about the lead-in time and the fact that the spring Supplementary Estimates were not available and were not laid with the Assembly until 6 February, which had not given time for Committees to properly look at the information. He was hoping, as did other Members, that the review of the Budget process would change that situation. I want to be blunt about that; the spring Supplementary Estimates, which approve the spending that took place in the particular year in which they are laid — this year being 2011-12 — are laid so late because all the information that is needed would not be available until then. For example, we have to get through the January monitoring round because that is reflected in the spring Supplementary Estimates. We also have to leave to the last possible moment the demands that there may well be in Departments so that we can build in the headroom that a number of Members have spoken about. It does not matter what budgetary process we put in place; that situation will always exist.

Given the work that has to be done on the Vote on Account and the Budget Bill and the fact that we have to get Royal Assent and what not, we cannot start the process any sooner than we do. However, I point out to Members that as far as the information from the monitoring rounds is concerned, and despite Mr Allister’s point, which is quite correct, that the Assembly does not vote on the monitoring round allocations, Committees will be informed of the nature of

the reduced requirements from Departments in June, October and January and of the bids that Departments are making. Of course, there is an opportunity to question me in the Assembly when the statements on those matters are made. The Member is quite right; the final authorisation can only come at the end of the process when we bring the spring Supplementary Estimates to the Assembly.

Mr Buchanan raised a number of issues. He talked about some Departments feeling undernourished and said that, perhaps, not enough money had been allocated to them, but I suppose that everyone could make that complaint. Nevertheless, the Departments have worked their way through the Budget this year very well, and I would point out to the Member, as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, that the Department for Employment and Learning had an increase of just over 3% in its budget this year and, during various monitoring rounds, was allocated an additional £16.4 million for the Steps to Work programme and other measures for the employment service.

Mr Buchanan raised the issue of youth unemployment. We all have to be sympathetic to the difficulties that young people in Northern Ireland are experiencing at present. That is why, in the most recent monitoring round, the Department for Employment and Learning was given £12.7 million for the Steps to Work programme. However, youth unemployment in Northern Ireland has fallen by about 2% over the past year.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister not accept that while the unemployment rate has fallen, one of the reasons for that is that so many young people, including my neighbour’s children, have now emigrated?

Mr Wilson: There are a number of reasons for it. We measure the claimant count in Northern Ireland, and it has fallen. Of course, we do not want people to leave Northern Ireland, especially those who have skills and whom we see as the future. One of the reasons why the Minister for Employment and Learning is drawing up a strategy for youth unemployment — he has been speaking to the Executive about it — is to deal with that particular problem.

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

4.00 pm

Mr Cree, who has been at the top of the class, gave a fine example of how Members should conduct themselves in this debate. He raised a number of issues. He talked about Invest Northern Ireland; indeed, a number of Members mentioned Invest Northern Ireland's underspend. At least Mr Cree got his figure right. The SDLP, which is not the best at budgeting, as we may have guessed from some of its members' speeches, could not even get that figure right. I do not know where the figure of £54 million, which Mr Bradley threw out on to the Floor of the Assembly, came from, but it is certainly not based in reality. Invest Northern Ireland has had to surrender money, and the reason for that is very well known. A lot of its spend is demand-led. If the demand is not there because firms do not have the confidence to invest or cannot match the money that is required by Invest Northern Ireland for any investment grant, because of the banks or whatever, of course that spend is not going to materialise. This is still at the front of the Programme for Government. The fact that we have built in headroom for Invest Northern Ireland this year in case projects do materialise indicates that the commitment is still there that, when the funds are demanded and when the need arises, we will provide them.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for giving way. I accept his point about Invest NI and about making sure that it is at the forefront of the Programme for Government (PFG). Does he accept that Invest NI may be required to change some of its criteria for investment and for bodies to access money?

Mr Wilson: That is an issue that I think would best be taken up with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I know that Invest Northern Ireland is continually looking at the appropriateness of how it allocates money and what it does to attract firms to Northern Ireland and to support firms. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment continually holds discussions around that. I know that she is well aware of some of the kinds of changes that may well be required, because she is close to the ground and listens to the various trade bodies as well as individual firms.

I claimed that although money was taken from Invest Northern Ireland in monitoring rounds,

it went towards job creation. Mr Cree asked where. A number of other Members also asked about that. When we spend additional money, for example, on roads maintenance, it goes into job creation and keeps jobs in the construction industry. Roads maintenance itself is quite labour intensive. When we put money towards the insulation of homes, as happened with the Department for Social Development (DSD) through the £4 million that it got during the period in question; that creates jobs. When it goes towards first-time homebuyers through the Co-ownership Housing Association, that again, creates jobs in the construction industry. So, the money is actually going into job creation, albeit, not through the schemes that Invest NI hoped would take place.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for giving way. Just on a point of information for him: I did not actually mention Invest NI once during my speech, but I did mention the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). The figures that I quoted are from a table supplied by the Minister's officials at last Wednesday's meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Mr Wilson: If it was DETI he mentioned, rather than Invest NI, I stand corrected. I had written that in my notes, and the figure I had written down was £54 million, which he is not denying talking about. Maybe in the mass of stuff that he put forward, I misheard him. If I did, I accept that, as I always do. Although, I think he should check as to whether he mentioned Invest NI. Mr Bradley also talked about the Budget review and the PFG relationship.

Again, I think that he misunderstood my comments about not needing a Programme for Government. In fact, I think that he did not, or chose not to, hear properly the point I made during the previous Budget debate, which was that we did not need a new Programme for Government because there was already a Programme for Government in place. Indeed, the priorities that were set in the old Programme for Government are the same as the priorities in the current Programme for Government. Therefore, the Budget allocations that were made when we discussed the 2011-12 Budget fit in well with both the previous Programme for Government and the present Programme for Government.

Mr Bradley also raised the issue of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) monitoring round surrenders and asked for some explanation as to why DFP had surrendered some money. I am sure he will be pleased to know, because he raised it later in his speech, that one of the reasons for that was that we had fast-tracked the sale of a property at Belt Road in Londonderry, and that resulted in a reduced requirement of £0.6 million. We raised a further £1.2 million from the sale of the Andersonstown Road jobs and benefits centre. The Member for West Belfast Mr McCann lobbied me to get that sold quickly, because it was an eyesore in the area and was causing grave social problems, so he wanted it fast-tracked. As a result of fast-tracking it, we received a receipt, hence we had the money ahead of time. There were also savings as a result of our reducing accommodation costs, by looking at how we could use the estate better, and we also negotiated a better price for gas.

I think that the Member and some other Members have misunderstood this: surrenders of money do not mean that Departments have been negligent or inefficient or have not dealt properly with the money allocated to them. Very often, surrenders of money are a result of Departments doing the job that we want them to do, and doing it properly and efficiently. I am glad the Member raised the issue of my own Department, because I would have been too modest to raise it myself, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, as I am sure you will understand. As a result of our looking for better prices for gas and for accommodation efficiencies, and as a result of our fast-tracking the sale of properties, we have actually made savings. I would have thought that should be applauded. Indeed, on many other occasions with other Departments, that has been done as well.

Mr Bradley raised the issue of the assets management unit and its performance. He pointed out, as I think Mr Allister also did, that although we had budgeted for £10 million this year, we had raised only £1.3 million to date. We are hopeful we might be able to raise £4 million to £5 million before the end of the year; however, we cannot be absolutely certain of that. Indeed, Mr Bradley then sought to project from that, saying that if we can only get 13% this year, what hope have we of getting the £100 million that has been projected over the four years of the Budget?

First of all, Mr Bradley and others need to recognise that we are dealing in a difficult property market. This was the start of a four-year Budget period. Properties have to be identified and then put up for sale, and the process gone through. The thing is, the properties have not disappeared you know; they are still there, they will still be available for sale. The fact that they have not been sold this year means that the receipt may come in next year, but at least the properties are still there. Despite the difficult property market, we still believe that, since we have back-loaded this, most of the sales will be towards the end, when hopefully the property market will have picked up.

The one good thing is that we actually own the properties that we have put up for sale and have decided we are going to raise money from. If we followed the SDLP's advice in the Budget last year, we would be trying to sell properties we do not even own.

It had receipts for properties that belong to Londonderry council and Lord knows who else. Before he starts preaching about asset sales, he should perhaps look at his own party's record when it comes to receipts from property sales and see —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I am quite happy to give way, because I would like to hear his explanation.

Mr D Bradley: I do not think that the Minister is in a very strong position to attack the SDLP on the issue, since he said during his original introduction of the draft Budget that he would take, I think, £125 million from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. He did not realise that he was not in a position to do that in the absence of legislation. He has still not got that legislation.

I will return to the question of land sales. One of the points that I made in my speech concerned the delay involved in valuing land. By the time that those valuations get back to the asset management unit, the market has often moved on. In some cases, the land is overpriced, so developers are unwilling to buy. If we had a more realistic and speedy valuation system, we might realise much more from the sale of assets.

Mr Wilson: I suspect that I know the asset that the Member is speaking about, because half the SDLP has lobbied me on its sale. I do not think that it would be appropriate for me to mention

it here, other than to say that we have no intention of giving assets away. It would be most imprudent of the Executive to do that simply because one bidder comes in at an unrealistic price. However, the SDLP expects us to sell the property to that person. If that were to happen, it is very likely that, in about three years' time, Mr Dallat, who usually sits in front of the Member, would be hauling some poor official before the Public Accounts Committee and demanding an explanation as to why we gave away assets when the market was not there. I do not want the Member to go down that road. I know what he is lobbying for, and I will not enter into a public debate on it.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. May I clarify that this is not a lobbying exercise and that the point that I made was raised by Members from other parties in Committee as recently as last week?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Your point has been put on the record, and I am sure that it will be reported in Hansard. Perhaps we can return to the debate.

Mr Wilson: I was really only referring to a point that the Member made.

He also mentioned the schools' end-year flexibility (EYF) scheme. I am glad that the misunderstanding about that has also been cleared up in the Member's mind and that, although he claimed during the January monitoring round that that money had been lost to schools, he now understands that it has, of course, not been lost to schools. Schools got access to all the money that they required this year. The money was returned, albeit, I have to say, rather late in the day. I have already put on public record that the money will be available to schools for next year.

Judith Cochrane and Chris Lyttle, as always happens, raised the question of the cost of division and how we could reduce spending in that regard. There is an absolute commitment from the Executive to build a stronger, more united and diverse community. It is one of the key priorities in the draft Programme for Government. I always urge Ministers to look at how their Departments spend money. Where there is duplication that can be reasonably eradicated, they should, of course, do it. It makes good economic sense, but it also makes good societal sense. I want to give Mrs Cochrane that assurance.

Mr Lyttle spoke about the decrease in community relations Estimates. I am aware of today's press coverage, where it was reported that £1.2 million of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) community relations budget had been left unspent.

That is not quite accurate, because much of that reduction was due to transfers to other Departments and to those within OFMDFM to address community relations issues. For example, £400,000 of that £1.2 million went to the Department of Education for the summer scheme initiative, which is part of that Department's cross-community work.

4.15 pm

Mr McLaughlin raised the issue of in-year surrenders and asked for confirmation of the reasons for those surrenders. I am not fully aware of the reasons. In the Budget review, we will look at the allocations made at the beginning of the year and at the out-turn, the figures for which we will know in May. One reason for that review is to examine the difference between the allocations and the actual spend to see whether adjustments are required. I have to say that the surrenders are at the margin. I have been able to explain some of them, such as those for DETI. However, the reasons for the other Departments' surrenders are not so apparent, and the Budget review process will hopefully address that. I welcome that Mr McLaughlin has given his support to the Budget review, as has the Committee.

I just want to check one point that Mr Humphrey made, because I do not want the House to be misled by it. He counted up the figures that I had given for the cash, the resource and the capital money and said that it came to £33 billion.

Mr Humphrey: Billion?

Mr Wilson: Yes, £33 billion: £15 billion; £16 billion; and £2 billion. Maybe I should have made it clearer in my speech that there is an overlap between the cash and the resource money. The £16 billion includes the £15 billion cash, plus the money that is available for resource for, for example, non-cash items such as depreciation etc. So, the total is actually £18 billion rather than £33 billion. I wanted to make that clear just in case there had been some misunderstanding.

Mr Humphrey, of course, pointed out that, of the full £10 billion allocated to us, which we were responsible for spending, we surrendered only £1 million. That is good financial management over the year. Although I would love to claim the credit for that, it was down not to me but to the very hard work of departmental officials, Committees and Ministers in ensuring that we spent the money rather than return it to Westminster.

Mr Kinahan thinks that I have some kind of magic wand that can wipe away all the economic difficulties that we face. He did, however, raise a number of issues that I want to deal with. First, he raised the issue of the green new deal, for which £12 million has been set aside. We said that that money will be released once there is an appropriate business case. However, some money has been released to some extent through the monitoring rounds for work that is normally associated with the green new deal. For example, money has been released for the insulation of Housing Executive houses, which is green new deal-type work, even though the funding that was to be raised through the plastic bags tax was not raised this year. Nevertheless, we found money from other resources. That money is going into the kinds of initiatives that Mr Kinahan, I think, will welcome and that will help us to achieve, as other Members pointed out, a whole host of other objectives, such as better thermal insulation of houses, construction jobs and dealing with fuel poverty etc. I do not care for the name “green new deal”, but its objectives and outcomes are important.

Mr Kinahan also raised the issue of Department of the Environment (DOE) funding, as did Ms Lo. I apologise to Ms Lo for not being here for the beginning of her speech; I am suitably chastised for arriving late. The Department of the Environment registered only one bid in the June monitoring round, and that was partly met. No further bids have been received from the Department of the Environment. Some money was surrendered but, as the Member for South Belfast will know, just because the money was surrendered did not mean that the DOE could have used it elsewhere. If it was not being used for the purpose for which it was allocated, it had to be returned to the centre for reallocation.

Mr McDonnell's speech was totally irrelevant. He seemed to want to reopen the Budget debate and point us to the two documents that the SDLP produced. As those documents were so

roundly shredded in Budget debates this time last year, I would have been embarrassed to mention them. However, he seems to keep coming back to them. If he wants another round of that at some time, I am sure that the Assembly would just love to have the opportunity to go through them. He said that he was not going to vote for something, but I was not quite clear what. He said that his party did not want to deny Departments the funds that they needed. From that, one might assume that the SDLP will vote for the motions, because it would be voting to authorise the expenditure and make sure that the expenditure to date has not been illegal. The Vote on Account gives money to Departments for the next three or four months. However, no sooner had Mr McDonnell said that than he said that he would not vote for something that was “damaging”. I do not know, and I suppose that we will not know until the end of the debate — maybe the SDLP will not even know until then — what way it will go. It is that kind of mixed-up approach that makes the SDLP more and more irrelevant in the political debate. It says that it wants to play an active part, but I do not know what active part it plays. If the leader of the SDLP cannot even understand what the debate is about, dear help us if it comes to looking to him for proposals that can guide the economy. I do not know how many times the simple words of the motions were explained by the Speaker, by me and by other Members. Mr Cree can understand them — I was going to say, “Even Mr Cree can understand them”, but I did not; I pulled myself back — but the leader of the SDLP still does not know what they are all about. Yet he wants to tell us that he has a better plan for the economy than that agreed by the Assembly. I must say that his record on this is not very good.

Mr Campbell identified the additional money for roads and housing, as did a number of other Members, and I dealt with Mr Lyttle's point.

I do not know what it is about leaders and former leaders of the SDLP Ms Ritchie started by saying that we had “missed a trick” with the SSEs because we did not consider any tax-raising powers. She said that had we considered tax-raising powers — we do not know which taxes because, although Mr Hamilton tried to draw Ms Ritchie on that, she would not be drawn — we could mitigate the effects of welfare reform. According to Ms Ritchie's party — it is wrong on this as well, but let us just use its figures — that would produce £600 million

a year. On top of that, she said that we could spend more money on health, education and major road schemes. I do not know what kind of tax-raising powers the SDLP has in mind. I do not know, if we get those tax-raising powers, how much the SDLP intends to put up taxes to find all the money to mitigate the effects of welfare reform and spend more on health, education and major road schemes. I think that Ms Richie then ran out of breath, because she was going to go on to do more after all that. The people in Northern Ireland might just like to know where the hundreds of millions of pounds required for all that would come from if those tax powers were devolved.

The only tax proposals that I have heard so far from the SDLP have been to get corporation tax back — not to increase it, but to reduce it — and to get air passenger duty back — not to increase it to raise revenue for welfare reform, health, education and roads, but to reduce it. In the debate on student fees, the SDLP wanted not to raise more money from student fees but to take student fees down.

Ms Ritchie: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will be more generous to the honourable lady than she was to me, and I will give way.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for giving way. Since the Minister is talking about the mitigation of welfare reform proposals, will he tell us exactly what plans the Executive have in store for such mitigation? There is absolutely no doubt that it will have a detrimental impact on many working and workless families throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Wilson: At the risk of being chopped down by you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, since the Member has raised the issue, I am sure that you will indulge me so that I can give her a quick answer. On the basis of the information that has been provided by the Department for Social Development and the Department for Work and Pensions — so, not my information — between now and 2014-15, the amount of money spent on welfare in Northern Ireland will be £5.739 billion. By 2018-19, it will go up to £6.023 billion, so there will be an increase in spending over that period. Some groups may be adversely impacted, but other groups will benefit.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: No; I said that I would deal with this one point. There will be groups that will benefit from it, and of course the Executive have the opportunity to look at whatever limited resources are available to them and how they might mitigate the impact. We have the social investment fund and the social protection fund. Incidentally, the SDLP opposed both of those funds, saying that they were pointless and everything else. We have that money, and we will have some money over which we will now have total control, such as housing benefit and the social fund, and we can make decisions on how that will be used. Nelson McCausland is discussing those kinds of things with the welfare reform group in the Executive at present.

Ms Lo raised the issue of the DOE handing back money, and I hope that I have made it clear that some of that money had to be handed back because it could not be transferred within the Department. Any bids that it made were partially met, and it made only one bid. Mr Elliott raised the issue of consultancy spending and the fact that a business case had not been received for that. There is still work to be done on consultancy spending, and some Departments still have to get procedures properly done, whether that is in the presentation of business cases or in the analysis afterwards of how the money has been spent. Consultancy spending has dropped significantly over the past number of years, and last year, indeed, it fell by 38%. The fact that Ministers now have to approve consultancy spending has helped to bring some of that under control.

Mr Swann raised the issue of funding for DCAL projects. I cannot make any commitments beyond this Budget period, but there will be a review of the Budget for the past two years. We are looking at where Departments have underspent and overspent, and that will present opportunities for all Departments to show where pressures arise as well as where there have been reduced pressures. The whole point of the review is to make adjustments there.

4.30 pm

Mr Swann: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will, yes.

Mr Swann: I wanted clarity about the overall stadium allocation and the six-year funding package. If we take out money at the start, how

can you guarantee that money will be there in next year's budget?

Mr Wilson: If money cannot be spent in a particular year, it has to be surrendered, and that is the right thing to do. Obviously, the money could not be spent in that year. A sum of money has been allocated for stadium development, and it is in the Programme for Government. It may be that some of the money has to be surrendered this year to be spent in different years when the projects are ready to be up and running. The point that I will make later in the debate on the Budget process is that one way to make decisions on in-year monitoring allocations is to ask how a Department's bid fits into the Programme for Government. Where there is a Programme for Government commitment, as there is for stadia, if money is not used in one year because it could not be spent, there will be a strong case in later monitoring rounds. That is probably all that I can say about the issue.

Mr Givan raised the issue of legal aid. Reforms have already been made to legal aid expenditure, an example of which is the introduction of the revised Crown Court remuneration rates, and further reforms are under way. The Department of Justice continues to work with the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission to monitor legal aid and to forecast spend. He also raised the issue of the Probation Board budget. DOJ officials are working closely with the Probation Board in setting its budget, and more than £1 million of additional funding was provided to reduce the impact on front line staffing.

Mr Durkan raised the issue of the reduction in DSD benefits. I know that these documents are complicated, but before a Member stands up and makes all kinds of allegations about the cost of welfare reform, if he is not certain about the figures, he should at least ask. He quoted figures for reductions in various benefits in 2011-12. He then said that that is before welfare reform has even happened. It is either due to welfare reform or it is not. He will know that the payment of benefits is demand-led. We do not finance them out of the block grant, and, indeed, one benefit of keeping in step with welfare reform at Westminster is to ensure that Westminster continues to finance benefits on the basis of demand. If there are reductions in the figures, they are there because demand has gone down, not because of welfare reform. Welfare reform has not impacted yet, but AME

spend is demand-led, and if the demand is there, the payments are made. If the demand is not there, the payments are not made, and the reductions will reflect that demand rather than be a change in policy.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: No; I do not have time. I want to come to Mr Allister's points. He talked about flexibility and about how this seems to be a feast that you can dip in and out of and that, despite rigid rules, money could be allocated here and there. It is a good story, but he knows that it is not like that.

He talked about the amount of money. We have reached the end of a difficult year in which we had £10 billion to spend and have found that we could reallocate £117 million. That is all that we had to do, albeit during a time when Ministers said that their budgets were to be very tight. That is good financial management by Departments. He also said that things were so bad that we could not even give the money away and that we had £40 million-odd but had bids for only £17 million of it.

I think that the one thing that he would not want us to do would be to allocate money to things that are not priorities. Again, this comes back to the kind of flexibility that he has suggested. Departments are now becoming aware of the fact that there is some rigidity. There is no point in them bringing forward Mickey Mouse proposals just to absorb money at the end of the year. If those proposals do not fit into the priorities and targets that we have set in the Programme for Government, they will not be accepted. The benefit of that is that we have actually been able to carry money over into next year, which will deal with some of the pressures that we are already identifying — pressures that relate to the Programme for Government next year. I hope that the fact that we have had £117 million reallocated this year, and that we have had to carry some money forward because people did not make bids for it, will not be seen as some kind of fiscal laxity. Indeed, it is an indication that we have been fairly rigid in the way in which we have adhered to our fiscal rules.

I think that I have already dealt with the matter of accountability. The Member is right: it is now that the House will vote on the allocations that we have made through the year, but that is not to say that the House has never been consulted

on them. Committees have been consulted on them, there have been opportunities for statements to be made here and for those to be questioned, and Ministers and officials have had to justify reduced requirements and bids to their Committees. There are lots of other ways in which accountability can be adhered to.

The Member raised the issue of the savings from North/South bodies and the fact that we spend a lot of money on those bodies. I find it difficult to disagree with him on that, as does my party, as he knows. It is the same with issues such as the Equality Commission, the Community Relations Council, etc. They are part of the structure that, unfortunately, we have inherited. They will require change, but that change requires consent in the House. My view is that the more that we can make government more relevant in Northern Ireland, the less need there will be for money to be spent on those things. However, I will point out that there have been savings of £5.6 million on North/South bodies.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I just want to finish because I have only got about a minute left.

Mr Allister also talked about OFMDFM costs and how those have increased. They have increased for a number of reasons.

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

Mr Wilson: Money has gone to sites — £27 million. That was a non-cash impairment that did not take money away from front line services. The social protection fund, the £22 million that he referred to, went to other Departments — DSD and DHSSPS — for delivery to people.

I thank Members for the contributions that they have made, the relevant and the irrelevant ones. Perhaps the irrelevant ones were better fun. I look forward to Members giving support to the Vote on Account.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a total sum not exceeding £15,244,040,000 be granted out of

the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2012 and that total resources, not exceeding £16,220,944,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2012 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(c) and 2(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2011-12 that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We will now move to the motion on the Vote on Account, which has already been debated.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £6,987,469,000 be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2013 and that resources not exceeding £7,451,346,000 be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2013 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Vote on Account 2012-13 document that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012.

Budget Bill: First Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to introduce the Budget Bill [NIA Bill 4/11-15], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31st March 2012 and 2013; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the years ending 31st March 2012 and 2013; and to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31st March 2012.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that confirmation has been received from the Committee for Finance and Personnel, in accordance with Standing Order 42(2), that the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill, and that the Bill can, therefore, proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. The Second Stage of the Bill will be brought before the House tomorrow.

Committee Business

Committee for Finance and Personnel: Executive's Review of the Financial Process

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 1 hour 30 minutes for this debate. As the motion relates to a Committee report, the proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

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

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the Response to the Executive's Review of the Financial Process in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with relevant Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained therein.

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to debate the Committee's report on the response to the Executive's review of the financial process. This is a timely and topical debate, given that we are in the midst of the annual Estimates and Budget Bill process.

The main aim of the Executive's review is to create a streamlined process that is more efficient, transparent, open to public scrutiny by and accountable to the Assembly, and which takes the needs of the Assembly into account. A DFP discussion paper setting out 15 recommendations was subsequently issued to key stakeholders, including all Members, on 10 October 2011. In line with convention, the Finance Committee has co-ordinated the Assembly's response to the review.

At the outset, I will highlight the recommendations in the Committee's report and emphasise that they reflect a collective response from all relevant Assembly Committees, including Statutory Committees, the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee, as well as the Northern Ireland Audit Office. In addition, the Committee endorsed recommendations at the start of this mandate that were made by its predecessor in respect of the Budget process. Consequently,

several of the report's recommendations are aimed at addressing long-running issues that were recurring themes in previous mandates.

The review's recommendations were broadly welcomed by the Committee and by other Assembly Committees and key stakeholders. It is expected that they will go some way to increase transparency and enhance scrutiny by and accountability to the Assembly and to the wider public.

The Committee took evidence from DFP officials on the Department's initial response to the Committee's report on 25 January. The officials indicated agreement with the Committee's response to nine of the review recommendations. However, they raised queries or concerns with five aspects of the Committee's position on the remaining review recommendations: the timing and relevance of the Budget review group's review of arm's-length bodies; the relationship between the Programme for Government (PFG) and the Budget; the Scottish experience of outcomes-based budgeting; provision for pre-Budget consultation; and the role and capability of Account NI. I will briefly address each issue in turn.

The Committee strongly supports the consolidation of Executive non-departmental public bodies within the accounting boundaries. On the basis of submissions received from other Committees, the Committee recommended that other types of arm's-length bodies, which form a significant part of some departmental expenditure remits, should be included within the scope of this reform.

4.45 pm

In their evidence to the Committee, DFP officials confirmed that all of what they describe as central government bodies will be brought into the accounting boundaries, with only local councils and a few public corporations not being consolidated. In that respect, it would be useful to have a definitive list of public bodies that will be included within the consolidation boundaries, together with those that will be excluded.

The Committee also felt that consolidation should be informed by the outcome of the Budget review group's review of arm's-length bodies, which would avoid unnecessary use of time and resources should any bodies be later merged or wound up. In their evidence, DFP officials pointed out that to await the outcome

of the review of arm's-length bodies would delay progress on the consolidation, as the target date for completing the review is not until 2015. The Committee believes that it would not wish to see the progress of the consolidation stalled as a result of that matter. Nevertheless, it is important that the Assembly is provided with an assurance that there will be no unnecessary work or expense in the consolidation if the proposed reform of financial process proceeds ahead of the review of arm's-length bodies.

Perhaps the most contentious recommendation from the DFP discussion document is recommendation 7, which states:

"Performance outcomes and the delivery of the Programme for Government should not be directly attributable to allocations in budgets but should be monitored and delivered regardless of budget inputs."

It was noted that that is an apparent about-turn in DFP thinking from recommendations that it previously made in the review of the Executive's 2008-11 Budget, in terms of identifying the level of public expenditure required to underpin actions to deliver public service agreements (PSAs) in the Programme for Government. It is not clear what substantive evidence there is to support that policy change.

The Committee felt strongly that there should be clear, visible links between the Programme for Government and the Budget, as did the majority of Committees that responded to the DFP discussion document. It was a view that was also echoed by the Audit Office. Without links, it is not possible to identify how much funding is being channelled to key commitments or objectives that are not being achieved or, conversely, where additional funding may make a significant, positive difference to the outcome of a particular programme.

In their evidence, the DFP officials advised that they had concerns with the Committee's position on that issue. It was noted that many of the milestones in the draft Programme for Government are high level and hard to measure. As an example, it was suggested that only 10% to 15% of the budget for health could be mapped on to the commitments for that Department. The implication of that is that 85% of the budget of our largest spending Department cannot be linked with the commitments or milestones underpinning the Executive's priorities.

A particular issue of concern for the DFP officials appeared to be the Committee's stated intention to further examine outcomes-based budgeting, specifically with reference to the position in Scotland. Following publication of the Committee's report, a helpful response was received from the Scottish Government, which explained their longer term endeavours as regards outcomes-based budgeting, with the aim of aligning expenditure to priorities and performance.

In light of the initial response from departmental officials, perhaps it is important to be clear on the distinction between, on the one hand, establishing a full outcomes-based budgeting system and, on the other hand, creating clear linkage between the underpinning objectives or actions required to deliver high-level PFG priorities and the associated budget allocations and expenditure.

A switch to a full outcomes-based budgeting system would be a considerable step change and should, therefore, be considered as a longer-term measure. In the meantime, as an interim measure, I believe that consideration should be given to constructing a future Programme for Government and Budget framework in which the objectives and actions underlying the high-level Programme for Government priorities are defined in tangible and measurable terms and clearly linked to resource allocations. Perhaps the Minister will pick up on that issue.

I turn now to consultation. The Committee is pleased that the importance of an early pre-draft Budget stage has been recognised by DFP and the Executive. I must stress that that is considered to be an essential requirement rather than something that will be fulfilled if circumstances and time permit. In that regard, DFP officials pointed out that they were accurate in their forecasts about the outcome of the October 2010 spending review and indicated that they would expect to be able to provide accurate forecasts for future spending reviews. As such, external factors such as later-than-usual spending review announcements would not be an impediment to an early pre-draft Budget stage.

As outlined in its report, the Committee intends to further examine whether a pre-draft Budget scrutiny stage would be best formalised via an agreement between the Assembly

and the Executive or by statutory provision. Further discussions on the actual shape of the early scrutiny phase should, therefore, be deferred until the outcome of the Committee's investigations in this regard.

In their discussions with the Committee, departmental officials queried whether the Committee considered that the time afforded to the public consultation on the draft Budget could be reduced if there was sufficient and robust consultation with key stakeholders and Committees at the pre-draft Budget stage in the process. It will be clear from the report that members considered the early stage to be a more productive and effective approach to consultation.

I am also aware that during the previous mandate, a senior DFP official noted that the changes between the draft and final Budgets tend to be minimal, as the hard work is done at the early stages. It may, therefore, be possible to compress or dispense with the public consultation between draft and final Budget, but confirmation would be needed in respect of the intention to consult publicly at the early stage. Additionally, there is a need to ensure that any necessary legal obligations are fulfilled.

Finally, I will touch briefly on the Account NI system. The Committee believes that, as far as is practicable, NDPBs and arm's-length bodies should be integrated within the system. If full integration is not possible in the health financial systems, say, connectivity between the systems should be developed. That would enhance transparency and enable public spending to be examined in its entirety. In addition, previous DFP advice indicated that Account NI had the capacity to map expenditure to outputs and outcomes. It was disappointing, therefore, to hear DFP officials confirm that although the system may have that capacity, the data is not there, so it is currently of no use in facilitating the link between expenditure and objectives or in practical applications, such as ensuring complete figures on the payment of government invoices. The Committee firmly believes that all efforts should be made to exploit that system to its full potential to enhance transparency, scrutiny and accountability.

A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, by implementing the recommendations in the Committee's report, DFP and the wider Executive will establish a financial process that is tailored

to the Assembly's needs and will provide greater transparency and understanding, together with enhanced scrutiny and accountability. Ultimately, it will lead to a more efficient and effective use of public expenditure and have the ultimate aim of improving the quality of the lives of our people.

Molaim an tuairisc don Tionól. I look forward to hearing the contributions of other Members. I commend the report to the House. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Girvan: I agree, in principle, with the majority of the report as presented. I appreciate that some aspects and a number of areas about which we had concerns were discussed at the Committee. I know that we will go into some detail on those at a later stage.

One concern related to outcomes-based budgeting. Some people said that we should follow the Scottish model. The feedback from the Scottish model is that they have tried two different types and they do not work: they are not as effective as they could have been.

There is wide support for 10 of the 15 recommendations put forward at Committee, and we have no major issues with another three of them. As regards the other two; recommendation 7 is linked directly to the Programme for Government, which makes it somewhat prescriptive in some of its approaches. For example, there was a debate about money that had to be allocated for railways — the Coleraine to Londonderry line — and money was put aside to deal with that. So, unless major projects are included in the Programme for Government, they might not get funding, and there is the possibility that that could cause problems. On reflection, and with adequate information, the result might be slightly different if that one area were brought back to the Committee. By and large, it has been a necessity for us to streamline the process so as to ensure that it gives adequate time for the analysis of budgets, Estimates and expenditure with adequate time to come forward to deal with budgets in a timely fashion.

I appreciate that there is an element of crystal-ball gazing when it comes to our Estimate process. A lot of people say —

Mr Allister: I have been trying to follow what the Member is saying. If I discern correctly, he is distancing himself somewhat from some of the recommendations, particularly recommendation

7. However, unless the minutes in the report are in error, the Member was present on 18 January, assented to the very proposals that he is now dissenting from, and does not seem to have had any difficulty indicating that assent and voting for it. Today, for some reason, he has a difficulty. Will he explain what has changed?

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

Mr Girvan: I appreciate the Member's intervention. We were led to believe that there was merit in following the Scottish model. To a large extent, part of our process is similar to that in Scotland. However, the Scottish model stated that there were differences, and that is why I have some difficulty with recommendation 7. By and large, the majority of the report is acceptable and should receive wide support in the Chamber. However, I have a concern with that one area. That does not mean that everybody else will be concerned about it, but that is by the way.

I appreciate that we need to make changes to the process, and this is a way of trying to streamline some of that and give adequate time for scrutiny to take place with the Estimates put forward for the Budget process. I rest my case.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to address the motion. The Health Committee considered the matter at its meetings on 26 October and 29 November. Like other Committees, we welcome the fact that DFP has decided to look at how the Assembly handles the Budget process. It is fair to say that it can be complicated and hard to follow. If Committees are to be able to scrutinise Departments and hold them to account, we need to be able, at the very least, to have a clear understanding of how and when they intend to spend the money allocated to them. However, this is not just for the benefit of Committees and individual MLAs. The public that we represent also have a right to be able to follow what is going on so that they can fully engage and give their views on how they think government should be spending their money.

5.00 pm

The Committee has views on a number of the recommendations put forward for reform. We

believe that there must be early consultation with Committees and other stakeholders, including the public, before a draft Budget is produced. If Departments are to carry out meaningful consultation, people need to be able to put forward their ideas on how public money should be spent while budgets are still being developed. Related to that point was the suggestion that Committees should be responsible for conducting public consultations on the draft Budget. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was against that. It is not the responsibility of Committees, not least because we have no authority to make decisions on how money is spent by the Department.

The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) recommended that the Programme for Government not be directly linked to budget, but the Health Committee completely disagreed. We think that money should follow the priorities set out in the Programme for Government (PFG). That is important, as we need to be able to demonstrate to communities that we are funding those issues that are a priority for the people. If DFP is saying that that is too difficult, it needs to look again at what sort of targets are in the Programme for Government and make sure that they are the sort of targets that can be linked to spending.

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety welcomes the Finance Committee's report. It is a good piece of work, and I support the motion.

Mr Cree: A review of the financial process in Northern Ireland has been talked about for many years. It was, therefore, gratifying that the Executive agreed, about this time last year, its terms of reference. The Department was to produce a new financial framework that was:

"more efficient, transparent, open to scrutiny by and accountable to the Assembly".

The strategic aims of the review were:

"To align the Budget, the Estimates and the Accounts ... to improve transparency; and

To synchronise the presentation of the Budget, the Estimates/departmental expenditure plans, the Budget Bills, the Rates legislation and the Accounts in order to create a single co-ordinated public revenue and expenditure process."

The Department produced a paper that contained 15 recommendations, and Members have referred to those. Those were broadly welcomed by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, the various parties and others. However, some recommendations need to be improved, and recommendation 1 is one of those:

"departments budget against one set of controls within the Budget, but account for spend against different controls set in the Estimates."

Therefore, it is the Committee's view that:

"relevant financial documents ... are simplified and harmonised to increase transparency."

That will assist the general public and the Committees, in particular, in their statutory duty of scrutinising the budgetary process.

Recommendation 2 addresses Executive non-departmental public bodies being consolidated within the Estimates and accounting boundaries. I support the view that other types of arm's-length bodies also need to be included.

The fifth recommendation does not go far enough. It is essential that there are adequate safeguards to ensure that firm control is maintained over the use of income by Departments.

Recommendation 7 falls far short of what is needed. The Department, I have to say, appears to be reluctant to move in that area. Clear, visible linkages between Budget allocations and the Programme for Government are vital. Budget allocations should be driven by priorities, not the other way round. The draft Programme for Government must be developed prior to the draft Budget, and recommendation 9 needs to reflect that.

It is essential to have an early strategic phase to allow sufficient time for consultation by Committees and with the public. In recommendation 10, the Department suggests that that should happen:

"if circumstances and time permits".

That is not acceptable. The Committee suggests that the public consultation be conducted at pre-draft Budget stage, as in Scotland. I think that that is, perhaps, where Mr Girvan got it slightly wrong. The discussion must take place at that pre-draft Budget stage. That would reduce or remove the time required for public consultation once the draft Budget has been agreed by the Executive. It tends to be front-end loaded.

The Budget process agreement to which review recommendation 12 refers has merit, but so has the option of statutory provision. More work needs to be done in that area.

The reform process to which review recommendations 13 and 14 refer is necessary to obviate the convoluted and repetitive nature of the Budget process, particularly in the later stages. That is also work in progress.

The integrated approach to considering revenue and spending plans in review recommendation 15 is welcome. The Committee has undertaken considerable work in that important area, but the existing system has been tolerated for too long. We have a system in which there is no direct read across, approximately 25% of all expenditure is not voted on, and parts of government expenditure are outside the Estimates and accounting boundaries.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel's report is a major step to improve the situation, and I am therefore pleased to support it on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mrs Cochrane: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue, given the timing of the debate alongside the annual Estimates and Budget Bill process.

As Members have said, the main aim of the Executive's review of the financial process is to create a streamlined process that is more efficient and open to scrutiny. Given that the Assembly uses Statutory Committees to hold the Executive to account by scrutinising the work of Departments and Ministers, including how they spend their budgets, I fully support any improvements to the financial process that will assist Members in carrying out that important role.

Many of the points that I was going to raise have been dealt with by other Members. However, I draw specific attention to the concerns in review recommendation 7, which states that performance outcomes and the delivery of the PFG should not be directly attributable to allocations in budgets and should be monitored and delivered regardless of budget inputs. There should be clear and visible linkages between the PFG and the Budget. How else can we hold a Minister to account unless we know what is being committed to which objective and how effective that spend has been? How else can our constituents understand and be confident that public money is being spent effectively?

Although I understand that the draft Programme for Government has been written in overarching, aspirational language, with many high-level milestones that could be hard to measure, it is imperative that there are clear linkages between the PFG and the Budget. Is there an opportunity to map the Budget closer to the key commitments of the PFG and lower-level monitoring targets and departmental operational plans? If that can happen, it might allow Committee members to consider better and to advise on departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocations.

Another key issue that has been raised and needs to be addressed is whether the budgetary consultation process should be in legislation. Wales uses standing orders, Scotland uses an agreement, and the Executive appear to use whatever they can manage. A Budget agreement is OK if it is adhered to at all times and not just when time permits, as is suggested in review recommendation 10. Assembly Committees are an important part of the checks and balances that are built into our system of devolution and should, therefore, be given their place and time to scrutinise the Budget.

Is there a cost to the reform process? If so, will that cost be outweighed by the benefits? Will the changes mean that more detailed information will be provided in a timely manner to allow a process of proper scrutiny? Will there be more accountability?

I hope that the implementation of the report's recommendations takes into account the issues that we debated today.

Mr Hilditch: I am one of the newer members of the Finance Committee in this mandate, which gives me the opportunity to serve on the Committee for the first time.

That said, the Committee considered and endorsed previous work and recommendations in earlier reports such as the 'Report on the Executive's Draft Budget 2011-15' and the 'Third Report on the Inquiry into the Role of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Scrutinising the Executive's Budget and Expenditure'. Those reports provide a useful insight at the outset of this session in particular and a prelude to the review paper's proposals.

Those papers focus mainly on recommendations aimed at Committees and Members, timelines,

the provision of good financial information and scrutiny. It is a given that all Members, and, indeed, laypeople, will strive for increased scrutiny, transparency and accountability in all aspects of governance.

Soon after the review paper was published in October 2011, I was pleased to chair the event hosted by the Committee on 18 October in the Long Gallery, which took the form of a workshop on the overview of the public expenditure system.

Committee members and staff throughout the Assembly had the opportunity to attend that event and hear departmental officials provide an overview of the public expenditure system and budgetary control. That was a useful exercise in taking us to where we are in the process.

From those initial steps in the process, to where we find ourselves in the House today with the report, the majority of the review, as already identified, has been welcomed and generally well received, with much agreement on the 15 or so recommendations, including on the important areas of Bill passage, alignment, transparency, departmental spending plans being restructured and non-voted issues. Probably the most important area of today's debate, however, will centre on the response from the Minister and the Department. Although many of the Committee's recommendations are understandable, and perhaps take us to where we want to be in the process, there may be practical difficulties or technical matters requiring further consideration.

The most interesting issues have been clearly identified by the vice-Chair in moving the motion and by other Members who spoke. I look forward to the response on how other jurisdictions deal with some of the matters under consideration around draft or pre-Budget consultations, in particular those jurisdictions that were mentioned, and also the Department's view on the early recommendations on the future process regarding arm's-length and non-departmental bodies. We should also have a look at cleaner, clearer and easier-to-read lines across budgets to make them more understandable. It seems that most stakeholders were in general agreement with the report.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

A number of issues have been raised, and I do not wish to repeat comments made by others. However, I wish to speak briefly on two issues that came before the Committee. The first is aligning the Programme for Government with the Budget. I understand perfectly that there are other variables such as the comprehensive spending review, the timing of general elections at Westminster or things that can throw the best-laid plans awry. Nevertheless, there is a feature of the Assembly that should be considered in how we would manage those variables; namely, that we are a fixed-term Assembly. I mentioned that in discussions with officials at the Committee. The possibility of going for an overlap in a Programme for Government period should be explored. That mirrors the convention elsewhere.

I recognise that for an incoming Administration elsewhere there is less predictability about when there will be an election and, at times, even less predictability about who will win that election. Here, however, we know how long an Administration will be in place and who will be the partners in Government. With regard to establishing a four-year plan, the last year could overlap into the incoming period, which would allow for a degree of continuity in spending projections and programmes. I will not bounce the Minister for an answer on that today, but I hope that he will give it consideration.

The other issue is about relating outcomes to the budgeting and Programme for Government processes. A particular example may help to eliminate some of the confusing and, perhaps, contradictory opinions that emerge from the evidence that we got from the Department and the discussions that emerged on that issue publicly and within the Committee. Different views are fine, but we have to process them to an agreed conclusion.

I welcome the commitment from the First Minister and deputy First Minister on social clauses spreading across all Departments, particularly with regard to the commitment section of the Programme for Government. However, when one reads the economic strategy and the investment strategy, there is no mention of social clauses in them at all. That seems to me to be a degree of ambiguity that should be removed.

5.15 pm

The Minister could consider the following issue, which is specific to today's debate, and come back to either the Assembly or the Committee on it. We discovered during our discussions that the Department of Finance and Personnel considers or defines social clauses as including standard provisions for equality, health and safety, and so on. One would expect such issues to be reflected in all public contracts already. Theoretically, that means that the Department could meet its commitment to ensuring that social clauses are included if it is restricted to the definition, rather than through tailored clauses that establish requirements for apprenticeships, jobs for the long-term unemployed and environmental provisions, all of which are issues that, I believe, the Assembly wants to address.

I hope that the Minister can give the Committee some comfort by saying that he is prepared to consider such issues seriously. The standard template for health and safety and equality provisions is in statute as far as the Assembly is considered. Therefore, those provisions very much form part of the standard approach. We seek a new approach. We want to extend what exists. Social clauses that would address, in particular and where the opportunity presents itself, apprenticeships, environmental issues and the long-term unemployed being given the opportunity to return to economic activity are ways in which the Assembly might tailor —

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

Mr McLaughlin: — its output to discussions on the Budget and the Programme for Government. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Humphrey: I, too, am a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. As a relatively new member, I believe that the Committee's recent deliberations have been helpful and productive. There has been broad agreement across parties on the Committee, for which I must commend members. Clearly, there is broad agreement on 10 recommendations, considerable agreement on three and concerns about a couple.

My colleague Mr Girvan mentioned the concerns around recommendation 7. Mapping budgets for key government commitments and the Programme for Government is absolutely crucial. However, by definition, a Programme for

Government is an aspirational-loose document compared with the Budget, which is a detailed cost-strategic document. Obviously, the Budget comes to the House with its commitments costed.

The reason that we have concern about that is because the Committee has written to the Scottish Executive —

Mr A Maginness: Can the Member explain to me the relationship, as he sees it, between the Programme for Government and Budget funding?

Mr Humphrey: The Minister will deal with that in his concluding remarks. I think that the Member is trying to cause mischief. Perhaps he should sort out differences in his own party before he asks us questions.

On reflection, the Committee had concern about certain issues in Scotland because some of what was done there simply did not work. Therefore, it is prudent that the Committee discuss the reply from the Scottish Executive. I have said that it has not done so yet. That is a sensible approach for us to take. We cannot be expected to take a position on something that we believe not to work when, to be fair, we have not even discussed the Scottish Executive's response.

It is important to map out budgets in the Programme for Government. However, we must consider entire budgets when we make those decisions. In the draft Programme for Government 2011-15, those commitments do not cover services that Departments deliver on a day-to-day basis. One example of that in the draft Programme for Government is the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) targets to eradicate brucellosis, tackle rural poverty and relocate its headquarters. Where is the reference to its important daily services, such as the Veterinary Service, the Forest Service and those that deal with rivers, fisheries, delivery of the common agricultural policy, flood protection, and so forth?

That is the point that I am making. Therefore, how could one map the budget for DARD or any other Department from the key commitments in the draft Programme for Government?

Let us look at evidence of Scotland's approach to outcomes-based budgeting and agree that it is similar to our own. The 'Scottish Spending Review of 2011 and Draft Budget 2012-13'

acknowledges that the Scottish Programme for Government and strategic priorities shaped their spending plans. However, it also recognised that:

“money is only one of the tools available to government.”

The portfolio chapters in the document, which are the equivalent to the departmental chapters in our draft Programme for Government, show that Scottish spending allocations are not linked directly to their Programme for Government outcomes or targets. The text states — at a very high level — that the portfolio of health, for example, “made a significant contribution to” and “has a major role” in achieving outcomes from the Programme for Government. However, that hardly allows for mapping budgets to outcomes.

After due consideration has been given by the Committee, I hope that it and the House will give their broad agreement to the 15 recommendations. As I said before, the Committee needs to discuss the Scottish reply, but it has not had an opportunity to do that as yet. When it has had that opportunity, I hope that the Committee and the House can come to a unanimous position.

Mr Kinahan (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): As you said, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will speak as the Chair of the Audit Committee. However, I will also make a few comments of my own.

The Audit Committee welcomes the report on the response to the Executive's review of the financial process in Northern Ireland. The Audit Committee responded to the consultation by the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the review, and I want to take this opportunity to set out its position.

First, I want to address the strategic objectives of the review. It is right that we should seek to simplify and streamline the Budget process, which is outdated and overcomplicated. The current misalignment between the Budget, Estimates and accounts boundaries makes the Assembly's scrutiny role much more difficult than it needs to be. Therefore, the Audit Committee supports the principle of the greater alignment of those boundaries and frameworks, as that will improve transparency and will enable the Assembly to scrutinise more effectively the financial planning and performance of those who use public money.

DFP's discussion paper on the review recommended that the Budget should be developed in the context of a Programme for Government that was agreed by the Executive, and that proposal is sensible. However, it must be noted that previous Budgets have included expenditure that falls outside the remit of the Executive, its Departments and the Programme for Government. Indeed, previous Budgets have included expenditure for the specific purpose of holding the Executive and its Departments to account, including, for example, the expenditure of the Northern Ireland Audit Office. Let us remind ourselves of the position of the Audit Office: it is entirely independent of the Executive and its Ministers; it serves the Assembly. The core purpose of the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Audit Office is to ensure that the Assembly is provided with an effective and truly independent audit assurance on the use of public funds.

The Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides for the Audit Committee to agree the annual estimate of the Audit Office. The Act took that power from DFP and gave it to the Assembly, because it is a fundamental principle that an Executive should not control or direct an audit institution's access to resources. That principle is recognised, observed and upheld across the world, and it is obvious why that should be the case. How could an audit institution truly scrutinise and hold an Executive to account if that same Executive directed its access to resources? The answer is that it could not. Its independence would be compromised and its effectiveness diminished.

The Assembly values the Audit Office's independence. Over the past few years, the Audit Office has identified savings of tens of millions of pounds. Its work has allowed the Assembly and, in particular, the Public Accounts Committee to examine practice in all Departments. We especially appreciate the Audit Office's value-for-money reports, which examine the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which public funds have been used. Previous reports have looked at the public-private partnerships, large capital and reform projects, procurement of IT and other systems and services, inward investment, fraud, and the use of consultants.

Only last week, the Audit Office's report on the use of external consultants by Departments was considered by the Public Accounts Committee. The Audit Office's report highlighted how, in the Finance Minister's own Department, an Account

NI contract with the original value of £0.97 million ended up costing £9.6 million, more than four years after the original completion date. Such revelations are difficult and uncomfortable for the Departments concerned. Who would rather that their financial mismanagement never came to light? However, the Audit Office's independence allows it to ensure that the Executive and their Departments are held to account by the Assembly for their financial performance.

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

Mr Kinahan: It is not enough that that financial independence from the Executive be recognised and upheld in the annual Estimates processes. The Audit Office needs to remain independent and be allowed to act as such. We support the motion.

Mr A Maginness (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): From the outset, the basic principle should be that the Executive and Departments are accountable to the Assembly. The Assembly is not accountable to the Executive. Sometimes, I get the impression that Ministers think that the Assembly should be accountable to them.

I have to praise the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for its collective approach to the issues that are before the House this afternoon. The Committee considered DFP's review of the financial process at its meeting of 17 November 2011, at which members broadly welcomed the findings of the review and agreed that many of the recommendations will assist in streamlining and improving the efficiency of the financial process.

The Committee had concerns about some of the recommendations in the DFP report, and those concerns have been brought to the Committee for Finance and Personnel's attention. I am happy to say that the Committee's concerns are reflected in the recommendations from the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which Mr Bradley outlined comprehensively.

DFP's recommendation 7 proposes that performance outcomes and the delivery of the Programme for Government should not be considered to have any direct link to funding inputs. Are we really saying that we should be able to achieve any outcome that we desire, regardless of how much or how little funding we

allocate? Allocation of resources is an integral aspect of any strategic planning process, so the link between expenditure and outcomes and performance is unavoidable.

In its consideration of the Programme for Government, the draft economic strategy and departmental business plans, the Committee has always encouraged a more outcomes-based approach to objective setting and to efficiency of delivery against planned expenditure. That link should extend to public service agreement (PSA) targets. The consultation document states that the driver for PSA targets should be performance and the efficient delivery of the target. A key aspect of efficiency is delivery against expenditure, and, therefore, budgets. It is common sense that, if you plan to achieve certain outcomes, you must know what resources you need to allocate in order to achieve those outcomes. The Programme for Government is a road map.

The Budget funding is the fuel by which one tries to reach the destination. Therefore, the two are inextricably linked and should be meshed.

5.30 pm

DFP recommendation 10 states:

"the Budget timetable should include an early strategic phase, allow sufficient time for consultation by Committees and with the public".

However, it also states that that should occur "if circumstances and time permits". The addition of that phrase suggests that that aspect of the timetable is not absolutely necessary. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment recommends that that phrase should be removed in order to ensure that Committees are always afforded sufficient time for scrutiny. The role of the Committee is a scrutiny and advisory one, rather than a consultation one, and the Committee believes that the phrasing of the recommendation should therefore reflect that.

The issue of consultation by Committees arises again in the DFP report, where it states in paragraph 89 on page 40 that consultation with key stakeholders should take place by Committees. It is the role of Departments to consult on policy. As I said, the role of Committees is to scrutinise and to advise on that policy. Therefore, this proposal and the related reference in the Budget timetable at recommendation 11 should not be included.

DFP recommendation 12 proposes a Budget agreement between the Assembly and the Executive. As the Committee for Finance and Personnel is working on proposals for a Budget process agreement, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment agreed to reserve comment on that recommendation until the outcomes of that Committee's work are known. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment therefore welcomes the undertaking in the report that the Committee for Finance and Personnel will further explore the merits of the Budget process agreement, and we look forward to its discussion paper on that matter.

I believe that the financial process should be streamlined, transparent and more intelligible to everybody. Clearly, it should be linked to the Programme for Government. That is a fairly logical and —

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

Mr A Maginness: — reasonable proposition, and it should be formally adopted.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): The Committee for the Environment considered a Department of Finance and Personnel discussion paper on the Executive's review of the financial process at its meeting on 27 October 2011 and agreed to respond via the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

The Committee for the Environment commends the Executive's initiative to create a coherent financial framework with greater transparency of its public revenue and expenditure. In general, the Committee welcomes the 15 recommendations, which indicate a direction of travel for improvement.

However, on behalf of the Environment Committee, I will make the following comments regarding specific recommendations. The Committee is keen to see clearer linkages made between spending proposals and specific outcomes, and it is disappointed that recommendation 7 stopped short of that.

The Committee believes that greater opportunity for engagement in and scrutiny of the Budget process is essential. Therefore, the Committee welcomes recommendation 10, which calls for the Budget timetable to include an early strategic phase to allow sufficient time for

consultation by Committees. Committee members are concerned, though, that that recommendation is completely undermined by the caveat that it should be provided "if circumstances and time permits". Committee members would like to see an unequivocal requirement for enough time to be given to Committees for comprehensive scrutiny.

Members also made the point that, because summer recess commences in July, there should be a requirement for Departments to submit budget information in advance of summer recess.

Stakeholders and NGOs have voiced to the Committee their common frustration at the serious lack of consultation on their perspective budgets and funding. In the current financial climate, a lack of consultation and rationale causes great uncertainty. That uncertainty can seriously undermine the services provided by NGOs and stakeholders and can, unfortunately, threaten jobs.

To help alleviate that frustration, the Committee feels that review recommendation 11, which provides for the advance publication of a Budget timetable and includes the requirement for Departments to reach agreement by December, would enable Departments to forward plan budget allocation, both internally and for arm's-length bodies, well in advance of the new financial year. That would greatly diminish the uncertainty that NGOs and other stakeholders currently experience.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel recommended the formalisation of the process in legislation or in the Assembly's Standing Orders, as in review recommendation 12. In the light of my previous comments on the timing of the process, the Environment Committee is supportive of the Finance and Personnel Committee's recommendation that the Budget process be formalised in legislation. However, the Committee also feels that proposals to reinforce the approach in Assembly Standing Orders could provide an acceptable alternative. On that basis, and on behalf of the Environment Committee, I welcome these regulations and support the motion.

Mr Allister: I have no doubt that the financial process needs reviewing to add and build more transparency into it and, indeed, to make it more intelligible, frankly. When I look at the budgetary expenditure lines in some budgets, such as that of the Department of Education, and I see that

it has a single figure for capital expenditure and a single figure for resource expenditure, they tell me nothing. I want to know, for example, how much the capital figure is for the various sectors in education. I want to know how much the capital figure is for the controlled sector, the maintained sector, the integrated sector, the Irish-medium sector, etc, and, likewise for the resource figures. However, in the Budget, as such, you see none of that. So, yes, of course we need to find some greater transparency so that the process can be more intelligible and more relevant to need.

I had some expectations of this report, given the content of the Department's paper last October. I will admit to being somewhat disappointed that the report is not very forensic in its approach and that it is quite vague here and there. It takes refuge many times in saying, "We need more information." The review has been published since October and here we are in February, but, instead of being able to progress the matter definitively today, we are in a scenario where the Committee is saying that, on a number of issues, it needs more information and that it needs to look at that information.

In this debate, we have had what appears to be a quite surprising scenario of people in groups repositioning themselves. Although the minutes suggest anonymity in the endorsement of all these recommendations, when it comes to some of them today, various individuals and parties have been noticeably repositioning themselves. Whether that is indicative of the issue's not having been particularly interrogated at Committee level, indicative of new information or indicative of some people today wanting to sing off the Minister's rather than the Committee's hymn sheet, which they previously had, I do not know. However, one thing is clear: it is giving a fairly muddled approach, which goes with the muddled content of some of this report.

On the issue of alignment and tracking between the Budget and the Programme for Government, of course it would be nice to have that capacity. However, the Programme for Government that we have is not a definitive document; it is an aspirational, feel-good, cuddly document that really does not address delivery with any certainty and commitment. I am not too sure how this House would ever hope to begin to match what has to be definitive in Budget lines with what is deliberately non-definitive in a Programme for Government.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr A Maginness: If you had a real Programme for Government in the manner that the Member has just described, would the Member agree that it should be tracked to the Budget?

Mr Allister: Yes. If you had a Programme for Government that was definitive and capable of being tracked, a Budget and a process to track it would be all to the good. However, that would not suit the arrangements of this House, where, of course, when it suits, some want to take refuge in ambiguity as much as possible. How would you do it in the set-up of this House, where it is six months after an election until you even get a draft Programme for Government, never mind putting in place a twinning arrangement with a Budget?

Of course, we have a Minister who famously told us that we do not really need a Programme for Government anyhow and that the one from four years ago would do us fine. That underscores the point that the Programme for Government is a farcical document. It is not a document capable of being tracked and marked against a Budget, because it lacks the certainty and delivery that you would look for in that regard. I question how that could ever be attained under these arrangements.

The other paragraph of the report that greatly puzzles me is paragraph 13. The ambition is expressed that:

"the Committee calls on DFP to extend consolidation beyond Executive NDPB's to include other types of ALBs, which form an important element of some departmental expenditure remits."

Not being a member of the Committee, how am I meant to interpret that? What sort of bodies are we trying to bring into this? I heard Mr Bradley say that virtually everything except councils will be included. Really? Is that the proposal being made, or is it another indication that the Committee has not really thought out its position? Are we in a position where this matter —

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

Mr Allister: — will have to be referred back to the Committee and more months will be lost as we fail to get to where we need to get to?

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel):

I thank all those who have taken part in the debate. I will make something clear at the very start. This whole process was initiated by my Department, because we want the Budget process and how money is spent to be better understood by the Assembly and more open to scrutiny by the Assembly to ensure that the money that is spent is spent properly and on the priorities that have been set by the Assembly. I have no difficulty with the points that have been raised, and, as I said, we initiated the process.

I welcome the Committee's report. It is the very nature of a debate such as this that Members will highlight the areas of disagreement. However, I should point out that there is no disagreement between the Department and the Committee on 10 of the recommendations. The agreements on some recommendations have caveats, but two particular areas have been mentioned: recommendation 7 and recommendation 13. A number of other issues have also been raised. I will quickly dispense with those and then deal with the two most contentious recommendations.

Mr Bradley raised the issue of the bodies to be included. We can provide the Committee with a full list of all the executive NDPBs that would be covered. However, as Mr Allister pointed out, as it stands, all bodies but local councils will be included in the consolidation.

I will turn to the two points about which there has been greatest contention. The first one is around the whole area of consultation and when consultation should take place. As I understand it, the Committee's report indicates its wish for consultation to happen at an earlier stage, before we actually come to the draft Programme for Government. To a certain extent, a lot of consultation takes place at that stage. Officials from my Department meet and talk to the various interested groups, and that shapes what goes into the draft Budget.

5.45 pm

If the Committee is saying that it would prefer a full consultation at that stage, I would have no difficulty with that. However, I would have difficulty with a full consultation at that stage, then a draft Budget and then a full consultation on the draft Budget before we reached the final Budget, because that would unnecessarily elongate the process and be quite expensive, as such consultations are, of course, very resource-

intensive. The Chairman might clarify that when he responds. If the Committee is happy for the full consultation period to be pre-draft Budget, I think that the area of disagreement between the Department and the Committee on that recommendation could be sorted out quickly. The Chairman might want to take that issue back to the Committee, and I am happy to look at it.

The second, more contentious area is what the relationship between the Budget and the Programme for Government should be. Should the Budget be tracked through the Programme for Government? Should all the targets in the Programme for Government have a set budget? Should the high-level strategic aims of the Programme for Government have a budget attached to them? There seems to be some misunderstanding here. Such a model has been adopted elsewhere, and Scotland was mentioned. There were a couple of low-level pilot schemes involving partnerships in Scotland, but they were certainly not on the kind of basis that the Scottish Government accepted. Indeed, two community planning partnerships explored that model to investigate investment patterns. However, the Scottish Government indicated in their Programme for Government that strategic priorities and economic strategy shaped their spending plans. Nevertheless, they recognise that money is only one of the tools available to the Government. The Scottish spending document states that, at a very high level, contributions are made to the relevant national outcomes and Programme for Government objectives, but that those contributions are not quantified in funding terms. I am not too sure, but I think that Mr Cree or Mr Bradley quoted from the Scottish example. If that is the case, there is a bit of a misunderstanding. Its Programme for Government certainly shapes and reflects, but specific funds are not attached to it, and there are very good reasons for that. I will address those reasons and then look at a way forward. The Chairman will, I trust, respond to that when he sums up at the end.

There are particular difficulties with attributing funds to the Programme for Government at that strategic level, because, as Mr Allister pointed out, strategic aims, by their very nature, have to be in broad terms and, therefore, attaching funds to them is not possible. Indeed, if you look at the broad terms and strategic headlines in the Programme for Government, you will see that they do not totally reflect the operational

service delivery that Departments undertake. There are also particular difficulties with attaching funding even to specific targets in the Programme for Government, which has been tried in the past. Departments tried to match funds to their PSAs, and many of them commented that it was a meaningless exercise. The Department of Education, for example, said that it was unable to complete the required mapping. If we were to go down below the strategic level and map those targets, we would disaggregate the Budget to a level at which it would become impossible, and it would not be a practical or even efficient use of resources.

Also, when you try to link funding to particular targets, the danger is always to suggest that if you are missing a target, you should stick more money into it and you will achieve it. Of course, that is not always the case. The target could be missed for a whole lot of reasons. Indeed, it might be that the target is not being met because resources are not being used efficiently or wrong processors are being used, so throwing more money at it would only reinforce that.

Many of those targets are not dependent solely on money. Some might be dependent on legislation, others on a change of culture. Let me give you an example: the setting of a target for the number of youngsters in schools doing STEM subjects will have a resource implication. If there are not enough science teachers or labs, or the facilities in schools are insufficient, you might not be able to attract youngsters to those subjects. However, there are many other reasons why we do not meet, and have not met, our targets for STEM subjects. Some are cultural, some are connected to the advice that careers teachers give, and some are associated with the opportunities that people see beyond school and degrees. Others relate to the attitude of parents who say that they do not want their youngster going into a dirty job. Some parents think that STEM subjects lead eventually to engineering, and you have to get all clabbered in oil, etc. Those are the kinds of things that can impact on the ability to meet targets. Simply saying that we should track money to targets, put the two together and, hey presto, we will be able to see whether resources are being used efficiently and whether we are capable of meeting targets is a misunderstanding of the way in which the Programme for Government can work.

That is not to say — this is where there might be some agreement between the Committee and me — that it is not possible to have a meaningful relationship between the Programme for Government and Budgets. Budget allocations and savings plans should not be clearly focused on the outcomes planned in the Programme for Government. Outcomes-based budgeting is an ongoing process. Aligning additional allocations and Departments' savings to the Executive's priorities and Programme for Government outcomes, while measuring achievement and outcomes over time, is one way of looking at Budgets and their allocations to Departments.

As I said earlier, when it comes to the monitoring rounds, in which we look at how we allocate available money, we marry that money to specific bids. Here is a bid made by one Department, there is a bid made by another, and here is what it says in the Programme for Government. We ask ourselves which bid most reflects what we want from the Programme for Government. If one of two competing bids is more likely to help us to meet a target in the Programme for Government, the resources will be allocated to that bid.

So I still think that we have the ability to look at the strategic aims and targets set in the Programme for Government and, in that context, make Budget allocations. However, that is not the only basis on which Budget allocations will be made, and it is not the only way in which we can measure outcomes. The measuring of outcomes and Departments' delivery should be done regardless of the Budget allocations made to them. That is the job that Committees should understand.

I will be interested to hear the Chairman's response. These are two fundamental things: there are resource implications, timing implications and, indeed, there is the issue of the practical ability to marry budgets to the Programme for Government and the targets in it. I really do not want to reject the Committee's report out of hand on the basis of those issues. There are points on those two recommendations on which there could be further discussion between the Committee and my officials about when the consultation will take place and whether it will replace the current consultation arrangements. Secondly, can we reach agreement that budgets and the Programme for Government can be viewed in the context of one and other, as is the case in Scotland? If that could be done, we

could come to a view that the Department has no difficulty with the Committee's report.

I look forward to the Chairman's response on those two points. I trust that, if needed, further clarification can be given on some of the other points that Members have raised, especially in relation to the bodies that will be covered, and so on. I am sure that it is not the Committee's intention to bring in councils and consolidate them in the Budget process, and I think that councils might also have something to say about that. I look forward to what the Chairman of the Committee has to say, and I trust that he can take my remarks in a positive way and accept them in the way in which they have been offered.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all the Members who spoke, and indeed the Minister, for their contributions to what has been a useful and timely debate on the Committee's report on the response to the Executive's review of the financial process. It is perhaps worth pointing out that the terms of reference for the Executive's review stated that the overall aim will include enhancing:

"scrutiny by and accountability to the Assembly, taking into account the needs of the Assembly."

Most Members will agree that the financial processes that we have inherited do not take into account the needs of the Assembly; hence the process from the Executive and the input from the Committees of the Assembly to try to change that and to bring some order to it.

The Committee's co-ordinated report, which sets out the collective position of the Assembly Committees for the debate, serves the purpose of establishing and communicating the needs of the Assembly in that regard. I am grateful to the various Committee Chairs who spoke on behalf of their Committees during the debate. As the Deputy Chairperson who launched the debate explained, the Committee broadly welcomed most of the review recommendations in the DFP discussion document and put forward additional recommendations aimed at enhancing the future Budget process. The current process is outdated and convoluted, and although the work required to move us forward may be difficult and complex, it should greatly improve the transparency of our budgetary and financial arrangements and allow for greater scrutiny

of the use of public money. Having said that, I think that it is important that a clear analysis of the overall cost implications for the proposed reforms be established in the period ahead, and Judith Cochrane referred to that point.

In the Committee's report and during the debate, a number of issues were raised that highlight the need for change. Although the relationship between public finance and policy delivery can be complex, it is not rocket science, and, after all, we are only governing a small region with a population that is comparable to that of some local authorities. Surely, therefore, we can design and tailor processes to suit local circumstances.

Committees have stressed the vital importance of making firm provision for a form of pre-draft Budget stage, which would enable the Assembly and other stakeholders to exercise real influence before the draft Budget is agreed by the Executive. The Minister made a specific point about how that would impact on, if you like, post-draft Budget scrutiny, and the Deputy Chairperson made it clear that the Committee was quite prepared to look at the length of the consultation period and at whether that time would be better spent in a pre-draft Budget stage that would allow Committees to get a real involvement in setting the budgets of Departments. There is an acceptance, even among departmental officials, that consultation on the draft Budget alters it very little and only at the margins. A strong desire was expressed across all the Committees to have an earlier input into the process and to shape the process better.

6.00 pm

On a separate but equally important issue, the Chairperson of the Audit Committee, Danny Kinahan, raised an important point about the role of the Audit Office as an independent audit assurance and the necessity for its financial independence from the Executive. The proposal for independent input into the Budget from those oversight bodies that fall outside the Executive's remit but which are included in the provisions of the Budget has considerable merit, and I urge the Minister to take that on board as part of his review.

The principle behind the proposals for aligning the various budgetary and financial documents and consolidating NDPBs within the accounting boundaries has been generally welcomed by the Assembly Committees, and a number of

Members spoke about that issue today. With reference to the proposals for consolidating NDPBs within the Estimates and accounting boundaries, I will briefly touch on the Account NI issue. Members will be aware that the Public Accounts Committee heard last week how the cost of that service had multiplied. Indeed, it is my understanding that although the total lifetime costs of the 12-year contract were expected to be £113 million at the time of the outline business case, they are now anticipated to exceed £180 million, which is £15 million for each year of the contract. Members will agree that that is a significant investment. In view of the sums involved, it is imperative that the system be exploited to its fullest and that it delivers best value for money. Indeed, as far back as December 2007, the previous Finance Committee called for the roll-out of Account NI and the other shared services to NDPBs and other public bodies and for suitable contractual arrangements to be established with the providers in that regard. Although assurances were received from DFP, it appears that little progress has been made on the matter.

At various points, the Committee received contrary advice from senior departmental officials on the suitability and capacity of Account NI to support the consolidation of NDPBs within an integrated accounting system and on facilitating greater linkage between performance objectives and spending. Jim Allister was critical of that vagueness, and I appreciate that the report does not come up to his high standards. However, at times, we have received conflicting evidence, and, therefore, the Committee was not able to be definitive about how that will be managed and about the range of bodies that could be brought in underneath that. Further work needs to be done on that. Although the Committee was keen to bring a report to the Assembly as part of the process, a continuation of work is clearly required in some areas of it, and I am pleased that the Minister expressed a willingness to continue to work on areas that are still points of contention between us and the Department.

In recent weeks, the Committee has been advised by senior officials responsible for Account NI that there is no practical reason why NDPBs and arm's-length bodies could or should not be consolidated in the system. At a very early stage, the previous Committee identified the benefits of increasing the customer base of Account NI to maximise efficiencies across

the public sector. More recently, the current Committee has reiterated the call for the system to be extended as far as possible, including to prevent unnecessary duplication of costs when other parts of the public sector wish to move to shared financial services. Clarity is required, and answers will be needed on whether there are contractual barriers that prevent the cost-effective incorporation of NDPBs into Account NI. If that is the case, why did the Department not have sufficient foresight to build flexibility into the contract conditions at the procurement stage? Clearly, other areas need to be explored and work needs to continue. Members of the Committee and of other Committees have expressed the ambition to have a greater clarity.

Mr Bradley referred to the prompt payment issue, which was a very valued message in relation to the improvements that are being made under the prompt payment scheme across Departments. However, only those Departments and those public spending bodies that are under Account NI can be measured, and a substantial section of them are outside it. So when the Minister comes to give a view on how public spending is performing across any area, it is restricted to those areas in Account NI, but substantial sectors of public spending lie outside that. Therefore, we are unable to report the sort of progress that we want from those bodies towards the direction in which the Executive and the Assembly want them to move.

The need to move towards a position where there is clear read-across — again, that is a contentious issue and one that I am pleased that we will continue to work on — between the Budget and the Programme for Government has been a recurring theme in co-ordinated responses from Assembly Committees over the years, and the issue has featured again in this debate. Most Members referred to that. Committee members talked about the practical difficulties, and I do not think that anyone underestimates those.

I think that the Committees themselves accept that the necessary improvements are something that cannot be realised in the short term. I also believe that we need to be clear on precisely what we should be aiming to achieve in both the medium and the long terms.

In the medium term, clarity and transparency on the level of resources allocated to achieving each output or commitment underpinning the

five high-level Programme for Government priorities would facilitate greater understanding of the Executive's relative priorities and demonstrate how the Budget is being used as a tool to achieve those priorities. Indeed, an integrated approach, with a more visible linkage between the outputs needed to achieve our priorities and the associated allocations, could assist in facilitating and smoothing the process for developing and agreeing the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget.

From its discussions with DFP officials, the Committee is mindful that the establishment of visible linkages between the Budget allocations and the key commitments or outputs in the Programme for Government will require the latter to be fine-tuned and costed over time, including for the purpose of assisting in the measurement of departmental performance. For the longer term, there is the aspiration of achieving an outcomes-based budgeting system, with full alignment between expenditure, priorities and performance and achieving high-level outcomes. That view was reflected by various members of Committees who spoke today. I believe that that would assist us in robustly measuring and assessing the performance in achieving the five Programme for Government priorities.

As the Deputy Chairperson mentioned at the start of the debate, the Committee has received helpful advice from the Scottish Government on their longer-term move towards an outcomes-based approach. The Scottish pilot may or may not offer some learning opportunities for us, but there are examples from further afield of alignment between government performance and Budgets. I accept quite clearly, as the Minister and others outlined, that the Scottish example was not put forward by the Committee as a model of good practice but rather as one that may offer some lessons. Indeed, the Finance Committee in the Scottish Parliament has also called for a closer linkage between spend, performance and outcomes.

Although there is an acceptance that that is an interesting area to look at, there are other interesting areas further afield. There is no established model of good practice, but there is, nonetheless, a growing sense of an aspiration for closer linkages that will bring clearer transparency and accountability through measuring the Budget against the targets in the Programme for Government. As I said, there are

other examples, including in some EU countries and the United States.

There are likely to be initial resource implications in moving towards such a system and there will be longer-term benefits in transparency, scrutiny and accountability. I think that it will contribute to efficient and effective use of public money. As I said, I have listened to the Minister's concerns in relation to this. I say very clearly that the Committee was very firm in its view, whether or not people agreed completely with recommendation 7. There was a firm aspiration that this is an area of work that will help us regarding the whole process in which we are engaged. The review of the financial process is about bringing greater transparency, so that people can measure it.

The debate earlier today on the Supplementary Estimates made it clear that there are still anomalies between voting various things through and aspects of the Budget that are not voted on at all in the Assembly. We are trying to improve transparency, accountability and clearer understanding for all Members — and I do not think that there is any Member here, perhaps even the Minister included, who could not do with a clearer understanding of how the budgetary process works and how that process, which we have inherited and which suits a different system, needs to be changed to suit our own system and meet the Assembly's needs. The remit given for the review was that the process was to meet the Assembly's needs. Building into that process clearer linkages between the Programme for Government and the Budget will certainly help in that regard.

I thank all the Members. People raised very genuine concerns. They raised issues that clearly demonstrate that although there is a strong measure of agreement on going forward with a lot of those points, there are still areas to be worked through. There is still conflicting evidence coming forward, which needs to be sorted out. There is still detail, but I certainly think that, however we feel on all the points of detail, everyone shares the longer-term aspiration of having a clearer Budget process, one that is accountable, that gives Members, Committees, and, indeed, the public, more ability to scrutinise and clearly follow through on lines of expenditure, Programme for Government priorities, accountability and transparency in the spending of public money, across the broadest range possible of publicly spending bodies, and,

in doing so, to improve the system that we have here and improve the services that we, in turn, provide to the general public in looking after public finances.

I commend the report to the House and ask for support for the Committee's motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the response to the Executive's review of the financial process in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with relevant Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained therein.

Adjourned at 6.10 pm.



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