

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 18 June 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

New Assembly Member: Ms Maeve McLaughlin

Mr Speaker: Before we begin business, I advise Members that I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Maeve McLaughlin has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the Foyle constituency to fill the vacancy that resulted from the resignation of Ms Martina Anderson. Ms McLaughlin signed the Roll of Membership in my office this morning and entered her designation. Ms McLaughlin has taken her seat, and I wish her well.

Public Petition: Suicide Awareness and Prevention Project, Poleglass

Mr Speaker: Ms Jennifer McCann has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. She will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am very honoured to present this petition. It was compiled by young people who are involved in the Bytes Project in Poleglass and has over 5,000 signatures.

There are 30,000 people in the Colin area, which is where those young people live. There is a large number of young people there, and it is an area of multiple deprivation and disadvantage. Over the past 10 years, over 100 people in the area have taken their lives. The majority of those were young people. About 18 months ago, there was a particular cluster of suicides in the area, where 20 people took their own lives over a period of 16 months. So, this is a very serious issue.

The young people involved in the project came together to do something about the problem, because the people who died were their friends from school and elsewhere. The young people got together, and, over a period of weeks, they went to all the different shopping centres across west Belfast and into schools to get people to sign the petition. They also visited the Speaker's Office, and my colleague Sue Ramsey worked with them to highlight and raise awareness of this very serious issue and ask for the services needed for the people of not just the Colin area but across the North to try to tackle this issue.

So, I want to present this petition on their behalf and say a very big thank you to them for getting together, having courage and giving their time. The Assembly appreciates them doing that.

Ms J McCann moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and send a copy to the Chairperson of the Health Committee.

Public Petition: WAVE Trauma Centre Research

Mr Speaker: Mr Mike Nesbitt has also sought leave to present a public petition. The Member will also have up to three minutes to speak on the subject.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Speaker, thank you. WAVE Trauma is one of the largest and most respected organisations providing support and services for victims and survivors of the Troubles. With offices in Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, Armagh, Ballymoney and Omagh, it has a geographical spread that has assisted in the collation of this petition of 10,000 signatures. I would like to be clear, Mr Speaker, that the petition was not handed to me or my party alone but to representatives of all five parties of the Executive. It reads as follows:

"We, the undersigned, call on you to carry out an urgent review of the past provision made and, in some cases, not made to those bereaved or injured in the Troubles, and to put right all unfairness and shortfall in those provisions."

WAVE has also given us a route map to identify those unfairnesses and shortfalls by commissioning research that highlighted what it describes as a staggering shortfall in services for the very many people physically injured in the Troubles. It highlighted another staggering fact: there is no robust figure agreed for the number of injured.

Much emphasis has been placed on the dead, and rightly so. Much resource is also, rightly, devoted to the dead. For example, the Historical Enquiries Team (HET) reviews the files of every killing and seeks to address specific questions posed by families about the circumstances of their loved one's death. However, there is no HET for the injured. The dead are remembered in books such as 'Lost Lives', but there is no book of damaged lives for the injured. If that research were to be undertaken, it may take more than a dozen volumes the size of 'Lost Lives' to cover everyone who suffered lost opportunities because of the Troubles.

In short, we sometimes focus on the dead at the expense of focusing on what we can do for the living injured. This petition is a clear call to put that right. WAVE contends that there is not only a lack of attention to the injured but also a lack of knowledge about the consequences, not least for the disabled and their carers.

This petition is a call to look again at key issues for the injured of the Troubles and their carers across areas that include pain management and medical service provision; lost opportunities with regard to the type of work and level of income they would otherwise have reasonably expected to attain, and the consequent impact on occupational pensions; compensation top-ups to address those whose life expectancy and/or needs were underestimated in the original awards; and how short-term funding of support groups undermines their ability to attract and retain professional staff, who would provide the services required on a long-term, ongoing basis by the victims and survivors of our conflict.

I commend this petition to the House.

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

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and send a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Colum Eastwood replace Mr John Dallat as a member of the Committee for the Environment.
— [Mr P Ramsey.]

Mr Speaker: We now move to the second motion on Committee membership. Again, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Ms Caitríona Ruane replace Ms Jennifer McCann as a member of the Business Committee.
— [Mr P Maskey.]

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution:

Main Estimates 2012-13

Mr Speaker: As the next two motions relate to Supply resolutions, I propose to conduct only one debate. I shall call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to move the first motion. Debate will then take place on both motions. When all those who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. Before putting the Question without further debate, I shall call the Minister to move the second motion.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours for this debate. The Minister will have 60 minutes to allocate as he wishes between proposing and his winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes.

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

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £8,203,787,000 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 the 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 £8,424,156,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the 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 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2012-13 that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that resources not exceeding £13,004,918.26 be authorised for use by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development for the year ending 31 March 2011, as summarised

for each Department in part II of the 2010-11 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Wilson: As you set out, Mr Speaker, the debate covers two Supply resolutions. The first resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of the 2012-13 spending plans of Departments and other public bodies as set out in the Main Estimates. The second resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of Excess Votes for two Departments for 2010-11 as detailed in the Statement of Excesses for that year. The Main Estimates and the Statement of Excesses were laid in the Assembly on Wednesday 6 June 2012.

The first resolution relates to the supply of cash and resources for the remainder of the current year, 2012-13, as detailed in the Main Estimates. The Assembly passed a Vote on Account in March 2012 that provided initial allocations for 2012-13 to ensure the continuation of services until a Budget was agreed and these Main Estimates could be presented to the Assembly for approval. The first resolution and the Budget Bill, which I will introduce later today, now request the balance to complete the total cash and resource requirements of Departments and other public bodies for 2012-13. The balance to complete amounts to over £8 billion of cash and over £8 billion of resources. These requirements reflect the second year of the Executive's Budget 2011-15, which was approved by the previous Assembly on 9 March 2011, as well as the demand-led annually managed expenditure (AME).

The second resolution seeks the Assembly's approval for Excess Votes for 2010-11 on behalf of two Departments. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) exceeded the resources approved by the previous Assembly for 2010-11 by almost £3 million, and the Department for Social Development (DSD) exceeded its resources limit by £10 million. I draw Members' attention to the explanations that are given in part 2 of the Statement of Excesses for each Department. Those excesses were reported by the Comptroller and Auditor General, and the Public Accounts Committee has considered the reasons for them and has recommended that this Assembly now provides the necessary sums by Excess Votes. On behalf of the Executive, I request and recommend the levels of Supply that are set out in these two resolutions under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

I want to turn to the issue of accelerated passage for a few moments. First, I place on record my disappointment with the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its failure to, so far, grant accelerated passage. Indeed, I challenge the Committee to do so on Wednesday. Quite frankly, I am staggered by its belief that it has not been adequately consulted on the public expenditure proposals that are contained in the Bill.

12.15 pm

Let me make it clear: the public expenditure proposals for this financial year — 2012-13 — did not suddenly materialise three weeks ago, nor did we suddenly wake up on 1 April and decide what Departments should spend on public services. The public expenditure proposals that cover this financial year, the very proposals that are contained in the Bill and the resolutions that are before us, were not created in a vacuum. The reality is that the public expenditure proposals that are contained in the Bill find their roots in the Budget that was agreed last March.

I remind the Assembly that the Chair of the Finance and Personnel Committee outlined in the House how the Finance Committee had provided a co-ordinated report on the Budget; had taken evidence from a wide range of witnesses, including business and voluntary sectors, economists, academics and trade unions; and had received submissions from each of the Statutory Committees, the Audit Committee and the Assembly Commission. To top it all, it then arranged a take-note debate on the Budget. If that is not satisfying itself of the necessary consultation on public expenditure, I do not know what is.

Do not forget that the Budget Bill that is before us today is essentially 95% the same as the Budget that was agreed back then. Any non-technical changes have been agreed by the Executive, and my officials took the Committee through all the changes in full detail and answered all the questions that members had on the changes to the Budget since it was agreed in March. Therefore, I fail to see how any member of the Committee can say hand on heart that the Committee has not received sufficient consultation on the public expenditure proposals for 2012-13. Indeed, the norm in the past was that one evidence session with my officials was sufficient to grant accelerated

passage. The Committee has had that, so what is the difference this year? Once again, I challenge the Committee to consider the evidence of the consultation that I have outlined and agree to the accelerated passage of the Bill. It is vital to ensure that Royal Assent for the legislation is given before the end of July.

It is a sign of the collective maturity of the Assembly, in stark contrast to the Committee, that Members recognise that the Estimates process is the culmination of a lengthy Budget process and that the stages are to provide legislation to cover a Budget that has already been extensively debated and approved by the Assembly. That having been said, I have no doubt that one or two Members have still not fully grasped the nature and nuances of these debates. I expect that the debate today will ebb and flow, moving from the relevant to the perhaps not so relevant, or maybe to the totally irrelevant.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes.

Mr Allister: I take the Minister back to what he said about accelerated passage. On this occasion, I am not unsympathetic to the Minister's position, but I ask him to elaborate. He said that he exhorted the Committee on Wednesday to agree to accelerated passage. However, the situation is that we supposedly have the Second Stage of the Budget Bill tomorrow. That cannot happen without the Chairman of the Committee affording consent between now and then. Will he cast some light on whether tomorrow's business is likely to proceed? If approval for accelerated passage is not given, does he agree that the power in the 1998 Act for the permanent secretary to grant 95% of the budget authority will not be appropriately used in circumstances in which there is a supposedly working Assembly and Executive?

Mr Wilson: As usual, the Member puts his finger on a number of key issues. I was not going to mention it but let us make it quite clear that, as the Member for North Antrim has outlined, the irony of the Committee remaining truculent, petulant and carrying on in — this will probably not help my case much, but I do not mind — infantile mode will be that, instead of having the opportunity to scrutinise and debate the issues on the Floor of the Assembly and through the Committee, an official will decide what money

is allocated. That will happen if we do not get the Bill through under accelerated passage in time. If we go down that route, we will be £500 million short in the allocations, because only 95% of the Budget can be allocated on the basis that the Member has outlined. While there is a functioning Assembly, one would expect us to not go through that process, as he has quite rightly pointed out.

There are two ways to get out of the situation. First, during the debate, having received the information and been reminded that it has looked at the information in quite a lot of depth on previous occasions, the Committee may well decide to accede to accelerated passage. If it needs some more time to think about the error of its ways and repent at leisure, we may have to wait until Wednesday. That would mean, of course, that tomorrow's business on the Budget Bill would fall. If accelerated passage was agreed on Wednesday, that would mean that the Second Stage of the Budget Bill will happen next week, and it is my understanding there would still be time in the Assembly session for us to push the matter through by accelerated passage.

I am sure that, during the ebb and flow of the debate, we will hear explanations from those who have taken the stance that they have, but I hope that, in the interests of the public good, they will make the right decision. It is not in anyone's interest for, first, this Assembly not to do its business and, secondly, as a result of that, for us to have to go through the unusual process of the permanent secretary making budget allocations, which would be 5% less than what is in the Estimates in the Budget Bill. That would leave Departments with £500 million less to spend than would be the case if the Assembly had done its job properly.

I will move on. The 2010 UK spending review outcome for 2012-13 provided a resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) that was 4.3% less than the 2011 baseline, and capital DEL was over 32% less than the 2010-11 baseline. However, it must be remembered that a lot of difficult decisions on curtailing public expenditure were taken in 2011-12, meaning that we entered this year better prepared for the level of public expenditure available. Indeed, with further allocations from Her Majesty's Treasury through its budget process, along with some changes to our own public expenditure position, we will be in a position to provide

some additional funds to Departments in the first monitoring round of this financial year.

As an Assembly, we must continue to be mindful of the issues that face our economy as we seek to provide the optimum level of public services. Rising oil prices and ongoing inflation levels have constrained our economy in general, whilst the failure of Project Merlin in the banking sector has not helped our private sector to lever in much-needed finance. I am happy to note that the national loan guarantee scheme, which many see as the successor of Project Merlin, has been signed up to by Ulster Bank, and that will hopefully allow local businesses easier access to finance.

We face some difficulties in 2012-13. However, it would be misleading to end there. This is only part of the story, because 2012-13 also provides significant opportunities for the Assembly to improve our economy and assist our society. The year provides many opportunities to promote Northern Ireland as a major tourism venue. We have already had the Titanic centenary and seen how government can contribute to major projects such as the Titanic signature project, which we should be proud of. The Irish Open is just around the corner and will provide a significant boost to our tourism and sporting reputation and provide much-needed tourism income.

Over the coming months, a number of critical discussions are to be had with Treasury Ministers on public expenditure issues that are strategically important to Northern Ireland. Foremost among these strategic issues is the implementing of the UK Government welfare reform agenda in Northern Ireland. The key challenge will be to ensure that national decisions are applied appropriately to Northern Ireland and that we are not disadvantaged, particularly on issues such as the operation of the social fund on housing benefit relief. In general, we can expect HM Treasury to exert greater control and scrutiny on the drawdown of annually managed expenditure, and we need to ensure that our reporting to Treasury in all aspects continues to be robust and timely. We are working with HM Treasury officials on that issue.

The challenge facing us is to nurture our economy and appropriately support the significant milestones and events of 2012-13, blending the provision of public services with maximum opportunities for enabling private

sector growth. It will also be critically important that we take measures in this financial year to ensure that our Departments are prepared and ready to adapt to an even greater tightening of the Treasury purse strings. The latest Office for Budgetary Responsibility forecasts, which go to 2016-17, two years into the next spending review, show that the UK Government envisage further cuts, particularly on the resource departmental expenditure limit allocations. We cannot wait until then to decide what we are going to do. We have to make preparation for what we are being told we will have to face in three years' time. Therefore, we need to do all to facilitate regional economic growth while ensuring that our central government Departments are focused on delivering greater efficiencies while protecting front line services. I believe that the Estimates before you today will facilitate that process.

I look forward to the debate on the expenditure plans, the Main Estimates and related issues. I look forward with some interest to see how some Members will attempt to contort the Estimates to provide a platform for issues that they wish to raise today. I am sure that you will rein them in sufficiently, Mr Speaker. I request the support of Members for the first resolution to approve further supply in the 2012-13 financial year to enable vital public services to continue beyond the current provision in the Vote on Account. I also ask for the support of Members for the second resolution to regularise the excess expenditure of resources in 2010-11 by DCAL and DSD.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has a track record of engaging positively and constructively with the Minister and the Department. It is disappointing, therefore, that my contribution to this important debate has to focus on unprecedented, inexplicable and yet to be explained shortcomings on the part of DFP in conducting its engagement with the Committee on the Main Estimates 2012-13 and related Budget (No. 2) Bill in a timely and proper fashion.

DFP officials had been scheduled to brief the Committee on 30 May and 6 June, and that is in line with what has happened previously. The Minister was incorrect - I hope not deliberately so - when he said that one evidence session had been the norm. Although I was not on the Committee in previous

years, my advice from the Committee staff is that having two evidence sessions was the norm in 2010-11. The officials were due to brief the Committee on two consecutive weeks. However, the Estimates, Budget Bill and associated DFP briefing paper were not provided to the Committee in time for the first scheduled evidence session in line with normal practice. As a result, members were unable to engage with departmental officials.

12.30 pm

The Committee was told that the papers were being considered by the Minister, that the Minister was aware of the urgency of the matter, and that there were no significant delays on the part of any other Departments. Indeed, it is still unclear whether the Minister had any issues with the papers. On 30 May, I also drew the Committee's concerns to the attention of the DFP permanent secretary, who was in front of the Committee on that day on another matter.

Another week passed, and at the scheduled evidence session on 6 June, the departmental officials were again unable to explain the reasons for the delay in the papers' being cleared by the Minister. Fortunately, the Committee had allowed an additional week in its work programme that would facilitate a further attempt at engagement with DFP. The papers were eventually provided after the Committee meeting on 6 June, during which members had discussed inviting the Minister to a hearing on 13 June. Although evidence was received from departmental officials on 13 June, this whole episode raises disturbing questions on how and why DFP conducted itself in the way that it did on this occasion and on such an important piece of Assembly business.

In response to the Committee's request for a detailed explanation for the delay, the Minister wrote to advise of an "oversight within the Private Office". To date, that is the only explanation that we have received, and I note that while lambasting the Committee this morning, the Minister did not at any stage attempt to explain why he kept the Committee waiting for two weeks as he sat on the papers that were needed for our scrutiny function. Members were not content with the Minister's explanation, however, and the Committee has invited him to its meeting on Wednesday to provide a full explanation. Again, he has not, as

yet, communicated with the Committee to say whether he will or will not attend.

It was also agreed that a decision on whether to grant accelerated passage under Standing Order 42(2) would be taken in light of this meeting with the Minister, and when the Committee is satisfied — as it has a statutory responsibility to the House to be — that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the Bill. The engagement on Wednesday will allow the Minister to explain any mitigating factors for delaying the papers and to account for how he and his Department have conducted consultation on the Budget Bill.

The decision made by the Committee on 13 June was not taken lightly, and I have to say that, in today insulting the Committee members who took that decision, and in knowing their view and their annoyance at the way in which we were treated by the Department of Finance and Personnel — in particular by the Minister, over his lack of explanation for the delay in providing the papers — the Minister has been rapidly talking himself out of the Bill being granted accelerated passage. It would be much better, in terms of constructive engagement with the Committee, if he were to wind his neck in, come along to the Committee on Wednesday and offer a proper explanation for any delay in this, and allow us to get back to normal business rather than seeking to confront and insult Committee members on this issue.

Clear legal and procedural advice has been received to inform the Committee's deliberations, including on the consequences of not granting accelerated passage to the Bill. DFP previously advised that, should a Budget Bill not be granted accelerated passage:

"Departments would not have the authority to spend and all services would have to stop."

In my view, this advice could potentially have the effect of misleading the Committee.

More recently, the Department has acknowledged that fail-safe mechanisms within existing legislation would allow the DFP permanent secretary to authorise the payment of sums out of the Consolidated Fund and the use of resources in the absence of a Budget Act. However, DFP highlighted two main concerns in that regard. It first argued that the mechanisms allow only for the use of resource of up to 95% of the amount authorised

by the previous year's Budget Act and that, as a consequence, some £540 million would be "lost". Indeed, the Minister repeated that this morning. Again, that is inaccurate. The same point was also made in the press release that the Minister managed to issue on 13 June, while he was not communicating with the Committee. Nevertheless, as I said, it is not accurate. It neglects to acknowledge that expenditure will be limited to 95% of the previous year until the Budget Bill is passed, when the full amount of expenditure, as set out in the Bill, will be authorised.

Secondly, DFP stated that £2.1 billion of accruing resources would be lost to the Executive if the Bill did not pass by accelerated passage. Again, this assertion is inaccurate. The Committee is clear in its understanding that the Budget Bill does not authorise the use of accruing resources but instead sets upper limits in this regard. Authorisation for the use of accruing resources is made separately by direction of the Department, subject to the limits set in a Budget Act. In the event of a delay in passing the Budget Bill, it is entirely possible for DFP to make a direction that might, for example, reflect the sums set out in the Bill and the resource use authorised by the DFP permanent secretary. Therefore, the £2.1 billion need not be lost to the Executive if a Committee Stage were to take place.

The Department stated that the Committee had been consulted on the Budget 2011-15, upon which the Estimates and the related Bill are based. That assertion needs to be treated with caution. The Budget 2011-15 was agreed during the previous Assembly mandate, and the consultation took place with a differently constituted Committee. Therefore, although the Committee might have regard to that consultation, it can be afforded only limited weight. Budget Acts for the issue of sums from the Consolidated Fund, their appropriation and use are made annually, and the Committee must be content that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the expenditure proposals in the Bills that are introduced each year.

During the debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates in February, I pointed out that, as there is only one week between those complicated financial documents being laid and debated, there is no opportunity for all the Statutory Committees to scrutinise the departmental estimates. Therefore, if a

Committee Stage of the Budget Bill were to take place, the value of the exercise would be in giving Committees an opportunity to consider the cumulative effect of changes in the 2012-13 figures from the Budget 2011-15 to the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Although some of those changes were contained in last year's monitoring rounds, Committees will not have had an opportunity to examine those in their entirety, and some changes have also taken place since the Vote on Account in February last. In anticipation of today's motions being agreed, a Committee Stage of the Bill would focus on obtaining detailed explanations of the figures, rather than proposing amendments. In many ways, that might serve a more useful purpose than a Second State debate tomorrow.

I turn briefly to the motion on the Excess Votes for DCAL and DSD. Following consideration of the Minister's correspondence of 14 May, the Committee requested the views of the two Statutory Committees on the issue. Both Committees subsequently confirmed that they were content with the position for their respective Departments. Members are also mindful of the recommendation of the Comptroller and Auditor General in that regard.

To conclude, I reiterate my disappointment that, due to the approach taken by the Department, the Committee is not yet in a position where it can decide to grant accelerated passage to the Budget (No. 2) Bill on the basis of having been appropriately consulted. I trust that the Minister will respect the position of the Committee, although from his earlier comments, I think that that seems unlikely. I urge him to attend the meeting on Wednesday — he has yet to communicate to us whether he intends to — and to provide the necessary clarification and assurance. In his winding-up speech, he has an opportunity to explain why he sat on documents for two weeks, denied the Committee an opportunity to properly scrutinise them, embarrassed his own officials, who turned up two weeks in a row without any papers, and continues to insult the intelligence of the Committee and lambaste it for acting responsibly on behalf of the Assembly. It is our statutory duty to assure the Assembly that we have been appropriately consulted and, in this case, quite clearly, we have not.

Although I support the motions before us today, I must indicate that that support is without prejudice to any further explanation

of the figures contained in the Estimates and the Budget Bill, which might be required if a Committee Stage of the Bill occurs.

Mr Girvan: I support the motion. As has been outlined, consultation seems to be a major issue in relation to why we are in this position this afternoon. Members are well aware that it is not that long ago since we looked at our budgets for 2012-13. I appreciate that a few months have passed since then. However, to regularise and make major changes, the monitoring rounds have taken place during that process, and the reallocation of funds and how those could ultimately impact on the way forward have to be taken into account.

I appreciate that we are dealing with an £8.2 billion cash allocation and an £8.4 billion resource allocation that needs to be approved to allow spend to go ahead. I agree that it is somewhat ludicrous for the Assembly to have the power to discuss the Estimates and move them forward, and then not move ahead but allow civil servants to take the decisions on behalf of the Assembly, as opposed to ourselves. As has been said, if a Budget or the Estimates are not agreed, only 95% of that spend could be made up until March 2013. That is something —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Girvan: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that 95% could be spent before a Budget Bill was approved?

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that it is probably correct that 95% could be spent before a Budget was approved. However, I think that some Members are starting to get a little precious about what they believe to be their consultation. Last week, in Committee, I asked how many changes had been made to the Estimates in all the times that they had been presented to the Committee. The answer was that no changes were made in previous years. I agree that the Committee is looking for transparency. It is vital that we have transparency, openness and accountability for all. Unfortunately, some Departments have, in their Estimates, put in headings such as "Miscellaneous". I am talking about the Department of Education, which seems to use this as a catch-all, and I appreciate that I may be going into another debate, which could take place on another date. The Committee is attempting to deal with those

sorts of issues and create more accountability in the process. However, I believe that what is happening now is just a bit of point scoring on the Northern Ireland draft Estimates, as we have already agreed the budgets and, with very little change, are moving ahead into 2012-13. There is very little change from what was approved.

The Excess Vote deals with a combined unaccounted spend in 2010-11 of some £13 million by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and DSD. The Committee was satisfied with the explanation for that, as was the Public Accounts Committee, so I feel that I can support that.

The Committee has been given its opportunity. The Estimates were laid before the House on 11 June this year. Members were given an opportunity. I believe that, should issues arise, we still have time to move this through. I hope and pray that we can grant accelerated passage to allow us to have proper accountability and move forward as a mature Government. That would be sensible. I am in favour of the motion and the Excess Vote.

Mr Cree: It is that time of year again when we struggle through this huge chunk of paper, with figures that do not facilitate direct read-across, do not provide transparency and do not afford the Assembly the opportunity to adequately scrutinise what financial plans are intended for the year ahead. We call it the Budget process.

In the previous mandate, the Committee for Finance and Personnel worked hard to have the process improved. The current Committee has continued to stress the need for an accountable and transparent process and it provided a report, which was debated in the House. So what has happened in the past year? To the Minister's credit, he prepared a paper, which was sent to his Executive colleagues.

Mr Wilson: On time.

Mr Cree: He gets it right sometimes.

The paper was placed on the agenda, but was not discussed because the Education Minister did not agree with it. That is totally unacceptable. We need to move forward with an improved financial process that is accountable. One-line descriptions are no longer acceptable, such as the already referred to, "Miscellaneous Educational Services", for which £13 million appears in the Budget.

Today, we are considering the Main Estimates for 2012-13. We are told that this is the second year of a four-year Budget agreed in the previous mandate. I do not believe that previous expenditure proposals are relevant. They are, in fact, of very limited relevance. Each annual Budget deserves scrutiny of every detail. However, this year is different, in that the Committee was unable to examine the departmental documents, because the Department failed to produce any in the vital two weeks. The Committee, therefore, faced a dilemma. To support accelerated passage of the Budget Bill, it must be satisfied that appropriate consultation has taken place with it on the public expenditure proposals. We also know that other Committees have raised concerns about the lack of engagement by their Departments in the monitoring rounds.

12.45 pm

The Minister has been invited to attend a Committee for Finance and Personnel meeting this week to provide a satisfactory explanation for the inordinate delay, on his part, in providing the necessary papers. We were told that a fault had occurred in the private office. I do not know where the private office is; I do not know whether it is in Honolulu, Belfast, even at his home or somewhere else. However, as the Member who has just spoken said, there is sufficient time, given proper consultation, to be in a position to grant accelerated passage to meet the anticipated 31 July deadline for attaining Royal Assent. However, the Minister will be aware that, in the event of a Bill not being in place by that date, the legislation exists, as has been referred to, to enable the DFP's permanent secretary to authorise the payment of sums out of the Consolidated Fund and the use of resources. That is in the region of 95% of the previous year's figure and would be more than sufficient to ensure the smooth running of government until a Budget Bill were passed. That, in fact, would allow for the extra 5%, as has been talked about, and it could take place any time from October to 31 March 2013.

I turn now to some detail in the Main Estimates. In part II of each of the Main Estimates, a breakdown is provided on requests for resources against DEL and AME. Administration is a significant cost to all Departments. How has the request for resources for administration developed over a period? What has been the trend over, say, the past five years, relative

to gross total resources required? That could help Committees to build up a picture of the overall balance between expenditure in administration against expenditure on services and programmes. Are Departments becoming more efficient?

Similarly, how has the other current heading changed as a proportion of gross total resources over time? Have resources under the other current heading changed, relative to the requests for administration? Has the level of grants changed significantly over the past few years? What is the Department's explanation for that? What are the consequences of reduced grant-making for departmental priorities? Is there increased grant-making? Are there implications for what Departments are doing?

What is the pattern of the level of accruing resources identified as a proportion of gross total resources? Are Departments bringing in larger or smaller amounts of income, relative to their total resource requirements? All those points could be supported by the provision to Committees of tables and charts over an appropriate time, which could identify the trends in the figures. Committees could then be empowered to ask Departments for an explanation of trends and/or apparent relative shifts in resource requirements. Committees would be better equipped to understand more about Departments' financial prioritisation and enhanced consideration of the Bill.

I understand that the Second Stage of the Budget Bill will be postponed until next week and will not be debated tomorrow, so we will have more time to scrutinise the figures that continue to be produced.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht ar an rún atá romhainn. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Supply resolution, etc. Listening to the Minister here pouring scorn on the Committee was, as someone said, *déjà vu* all over again. The only difference is that it is usually the SDLP that he is pouring scorn on, so it is a nice relief to have that scorn shared with others in the Chamber. In any case, I detected a certain arrogance in his attitude to the Committee and in his disregard for the Committee's responsibility to carry out its scrutiny functions. I have to say that it seems that the Minister was somewhat lacking

in his responsibility to provide the Committee with the papers in a timely fashion so that it might perform adequate scrutiny. I hope that he will agree to come to the Committee meeting on Wednesday so that whatever misunderstandings have arisen can be sorted out and the Bill can be advanced without any unnecessary delay. We are approaching Wimbledon time, and the ball is in the Minister's court. It is up to him to play it now, and I hope that he makes the right shots.

To return to the Estimates and the debate, there is no doubt that this budgetary period has been among the most difficult faced in Northern Ireland, with a £4 billion cut to the block grant. Added to that, we also had the ending of end-year flexibility, which presented another challenge. That has been replaced by the Budget exchange scheme, which has helped the situation. I commend the Minister for his role in ensuring that the scheme was agreed with the Treasury.

There have also been indications that there were considerable underspends in Departments, and at a time when resources are scarce, that is very worrying. Those underspends will have exceeded the scope of the scheme and may have led to finances being lost to us here. Moreover, the reduction in the number of in-year monitoring rounds from four to three has required Departments to make submissions on underspends earlier than was previously the case. They are now made in October. That change requires much more exact financial monitoring and planning and is a huge challenge for Departments.

As a result of departmental overspends, the Minister has launched a review of departmental spending, which, it is hoped, will ensure that resources are directed more closely at where they are needed and that spend will be effective and efficient. I have no doubt that the Minister will want to update not only the House but the Committee on the progress of that review to date.

As the Minister said, the capital side has been hardest hit, with a reduction of around 32%. It is important that we continue to push the Westminster Government and urge them not to renege on the £4 billion in capital funding that remains to be paid in the final two years of the investment strategy to 2017. That is in line with the previous Government's commitment.

The SDLP has fully engaged with the budgetary process. We are trying to take every possible

step to ensure that the effects of the cuts are mitigated, especially for our most vulnerable citizens. The Minister mentioned the further cuts that we will face owing to changes in welfare provision. Therefore, it is important that the most vulnerable be protected from the severity of the cuts to the fullest possible extent. We have always passed our proposals on to the Minister. We have had robust engagement with him here on many occasions, and I hope that he continues to give our proposals due consideration.

The Minister has said on a number of occasions that the Budget is not set in stone. We all must work to continue to mould and shape it to ensure that it best fits Northern Ireland's needs. Mr Cree mentioned the need for reform of the budgetary process. The SDLP certainly agrees with and supports that proposal. It is important that we attempt to align the Budget with the Programme for Government to the greatest extent possible and ensure that strategic policies are driving financial allocation, not the other way around.

We have been told on previous occasions that £1.6 billion in revenue could be raised. On a previous occasion, the Minister told us that of that £1.6 billion, he would include £862 million in the Budget because he was confident that that could be realised. I wonder whether he still has that confidence and how much of that £862 million has been or will be realised.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for raising the point. He raises it continually and is quite right to do so, because we set targets. We have exceeded the amount of money that we proposed to raise in capital this year by about £29 million. I cannot remember the exact figure offhand, but we have raised almost £200 million through capital asset sales this year, which is above the target set. Even in a difficult time, we are achieving what we set out to achieve.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for his intervention. I welcome the increase in the amount of asset sales realised. However, that certainly was not the case earlier in the year, when realisation was much lower. If we can increase the amount of asset realisation, we will go some way to mitigating the effect of cuts, particularly those resulting from reform of the welfare system.

Much faith has been put in the Budget review group to deliver further revenue. I urge the

Minister to do all in his power to ensure that we continue to raise revenue where possible. A further £738 million of the £1.6 billion has not yet been considered. I ask the Minister to consider that figure and to investigate the possibility of further revenue coming from it.

I do not think that we can afford to sit back and view the Budget as done and dusted for the remainder of the Budget period. We must continue to enhance it at every possible opportunity and ensure that we follow every possible measure to mitigate the effect of cuts, through further revenue-raising options; capital asset realisation, as I said; alternative sources of finance; and preventative spending. Most of those ideas have been advanced by the SDLP.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr D Bradley: I hope that the Minister will give due consideration to those proposals. A Cheann Comhairle, go raibh míle maith agat as an deis a thabhairt domh labhairt sa díospóireacht seo.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motions. As others said, the onus is on us as Members to consider carefully the cause and effect of the detail set out in the documentation evidenced and interpret how the consequences not only of the Estimates but of the impending Budget (No. 2) Bill might serve to improve and develop our local economy and what impact that will have on our constituents.

The first motion relates to the supply of cash and resources for the remainder of the current year, 2012-13, as detailed in the Main Estimates. The impact of the cuts from Westminster is evident throughout the figures, and this Administration have had to make difficult decisions across almost all Departments that will affect the people whom we represent. There will be further significant impacts as the coalition Government progress the welfare reform programme.

1.00 pm

The financial difficulties that we find ourselves in must be handled maturely and innovatively and with a corporate approach. The Alliance Party believes that we now have an even greater responsibility to tackle the costs of division, which we still estimate to be around £1 billion every year. That is an unjustifiable burden, even at the best of times. I welcome the fact that other parties are now coming round to the

Alliance way of thinking and are providing plenty of shared future sound bites, but are we actually making any headway on creating a cohesive, shared and integrated society and achieving the resulting financial savings?

When 'A Shared Future' was published back in March 2005, it recognised that there was a strong financial and economic imperative to build that shared future. Indeed, it declared that the concept of separate but equal was unsustainable, and it argued that parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable, both morally and economically. It also stated that policies that simply adapt to segregation, rather than challenging it, result in inefficient resource allocations. For example, in the education sector, a failure to move towards a shared system has resulted in Northern Ireland still having the highest spending on education per capita of any part of the UK. However, less is actually spent per pupil than anywhere else. It is estimated that the benefits of shared education could amount to savings of £300 million in the longer term, but, instead, too much money continues to be eaten up through overadministration and the overprovision of partially empty buildings. Budgets are becoming skewed, and, with too much money locked up in capital, the pressure for cuts falls on teachers, pupils, transport, support and special needs. As well as the potential to use resources more efficiently and effectively, there are conceivable hidden benefits to young people and society as a whole.

Also related to education but within the remit of the Department for Employment and Learning is the issue that initial teacher training education in Northern Ireland is still provided through five higher education institutions. There would be potential savings through administration costs if that was reduced to just one. I welcome the fact that the Minister for Employment and Learning has instigated a two-stage review of teacher training institutions. Phase 1 is looking at the financial viability of the teacher training colleges and is due to be reported on shortly, and phase 2 is to explore models of sharing.

It is important that the Budget and Estimates reflect the fact that the costs of maintaining a divided society manifest themselves across all Departments and spending areas, not just education. We must ensure that the provision of goods, facilities and services at least reflects

the changing attitudes to and preferences for sharing and integration.

I now turn to the second resolution, which seeks the Assembly's approval for Excess Votes for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development for 2010-11. Departments really should make sure that expenditure does not exceed the limits and restrictions set by the Assembly. The Public Accounts Committee has already considered the excesses in advance of today's debate and found no objection to the granting of such excesses.

The excess resource expenditure of almost £2.8 million by DCAL was due in large part to the unexpected impairment charge levied against land and buildings following the year-end valuation. The excess resource expenditure of approximately £10.2 million by DSD is rationalised by the Department's commitment to increase its spending by up to £11.5 million on promoting measurable improvements to housing in Northern Ireland. It may be worth noting that, in the Estimates, that same area has also seen the most significant cut in comparison with previous years in DSD.

In view of the current constraints on public expenditure, there may be some concern that the risk of overspending will increase and the Assembly will be required to give retrospective approval to more Excess Votes. Our Committees can play a vital role in scrutinising the financial management performance of their respective Departments. The Finance and Personnel Committee, of which I am a member, has been actively involved in the review of the financial process. That should, hopefully, ensure the provision of timely and accurate information by all Departments in order to assist in the scrutiny role and to ensure better financial management across Departments, which can minimise the risk of overspends and significant underspends. The Alliance Party supports the Supply resolutions.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I rise as Chair of the Education Committee to inform the House of the Committee's position on the 2012-13 Main Estimates. I am on record as stating previously in the House that education provides the basis for the personal development in intellect, skills, competencies, personal attributes, values and knowledge that can equip our young people

to succeed in their chosen professions. Although there is much success to be proud of, there is still a significant body of educational underachievement that must be addressed. I remind the House that, in some respects, dealing with that issue sits in the context of how we spend the money that is given to us and the allocation made through the Budget process.

I come again to the House to iterate one issue, which is how the Education Committee receives its information from the Department. I listened with great interest to what the Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel had to say and his outlining of how badly the Department had performed in giving information to his Committee. He should come and sit on the Education Committee for a week or two — he and the members of his Committee, including the former member of the Education Committee who spoke earlier about timely papers. It is not timely to receive a Budget paper on the morning of the day on which you are going to discuss the issue.

There are many people outside the House who would question the ability of Members to do their job. None of us has the ability to take what are, in many respects, challenging and difficult papers on budget allocations, especially from the Department of Education, and find a budget line from one month to another. It is very difficult. I notice Members, including the former Education Minister, who has now been elevated, I understand, to another position of relevance in the House, making comments. If they have any particular issues, I will take interventions — [Interruption.]

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

Mr Storey: Committees can scrutinise only on the basis of relevant information that is given to them. I will give you a prime example: the Department of Education has failed over a period to give the Committee information on the allocation of the out-turn. I had to get that information by asking a private Member's question. What does that tell us about the budgetary process that the Department of Education carries out?

Departments, arm's-length bodies, education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Youth Council were all given

allocations from 2009-2010 through to 2011-12. Their original allocations are stated, as is what they received. In each of those three years, there is an additional £67 million, £91 million and £96 million. I would love to know where that money came from. That is why the Minister is absolutely right in pursuing the issue of a review of the financial process. It is absolutely clear that we need to know where money is allocated and how it is spent.

The Committee has welcomed the additional funding announced by the Department, and I place on record my appreciation to the Finance Minister for his part in that. He has worked extensively to ensure that any additional allocations that could be secured for the Department of Education are secured, and I welcome the fact that that has happened. However, the Committee notes the Minister's recent review of the Budget allocation and calls for better planning in future to assist the Committee with its detailed scrutiny of the Budget throughout the year. I ask that monthly out-turns are forthcoming. That will provide a clear picture of spend and pressures. In short, the Committee would be the beneficiary of transparency in regard to how the Department of Education deals with its finance.

We all recognise that there are financial constraints on all Departments in how Budgets are allocated and how they are spent. However, the process would be greatly enhanced if the Department of Education, in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel, were able to give information that clearly defined where those budget allocations were being spent.

On 15 May, Members thought that we were to receive £72 million of new money. We were not: that was a reallocation of money that was already in the Budget. Some of us have serious concerns about a new initiative that appeared on a budget line. I am referring to the Belfast initiative. We await information about what that initiative is, as well as information on where the money will be spent and how it will align with policy objectives. It is that type of issue that the House deserves answers to. However, to date, neither the Education Committee nor the House has received adequate answers.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. If we were to reflect on the Assembly's experience over the past mandates, we would see that it demonstrates

that the Finance Committee has taken a fairly responsible and flexible approach. The review of the budgeting process was the result of a substantial body of work by the Committee which it reported to the Assembly and got support for. Like other Members, I welcome the fact that the Finance Department and the Minister have responded positively to that work. However, I think that we have come to a situation.

I listened carefully to the Chair of the Education Committee's comments. If ever a presentation argued for a detailed examination of budgetary processes, it was that one, and the Chair of the Education Committee's remarks bear that out. The Finance Committee has always progressed on the basis of co-operation with the Minister and the deadlines that he must operate within, and it has always attempted to respond positively when asked to take exceptional measures.

We have a difficulty. We got an explanation for the failure to produce the relevant documentation — the 2012-13 Estimates. It is not the lightest booklet, nor does it make the lightest reading. It takes a bit of time and consideration. On the first scheduled meeting, during which we were to receive the material and a briefing, the Minister failed to produce the document. The meeting was rescheduled for the following week, and the Minister again failed to produce the document until one hour after our meeting had ended. The document had obviously been prepared. The explanation that we got was that there had been an oversight in the private office. I would like the Minister to explain whether there was an oversight two weeks in a row. Did the Department forget for two weeks to send the material to the Committee that it is statutorily obliged to consult? I also ask you, Mr Speaker, to consider whether it is proper for the Minister to come here and tell the scrutiny Committee what it should do. It is our decision, not the Minister's, how many evidence sessions we require, how much detail we want in answers from the Department and whether we will accept that we have been properly consulted.

We have heard comments on aspects of the budgeting process. Indeed, the Minister has confirmed that the Estimates document is a living document. It does change. At times, Departments may have expectations and make projections that are reported to and accepted

by the Assembly but then run into unforeseen problems, such as legal challenges in the tendering process and difficulties with site acquisitions. There are all sorts of reasonable and credible explanations that can be presented for why a particular spending programme was not delivered on time. Indeed, the Assembly has monitoring rounds, reallocation processes and reporting processes that allow people to accept reasonable and credible explanations. Let me say this clearly to the Minister, because he will have an opportunity to correct it today: an oversight in the Minister's office is not a credible explanation for forgetting to send the documentation. For a start, it is too heavy to forget, given that 108 copies have to go out to Members. That is a big pile of documents on somebody's desk.

1.15 pm

The Committee did not get the documentation for two weeks. It addressed the question of trying to meet the deadline, of whether there could be a loss of £500 million and of whether it was essential and necessary. It took independent legal advice. None of the information that we were getting was correct. It was misleading, and some of it was presented to the Assembly again today. It is desirable and preferable that we do things in time. The nuclear option would be the Assembly ending up being logjammed on a budgetary process and being unable to agree a Budget, meaning that we would then lose money.

I am confident that we will resolve the issue, because there are enough reasonable people with common sense around the Chamber. I am confident that we could even do it by the deadline of the end of July, with a bit of come and go from the Minister. I hope that the Minister confirms today that he is coming to his scrutiny Committee on Wednesday to give us an explanation that we can accept as credible and reasonable. We have allowed enough time to meet the original deadline. We can still do it, Minister, but not by calling the Committee infantile and by telling Members that he hopes that they will see the error of their ways. I hope that he will recant when he has an opportunity to speak.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the opportunity to take a more detailed look at the Estimates, particularly given the limited opportunities to date to do so. There has been a lack of transparency in

the Estimates process and, as I understand, in the information that has been passed to some of our Committees about that process. Some of my colleagues on Committees told me that sometimes information went to Committee Clerks and that some questions could not be answered. This is about public funding; it is not about money owned by the Minister of Finance or the Minister of Education or any other Minister, for that matter. It is public money, and we have a right to scrutinise how it is spent to try to ensure that, in the public interest, best use is made of it.

Under Standing Order 42, the Finance Committee can grant accelerated passage if it is satisfied that there has been sufficient consultation during the scrutiny process. I wish to repeat something important that the Minister seems to have ignored: for two successive weeks, officials came to the Committee for Finance and Personnel to brief it on the Estimates process, and for two weeks in a row we were told that the officials could not discuss the matter because the information had not yet been released. On 30 May, an official told us that he understood that:

“the Main Estimates papers are still being considered by our Minister.”

On 6 June, officials advised the Committee that:

“The Minister is still considering the papers, and we have not got them cleared by him yet.”

The Minister has said that the documents have not really changed since the Budget was approved. If the documents do not change and they are a *fait accompli*, I want a further explanation for the delay. I would like to understand what is going on. Subsequently, the Committee got a letter from the Department advising it that there had been an oversight in the private office. The Assembly and the public deserve an explanation. Was the Minister on gardening leave? What was going on? Our role is to scrutinise the Estimates and to ask questions to try to ensure good use of public money. We are not being given that opportunity.

Given that process and the lack of engagement, how could any member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, with integrity, consider that there has been sufficient consultation? I also want to highlight to Members something new that has happened since the Budget was passed earlier in the year, which is that we

have the Estimates and the out-turns of last year's financial figures. We now know where money has been allocated and whether it has been spent well. What has been the level of expenditure? Again, officials have advised us that the figures for those outcomes are very accurate and are unlikely to change until they are finalised later in the year, so it is a good set of figures to work from. I read the document and looked at a range of figures. In particular, I looked at where there were significant differences between those figures. That showed areas that had not had significant amounts of money spent on them in previous years but might still receive a large allocation when money might be better spent elsewhere.

It is important that there is proper engagement with the Assembly and with the Committees on how the money is spent. I reiterate that this is public money; it is not the fiefdom of an individual Minister. Surely, the Minister must be accountable to the Assembly and to the Committee for Finance and Personnel so that they can ask the appropriate questions.

I welcome the fact that, when engagement finally started with the Committee last Wednesday, 13 June — some two weeks late — we were able to ask why there had been a delay. We started to ask some of the questions that should have been asked a considerable time ago. There is a question still on my mind, on which I seek further explanation. On page 60 of the Estimates, at point A-16, I see that the Middletown Centre for Autism, which had £655,000 allocated to it in 2010-11 and £725,000 in 2011-12, has been allocated £4.9 million. We were not certain why that increase had occurred. The officials came back to us the following day — I think it was the following day, but it was certainly after the Committee meeting — in writing, indicating that the allocation related to a capital grant. Is that the best use of public money? Is it the best use of money for children with autism? Are there other public assets that could be utilised? Are the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety continuing to go in different directions in dealing with autism? Should we not have an integrated approach to try to ensure good value for money and better outcomes for our young people? The building in itself does not deliver services. We need to know how best we can provide services to our young people and make the best use of that money. I still seek further information

about what exactly is planned there and what is envisaged in the long term.

The Minister criticised the Committee for not granting accelerated passage. We actually sought further information and are yet, as I understand it, to take a final decision on the matter. I hope that the Minister will show some humility and, as the Chairman said earlier, wind his neck in. His arrogance in lecturing us does not go well when he is trying to convince Committee members that they have been consulted. The Minister needs to be very careful. The Finance Committee has been very careful. We have taken legal advice, we have checked with the Business Office and we have taken advice from our Clerks about the options between now and the end of the Assembly term and the options thereafter. Again, we have sought detailed advice on the process if the Minister, for some reason, fails to come and consult the Committee appropriately.

I hope that it will be possible to proceed in a timely fashion and without difficulty, but the Minister needs to be very careful about what he says from now on. He can get Committee members' backs up by not realising that they genuinely feel that there has been a lack of consultation. I see he is shaking his head at me again. As I have said, the outcomes have become available. That is new information that can affect my judgement on where various amounts have been allocated in the detailed Estimates.

When the Budget went through, there was no detailed breakdown. All we had in the Budget was headline figures. We now have a more detailed breakdown of how the Ministers intend to spend the money. Surely there should be public scrutiny of how that money is spent to ensure better use of public money.

As others have said, the financial process in the Assembly is very poor. That is not the Minister's fault; it is what has been inherited. I give credit to him and his officials for attempting to change that. I ask why the Minister of Education is holding up the public scrutiny process. I understand that he wants a single line of accountability for his £2 billion budget. Surely, that is not in the public interest. There ought to be greater scrutiny of what is happening and greater transparency in how money is spent during the year, so that we can get the maximum

use of that money for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.

I posed a couple of other questions because I am concerned that we make good investments. I noticed that DFP increased the Land and Property Services budget from £26·8 million to £31 million. It was right to ask the question, and after doing so we learned that there is an invest-to-save procedure going on there whereby they are trying to become more efficient. I am content with that explanation. That has to be welcomed.

Other colleagues were concerned about the increased use of the word "miscellaneous" to avoid transparency and accountability. It would be much better if that word were avoided except in exceptional circumstances, and if it is used as a heading then the detail of what the money is spent on should be given below.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Beggs: With regard to the Excess Vote, I am content with the explanation for DCAL. I would seek further information on what the additional £11·5 million for DSD was spent on in order to be satisfied with that.

Mr Hamilton: I support the two motions. When I was first elected, many Members here today were also first elected to the Assembly in 2007. I have to recall that now. It seems like a lifetime ago. One argument that many of us put forward was the need for better budgeting.

We inherited many things, not least the process. We also inherited a fairly lax approach to spending what was given to us through the block grant. It was maybe not a popular thing to preach at that time because the Budget was pretty good, certainly in comparison with where we are now. A lot of money was coming into Northern Ireland from the Exchequer, so maybe it was not the most critical of matters at that time, but it was one that many of us did keep on and on at. During my time on the Finance Committee, we regularly discussed how we could make sure to spend every penny we had and in the most efficient way possible.

Now that we are in distinctly tighter times with public funding, that is a message that everybody should be getting. It would seem that thankfully over the past number of years, particularly in this past financial year, performance is much better. When devolution was re-established

in 2007, underspends of around or in excess of 5% were the norm. Some members of the Finance Committee at that time will remember seeing such figures coming before us from direct rule Ministers, underspending huge swathes of the money that they had. The Committee and Minister at that time said that that was not good enough and things needed to be tightened up and Departments needed to sharpen their pencils. So, we have moved from having underspends of around 5% and hundreds of millions of pounds going back to the Treasury unspent every year to a position where capital and current underspend in the past financial year is at 0.5%. The average underspend over the past seven years was, I think, around 1.7% in current expenditure and an unbelievable 7% on the capital side. Think of the projects that that could have built. It really was a scandal.

We bandy percentages and figures about, but it is worth putting this into language that people can understand. We are regularly argued at by some people in ivory towers who say that we should introduce water charges and to hell with the consequences for householders in Northern Ireland. However, the difference in moving from where we were to 0.58% is more than would be raised by levying water charges on individuals in Northern Ireland. So, just by managing our expenditure better, we are in a much better position. It meant that, this year, because of the budget exchange scheme that the Minister suggested to the Treasury, none of the money that we did not spend this year went back to the Treasury, whereas under the old rules even end-year flexibility money could have gone back. Certainly, under the initial budget exchange scheme we would have lost large percentages of that cash and would not have been able to put it to good use in Northern Ireland.

1.30 pm

In addition, it was noticeable in the provisional out-turn this year that Departments were bearing down on administration, and that, without putting any targets on it, unlike Whitehall Departments, administration expenditure was reduced by an average of 6%. That sends out the message that Departments are not only understanding that they need to work better at spending the money that they have but that they are spending it where it should be spent and not on administration. I think that Departments are managing their finances better, particularly

in these tight circumstances, which Mr Bradley described as some of the worst ever.

We agreed to a four-year Budget to give certainty to Departments. We have done that, and Departments are getting the message about better financial management. Why then, would we not grant accelerated passage and, thereby, cause uncertainty to trickle into Departments? As the Minister said, it is not as though the Budget Bill to be debated tomorrow is, in any way, a revelation. About 95% of it is what was agreed in the Budget anyway. The difference is in the movements about which we are all well aware, such as the reallocations of the A5 and A8 money, the movement of money from the centre into the social protection fund, the money associated with not increasing student fees and the reduction in air passenger duty. We are aware of those things anyway.

I appreciate the point that the Budget requires scrutiny, but the Assembly has already agreed to more than 95% of this Budget, and the remaining figures are things about which we are already aware, by and large. The Main Estimates and, indeed, the Budget Bill, do not represent some sort of revelation for Members.

Much has been said about a lack of consultation. I am a Member of this House and I respect that Committees should be able to scrutinise. Individual Members such as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education and members of other Committees have sometimes said that they do not get sufficient time to scrutinise things, and the Budget process itself has been questioned. I agree with the comments made about that. The Budget process is not sufficient, and that is why there is a proposal to change it and make it better. However, to say that there has been a lack of consultation on these Estimates, these motions and, indeed, the Budget Bill, is not true.

Mr McLaughlin outlined the sequence of events. The Committee for Finance and Personnel did not get the papers when it thought it was going to get them, but it is my understanding that it got them a week before its meeting last week. That may sound like a short period for the Committee to scrutinise the material, but the truth — as Mr McLaughlin will know, because he chaired the Committee for a number of years — is that in the previous term of this Assembly and into this term, Mr McLaughlin, and Mr Beggs, who was on the Committee at that time,

agreed to accelerated passage of the Budget Bill on every occasion but two, with one meeting with officials and one meeting with the papers before them. Therefore, to say that this is some sort of anomaly and that it is wildly different is completely inaccurate.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Mr McLaughlin, Mr Beggs and others, including Mr Bradley and I, have agreed to accelerated passage with one meeting and the papers before us once.

I will give way.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. I accept his point about previous years, but will he agree that the circumstances this year are exceptional in that officials arrived at the Committee on two consecutive weeks embarrassed by the fact that they had no access to the papers that they were to share with the Committee?

Mr Hamilton: It is not the first time that that has happened in this Assembly. It is probably not the first time that it has happened in the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I recall officials coming to the Committee and being sent away because papers had not arrived. I was happy to agree to that, even though colleagues of mine were the Ministers at the time. The argument put forward for accelerated passage not being granted was that there has been a lack of consultation. My point to the Member and to others is that exactly the same time for consultation has been granted as has been granted on every occasion in the past.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: It has been agreed to by the Committee on every occasion, except two, amounting to close to a dozen times over the past five years.

I will give way.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I know that you are anxious about the time. We should remember that the Committee has not decided not to grant accelerated passage. It has allowed sufficient time to resolve the difficulty that has arisen. When an agenda for Committee is set, the Department is notified. There was no courtesy of a warning in advance that we would not have the documents and that the item should have

been taken off the agenda. In fact, the officials turned up and the Committee was expected to discuss a document that it had not seen. That is the issue. I think that we can resolve it, but no decision has been taken yet.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the points at the start and the end of the Member's contribution. I think that this can be resolved. It has to be resolved, because there are consequences. The Member was right in his contribution: the Committee can decide to do whatever it wants, but there are consequences for taking certain decisions. There are issues over the use of the permanent secretary granting 95%. The idea of handing over the ability to grant that money — I think that the ominous words “as he may direct” are contained in the relevant legislation — to a civil servant is what many of us have fought to get away from over the years. There are potential consequences for the use of receipts. Some Members may vote in a way that harms their own Minister. The Department of the Environment, which is the Department of Mr Bradley's ministerial party colleague, Mr Attwood, is very dependent on receipts coming in. It is our understanding that that may not be able to be used, so that Department may run out of cash much quicker than others. There are consequences for not doing this. The Committee has the right to do what it has done, but it is not without consequence.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Hamilton: I urge that in the time available to us we resolve this issue so that those consequences do not become a reality.

Mrs Overend: I am pleased to speak on the Main Estimates today, given the importance of the subject matter at hand. The Estimates set out the detailed resource and cash spending plans for all Departments for 2012-13. For that reason, it is important that they are given adequate scrutiny. I express concerns about the amount of time that Members have been afforded to consider a document that is 370 pages long and contains a vast amount of information and figures. The Finance Minister will be well aware of the position of the Committee for Finance and Personnel in that regard. It is important that the situation does not recur.

Every debate around the Budget in the House is accompanied by the usual calls for changes to how the Budget process works. I welcome the work that the Minister has undertaken thus far,

but we cannot allow the review of the financial process to be held up any longer. It is important that the Finance Minister ensures that the necessary changes are put in place despite the opposition that is coming from some quarters.

As the UUP's enterprise, trade and investment spokesperson, I want to use my time to focus specifically on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). The work that is undertaken by that Department is hugely important, given the current economic climate. The Executive have rightly set out the economy as the number one priority in this Assembly mandate. The Estimates state that the provision that is sought for 2012-13 is 11% lower than the final net provision for 2011-12. That shows the scale of the challenge that DETI faces. By any standards, that is a significant decrease in budget; it equates to over £30 million. Therefore, it is imperative that every funding allocation is scrutinised to ensure efficiency.

Unfortunately, it is not possible through the Main Estimates to look into that level of detail. However, I intend to look at a few of the central features of enterprise, trade and investment. Job creation is key to the recovery of the Northern Ireland economy. The latest unemployment figures show that 62,500 people are claiming unemployment-related benefits. That figure has increased steadily over the past while. That is compounded by the serious problem of youth unemployment, which has increased by around 125% since 2008. The Programme for Government sets out the commitment to support the creation of 25,000 jobs by 2015. That is what we are working towards.

In autumn last year, following the Chancellor's statement, the Minister confirmed to me that Northern Ireland was due £10.3 million in Barnett consequentials in 2012-13 from the youth contract initiative. I have called for that to be directed towards tackling youth unemployment, which should be a priority. Can the Minister explain where that money is going? Does he agree that youth employment is the ideal area for that substantial funding to be allocated to?

Invest Northern Ireland obviously has an important role to play in job creation, given that it is responsible for the establishment and expansion of small businesses. Indeed, it accounts for the majority of the DETI budget.

The Estimates show a slight reduction in DEL from last year to £104,000 as well as an increase of £11.08 million in the form of a grant that is included along with the non-budget allocations. I support the prioritisation of job creation, but it is regrettable that there is no detail on what the substantial increase is for, and that is perhaps a flaw of the financial process and, to some extent, exposes the inadequacy of today's debate.

It is important that there is flexibility in Invest NI's budget to ensure that there is no repeat of its performance of last year when it handed back nearly £40 million during two monitoring rounds. That was not ideal and creates a very negative perception of Invest NI among the business community as well as the public at large. That issue was raised when the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment received a briefing from Invest NI recently, and I would welcome an update from the Minister on the potential opportunities for increased budget flexibility for Invest NI.

I mentioned the Programme for Government (PFG) target for jobs, and it is important that the PFG ties in with the Budget. In the absence of a costed PFG, I would welcome clarification on the specific number of jobs as well as the type of jobs that the Estimates will support the promotion of in 2012-13.

I will also mention tourism within the context of the Estimates. We are all aware that tourism is a key driver of the economy, and Northern Ireland has some unique events next year to take advantage of. Examples include the World Police and Fire Games, with events taking place at locations throughout the country, as well as Londonderry as the UK City of Culture. The Estimates show an allocation of £370,000 in 2012 for the development of tourism. You will agree that that is rather vague, and I would welcome clarification on specifically how that money is to be utilised. In the non-budget section of the DETI Estimates, it is evident that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland are subject to substantial cuts to their grant allocations. The economic strategy identifies tourism as a sector that needs to be developed, yet it is arguable whether the Estimates do that.

I will take the opportunity to raise the issue of a tourism strategy. It is clear that the sector wants that, and the Minister has stated

that she hopes to bring one alongside the economic strategy. That has not happened, and, as a result, we have no overarching cross-departmental strategic focus for tourism in Northern Ireland. That needs to be rectified as soon as possible.

Lastly, I want to mention the imminent abolition of the Department for Employment and Learning. It is clear that some of those responsibilities will move to DETI during 2012-13, and I believe that the majority of those functions should move to DETI, but that is a separate debate. The point is that increased budget responsibilities will come as a result, and, therefore, the DETI Estimates before the House today will not remain unchanged. I seek clarification from the Minister about how he will deal with the impending situation of the increased budget for DETI as well as other Departments that are to be affected in a practical sense as it is important that we have transparency.

Mr Hilditch: I support the motions before the House today, and I do so as a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee, which has been continuously looking at the situation and has received briefings from officials over the four-year Budget period thus far.

As an individual constituency MLA, I have taken a close interest in the financial planning process that has involved the four-year Budget being set and the agreeing of the finance to be spent, and there have been changes over the past 12 months. My constituency and others are affected by those matters, and Committees will discuss those issues at their meetings. The House has been made aware of and informed about that over a period of time.

Today's debate takes place, once again, with the backdrop of the economic difficulties. The difficult times continue for everyone. It was the same at this time last year and, if we are honest, will be the same for some considerable time ahead.

However, it is the job of government to see the country move forward, react accordingly and attempt to keep it moving forward. This is what the House is attempting to do by giving legal approval for the spend set out in the Estimates. I am content to do so, while joining the Minister, the Department and most Members to strive for the continual improvement of the financial planning process, the Estimates

process and the budgetary process, which have been discussed at length in the Finance Committee. That will be ongoing for some time yet. Hopefully, an end will be reached, when an open and transparent process will be in place to everyone's satisfaction.

1.45 pm

Two Excess Votes are before us, for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development. As a member of the Finance Committee, it was clear to me that the proper processes had been followed and that the appropriate approval had been sought. We will support the motion with that knowledge and in the knowledge that the Committee was fully informed and that it communicated with the relevant Committees. The budgetary process and the Estimates are the result of much consultation and input from the many sectors in Northern Ireland, and I hope that, within hours of today's sitting, the process can proceed as envisaged with as little discomfort as possible. We have already agreed the Budget, and many of the limited changes that have been agreed have been before the House. Hopefully, we can move forward after today.

I welcome the funding that is made available in the Estimates for both the major road schemes in my constituency, the A8 and the A2. Both schemes awaited approval for many years under direct rule, especially the A2 plans. The ideas and communications on that go back to the early 1960s, so we are delighted to see funding for that contained in the spend. Anyone who travels on the A2 from Silverstream to Seapark — Ministers have done so in recent times — will be aware of the problems of commuters and of the plight caused by a number of homes and properties having been derelict for a time, with a whole community displaced. This year's spend will be welcomed in that area for that reason.

The Budget for the year ahead will also present some difficulties and challenges, because the A2 scheme is a £60 million project. A number of sections in Departments will need to collate information to make the situation bearable for folk who live in the area.

Having served on the Committee for Social Development, I share the Minister for Social Development's enthusiasm for and commitment to urban and town centre regeneration. That is reflected very well in the spend for the coming year. The Department has been responsible

for the creation of a number of master plans in towns and villages throughout the Province and has budgeted accordingly. That spend should be commended, because there were doubters at the time.

I particularly welcome the major environmental improvement schemes throughout the financial year, and I cite as an example the one in the town of Carrickfergus in my constituency. A partnership between the local council and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) brings together some £2 million for the project, and, again, that is reflected in this year's spend. That is notwithstanding the help with rates that the Minister and the Department, in trying to help town centres, are providing to small businesses. I totally agree with the Minister's sentiments about putting the heart back into our cities and town centres. We must maximise the financial resources that are available through partnership-working with Departments, agencies and, indeed, the private sector, which is pretty enthusiastic about that area of work. Many of our older, historic towns have large portions of abandoned land and vacant properties. The master plans that we are funding and the streetscapes that we have budgeted for and that will soon kick in are a catalyst for regeneration. I particularly look forward to the completion of the regeneration schemes. In some areas, housing lists are excessive, and opportunities exist to encourage some development of domestic housing in town centres, especially development above premises and of courtyards, which is envisaged in some of the schemes. I can but encourage a continuation of the financial planning around such issues.

I am a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, which includes among its responsibilities the delivery of sport throughout Northern Ireland. Through our devolved Government, much has been delivered in that sector over recent years, but much more work needs to be done on the ground now that we are up and running at Stormont. However, there is some concern that the Budget, as it sits, will deliver projects at the high end of the scale. Although that will certainly benefit our elite sports people and athletes who are in the news, those at the grass-roots level may continue to suffer and struggle a little.

Clearly, the new stadium projects for the three main sports will eat up a lot of the capital. With proper planning, they can become vibrant

centres for their sports, and their hinterlands will also benefit from the spend, part of which will be in this year. Indeed, not redeveloping Windsor Park may have resulted in our national team having to play home games outside Northern Ireland. However, we must be careful not to create a have and have-not hierarchy in sport. I have previously stated in the House that sport has gone through some difficult times in the past 40 years and that its survival is due, in no small amount, to the many volunteers and administrators who give of their time and energy in the cause of their sporting disciplines and clubs. It is clear, however, where the investment has been, to date. I know and have witnessed from my work outside the political arena that that has been partly, or initially, down to, for instance, health and safety issues, particularly in stadiums.

In trying to cover those three areas, I am happy enough that the Estimates before us move forward, and I hope that the problems outlined by some of our other colleagues in the Chamber can be overcome within the next few sittings.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson for the Committee of the Environment): I welcome the opportunity to outline the Environment Committee's views on the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates for 2012-13.

Everyone in this place will be aware of the pressure that Departments face in providing their services for less and less income. The Department of the Environment (DOE) is particularly exposed to such pressures for two main reasons. First, some 80% of the Department's discretionary expenditure is on staff salaries, which places major restrictions on developing cost reductions. Secondly, the Department relies heavily on income from planning applications for its funding. At the start of this Budget period, the Department advised the Committee that it was looking at an income of some £10 million less, a 45% drop on that of three years ago. The Committee is deeply concerned about the long-term impacts of that on the Department's delivery of its services, but it welcomed many of the measures that the Department is putting in place to try to minimise the impact of falling revenue. However, the Committee is adamant that the Department needs to be very careful in how it achieves this.

One of the key ways that the Department delivers its services is by funding external

bodies that provide practical expertise on the ground. The Committee recently heard that, to meet the EU water framework directive's requirements, DOE produced and published river basin management plans to improve freshwater bodies in Northern Ireland by 2015. An interdepartmental bid totalling just under £8.9 million was developed to cover the additional resources that would be required to implement these plans, but it was, unfortunately, unsuccessful. Subsequently, it was agreed to fund the DOE elements of the bid through moneys returned to the Department's baseline budget for 2011-12, in lieu of income from the planned single-use carrier bag levy.

The DOE reprioritised its budget to grant-aid some small local community projects for improvement work under local management area action plans. That is welcome, and it has achieved some excellent results, but it cannot be seen as a strategic approach to delivering key European obligations. The river basin management plans state that only 28% of water bodies are at good status and, through the measures in the plans, the aim is to increase that to 59% by 2015. When briefing the Committee last week, DOE officials stated that that target would be very challenging if no extra resources were found. Failing to meet the requirements of the water framework directive has the potential for huge infraction fines from the EU.

We know that the single-use levy is pending, but we also know that it is unlikely to provide the revenue required in time to ensure that the necessary work is done. In fact, if it is successful in its aim, it will generate no revenue at all. The Environment Committee is adamant that the levy should not be used as a tax to generate essential funding for DOE, and I urge the Assembly to ensure that the necessary funding is provided to ensure that we can meet European standards for our environment.

The Committee is also concerned about the need for adequate funding for the RPA process. It is essential that the DOE bid in the June monitoring round is successful in order to provide the necessary assistance to the voluntary transition committees in this financial year.

I welcome the proposed £100,000 within the bid to commission community places to support

the development of community planning in communities and each council cluster.

Mr Allister: In the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates, there is £8.2 billion on the cash side and £8.4 billion on the resource side. The two put together come to over £16.5 billion. The fundamental question that anyone living in Northern Ireland should reflect on when hearing the figures that we have to spend is this: where has that money come from? Another way of putting it is this: how much of that money did we accrue ourselves in Northern Ireland — from our own tax base and our own various mechanisms for raising funds — and how much of it is subvention from the British Government?

Just yesterday, another one of the fantasists who used to sit on the Sinn Féin Benches opposite the Minister was telling us about the economic attractions of a united Ireland and the Utopia that it would be, and never paused to think, never mind answer the question, of where the money would come from. The first matter that the debate throws up into sharp relief for such fantasists is where the £16.6 billion is coming from. It is certainly not coming from the direction they want to take us. Rather, it is coming from the source that they want to take us away from, that of our affinity and partnership in the United Kingdom. That is the sobering reality of any debate about finance in this House, and one that too few want to discuss, contemplate or take on board. Oh yes, they are very happy to pontificate about all their nonsense proposals of Irish unification, but they are never willing to pause a moment to reflect on the fact that the £16.6 billion that we spend in this Province comes from that dreaded, hated British connection.

If that connection was not there, the money would not be there.

2.00 pm

Having said that, I hesitate to comment too much upon the latest rift in the DUP/Sinn Féin marriage. Far be it from me to talk at all about that particular marital discord, but it is quite clear that there is something of an issue between the Minister and his Sinn Féin colleagues in government around the accelerated passage process. He has waxed quite robust in his comments in that regard. I do not know when they will kiss and make up, but I am sure that they will, in due course. Nor do I know what this particular trade-off

is part of, or whether, in settling the issue of accelerated passage, there will be some other pay-off on something else. Doubtless there will be. I will never know the details of the kiss-and-make-up package, but I am sure it will be there, nonetheless.

The whole issue of accelerated passage is significant. As I understand it, as we stand here today, there is legal authority to discharge up to 45% of the Budget expenditure on the Bill that we previously passed in the spring. That should take us through, I suppose, until the end of the summer. Then, we have the suggestion that, if we do not sort the accelerated passage, we can still have the permanent secretary, under the powers given in the '98 Act, sign off up to 95% of the Budget. I have serious reservations as to whether that is legally tenable. It is quite clear that the reasonable expectation attached to the power in the '98 Act is that it is to be used in circumstances of extremis, where there is an essential breakdown in government. Where you have a supposedly functioning Executive and a supposedly functioning Assembly, the reasonable expectation is that the Executive will bring to the Assembly, and the Assembly will approve, the budgetary plans for the incoming year. The reasonable expectation is that, while the Executive and Assembly continue in existence, you will not circumvent that simply by a default mechanism through the permanent secretary. In real political institutions, if an Executive could not get their Budget through their Parliament or Assembly, that Government would fall. That is the natural logic of parliamentary democracy. I caution as to whether it is a right and legitimate use of the permanent secretary's power over 95% of the Budget to exercise it on that ad hoc basis. I really do have serious reservations whether that is viable.

When I look at the figures, I see £16.6 billion. I compare them with last year, and see that, last year, we voted through just under £16.8 billion. Yes, there is a reduction, but in the scale of things, it is a very small reduction. It is a reduction of £170 million, which is not to be sniffed at, but, in the scale of £16.6 billion, it is a relatively small percentage. The question that that raises for me is this: how does that sit with the fact that we have been repeatedly told about £4 billion of cuts? If there were £4 billion of real cuts to real budgets, one would expect the decline on the graph to be much steeper than

the decline it shows from last year. No doubt the Minister can explain that.

Even within that, there is still time for squander. There are still issues on which we can readily, happily and enthusiastically squander money. Perhaps the Minister can tell us whether these Estimates allow us to spend another £5 million this year on spin doctors, for example. Is there another £5 million earmarked for spin doctors to tell the story of the Executive? Sometimes, even with the 161 staff in the press office, they think that they get a raw deal with the press. They think, "How dare press people challenge, question or assert anything to the contrary in respect of what the Executive say." Are we going to squander another £5 million on that this year? Are we going to squander another £1.25 million on hospitality? That is £3,000 a day. Is that what the Executive require to spend on hospitality? Has that been cut? Are we going to spend £400,000 on the vanity project of photographers to take photographs of our Ministers, so that we might have the privilege of paying for the photographs we see appearing in the media? One wonders if there are any cuts there. One fears not. More will be squandered.

Of course, we come to the most sacred cows of all — those of the North/South arrangements. In this Budget, we see under the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister a 30% increase in the allowance to the wretched, miserable, useless North/South Ministerial Council. Oh yes, schools might be under threat of closure and hospitals' acute facilities might have to be reduced, but we can find an extra 30% for the North/South Ministerial Council, which has never done anything for anyone in this Province. There is £30 million this year again for the North/South bodies. Yes —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Allister: — there is still a lot of room for squander where the money is least needed. That is part of the story of these Estimates.

Mr Wilson: I thank Members for the contributions they have made to the debate. I suspect that the debate will be remembered more for what Mr Allister described as the little spat between myself and the Committee over whether it had sufficient time to look at the Estimates than for the detailed discussion on the Estimates. I do not think that anyone will want to take advice, on this issue, certainly, from the Jim Allister marriage guidance association. I do not think

that there is a great deal of kissing going on in this marriage anyhow. Some people described it as a shotgun marriage.

Mr Hamilton: They got rid of all the shotguns, did they not?

Mr Wilson: They were decommissioned some time ago, so I do not think that that will apply.

I will probably have time to deal with the main point about the consultation that has been made by a number of Members. I want to make it clear from the outset that, as far as I am concerned, as Minister, I seek to, and seek to ensure that my officials, provide information to the Committee, attend the Committee meetings when asked and deal with the Committee as fully as we possibly can on those occasions. There was a breakdown on this occasion. I wrote to the Committee and made it quite clear that it was a mistake; it was not deliberate. When it was discovered, it was immediately remedied. The total responsibility lies with me, and an apology was made. That is as far as I will go.

It appears that some of the Committee members want me to grovel. Well, I am not prepared to do that. I will accept responsibility for mistakes that were made, and I will apologise for them. Once I do that, I expect the people who have been inconvenienced by that mistake to be mature and grown up enough to accept that and to move on, and not to engage in some kind of petty point-scoring and to keep picking at the issue.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I do not want to delay you, but your officials will have come back after the first scheduled discussion had to be abandoned and reported that the difficulty was that the documentation was not produced and that they were unable to engage with the Committee. We were given two explanations. The first was that you were still engaged in checking through the document and were unable to sign off on it. We then got a written explanation, which said that it was an oversight. Which is the truth?

Mr Wilson: The letter that came from me, saying that it was an oversight, was the explanation that I wished the Committee to have. The Committee have that, and I do not wish to go any further than that. Let me put on public

record that I have accepted responsibility for that oversight, and I have apologised for it. Contrast that with what I have described, and I will not step back from it, as the truculent response and petulance of the Committee. It received the papers one week before the Committee was due to meet officials. Therefore, there was plenty of time to read them. Normally, Committees have only one session with officials. Committee members had time to read them and had the officials in front of them, but most of that meeting was spent discussing issues other than the Estimates. As a result, the process of accelerated passage was held up, and the Committee knew the consequences of that.

I have accepted that I made a mistake. It was not deliberate, and it was remedied quickly. The stance that the Committee has taken is deliberate, calculated and unnecessary. It had an opportunity to do what it had to do, which was to scrutinise the Estimates. However, when Committee members had the officials before them, they decided to talk about a whole host of other things that were not relevant to the Estimates, including why the papers were late. When you contrast the two situations, you can see why I feel particularly sore about the way in which the Committee has dealt with this matter. However, I welcome the remarks that were made by Mr McLaughlin, who at least seems to have taken a fairly measured response to the issue. He accepted that the Committee still has time and has not made up its mind yet about what will happen.

I hope that good sense will prevail. Outside, people will ask whether it is a mature response, once an apology has been made, for the Committee still to jeopardise the Bill's progress and, as Mr Hamilton said, cause uncertainty in Departments about what money they will have to spend for the next four or five months until we come back after recess and deal with the Budget Bill through the full process in September.

I really want to move on, but it is significant that many of the Members who felt most vexed, including the Chairman, spent their entire speeches complaining about the fact that the papers were late and did not mention anything that was in the Estimates. Again, that is an indication of where some people are coming from on this issue.

Despite what a number of Members said, on most occasions, apart from two in the past 10 years, one evidence session has been

sufficient. Officials reported to the Committee last Wednesday, so the Committee had a week to consider the papers provided, and it did not take the opportunity to have the normal one-session scrutiny.

In fact, as I say, about 80% of the time was used to talk about things other than the Estimates, which the Committee had in good time. I hope that, on reflection, Members will get off their high horses, which, I think, is how the Chairman described it, and that we will get back to the normal process for this.

2.15 pm

I will now turn to some of the remarks that other Members made. Mr Cree raised the issue of the figures that were before the Committee. The point is that 95% of what was before the Committee had been scrutinised before. As I pointed out, when the Chairman of the Committee spoke on the issue in the Assembly last year he reported that he was very happy with the level of scrutiny of those figures, the evidence that it had taken and the information from Committees, etc. So, 95% of what was before the Committee had already been scrutinised, and the Chairman reported that the Committee was well satisfied that it had been given an opportunity to scrutinise that information.

The remaining part was about monitoring rounds, etc. There have been statements in the Assembly, and members have questioned my officials about monitoring rounds in Committee. Again, some of the capital reallocations were subject to statements in the Assembly, and there were opportunities for Members to ask questions about that. So, it was not as though the other 5% had not been scrutinised either, because it had.

Mr Cree asked what relevance this year's figures had for the Budget 2011-15, which I referred to. I must say that I am puzzled by that, because the Estimates relate to the second year of the Budget. That Budget was fully scrutinised. I stood in the Assembly for hours getting questioned about it, and I bored Members stiff with my responses, which, sometimes, I gave until 12.00 midnight. So, I was puzzled when the Member asked about the relevance of the figures, because we have already discussed them.

Mr Cree also raised the issue of the transparency of the Budget process, as did a number of other Members. I have made it clear that I want the

Budget process to be as transparent as possible. I have criticised Ministers in the past for not giving their savings plans to their Committee. Indeed, some Ministers still have not done so. However, I did not hear any criticism of them. Some Ministers from the parties that do the most complaining have not yet given their departmental savings plans to their Committee for scrutiny. So, on the one hand, we get lectured about transparency, and, on the other, some Ministers from the very parties that lecture us about that have, one year on, still not told their Committee how they are going to save the money that they have to save in their budget. Therefore, so much for that kind of scrutiny.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister referred to the need for Departments to keep things transparent. Would he do the House a favour and name those Ministers?

Mr Wilson: I was, in fact, going to go further than that. The Member for East Antrim is one of those particularly perturbed by the whole issue. However, last year, his Minister, who of course is not now the Health Minister — the Health Department is being run much better as a result — would not even go and discuss the Budget with his Committee; he preferred to protest outside with unions. Mr Beggs was at the forefront of defending that Minister. Therefore, so much for his concern about transparency and the rights of Committees. When it suited him, he was quite happy to support a Minister who would not even give the Committee the time of day on the important matter of how £4 billion was to be spent in his Department.

Mr Storey, of course, raised the issue of transparency. It is a great point. It is now a matter of public record, so I am not breaking any confidences when I point out that the Education Minister seems to be the one Minister who does not want transparency in his budget.

The irony is this, of course: the information that the Education Minister gives about his budget to the Treasury in England — in what is, for Sinn Féin, the hated Westminster Parliament — is much more detailed than that which he gives to the Committee in the Assembly. So much for transparency. It is a great pity. It irks me that we have not been able to move forward with the Budget process and with a more transparent

Budget because it is being held up by one Minister, although I hope that the situation will be resolved. Two Sinn Féin Members have already mentioned the issue in this debate. I hope that they will bring pressure to bear on their Minister to accept that there must be transparency in how money is raised.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he explain why one Minister, namely the Minister of Education, can hold up the improvement of the financial process for the Assembly and the Executive?

Mr Wilson: The Minister of Education can do so for a simple reason. Perhaps the Member does not wish to remember the deal provided by his party when it was settled that such decisions had to be made by cross-community support and, as a result of one Minister deciding that he does not wish to have transparency, the process is held up. All I say to the Member is that we have to live with the legacy bequeathed to us by his party. Perhaps the Member should remember that before he makes silly interventions. He should think through the consequences of interventions before he gets up on his hind legs and raises the issue.

Mr Bradley raised the issue of additional revenue not in the Budget. The Budget review group is still looking at additional revenue proposals. I am pleased to report to the Member that we raised £171 million in capital receipts last year, which is £29 million above the target that we had set ourselves. Given the difficulties with the property market etc, that at least augurs well for us meeting the targets that we have set. If there are opportunities to raise more money through capital receipts, we have said that we will do so. We want to add as much to the Budget as we possibly can.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for giving way. The House might be interested to know where the hundred and whatever it was million that he raised came from. What items of the family silver did you sell to get it?

Mr Wilson: The Member uses the pejorative term “family silver”; however, we will not get any money if we do not sell something. The Member has to accept that. I do not have a comprehensive list of the capital receipts. The Member’s party was one of those that encouraged the Executive to raise money in that way. If we are to raise money from capital

receipts, we must relinquish something. People will not give us money for nothing.

Again, the Member ought to think through his point before he raises it.

Mr McCarthy: You did not tell us what you sold.

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

Mr Wilson: The Member says that I have not given a comprehensive list of the assets sold, but I am afraid that I am not a walking encyclopaedia on the issue. I can give the headline figure: we aimed to raise £142 million, and we raised £171 million; we are over the target for the year. That money goes back into capital projects that help the construction industry, improve our infrastructure and make Northern Ireland a better place to invest in. Those are the things that the money has gone on.

The Member talks about the family silver. If we have an asset that is redundant and we do not need, it makes sense to dispose of it and use the money for something that we want to do.

Mr Bradley also spoke about the underspend in Departments and suggested that the levels declared by Departments would lead to a loss of resources for Northern Ireland. I will finish on this point, Mr Speaker, because I know that you are keen to shut me up. All that I can say is that, because of the Budget exchange system that we negotiated with the Treasury, not one penny has been lost to Northern Ireland this year. We have been able to carry money over — money that I will be announcing very shortly — to be allocated to various Departments in the June monitoring round.

I would prefer Departments to underspend rather than squander money. If they find that they do not have the opportunity to spend money, they should return it early so that we can either spend it in-year or carry it into the next year for projects that are of higher priority. Departments should not spend money just to get rid of it.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry that I must interrupt the Minister, as he is in full flight at the moment. As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the Minister will continue his winding-up remarks.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Sexual Orientation Strategy

1. **Mr Lynch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will publish a sexual orientation strategy. (AQO 2164/11-15)

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer this question.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): It is our intention to bring forward proposals for a revised sexual orientation strategy, including a full public consultation, by the end of 2012.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the junior Minister for his answer. What are his views on civil partnerships and gay marriage?

Mr Bell: Legislation is in place for civil partnerships. The view on gay marriage is that the legal and factual definition of marriage is between a man and a woman. There are no plans to change that definition, and I endorse that position.

Mr G Robinson: Will any sexual orientation strategy contain new rights not already protected by law?

Mr Bell: A number of misconceptions have been put forward about what a strategy is. A strategy does not contain new rights or privileges. The intention is that the sexual orientation strategy and the supporting action plans will be directed at the issues that affect the everyday lives, hopes and aspirations of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. The development of the sexual orientation strategy will be used to bring a focus on and to prioritise those issues.

The strategy is not a list of rights; it is an accumulation of best practice. As well as providing an overarching policy framework and a basis for discussion and consideration,

it is important that the strategy supports our community in facing up to and tackling homophobic attitudes and behaviours. In the 21 years that I professionally practised as a social worker, using the values of anti-oppressive practice. I saw at first hand many instances where people's homes or property had been attacked, and children had been left isolated and lonely, and, in certain cases, homeless. We want to tackle real distress that has been caused by discrimination. Everybody, regardless of their sexual orientation, the colour of their skin or their gender, should have the right to live their life free from intimidation and fear. The proposed public consultation will allow anyone with an interest to make their views known and will, therefore, test opinion on those issues.

Mr Eastwood: What is the junior Minister's opinion on the Health Minister's announcement today that he will not end the discrimination that prevents homosexual men from giving blood?

Mr Bell: That is not a matter for which I have policy responsibility.

Child Poverty: Targets

2. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they remain confident that the 2020 target for the eradication of child poverty can be met, given the recent scepticism articulated by UNICEF on the ability to achieve this target at a time of ongoing government cuts. (AQO 2165/11-15)

Mr Robinson: As a matter of fact, the recent statistics released at the end of last week by the Department for Social Development show a significant drop in poverty levels in Northern Ireland. The largest reduction was in relation to our relative child poverty levels. We now have the lowest child poverty levels since Northern Ireland started measuring child poverty here some 10 years ago.

Some had projected that poverty would increase during the global economic downturn. However, it is clear from the latest figures that, in relative terms, families with the lowest incomes have been less detrimentally impacted than other income groups. The report referenced in the question sets out the latest international comparison data for 35 countries on child poverty measured separately through rates of child deprivation and relative income poverty.

We have always acknowledged that the statutory targets set in the United Kingdom are ambitious and will be challenging to achieve. However, as an Executive, we are committed to continuing to strive towards the elimination of poverty by 2020. The Executive have introduced a wide range of measures designed to maximise incomes and reduce living costs for families. We have developed a new structure in OFMDFM — Delivering Social Change — to drive forward an innovative and collaborative approach across government to tackle poverty-related issues. We have also introduced the new social investment fund to encourage strategic outcome-focused and joined-up interventions. However, it should be noted that the statutory, relative and absolute measurements across the United Kingdom are income-based only and that we are measured against the UK median income.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the First Minister for his response. Given the major concerns across Northern Ireland over the implementation of welfare reform, is the First Minister confident of maintaining those levels of child poverty? Has the Department set individual targets to ensure that they do not rise, going forward?

Mr P Robinson: We are, of course, bound by the targets set in law. Those are the targets that we will attempt to achieve.

I approach the issue of child poverty measurement with some caution. For instance, if the euro zone were to crash, child poverty levels in Northern Ireland, believe it or not, would greatly improve, as they are based on relative terms. There has been a significant improvement in child poverty levels over the past year, but I suspect that, in the real life of most people, things have not got significantly better. Child poverty levels are based on how Northern Ireland relates to the United Kingdom median level, so the statistics show that we are getting better. However, in another way, those at the top have got worse, and, as a result, the median level has come down. We therefore need to be very cautious in looking at the figures. If we look at the issue in absolute terms and the figures are income-based, we end up with much the same result.

The UNICEF document to which the Member referred indicates levels of deprivation and lists 14 measures against which we should judge whether there is poverty. As I looked through the measures, I felt that I must have been brought

up in abject poverty. I did not have the kind of features that are contained in that document.

The figures improve year on year, and they are probably more of an indicator of equality than of poverty.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Agus go raibh maith agat leis an Chéad Aire as na freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the First Minister for his answers to date. My question is on his last comment. Large-scale unemployment has reduced the median targets, so is it not the case that many families and children are not better off? Indeed, given the levels of poverty in the North of Ireland, many are worse off.

Mr P Robinson: That is my argument and why I do not think that we should rely on the statistics that show that, in relative terms, things have got better. You cannot freeze child benefit and cut other child allowances and expect people's real lives to improve. We need to look at the statistics with some caution. I am not saying that we should do away with them — they are a useful guide for us — but I do not think that we need to rely on them.

From the point of view of government, it is absolutely essential that we address child poverty. In the early and formative years of a child's life, education, health and housing are of the utmost importance, as they will shape the rest of his or her life. That is why the focus needs to be on child poverty and why we need to give the best assistance that we can to the poorest in our society.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the First Minister for his answers so far. Will you give us your analysis of why, on the basis of the statistics, you feel that people on a low income appear to have been less affected?

Mr P Robinson: I do not think that people on a low income have been less affected, but, statistically, their position has improved. That is largely because those at the higher levels have come down. People have taken cuts in wages and, in some cases, have moved to a three- or four-day week. That has reduced the level of income, and, as a consequence, the median level has moved down. Statistically, it has shown up in that fashion. We have always had misgivings about the ways in which statistics are prepared and whether there can be any meaningful statistics on child poverty. When I arrived in Mumbai, I saw barefoot children

begging on the streets. Fifty per cent of the population were without formal housing. I am told that, in relative terms, poverty levels in India are the same as those in Northern Ireland. In absolute terms, that cannot be the case, as there is real poverty across the whole society. However, in relative terms — that is, relating to other people in that society — poverty levels in India equate to those in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that questions 4 and 7 have been withdrawn and will require written answers.

Carer's Allowance

3. **Mr Gardiner** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have had any discussions with the Minister for Social Development in relation to potential equality issues arising from the non-payment of carer's allowance to carers who are in receipt of a state pension. (AQO 2166/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will ask my colleague Assembly Member Jonathan Bell to answer that question.

Mr Bell: This is a matter for the Minister for Social Development, and, to date, no discussions have taken place. The Minister for Social Development has confirmed that a basic principle of the social security system is that two benefits cannot be paid for the same purpose. Many benefits are intended to provide a level of income replacement where, for example, a person does not work because they have retired, have limited capability for work or have caring responsibilities. When a person is entitled to two income replacement benefits at the same time, only one is normally payable.

Although the question suggests that an equality issue arises in respect of age, I should point out that the overlapping benefit rules relating to carer's allowance apply to a person regardless of their age and are dependent on the benefits to which an individual is entitled. Therefore, they apply equally to people of working age and those over the state pension age. A person in receipt of contributory employment and support allowance, for example, cannot be in receipt of carer's allowance.

Mr Gardiner: Does the junior Minister know what steps the First Minister is taking, in national carers' week, to match the new paid respite

break being introduced by the Westminster Government?

Mr Bell: We are looking at all our potential moves to support carers, particularly those who are over pensionable age but are on a low income. We need to be careful: where a carer's allowance cannot be paid because it overlaps with the state pension, people keep their underlying entitlement to carer's allowance. That gives them access to a carer's premium in income-related benefits, so receiving carer's allowance in addition to the state pension would reduce or extinguish a pension credit and/or housing benefit or a pension credit. Carers who are over pensionable age on a low income can receive additional help from income-related benefits, such as pension credit and housing benefit, which are paid at the higher rate for carers.

With any increase in income as a result of changing overlapping rules, we need to be careful to take into account income-related benefits such as receiving carer's allowance in addition to the state pension, reducing or extinguishing pension credit or housing benefit, which would be payable and would leave some pensioners worse off. As a result, many would not automatically get help with the cost of their dental treatment, dentures, glasses, fares to hospital or court fees or would not have access to free school meals for children. It is about balancing all that and doing our best for pensioners. I compared the figures: in the 2008-09 DSD household survey, 31% of our pensioners were living in poverty; the figure today is 26%.

2.45 pm

Mr McCarthy: In all honesty, does the Minister not realise that there are people who have worked all their days, paid their national insurance etc and looked after a loved one? Despite all the nice words that the Minister has said, I can guarantee that a senior citizen listening to this will have no idea — not a clue — why, at an age when they need it more, the Government do not pay them extra money.

Mr Bell: I do not know whether any of the Alliance Party Ministers have the additional money in their budget to pay for that. If they did, you would need to be careful, Mr McCarthy. If you change the overlapping rules, will you go back to pensioners in our constituency and tell them that they are not entitled to their dental treatment and their dentures? Will you go back

to them and tell them that they will not get the help they need to pay for their glasses? Will you tell them that they will no longer get their fare to hospital paid or that they will no longer have access to help for court fees and free school meals? Those are the implications of what you are asking for. It is important that our pensioners get the best deal that we can give them. That is why the Department for Social Development needs to be very careful about any changes to the overlapping rules.

Mr Molloy: A LeasCheann Comhairle, thank you very much. I thank the Minister for his replies so far. I welcome the decrease from 20% to 13% between 2009 and 2011. However, that still leaves 37,000 pensioners living in absolute poverty. What further measures can be taken by the Executive to alleviate that problem?

Mr Bell: Is it absolute or relative poverty? We have shown over the period in question that we have had a significant reduction in pensioner poverty, but your question is about the actions that we can take.

The social protection fund was established by the Executive to assist those most in need. Subsequently, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister ensured that a winter fuel payment scheme was progressed by DSD and the Department of Health under the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. Through that scheme, a one-off payment of £75 has been made to some 158,000 of our people who are in receipt of income support, income-related employment and support allowance and income-based jobseeker's allowance. In addition, 96,000 pension credit recipients have received a one-off payment of £100, as have approximately 6,000 people who have had or are in receipt of treatment for cancer as per the criteria laid down by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. All of that was issued automatically to recipients.

It is estimated that, by the time that all the applications have been processed and the appropriate payments made, £22 million will have been allocated this year through the social protection fund to assist some of our most vulnerable citizens. We are on the right road if we take the Northern Ireland household's below-average income, which shows, as said, that we have 26% — 75,000 — of our pensioners living in poverty, compared with 31% in 2008-09.

Mr Newton: I thank the junior Minister for his answers so far. I want to specifically ask about the benefits that carers are entitled to claim. Will you offer some advice on the specific benefits those who are identified as carers are entitled to claim?

Mr Bell: As I said, where the carer's allowance cannot be paid because it overlaps with the state pension, the person keeps their underlying entitlement to carer's allowance, which gives them access to the carer premium in the income-related benefits. So, receiving carer's allowance in addition to state benefit would have reduced or extinguished the pension credit, the housing benefit and/or both. Where a carer is over the pensionable age and is on a low income, they can receive additional help from the income-related benefits — pension credit and housing benefit — which are paid at the higher rate for the carer.

As I said, we need to be careful regarding any increase in income as a result of potentially changing overlapping rules because you would need to take fully into consideration the income-related benefits. You do not want to remove or extinguish the pension credit or housing benefit payable, because that would, in effect, leave pensioners worse off. As I explained to Mr McCarthy, they would not get help with dental treatment, dentures, the cost of glasses, referrals to hospital, court fees or free school meals for children. For those reasons, we want to ensure that any potential change leaves pensioners better off. We have shown that there has been a 5% decrease in pensioner poverty. That is cold comfort to those still in pensioner poverty, I accept, but it is decreasing. We need to make sure that any change does not leave pensioners worse off.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

FM/DFM: Trade Missions

5. **Mr Ross** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have for further international trade missions. (AQO 2168/11-15)

China

8. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the recent

high-level engagement with the Chinese, what are the potential benefits of developing further links with China. (AQO 2171/11-15)

Mr Robinson: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission I will answer questions 5 and 8 together. The deputy First Minister and I, following a meeting with Xi Jinping, deputy premier, and an invitation received from Madam Liu Yandong, intend to visit China later this year. Our visit is also planned to coincide with and assist Invest Northern Ireland with a Northern Ireland trade mission to Shanghai in November. Some of our firms sell into China, and we hope through our visit to be able to create more opportunities for them and new businesses, which will, obviously, assist our strategy of strengthening the Northern Ireland economy and creating more jobs.

Our Programme for Government includes a target for increasing sales to countries such as China and India. We are determined to do all that we can to provide the assistance that our businesses need in establishing a presence in overseas markets. There are instances, particularly following our meeting with Madam Liu, where our personal participation will open doors, especially at a political level. Our intention is also to meet Northern Ireland companies in China, as we recognise the importance of our government being fully accessible to local businesses and overseas stakeholders. Ministerial involvement reinforces the message that we are pro-business and are committed to growing the economy. We will be supporting our universities in developing their partnerships with Chinese universities and colleges, particularly to enable them to attract financial support and encourage more students from China to come to Northern Ireland.

We hope to stimulate additional interest in tourism from China. The high-level Chinese Government visit to Northern Ireland in May attracted significant media coverage in China. In particular, the delegation was delighted with its visits to the Titanic centre and the Giant's Causeway. We need to build on those very positive developments.

Mr Ross: Will the First Minister agree that last week's announcement from Bombardier that it had received a significant order from NetJets, which could be up to the value of £4.5 billion, is exactly the sort of thing that Departments, working with Invest NI, local businesses and

others, can do to bring that level of investment to Northern Ireland?

Mr Robinson: Yes. As a representative for East Belfast, I do not think the Member would expect anything but a positive response to that question. It is a significant boost to the Northern Ireland economy as a whole. The deputy First Minister and I, when we were in Canada, visited the Bombardier plant in Montreal. We had a look at the Challenger jet, which is one of the two aircraft for which the order was placed. We are delighted because it is not only of benefit to Bombardier; their supply and service companies will also benefit. Therefore, the benefits go right down to the grass roots.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Do the Executive intend to produce an international relations strategy to ensure an effective cross-departmental approach to issues such as inward and outward investment, as highlighted by my colleague?

Mr Robinson: Yes. OFMDFM officials have been working up an international relations strategy. No small part of that will be the role that we already play in Europe, where I think we have access at a higher level than would be gained by many other regions of our size. We have direct access to President Barroso and the commissioners. Furthermore, the role that we have played in North America, particularly in the United States but also now in Canada, our recent visits to the United Arab Emirates, India and, shortly, to China indicate that, for the first time in generations, Northern Ireland is starting to look outwards to where we can boost our economy through the relationships that we build internationally. In addition, the deputy First Minister and I will meet, almost weekly, ambassadors and high commissioners from various parts of the world.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On which sectors will the Chinese visit focus? Also, does he agree that a visa waiver scheme for Asian countries such as China, similar to that in place in the South, would help to attract further trade? Will he and the deputy First Minister pursue that?

Mr P Robinson: The list of sectors for the Chinese visit has not yet been compiled, because businesses are considering whether to accompany us in November. If it mirrors the kind of delegation that we had in India, it will cover

virtually every sector that one could imagine. I suspect, however, that the agrifood sector will be particularly involved in the visit to China.

The deputy First Minister and I discussed protocols with the Taoiseach in the margins of the North/South ministerial meeting. He indicated that he was eager to share networks and contacts with us for our visit to China. The Tánaiste pointed out that protocols signed by the Republic of Ireland and China have been most beneficial, and we will look to see whether we can replicate some of their successes.

Mr Kinahan: The aim of the economic strategy was to support the creation of 5,900 jobs by inward investors. Will the First Minister update the Assembly on where we are with that?

Mr P Robinson: We have had some very significant successes over the past number of months. Invest Northern Ireland met all its targets in this area of activity during the previous Programme for Government. It was punished for its success by being given even greater targets to achieve in this Programme for Government. We have in place a monitoring process, and, when it is published, Members will see the success that has been achieved against each of the targets set. There certainly has been a good response thus far. If I did not say it, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment certainly would say that we are operating in a very difficult environment but are doing so with a lot more success than all those around us.

Contested Spaces Programme: Funding

6. **Ms P Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the timescale for the second round of funding for the contested spaces programme. (AQO 2169/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Bell to answer this question.

Mr Bell: Our commitment to the contested spaces programme, alongside that of Atlantic Philanthropies, is testimony to our continued work to challenge the segregation and division that exists across our society. The programme, which represents a total investment of £4 million over the three years from 2011 to 2014, provides a unique opportunity to encourage and support shared service delivery in interface areas and in the sections of our community where there are contested spaces.

On 22 May, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister announced the opening of the second call for applications to the programme. The second call closes on Tuesday 17 July, and applications are particularly welcome from projects in rural areas and those that focus on youth development. All applications received will be assessed by Atlantic Philanthropies and departmental officials over the summer, with a view to finalising the decision process by mid-September.

We expect successful projects to be notified thereafter. They will join the five existing projects that have been supported as a result of the first round of funding.

3.00 pm

Environment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer. Question 9 has also been withdrawn.

National Park

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on his plans for the creation of a national park. (AQO 2180/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I thank the Member for his question. The update is simply that a paper is in circulation around the Executive at the moment. I am going to revise that paper. With the Executive's support, before the recess in July, the principle of legislation for national parks will have been endorsed. We will then be able to take that forward, with the intention of tabling legislation in the Chamber during the course of this calendar year. In parallel to that, the Department will continue its work to identify potential candidate sites for national park designation so that, as soon as possible after the legislation receives Royal Assent — if that is what transpires — not just one but two parts of the North of Ireland will be designated as national parks. That will firmly and confidently make the statement that our natural and built environment is important to the quality of our lives and crucial to the growth of our economy, not least jobs. A report that will be published this Thursday will definitively demonstrate that fact.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer. I will hold you to account on the time frame for

legislation within this calendar year. Will you outline to the House the economic benefits of a national park, or national parks, to Northern Ireland?

Mr Attwood: I said that we would table legislation in this calendar year. Thereafter, as is proper, the Assembly will have to go through all the processes of that legislation, up to Final Stage and Royal Assent. I would like to think that, within the course of 2013, we will have the legislation in place, and, arising from that, the process of designation.

I reassure people that any national parks legislation that the Assembly might be inclined to endorse will fit the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. It will not necessarily be in the image of legislation and practice elsewhere in these islands. That way, I hope that, if I cannot achieve consensus, we can achieve very strong majority support. In a time of economic need, national park designation can be an economic tool as well as an environmental tool going forward.

What are the benefits? Evidence suggests that, where you have national parks, you have growth in tourism. Where you have national parks, you can have better management of the natural environment. Where you have national parks, premium prices are paid for products that come from that area. For all those reasons and much besides, national parks are part of a legislative programme that will manifest a strategic leap in the North of Ireland in policy and law that will serve the economy and the environment going forward.

Mr Campbell: The Minister outlined the distinction between the principle of the legislation for the national park and the actual establishment of a park. Does he accept that the support of local people, landowners and interested parties in and around any envisaged national park is absolutely paramount for it to be successful?

Mr Attwood: No individual or section of the community can have a veto — that was not what Mr Campbell suggested — on the principle or designation of national parks. We have to take into account all the views, hopefully build a consensus around those views, and do what is in the public interest and the interest of Northern Ireland. A number of months ago, a certain person said to me that anyone who supported a national park for the Mournes did

not love the Mournes. I gave that person cold comfort; that morning, I had been speaking to farmers who had been hostile to the principle of a park in the Mournes but were now supportive of it. They and everybody there love the Mournes as much as anybody else.

How will we ensure that the concerns that Mr Campbell rightly identified are dealt with? If there is to be a national parks management board, we will ensure that there is adequate — I am not conceding the principle at this stage — if not majority representation from the local community to ensure that local interest is not prejudiced in any significant way. How will we ensure that local interest is recognised? With the review of public administration (RPA), planning function will devolve to the local council, not to a national parks management board. That is the practice in other parts of these islands, and it has created worse fears in parts of this island. In that way, I believe that we can give sufficient reassurances so that the environmental and economic benefits can be maximised.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister detail what engagement his Department has undertaken with people in the Mournes specifically on any future national park status and how that will affect how they live, work and play?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. Extensive consultation has informed my mind and that of the Department on taking forward the proposal. I have been to the Mournes on two occasions to speak to local people, including those who are against it, those who are in favour of it, local farmers, the Mourne Heritage Trust, and so on. On the far side of any agreement in principle by the Executive to endorse legislation, there will be a further detailed consultation with areas of the North to define precisely what the legislation will look like and to define precisely the concerns and issues that need to be addressed, if not mitigated, through the content of the legislation.

However, the best advice that I got on the issue of national parks was that experience suggested that people's concerns were deepened and heightened in a way that derailed the potential and possibilities of national parks legislation. I do not want that to happen again because we are at a time and place in Northern Ireland where, given the scale and wonder of our built

and natural heritage, given the fact that it is such a significant economic driver, and given that we have a great opportunity to expand the tourist potential of our built and natural heritage, the designation of national parks in legislation is an essential tool. I hope that all in the House will endorse that principle.

Mr Agnew: The Minister mentioned the potential for growth in tourism from national parks legislation, and we have heard politicians recently on the news vexed about the speed of the Runkerry proposals. Does he find the same sense of urgency around the Executive table when it comes to national parks?

Mr Attwood: I cannot comment on the Runkerry proposal except to make one point. It is my view that, in the next 18 months, we must demonstrate in my Department and in the Executive a strategic shift and gear change in protecting and promoting our natural and built environment. There needs to be a baseline shift of new money into the Department of the Environment (DOE) to protect and enhance our built and natural heritage. We need a suite of legislative interventions, of which national parks is one, to define and develop the quality of our built and natural heritage. We need to do that because, in a short space of time, upwards of 80,000 people in Northern Ireland will be unemployed. If we cannot recognise the quality of our built and natural environment as a mechanism for economic growth as well as something to be protected because it is the character for society, we will let down our citizens and our community. However, some people — very few — do not get it.

Review of Public Administration

3. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the review of public administration. (AQO 2181/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I am inclined to refer you to the Hansard report of last week. He has it, and I am sure that if he has it, he has read it. If he has read it, I do not know how the Member could have any more questions, given the scale of the debate. Then again, the DUP did not participate in the debate last week, so it will, no doubt, have many questions to ask this week.

The Member asked for an update. Last week, the Local Government (Boundaries) Order was

approved in the Chamber. As a consequence, responsibility for the appointment of a commissioner for district electoral areas (DEAs) has now passed to the British Government, and that work will be taken forward. In the autumn, a reorganisation Bill will be tabled in the Assembly, which will take forward a lot of the strategic detail of the RPA initiative.

At the same time, work is ongoing to build up subordinate legislation, including legislation that will put into effect the governance and ethics regimes that are necessary for good government in local councils. In the past two weeks, we have seen examples of where there has not been good government in local councils. The consequence was that, last Friday afternoon, I wrote to all party leaders in Northern Ireland, advising them of the Executive's commitment on ethics and governance and reminding them of obligations in respect of governance and ethics. I asked them to address those issues in their political parties. It would be an unusual step for a public body to take a complaint against another public body, but, with the help of the departmental solicitor's office (DSO), I am looking at tabling a complaint to the Equality Commission about what has happened in a number of councils recently.

Mr S Anderson: The Minister has now raised what he said after the debate last week; that he may refer various councils to the Equality Commission. I am a member of Craigavon Borough Council, as he well knows.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member ask a question, please?

Mr S Anderson: Will the Minister be looking at the record of those who seek high positions in councils and the way that they carry on their business? Many times, in fact, they add insult to unionist people in borough councils and district councils.

Mr Attwood: During and after last week's debate, I said that I have some understanding of the point that Mr Anderson has just made. There are times and places in our society in which there are individuals, if not groupings, in councils who behave in a way that puts it in people's faces, winds them up and creates mischief, if not to hurt and cause pain. In that way, I understand what Mr Anderson is saying. However, in the previous mandate, the Executive agreed that d'Hondt, Sainte-Laguë or another mechanism would prevail as the method for

election to public positions in councils in the context of RPA. All parties agreed that there should be proportionality in allocating all positions in councils committees and so on and so forth. If that is the principle that people have endorsed for 2015, it should be the principle that applies in 2012.

There is tension in a very small number of places between those who cling to the past and those who advocate the new order of politics, for all of its difficulties, which I do not discount. In human terms this is not easy, but in political terms the right position is quite clear. That is why I wrote to all of the leaders of the political parties, and that is why, later this afternoon, I will discuss with the DSO as to whether we will take a complaint to the Equality Commission.

Ms Lo: During last week's debate on the Local Government (Boundaries) Order, the Minister mentioned putting the voluntary transition committees onto a statutory footing. Will he outline the steps he will take and the timetable that will be involved?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for her question. I agree that something based in statute is better than something not based in statute, because it creates certainty and avoids doubt. Therefore, I will introduce proposals that, hopefully, will be passed by the Assembly through subordinate legislation in this calendar year to make the voluntary transition committees statutory.

3.15 pm

That is what people want and it is good governance and a good outcome given my responsibility. However, let no one be unsure: it will be at least six months before that happens, and six months is a big part of the next three years in the rolling out of RPA. Although, as I have said, I do not agree with the 11-council outcome — I believe that 15 was a better model when it comes to upfront costs, upfront management, local identity and character — I will rigorously pursue local government reorganisation, even in the image of 11. However, given that six months of hard and good work can be done, I am looking to the voluntary transition committees to take forward that work. I am not relying on the explanation that a committee is not statutory to put in doubt or to delay the work of that committee.

Mr Elliott: Given the Minister's response to Mr Anderson, I foresee some interesting legislation coming to the House in the not too distant future. To get back to local government reform, why has the Minister not yet put a business case to the Executive to help fund the transition of local government reform and the rate convergence?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member; there will be interesting legislation, but the previous Executive and all parties to it endorsed that interesting legislation. They endorsed a model that would ensure that the elected positions and the distribution of committee places in local councils under RPA would reflect proportionality principles. So, the forthcoming legislation may be "interesting", but it was endorsed by parties around the Executive table, and whatever difficulties Mr Anderson indicated, I hope that that will prevail. Late last year, the Executive decided on the 11-council model for local government reorganisation, and, arising from that decision, the business case is being updated. On the far side of the summer, the details of that business case will become known.

As I said last week, I would, rightly, get cold comfort if I were to charge into Sammy Wilson's office and say, "Will you give me £50 million for RPA"? That is because your argument has to be based on a business case, and that business case is currently being updated. I remind you that people put up their hands in this Chamber in March 2011, when there was no budget cover whatsoever for RPA. That said, as Members will be aware from last week's debate, I have put in a June monitoring bid of £2.3 million, of which £200,000 would go to each cluster of councils to enable them to take forward change management in the transition from 26 councils to 11, with £100,000 for some pump-priming work on community planning, which is one of the big functions that will transfer. So, independent of there being no budget cover and of the business case being updated, I am already looking for money from my Executive colleagues, and I hope that that will be endorsed by all parties around the Executive table.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Here, at last. I thank the Minister for his response, but, in a six-hour debate last week, he intimated his support for severance payments to sitting councillors. How does he foresee meeting that? Also, the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report indicated that reform would cost

£118 million; does he believe that those figures would reflect the cost today?

Mr Attwood: The updated business case will definitively answer the latter question. However, if the Member is saying that putting the upfront costs of reorganisation at £118 million was putting them on the high side; I think that it was. I would be surprised if, on the far side of the updated business case, they were not put somewhat lower.

I hope that all Members will endorse the principle of severance payments for councillors. Without rehearsing all the arguments, people have, with virtually no income, served citizens of the North for many years. They have been great public servants during the years of terror, state conflict and great turbulence, when it was not easy. I believe that, as they depart the public stage, they should be given some recognition.

I want to point out, without prejudice to the updated business case or to my June monitoring bid, that the Executive said in the previous mandate and in this mandate, when all Ministers were round the table, that the cost of RPA would not come from Executive central funds. They said that there would be a self-financing business case for the funding of RPA through various means, not Executive funds. That is the situation that prevails and would prevail in the event of a councillor severance scheme. In the fullness of time, I will table regulations in the House to put that into effect, and those will govern that matter as well. However, on the far side of the business case and the June monitoring round, we will see where I can find good reason, good money and good political support to help councils through what will not be an easy process.

Driver and Vehicle Agency: Taxis

4. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the remit and powers of the Driver and Vehicle Agency's (DVA) taxi enforcement officers. (AQO 2182/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for her question. The collapsed role of enforcement officers is to ensure that taxis are properly licensed, properly insured, roadworthy and fulfil the legal standards. An enforcement officer's powers range from giving advice and warnings to issuing defective notices, prohibition notices, fixed penalties and, ultimately, prosecution. That

is the broad regime and architecture available to taxi enforcement officers.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his answer. What happens if a complaint is received from a taxi driver who believes that an enforcement officer has acted outside his or her remit or powers? Is the Minister aware of any taxi licences that have been revoked purely on the basis of an enforcement officer's evidence?

Mr Attwood: I have made it clear in the Chamber that, if MLAs consider that something is, on a prima facie basis, unreasonable, irregular or should be further challenged, I am willing to look at that, because I trust their judgement. When it comes to enforcement or planning matters, whatever they might be, I will look at them, as is consistent with the authority of my office. If any Member, including Ms Ramsey, knows of a case in which matters may have gone too far, I am prepared to look at that. However, depending on what happens in individual cases, taxi drivers have remedy and means of challenge. They can challenge through the normal processes, including, in the event of prosecution, a court case, during which they can interrogate the evidence base on which they were brought to account. Depending on whether the action taken is backed up by the evidence, they may reach a favourable outcome. So there are processes within the DVA and, in the event of prosecution, outside the DVA that should satisfy a taxi driver that an enforcement officer's powers have not been used disproportionately. However, if there is disproportionate use of those powers, I would like that brought to my attention.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he outline the principal benefits of the proposed new taxi licensing scheme.

Mr Attwood: I know that this is quite a highly charged development. However, I believe, as I have said before in the Chamber, that we should judge ourselves by proper regulation, followed by proportionate enforcement, whether it relates to hauliers, taxis, bus operators or, dare I say it, tour operators in Belfast. That is the twin-track strategy that should be used to achieve the protection of the consumer and serve the best interests of business. Significant taxi licensing legislation has been passed in the Chamber, and it will be rolled out over the next two years.

However, what will the outcome be? The outcome that governs all regulation: it will

increase customer confidence and business certainty; potentially drive out illegality; and, because taxis will, like other businesses, be regulated, enable better enforcement.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware of the work of the Driver and Vehicle Agency, and the consultation document that has been completed on MOT testing for vintage vehicles. Will the Minister advise the House —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you advise me of the relevance to the question, please, and ask a question?

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister advise whether the outcome of the work of the Driver and Vehicle Agency has been decided?

Mr Attwood: As the Member knows, there was a consultation. The responses, inevitably and rightly, indicated broad support for the exemption of pre-1960 vehicles. The Committee is content with the proposed way forward and that policy on exemption should be developed on the responses and on the European directive on periodic testing. My Department agrees and is taking forward that proposal.

Planning Policy Statement 21: Policy CTY 10

5. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of policy CTY 10 of PPS 21 since its introduction. (AQO 2183/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. Again, this is a question for which, if there are examples that Members think require further interrogation, at either ministerial level or by senior management, especially given that PPS 21 is a new policy, I am willing to undertake that. Members will know of cases in which I have interrogated what is going on to determine whether PPS 21 is being interpreted properly. There are issues of interpretation; that is why training on PPS 21 was rolled out last autumn; that is why there are monthly peer reviews of cases from district offices to see whether the policy is consistent; and that is why I have undertaken an operational review. That review has gone on for a while, because I want to make sure that, given that the policy is new, I have a significant evidence base from which to draw conclusions. Although I believe that PPS 21 is working in the round, as the evidence of

approval suggests, I have no doubt that, at the very least, fine-tuning is required.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer, and his commitment to look at whether there are specific issues. Although there seems to be a willingness on the part of the Minister, when it comes to senior planning officers, there seems to be a different interpretation in different locations —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr Storey: — of CTY 10. In considering CTY 10, will the Minister look at how his Department is interpreting CTY 13, which is linked by the issue of integration? If there is no principal dwelling on a location, there is a requirement to make an application on the basis of integration.

Mr Attwood: I do think that senior management in the Planning Service gets the ambition and best practice of PPS 21. However, there is a bit of a learning curve in some divisional offices on best deployment and best practice when operating PPS 21.

I recall a meeting with Mr Elliott, councillors of his party from Fermanagh and others, including agents, that put a spotlight on particular applications of the policy. That was very useful, and will, I hope, be reflected in the operational review once it has been concluded.

Yes, the matter raised by the Member will require further attention. However, I undertake to give it further attention.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister insist on a more flexible interpretation of the policy to allow a dwelling to be built slightly further away from the farm dwelling, often in a much better, integrated site and not be the immediate neighbour of a slurry pit or cattle shed?

Mr Attwood: I have been in Omagh with the Member's father looking at an example of the very point that she raises.

I need to be mindful of the fact that there was a lot of controversy around PPS 21. There was toing and froing and various versions, and, ultimately, it was the product of not only the Minister of the Environment but an Executive subcommittee. Given that it is a relatively new policy, I need to be very mindful of not trying to drive a coach and horses through it. If I did, I would be hostile to the ambition, as agreed by

the Executive, and I would leave the policy open to more and more legal challenge. Therefore I am going to be judicious.

3.30 pm

However, I believe that there are issues in respect of the location of the accommodation, clustering, being at a crossroads and the precise interpretation of the fine detail of the policy which, I believe, on the far side of an operation review, will address some of the issues of consistency and some of the issues of interpretation but will not lead to every application being approved. At the moment, the approval rate is well over 80%. I think that that is testament to the policy working well, by and large, but I have no doubt that there will be a number of cases, perhaps as indicated in the Member's question, in which some further interpretation and consistency are needed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends Question Time for today. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while we change the top Table.

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

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution: Main Estimates 2012-13

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £8,203,787,000 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 the 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 £8,424,156,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the 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 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2012-13 that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that resources not exceeding £13,004,918.26 be authorised for use by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development for the year ending 31 March 2011, as summarised for each Department in part II of the 2010-11 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I will continue where I left off. I think that I had addressed the remarks that were made by Mr Bradley. There was just one remaining issue, which was the capital spend and the shortfall in that. I am continuing to pursue that issue with the Treasury, as are the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It is a very complex issue and one on which we are

not making a great deal of headway. Treasury has one set of figures, and we have another set. Even when our figures are right, the Treasury says they are wrong, but it is something that we have to continue to work through with it. I am not so sure whether we will reach a successful conclusion on the issue, but I think it is something with which we need to persevere, as the Member pointed out.

Judith Cochrane the Member for East Belfast raised the issue of financial savings from a shared society and talked about the amount of money we spend on schools, for example, and about how there is an overspend on the number of schools because of the divisions within our society. Members raise that all the time. It is fine to say that there are surplus school places and that we have too many schools, and it is an issue that we need to address. However, her party would be the first to be out protesting and making pleas for special cases the minute the Education Minister raised the issue of a school closure, and it would not really matter what sector the proposed closure was in. It could be a constituency issue, and I understand the pressure that constituency representatives come under when a school closure is being proposed, even though there are surplus places in the area.

On top of that, the Alliance Party has been very good at proposing the extension of schools that it prefers, such as integrated schools, in areas where there are still surplus places in maintained or controlled schools. On one hand, it is easy to talk about the costs of division and the impact of that, but, when it comes to tackling it, Members will, sometimes, due to constituency pressures, take views that are inconsistent with the views that they express here in the Assembly.

Mr Beggs raised a number of issues. I dealt with a lot of his contribution when I made my general remarks at the start of the debate, so I do not intend to go over it again, other than to say that I trust that the explanation and exhortation that have been given to the Committee will be accepted. However, he raised the issue of the Department for Social Development Excess Vote and queried what it referred to. It was for additional money that was spent on the housing programme, and the details can be found in the Public Accounts Committee's report.

He also said that the Estimates change. I can understand that idea, because these are complex documents, and Members do not always get their heads around them. However, he said that we needed time to consider the matter, because, although I indicated that 95% of the information had already been agreed in the Budget Bill, if the out-turn figures were different, the Estimates would change. However, the out-turn figures for this year will not be reflected, and I cannot change the Main Estimates at this stage. It is not until we come to the June monitoring round that the Executive will reflect the out-turn figures. Therefore, he said that all the figures are different because the out-turn was different than what was proposed in the Budget, but that is not reflected in the figures.

As I said, by and large, the figures are 95% of what the Committee has scrutinised already, plus bits added on, which have had adequate scrutiny in the Assembly on other occasions.

I will now come to Simon Hamilton's remarks. He made the point, and he made it very well, that the lack of accelerated passage and the fact that we may have to deal with the Budget by extraordinary means only creates uncertainty for Departments, which runs contrary to the whole point of our agreeing a four-year Budget.

The idea of a four-year Budget was to give certainty to Departments so that they would know what their spending path would be over the next four years. At the time, it was hailed as a success for the Assembly, because, do not forget, we were the only regional Assembly anywhere in the United Kingdom to have the courage in an election year, before an election, to spell out clearly what we were going to do over the next four years with the money that we had.

In Scotland, they ducked the issue and gave only a one-year Budget before the election, because they did not want to spell out until after the election the difficulties that they were going to be faced with. We in this Assembly took the courage in our hands to lay before the electorate what it was going to put up with for the next four years, what the picture was going to be for the next four years and the decisions that we have made, and we asked people to judge us on that basis.

After giving that certainty, it would be a step back if we removed it by introducing a method of dealing with the Budget that reduced

expenditure by 5% and created that degree of uncertainty, albeit that, as Members pointed out, there is a Budget Bill in September that would restore the rest of the money. However, in the meantime, Departments do not have the certainty that would be created by getting this through before July.

Mrs Overend raised a number of issues about youth unemployment, the youth contract initiative and the Barnett consequential that would result. She is not in her place, but it is worth making the point that, although we lament that we are going through a recession, we sometimes underestimate the impact that decisions by this Assembly —

Ms Lo: It was not me who raised those issues.

Mr Wilson: I thought that I said that Mrs Overend raised the issue. I looked down in the direction of the Member. I really should have been looking over here, but something caught my attention.

Mrs Overend is not here, but it is worth making this point: we are going through a recession, which is not pleasant, and lots of people are not in employment. However, as a result of decisions made by the Assembly, the rate of unemployment here is not only lower than the UK average but is the fourth lowest of any region in the UK. Do not forget that we made growing the economy a priority and that the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister — she floated past me a moment ago, but I do not where she has gone — set very demanding job targets for her Department.

We also have a lower than average rate of youth unemployment. Although youth unemployment in other parts of the UK has gone up, the rate here has gone down. That is not to say that we can be complacent. Off the top of my head, I think that youth unemployment still stands at around 14%. However, that compares favourably with figures in the Irish Republic, England and Scotland. We have put money into dealing with youth unemployment. There will be an opportunity to look at that again, because the Employment and Learning Minister has made a bid in the June monitoring round for a strategy to deal with it.

I do not want to get into trouble with anybody else today, so I cannot say what will be in the June monitoring round before it goes to the Executive. However, I gave an assurance to

the Assembly before that, once the Minister brought forward a strategy to deal with youth unemployment, we would look favourably on the proposals. In a couple of weeks' time, once the Executive have had a chance to examine the June monitoring round figures, we will be able to announce what, if anything, we can do on that issue this year.

Mrs Overend also spoke about the tourism budget and mentioned the £370,000 for tourism, which relates to departmental administration. There was also a grant of £22.1 million for the Tourist Board and a grant of £14.8 million for Tourism Ireland. I know that the Member for North Antrim raised the issue of squandering money on such cross-border initiatives. However, I spent some time in America last week, and, at one of the events that I attended, Tourism Ireland was specifically promoting Northern Ireland in the US. I have to say that it put a lot of effort into the venture to promote Northern Ireland exclusively. When one looks at the expenditure, one will see that it is wrong to say that all the money spent on those kinds of cross-border bodies is squandered. That money had certain economies of scale because of the basis on which it was spent. However, that certainly did not in any way detract from the promotion of Northern Ireland.

Mrs Overend also talked about the Department for Employment and Learning budget transfer. Of course, that will be dealt with at a later date when we look at the transfer of government functions.

Anna Lo raised the issue of Planning Service receipts, which are down 18% in 2011-12. The Department of the Environment (DOE) is continuing to implement measures that will address the reduced income. That really is an issue for DOE to deal with.

The Member also spoke about RPA, for which there is a bid. It is my view that the fundamental principle of RPA is that councils will benefit from it. There will be substantial savings made if they can share services after amalgamating. If they make significant savings as a result of RPA, I really do not see why other public services should bear the cost of councils making those savings. That would be like giving councils money and saying, "By the way, you will make savings from the money that we have given you, but you can hold on to the savings made, because we will not be asking for them back."

So, when the Member raises that kind of issue, she ought to bear in mind what the impact of RPA will be.

3.45 pm

Mr Allister quite rightly raised the issue of the fiscal deficit for Northern Ireland. My unionism — and I am sure that this is also true of his unionism — is not based purely on the financial transfer from Westminster to Northern Ireland. As Mr Allister pointed out, those who talk about leaving the United Kingdom and moving towards a united Ireland — and it is fantasy talk — ought to be aware that there will be a very serious fiscal impact from that. It is good to remind ourselves of that.

If one looks at what has happened from 2004-05, when this current Assembly was set up, that fiscal deficit has increased by £2.6 billion. When one considers that kind of fiscal transfer, one can see the benefit of being a part of the wider United Kingdom.

Mr Allister also raised the issue as to whether, if we did not get accelerated passage, there was a mechanism within current governmental arrangements for the permanent secretary to undertake decisions about the Budget, and he referred to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. However, that power lies in section 7 of the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, which allows the permanent secretary of the Department of Finance and Personnel to set budgets for the remainder of this financial year at 95% of last year's allocation. So, there is provision, if the Assembly does not agree to accelerated passage for the Budget, though it is my belief that the Assembly Members are much better placed to do the job themselves. That is what Members are here for. Despite the disappointment that there has been in members of the Committee not getting papers when they wanted them, and papers not being supplied on time, I have given explanation and apology, and I hope that we can move on from that. It will not be necessary to use the powers contained in the 2001 Act.

The last issue raised by Mr Allister is that of the £4 billion reduction. That was a cumulative reduction in real terms over the whole period of the Budget. It did not fall in one particular year. Furthermore, since then, we have had Barnett consequential in this year of £200 million. We have also raised resources of our own to

fill the gap. As I indicated earlier, we have been successful in raising capital receipts above and beyond what we had originally planned. We have held rates at a real zero increase, but that, nevertheless, released some cash because we used the GDP deflator, so there is a 2.2% increase and that raised money. There were a number of other ways in which revenue has been raised which, of course, has reduced the impact. That is one of the things that we worked hard at: reducing the impact of the reduction in the Budget from Westminster.

I hope that I have covered the points which Members have raised. I recommend the two motions to the Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before proceeding 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 sum not exceeding £8,203,787,000 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 the 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 £8,424,156,000 be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the 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 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2012-13 that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012.

Supply Resolution: Excess Votes 2010-11

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

Mr Wilson: I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Just say, "I beg to move."

Mr Wilson: I beg to move.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Again, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that resources not exceeding £13,004,918.26 be authorised for use by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development for the year ending 31 March 2011, as summarised for each Department in part II of the 2010-11 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 11 June 2012.

Budget (No. 2) Bill: First Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Sorry; I was premature there, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was not listening to you, and I thought that you had moved on to this one. I apologise for the mistake.

I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 2) Bill, which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the year ending 31st March 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 (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31st March 2013; to authorise the use for the public service of excess resources for the year ending 31st March 2011; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members will know that the Second Stage of the Bill is scheduled for tomorrow. However, the Bill may not proceed under the accelerated passage procedure unless the Speaker is notified by the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the Bill in accordance with Standing Order 42(2). If the Speaker has not received that notification before the Second Stage of the Bill is due to be moved, the Bill may not proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. The Second Stage will have to be rescheduled.

Committee Business

Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is a joint motion from the Committee on Standards and Privileges and the Assembly Commission to appoint the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards. I call Mr Barry McElduff to speak on behalf of the Assembly Commission and move the motion.

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

That this Assembly, in accordance with section 19(1) of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, appoints Mr Douglas Bain as the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards for a term of five years from 17 September 2012.

Tá mé sásta an rún seo a mholadh. This time last year, the Assembly agreed to delegate to the Assembly Commission responsibility for making arrangements to identify, by fair and open competition, a person to be appointed as Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The Commission was also given responsibility for making arrangements for determining any criteria for appointment and for determining the terms and conditions on which such an appointment, when made, was to have effect.

I am pleased to be able to come to the House today to report on how the Commission made those arrangements and to seek the Assembly's agreement to appoint Mr Douglas Bain as the new Assembly Commissioner for Standards. On terms and conditions, the Commission ultimately agreed that the commissioner should be paid a daily rate of £550. In so doing, we took account of the Committee on Standards and Privileges' recommendation, which had been agreed by the Assembly, that the commissioner's specific salary and terms and conditions should be broadly commensurate with those of comparable office holders.

The Commission agreed a fair and open competition process for identifying a person to be appointed as Commissioner for Standards. We agreed that the seven key principles of best practice in respect of public appointments should underpin that competition. I thank Felicity Huston, the former Commissioner for Public Appointments,

who very kindly gave Assembly officials advice when they were drawing up the process for the Commission's consideration.

The Commission agreed that a selection panel should be established and that it should include the Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, as well as a member of the Assembly Commission, and I was duly appointed in that capacity. The panel was chaired by Stuart Allen, the Scottish Parliamentary Standards Commissioner. I thank all of the panel members for their participation and for taking time out of busy schedules to ensure that we identified the right person.

Unfortunately, an initial competition did not identify a suitable candidate. The Commission therefore agreed in January 2012 to carry out a further competition. The post was widely advertised and 25 applications were received. After having sifted the applications, the panel carried out interviews on 26 April this year. We were very impressed with everyone we interviewed. However, as a panel, Mr Bain impressed us most, and we concluded that he was our preferred candidate for appointment. Last week, a note was circulated to all Members that provided details of Mr Bain's extensive, high-level experience.

I am confident that Mr Bain's skills and experience will allow him to be an excellent Commissioner for Standards, and I ask the Assembly to agree to his appointment.

Mr Allister: I am disappointed in the choice. I thought that this Assembly would see the necessity to strive to obtain somebody from well outside the Government ambit and the tendencies that come with that. Instead, it seems that the person chosen is someone who fits neatly within the quango circuit: someone whose past experience does not demonstrate the independence that one might have expected, but who comes from that particular setting. My anxieties are increased when I consider the findings of the Billy Wright inquiry in respect of Mr Bain, who, during the relevant time, was director of services in the Prison Service. Anyone who followed the Billy Wright inquiry will know that a core issue in it was the alleged destruction of and failure to disclose documents.

Here we are, appointing someone who will adjudicate over us, so to speak; who will tell us whether we have lived up to the standards

expected of us; whether we have performed as we ought to or whether we fell down in any respect; and will, no doubt, be mindful of the Nolan principles, and all of that, in respect of the expectations that we face.

I invite Members to refresh their memories by re-reading some of the Billy Wright inquiry material. They will discover that a particular document lay at the heart of the non-disclosure. The existence of that document would appear to have been denied until a copy of it was delivered anonymously to Mr David Wright. The Prison Service then began to acknowledge its existence. It may not have been the core issue, but it was one of the core issues in the Billy Wright inquiry. When the chairman of that tribunal reached his decisions, he had some things to say about that particular issue. Paragraph 313 of chapter 6 of the inquiry report states:

"Mr Bain gave evidence that the file was ... within his office as Director of Services with which he was very much hands-on. For the vast majority of its life this file was under his control, whether it was in his physical position or not. It bore a sticker on its outside cover with the words 'Examined in connection with the BWI'."

That refers to the Billy Wright inquiry. The paragraph continues:

"The witness had never before seen a sticker like that. Mr Bain accepted that the file fell within the specification of documents served by the Inquiry. If, as the sticker indicates, it had been examined by the team tasked with producing documents in response to the specification, he had no explanation why it had not been produced, despite the file having been examined twice by the team. He accepted that the team had not exercised its judgement correctly. Instead, the existence of the file was very recently leaked anonymously to the Inquiry via the Wright family solicitor."

Paragraph 6.314 of the report goes on to state:

"Director of Services at the material time, Mr Bain, knew that this file was regarded as important by the Inquiry. He was also well aware of its contents since it was his file."

The report then states:

"We are surprised that after his return to work in December 2005 he took no steps to ascertain that its contents had been produced to the Inquiry."

The report goes on to state:

"Mr Bain also said he had no knowledge that HMP Maze Prisoner Security Files had been destroyed."

If we skip a paragraph, we will find that paragraph 6.316 of the report states:

"While all that might be accepted, the situation he found himself in was very different when he became aware that the HMP Maze Prisoner Security Files had been 'destroyed by Security' on a substantial scale. That he knew this is established in documents examined by the Inquiry. Although at first Mr Bain said he did not know that HMP Maze Prisoner Security Files were destroyed, he accepted that in the light of these documents, he knew in May 2004 that they had been. As he expressed it: 'It wasn't my recollection of events, but plainly I was aware of it at the time.'"

That was his explanation for giving evidence that he knew nothing about it. The next paragraph states that:

"In our opinion the fact that he did not take any steps in light of his awareness of the destruction of these files was very surprising."

Given the tenor of the language that tends to be used in such reports, an expression of surprise in the inquiry report stating that someone had not troubled themselves to take steps to tell the inquiry certain things and to make sure that certain things were brought to light is, of itself, quite damning of that individual. Yet that is the individual who has been brought to the House on recommendation to be appointed as overseer to examine how all of us conduct ourselves. I say that, on the strength of the Billy Wright inquiry, there are questions that remain unanswered over his conduct as the director of services in the Prison Service. For me, that raises a question about his suitability for appointment.

4.00 pm

We are all aware that he also served as Chief Electoral Officer in the Electoral Office, and we all have our own views about that. My experience does not add to my confidence in him. Fundamentally, I think that the Assembly should pause on this appointment and should not push it through today. We should take time to reflect on what was said about Mr Bain in the Billy Wright inquiry and to consider whether he is really the individual that we are looking for as the overseer and holder of the very important post of ombudsman. I suggest that he is not and that the Assembly should pause and consider whether he is.

Mr Elliott: I was not part of the overall appointment process, so I have a relatively limited knowledge of how this has happened. I apologise to Mr McElduff for not being here for his opening remarks, so some of the issues that I will raise may have been covered. If that is the case, whoever makes the winding-up speech can explain those points.

I am concerned about the entire process that has led us to this position. I am also concerned that we have got to it so quickly with very limited information coming back to Members. I note from the report that was in my pigeonhole today that, in the first round of applications, nobody was deemed suitable. There was no indication of how many people who applied for the post and were deemed unsuitable. In the second round of applications, it appears that there were 25 applicants, of whom three were deemed suitable for interview. I have no idea how that process came about, other than that there was an appointment from the Assembly Commission, one from the Committee on Standards and Privileges and an independent representative. I have significant questions about that process and how the appointment of Mr Bain was decided. I am not aware of any report being produced by the Commission or the Committee on the process or the appointment. I have significant queries, and I hope that the Member, during his winding-up speech, will take my interventions to establish some answers.

Mr Ross: I will first make some comments about the role of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The new commissioner's primary role is to investigate complaints that a breach of the Assembly's code of conduct has occurred. The new commissioner will be able to initiate an investigation when no complaint has been received but he believes that a breach of the code of conduct has occurred. The commissioner will also be able to give advice on any matter of general principle relating to Members' standards of conduct. As Members have said, the role of the commissioner is, therefore, of the utmost importance in ensuring that MLAs uphold high standards of conduct in public life.

The Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 provides for the commissioner's role. It also provides for the commissioner's independence and powers, which include the same powers as the Assembly to call

for witnesses and documents. Given the importance and significance of this powerful role, it is important that we appoint a person who has the experience and expertise to undertake the duties with skill, wisdom and judgement. As Mr McElduff said in his opening remarks, I sat on the selection panel that identified Mr Bain as the preferred candidate. The competition was, of course, demanding, and, as a panel, we were determined to get a high-quality candidate, and, in Mr Bain, we decided that we had one. He has a legal and public service background as well as a track record of investigation and independence. He impressed the panel with his responses, and I am confident that he will make an excellent Commissioner for Standards.

For a number of years, the Assembly has had an interim arrangement to ensure that allegations of misconduct are independently investigated. As we appoint the new statutory commissioner today, it is appropriate that we acknowledge and recognise the work that the ombudsman has done as the interim Assembly Commissioner for Standards. Dr Tom Frawley, supported by key staff in the ombudsman's office, has been the Assembly's dedicated servant during this period. He has had to investigate and consider many thorny and difficult issues. On behalf of the Assembly, I thank him for his service. It is important to acknowledge today that the Assembly and the wider public have been well served by his support.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Of course.

Mr Allister: The Member tells us how impressed the panel was by Mr Bain. Is the Member impressed by what the Billy Wright inquiry had to say about Mr Bain? Does he really think that the flaws and deficiencies found there speak to the man who should investigate anything in the Assembly?

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is important and useful in a debate such as this that Members can put forward views about not being content.

As for an individual's past and whether Members are content about a specific issue, the Assembly has a legal duty to ensure that whoever is appointed as commissioner is identified by fair and open competition. The Member suggested that the Assembly should

look to appoint someone from outside our quango culture — I cannot remember his exact words. The Assembly, of course, has to appoint somebody who applied for the post. It is perhaps unfortunate that in the initial appointment procedure we did not have more candidates of the calibre we had hoped for. We went out on a further investigation and managed to get considerably more applicants for the post.

As I said, it is important that whoever was appointed was identified by a fair and open competition. The Commission agreed that the principles of best practice in respect of public appointments should underpin that competition, which meant identifying a preferred candidate based on merit and on agreed criteria that applied equally to all candidates. It would have been inappropriate for the panel to bring other matters into consideration when assessing candidates.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way on that point. There are a number of queries that I had about the initial process, and that was one of them. Was the initial process for applications identical to the second one? If not, how did it differ? How many people applied in the initial process?

Mr Ross: The clear difference between the first and second process was the individuals who applied. It was not identical in that we had different candidates applying for the post. We had 25 applications when we readvertised the post. We did not have enough candidates the first time, so we looked to advertise more widely and in specific areas to get candidates of a particular calibre. That was important in order to widen the field.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for the explanation. He said that 25 people applied, but, if I picked it up right, only three were interviewed. That is a significant reduction in the number of candidates at the paper-sifting stage. What were the criteria used to cut down the number of candidates so harshly?

Mr Ross: We sought answers to a number of questions. There was a point-scoring system, as is the procedure in all such processes, and the panel sifted the applications on the basis of their answers. If candidates did not score highly enough in those categories, they did not get through the sifting exercise.

I must emphasise that the process was agreed by the panel. I hear that there are concerns from Ulster Unionist Party Members, but it was agreed by all members of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, including the Ulster Unionist member, and it was agreed unanimously by the Assembly Commission, which has representatives from all parties. It is important that that be noted.

In answer to Mr Elliott's concern about the process going too quickly, I would point out that, under the original resolution passed by the Assembly, we should have had the new Commissioner for Standards in place before now. It was because we wanted to make sure that we had an applicant that everybody on the panel, on the Committee on Standards and Privileges and on the Commission could have confidence in that we prolonged the recruitment process and readvertised to get more candidates. We wanted to make sure that we had a candidate that everybody felt comfortable supporting and that we would be able to get support for. That is why the process took longer than was initially thought. This has not in any way been rushed; we have taken our time.

Mr Bain has the skills and expertise necessary to make a good Commissioner for Standards, and I look forward to working with him over the rest of the mandate. I hope that Members from across the House will support the motion. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in accordance with section 19(1) of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, appoints Mr Douglas Bain as the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards for a term of five years from 17 September 2012.

Adjourned at 4.14 pm.



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