

Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 10 June 2014
Volume 96, No 2

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 10 June 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Employment Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 (Blacklists) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That the Employment Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 (Blacklists) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 be approved.

I am seeking the Assembly's approval to confirm the Employment Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 (Blacklists) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014.

The regulations make it unlawful to compile, use, sell or supply blacklists that contain details of people who are, or who have been, trade union members or who are taking part, or who have taken part, in trade union activities, where the blacklist may be used by employers to discriminate in recruitment or in the treatment of existing workers. Under the regulations, current and former trade union members may complain to an industrial tribunal if they are refused employment, subjected to a detriment or unfairly dismissed for a reason relating to a blacklist. Also under the regulations, employment agencies are unable to refuse to provide a service because a worker appears on a blacklist.

The regulations are subject to the confirmatory procedure as laid down in the parent legislation, which is in article 5 of the Employment Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1999. Article 5 provides the necessary powers to introduce regulations to outlaw the blacklisting of trade unionists.

The regulations were made on 19 March 2014 and came into operation on 6 April 2014. To continue to have effect, they must be approved

by a resolution of the Assembly on or before 5 October 2014.

The Department originally consulted on the issue back in 2003, but, as there was no hard evidence of blacklisting taking place at the time, regulations were not implemented. However, in March 2009, the Information Commissioner announced that he had uncovered a vetting service operated by the Consulting Association, an organisation for companies in the UK construction sector. The Information Commissioner proceeded to prosecute the chief operating officer of the Consulting Association for breaching a provision of the Data Protection Act 1998.

It was noted that the Consulting Association had collected information on the trade union membership and activities of many individuals and that that information had in effect been used to blacklist them. Following that announcement, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) in Great Britain brought in regulations to prohibit the blacklisting of trade unionists. The regulations have been in force in Great Britain since March 2010.

Given that some of the construction companies identified in the Information Commissioner's investigation were linked to operations in Northern Ireland, my Department, as the Department responsible for employment law in Northern Ireland, decided to investigate and consult on the need for similar regulations. This consultation ran for 12 weeks from 28 July 2010 until 20 October 2010.

Following agreement from the Executive and the Committee for Employment and Learning, I now intend to enact these regulations formally to prohibit blacklisting in Northern Ireland. This will ensure that all trade union members working in Northern Ireland will have similar safeguards and protections to those working in the rest of the UK.

The Department does not wish to deter employers from vetting prospective employees, provided such vetting is proportionate and

complies with employment law and data protection principles. The regulations have been specifically designed to target only listing activity that involves trade union membership and activities and to enable affected individuals to seek redress from this type of discrimination.

The very specific focus of the regulations should ensure that virtually all vetting activity that has nothing to do with trade union matters is left unaffected. I emphasise that good employers really have nothing to fear from the regulations.

I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Executive for their detailed scrutiny of the policy proposals and the regulations. I hope that I have provided the House with sufficient explanation of the purpose of the regulations and will, of course, respond to Members' points in my closing remarks.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I welcome the opportunity to outline the Employment and Learning Committee's views on this statutory rule. This is important legislation. As well as the detail of the statutory rule, it sends out an important message to employers and employment agencies that, while the Assembly supports them in their efforts to develop the economy, it will not allow them to discriminate against individuals whom they decide have been vocal in their opposition to some of their employer practices.

On 29 February 2012, the Committee received a briefing from departmental officials on the results of the Department's consultation on regulations to prohibit blacklisting. During the briefing, the officials advised that, in 2009, an investigation by the Information Commissioner discovered that an organisation held a database containing the details of more than 3,000 construction workers that included personal information on relationships, trade union activity and employment history. That database had been used by more than 40 construction companies. The owner was prosecuted for breach of the Data Protection Act and fined £5,000.

During that briefing, the Committee noted that there was consensus on introducing regulations on the issue. The Committee was content with the Department's proposal to bring forward the legislation as long as it would not be overly burdensome on the vast majority of companies that have never been engaged in such activity but would ensure that something was on the statute book to deal with any company found to be participating in such practices.

The statutory rule prohibits the compilation, distribution and use of blacklists to facilitate discrimination against trade union members and activists. Making it illegal for an organisation to refuse employment or dismiss an employee for a reason related to a blacklist is necessary to protect employees' rights.

The Committee considered the proposal to make the statutory rule at its meeting on 11 December 2013 and agreed that it was content with the need for the rule. It agreed, however, to write to the Department of Finance and Personnel seeking clarification on what action will be taken against companies that are found to have operated blacklists.

At its meeting on 15 January, the Committee considered the responses from the Department of Finance and Personnel advising that, should the legislation become law in Northern Ireland, it will mean that companies could have a formal court or tribunal decision or ruling against them for such practices. That would make it possible for contracting authorities to exercise their discretion clearly, under the Public Contracts Regulations 2006, as to whether individual contractors should be excluded from any procurement process. The Department of Finance and Personnel also pointed out that the contracting authority would still be required to carry out an assessment in every case.

The Department laid the statutory rule on 25 March, and it was considered by the Committee on 9 April. There was no change to the policy content since the proposal was considered by the Committee, and the Examiner of Statutory Rules raised no issues. The Committee for Employment and Learning supports the statutory rule and commends it to the House.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome the fact that the Minister has brought this issue to the House today. It will ensure that workers who have been involved in trade unions or been activists in previous employment will not be discriminated against in future employment because of their involvement in these types of organisations. Employers, by placing activists' names on blacklists, may inadvertently discriminate against those employees when they go for future employment, simply because of their prior involvement. The implementation of this statutory rule will prohibit the compiling, distribution and use of lists to discriminate against workers involved in trade unions and activists, and it will reinforce workers' employment rights.

The rule will make it against the law to refuse employment on the grounds of the details of an

employee appearing on a blacklist. It is important that workers have free access to involvement in trade unions without fear of future recriminations that would discriminate against them should they apply for work or try to get a job in other organisations. Any document compiled to treat some employees in any way less favourably than others is of grave concern to us. Discrimination on any ground is wrong, and I am happy that this legislation is being brought forward to outlaw such practices.

The blacklisting of employees because of trade union involvement is not widespread in Northern Ireland. However, despite it being a relatively minor problem here, putting in place legislation is a matter of principle to safeguard against it becoming a problem in the future. The legislation will guard against such practices creeping into different industries here. As a principle, we want to ensure that legal measures are put in place to guard against such discriminatory practices in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I welcome the implementation of the legislation and commend it to the House.

Mr P Ramsey: I very strongly welcome Minister Farry's bringing this very important legislation to the House. The SDLP welcomes this Executive business today. As the only Assembly party to vote against the increase in pension age for public servants and the reduction of redundancy pay for civil servants, many of whom are low paid, we have demonstrated our commitment to protecting the interests of hard-pressed households and trade union members.

The fact that the Information Commissioner in England named companies operating in Northern Ireland in a report on blacklisting is deeply and distinctly worrying. In the past fortnight, Northern Ireland has again witnessed at first hand the damage done when discrimination is permitted. The choice to join a trade union is a right under law. No employer is allowed to try to make you change your decision on trade union membership or to threaten to penalise you if you do not. Therefore, it is important to ensure that employers are prohibited from compiling lists of individuals who are members of unions or who have taken part in the activities of the trade union movement. We do not want those employees to be discriminated against when employers are recruiting or allocating work.

This is of specific importance in the current economic climate, when work is scarce and employees have less employment security. It is particularly important to bring in such legislation to protect workers: for example, those on zero-

hours contracts. I know that Minister Farry is painstakingly going through consultation on this, and our Committee has met officials. Industries should be more flexible. There should be more fluid employment practices, particularly in the construction industry, to ensure that employees are well protected.

The SDLP is committed to protecting and extending the rights of, and opportunities for, workers across Northern Ireland. We will continue to advocate that other parties follow the SDLP's lead and insert meaningful social clauses into Department contracts so that the successful contractors make a reasonable contribution to providing work experience for young people and opportunities for the unemployed. We will continue to highlight the need to remedy and stop zero-hours contracts. In that vein, we are very happy to support this very meaningful and important legislation.

10.45 am

Dr Farry: I welcome the comments made by the three Members who contributed. In reference to comments made by Robin Swann as the Chair of the Committee, I welcome its scrutiny of the regulations and the support that it has provided. I also note the importance of the regulations being enforceable through tribunals and our courts system.

Tom Buchanan's comments neatly dovetailed with those of the Chair of the Committee. That gives me the opportunity to stress, once again, that the practice of blacklisting is rare in Northern Ireland. It is also important to stress that the vast majority of employers are responsible and do not engage in this destructive behaviour. However, whenever they do, the consequences are serious and, as Mr Ramsey outlined, amount to discrimination and denial of opportunities. When people are found to be operating blacklists or engaging in other behaviour that will now be made illegal, it is appropriate, therefore, that we send a strong message.

Mr Ramsey ventured slightly beyond the immediate topic of blacklisting and chose to place the regulations in the wider context of other debates that are alive in society. Members will have their own views on that wider context and the measures that we may or may not wish to take. However, in response to Mr Ramsey's comments, I agree on the importance of people having the freedom to engage in trade union activity. Trade unions can be a very constructive voice, both in the workplace and in wider society. They have been proactive in leadership in standing up

against sectarianism and racism in society over past weeks.

The Finance Minister will no doubt be happy to respond on the use of social clauses in Government procurement, but they are routinely used and deployed by Departments and they make a real difference. My officials will brief the Committee for Employment and Learning on zero-hour contracts tomorrow and will discuss the advanced stage of the preparation of a consultation document. Subject to the outcome of those discussions, it is my hope that we will launch a public consultation on zero-hours contracts in Northern Ireland some time next week. We will seek people's views over the next number of weeks with a view to taking decisions on what regulations we may wish to put in place in Northern Ireland. That will be a decision for the Executive and, in turn, the Assembly to shape, but it is a debate that is required, and I am sure that there will be considerable interest from MLAs and members of the public in the outcome.

I thank those Members who contributed today as well as the Members of the Executive who agreed to the regulations and the Committee for its scrutiny and support of the regulations. I commend them to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Employment Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 (Blacklists) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 be approved.

Budget (No.2) Bill 2014: Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No.2) Bill [NIA 36/11-15] be agreed.

The Second Stage debate today follows the approval of the Supply resolution yesterday by the Assembly for the expenditure plans of Departments and other public bodies as detailed in the 2014-15 Main Estimates.

As Members will undoubtedly be aware, accelerated passage of the Bill is necessary in order to ensure Royal Assent prior to the end of July. If the Bill did not proceed by accelerated passage and receive Assembly approval before

the summer recess, Departments and other public bodies might have legislative difficulty accessing cash, which would threaten the effective delivery of public services prior to our return to the Chamber in September. However, the Committee for Finance and Personnel has confirmed that, in line with Standing Order 42, it is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill.

I thank the Committee for its work in agreeing to accelerated passage. It is often unheralded work, but the Committee has been involved in the setting of the 2014-15 Budget right from its inception in the 2011-15 Budget back in March 2011, through each exercise approved by the Executive, up until the finalisation and publication of the Estimates volume a few weeks ago. The work of the Committee in that respect is vital and, whilst much of it takes place in the background, so to speak, its importance cannot be underestimated.

The Estimates and associated Budget Bill are complex documents, and the review of the financial process that my predecessor and I have often called for would help to clarify the Estimates process. In fact, it is a review that the Committee has long sought. Any future review would be an opportunity for the Executive and Assembly to deliver a significant, positive reform of the financial process inherited under direct rule.

The Assembly's Standing Order 32 directs that the Second Stage debate should be confined to the general principles of the Bill, and I shall endeavour to keep to that direction. The main purpose of the Bill is to make further provision of cash and resources for use on services, in addition to the Vote on Account provided in the Budget Act in March, up to the requirements of Departments and other public bodies set out in the Main Estimates for 2014-15. Copies of the Budget Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members today, and the 2014-15 Main Estimates were laid in the Assembly on 28th May.

The Bill will authorise the issue of a further £8,411,921,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the further use of resources totalling £9,168,609,000 by the Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill. The cash and resources are to be spent and used on the services listed in column 1 of each schedule. Of course, those amounts are in addition to the Vote on Account passed by the Assembly in March, bringing the total amount of cash

provided for 2014-15 to over £15.4 billion pounds.

In addition, the Bill sets for the current financial year a limit for each Department on the use of accruing resources. Accruing resources are current and capital receipts totalling £2,299,191,000. Therefore, the resources authorised in the Vote on Account in March and the resources and accruing resources now provided in this Bill bring the total resources for use by Departments in 2014-15 to over £19 billion. Of course, those amounts of resources include not only the departmental expenditure limits (DEL) on which our Budget process mainly focuses but the departmental, demand-led annually managed expenditure (AME).

Clause 2 of the Bill provides for the temporary borrowing by my Department of £4,205,960,000. That is approximately half the sum authorised by clause 1(1) for issue out of the Consolidated Fund. I must stress to the House that clause 2 does not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power, but it does enable my Department to run an effective and efficient cash management regime and ensure minimum drawdown of the Northern Ireland block grant on a daily basis — something that is very important when contemplating the daily borrowing by our Departments.

Finally, clause 5 removes from the statute book two Budget Acts from 2011 that are no longer operative.

The numbers contained within the Budget Bill are significant, and I am sure that Members will agree that it is not an easy task to translate those figures into the delivery of public services on the ground, but the reality is that this legislation is required for every public service, whether it is a schoolteacher or a police officer, the building of a new road or the training required for gaining a new job. All public services need this legislation to operate in this financial year. So, whilst it may appear dry and seemingly detached from day-to-day life, it is in fact a crucial piece of legislation underpinning our public services.

I will conclude on that note, and I will be happy to deal with any points of principle or detail of the Budget Bill that Members may wish to raise.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As outlined, the Bill makes provision for the balance of cash and resources that are required

to reflect the departmental spending plans in the 2014-15 Main Estimates. They are based on year 4 of the former Executive's Budget, which was approved in the previous mandate of the Assembly. As on previous occasions, DFP has highlighted the potential consequences for the authorisation of departmental spending should the Bill not progress through the Assembly before the summer recess.

The Committee took evidence from departmental officials, and I wish to reiterate the Committee's appreciation for their helpfulness in explaining the detail of the series of allocations, reductions, technical adjustments and transfers that have been made since the allocations were initially set out in the Budget 2011-15. The Committee also examined DFP's June monitoring round return. I shall refer to that briefly as it is relevant in highlighting how the allocations in the Budget Bill can and will change through the monitoring process as we progress further into the financial year.

As a Department, DFP has the relatively small capital allocation of £21.7 million for 2014-15. However, in the June monitoring round, it has included bids for the asset management strategy that would provide £40 million in capital, in addition to £3.5 million in resource, with the aim of realising savings by rationalising public sector accommodation. While the Committee sought further detail on the anticipated savings and risks attached to the projects involved, the size of the capital bid is significant. If agreed by the Executive, it would result in an increase of over 184% in the Department's capital allocation in the Bill. I highlight that as an example of the extent to which departmental budgets and finances present a constantly moving picture. That is all the more reason why Assembly Committees should continue to undertake robust in-year scrutiny and oversight, and are facilitated by their Departments in doing so.

On a separate issue at departmental level, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development wrote to the Finance Committee to establish what relevant provision has been made in the Bill for the Reservoirs Bill, which it is at Committee Stage. The Finance Committee sought an urgent response from the Department on the specific detail of any provisions, including any conditions that might be attached, in advance of today's debate. While the Committee has not yet received a response to that request, I understand that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has also pursued the issue directly with its Department.

As I indicated during yesterday's Supply resolution debate, the Committee agreed to grant accelerated passage to the Budget Bill under Standing Order 42(2) on the basis of having been consulted appropriately on the expenditure provisions in the Bill.

In terms of the contribution of Assembly Committees to the Budget and financial process, I also highlighted during yesterday's debate the importance of facilitating effective scrutiny of departmental financial forecasting and out-turn data by all Statutory Committees. Detailed and regular monitoring of the financial performance of Departments will enable Committees to identify issues in real time and obtain assurances that the necessary corrective or preventative action will be taken. On that point, DFP provided prior-year forecast out-turn figures for all Departments to the Finance Committee on Tuesday 3 June. However, if that information were made available slightly earlier the Committee would be in a position to share the figures with the other Statutory Committees in time to further inform their contributions to the plenary debates on the Main Estimates and the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Perhaps that is something that can be addressed for next year.

At a strategic level, more effective Assembly input to and scrutiny of the Executive's Budget and expenditure will help to further demonstrate that devolution is making a difference in delivering accountable, responsive and efficient governance in the North. That would represent positive steps forward, but on the immediate business before us, and on behalf of the Committee, I support the general principles of the Bill.

I will make a few comments from a party perspective. Like a number of other Members, I have come from an event on air connectivity, which was hosted by George Best Belfast City Airport. Air connectivity is an issue that the Finance Committee has looked at.

The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee has also looked at it, and, obviously, we need to continue to oversee the work that those respective Departments are doing in regard to air connectivity.

11.00 am

Air passenger duty is a major issue and has been flagged up by a number of commentators, including PricewaterhouseCoopers. It said that, in its opinion, air passenger duty (APD) could be more important than corporation tax as an

economic game changer. There is a lot of frustration, not only among the airports but from many involved in the tourist industry and many in business circles in general, that APD is not moving as an issue at Westminster.

Of course, my party believes that the power should be devolved so that we can set a rate that is fair to allow competition on an all-island basis. Currently, our constituents have a choice about where they fly to and from, but that will always be dictated by a number of factors, primarily price. At the moment, because of the excessive charges in the North, most consumers and most of our constituents decide to fly from Dublin airport. I want to see a fair and level playing field across the island with the same rate of air passenger duty as its equivalent in the South, where it has been abolished. The only way to do that, in our opinion, is to have the measure devolved and then to abolish it. Obviously, that will come at a price, but everything comes at a price. Once the power is devolved, the Executive can decide not to change the rate of air passenger duty, but they can decide to lower it at least to make things easier for businesses and to try to ensure that we open up some new routes to places such as Germany and France and connect airports in Belfast and Derry to those hub airports in Europe. That would ensure that we are more open to the world and that we are more open to all those tourists who are willing to come here but who, too often, arrive in the South rather than the North and so are less likely, obviously, to come North, and therefore the tourist operators and the businesses throughout all our constituencies are less likely to gain revenue or economic benefits.

Credit is due to the tourist organisations and the Departments that were involved in the organisation of the Giro d'Italia in north Antrim, Belfast, south Armagh and elsewhere and, indeed, down to Dublin. The fact of the matter is that that was a great marketing opportunity, and the island has been marketed for one of the largest sporting events in the world. The problem is that the connectivity is not there to facilitate whatever demand will come out of that. My fear, which is shared by others in the industry, is that those tourists will arrive in Dublin and will do the usual circuit of Kerry, Galway and Dublin but might not come to Belfast, the Causeway Coast, Derry and Donegal.

If we were to have a mature debate about air passenger duty and a report from the Finance Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on air connectivity, we could make a decision on this sooner. I get the sense

that the economic Ministers in the Executive want to kick this issue down the road. We need to deal with this now because, as I said yesterday, growing the economy is one of the main pillars in our Programme for Government, and tourism needs to be front and foremost in that, as should agrifood and other sectors.

Unless you are going to grasp the opportunity to have the power for things like APD devolved, you will not realise the full potential for tourism. Obviously, there is a debate in Scotland about devolution there and, ultimately, independence. Hopefully, regardless of what the decision is in Scotland, we can have a mature debate here about the devolution of further financial powers. I heard what Members on the opposite side of the House said about waiting until Westminster gets round to abolishing air passenger duty. You could be waiting for decades until Westminster makes a decision. The only way that we are going to improve our economic outcomes is by taking economic decisions ourselves. After Scotland concludes its debate and has its vote on independence, all the parties around the Executive table need to have a mature debate about what powers we need to have devolved in the short to medium term. Air passenger duty is relatively small in comparison with something like corporation tax. We have heard some positive soundings from the Executive and the Minister about the devolution of corporation tax in the time ahead, and that needs to be prioritised as well. However, given the fact that APD —

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: Yes.

Mr McCallister: Does the Member not see an inconsistency in calling for the devolution of corporation tax and his party's position on welfare reform?

Mr McKay: I know that this particular issue is a hobby horse for the Member, and we heard him talk at length about it yesterday. At the end of the day, Sinn Féin's position on this is well known. We would like to have all powers devolved to this side of the Irish Sea so that we can make decisions for ourselves. Any change to the rate of corporation tax obviously comes at a cost, and welfare reform comes at a cost as well. However, we need to look at the costs in the round. Yesterday, I mentioned the impact that welfare reform proposals will have on the Tory agenda and the fact that the impact on the most vulnerable in our communities has not been thought through fully. There is always the reference to the estimates coming from

Treasury, and everybody has to bow down to what the Treasury says. This would have a huge impact on public health; the more people you push under the breadline, the more people you will have accessing the health service because of their mental health, in particular, and their physical health. That has not been assessed. I have not heard any estimates of the added pressure that that would have on the health service. I have not heard any estimates from the Department or the British Treasury about the economic impact that the withdrawal of millions of pounds would have in our town and city centres. It has not been thought out and that debate has not been had. Indeed, that debate has been avoided by many of the players who are willing to push forward welfare reform as soon as they possibly can.

Our position is quite clear; we want to see a fair outcome and a fair deal for everybody that we represent. We recognise that our level of deprivation is quite starkly different from that in communities in Scotland, England and Wales, and, therefore, we need to have different policies in place to deal with that and to ensure that we have better social outcomes for the people whom we represent. All the parties need to get round the table to deal with that and present a robust case to the British Government and Westminster to ensure that we do get a fair deal on welfare reform.

As I said, the Giro was a great success for tourism. In the coming weeks, we will see the Tour de France in Yorkshire, and that will obviously bring huge economic benefit to the communities in that part of England and in France. We need to aim for that as well. I speak to many who are involved in cycling clubs throughout my constituency of North Antrim, and they want to see that as well. Why should we not be more ambitious? Why should we just set the bar at the Giro? The Tour de France is being hosted just across the water, and I believe that we could do it better over here. Therefore, the case should be presented for it in the years ahead, as it should be for other major events, including the Rugby World Cup. Work is under way to try to attract that event to our shores as well.

Tourism majored in the Programme for Government, and we are not punching at or above our weight. Throughout the rest of the island, tourism is more mainstream. Communities recognise its economic impact on job creation, and so on, because it is more developed. We in the North need to match that level of development. The way in which to do that is by through improving access and by effective marketing of major events, such as the

Giro d'Italia. The Executive and their economic Ministers need to get serious about that, because the cost of APD is relatively minor in comparison with corporation tax. It is something that Ministers need to get to grips with to improve our economic outcomes and our image.

We referred to this yesterday: the image of the North, and of the island as a whole, is clearly linked to attracting tourists to these shores. I reiterate the point that we cannot afford to have a loose word here or there from our politicians that lead to major headlines across the world that paint this place — particularly this city — in a negative light. I say that conscious of —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am going to diplomatically encourage the Member to focus on the Budget Bill.

Mr McKay: I thank the Deputy Speaker for his intervention. Of course, I am speaking about budgets that are in place for the respective Departments for tourism and those for community relations through OFMDFM. That is my tenuous link.

To conclude, a LeasCheann Comhairle, as I said yesterday, we in the North have to major on tourism more than we do already. As politicians, we need to be more conscious of the image that we portray to the world. That is because a lot of the good work that has been carried out by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and by other Ministers to attract inward investment — foreign direct investment — week in and week out, can be undermined by the stroke of a pen or a loose word from a politician. Members need to be very mindful of that in the time ahead.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Paul Girvan, who will be mindful of what I have just said.

Mr Girvan: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am in favour of the Budget Bill and its progress. Hopefully, we can get there today. However, in doing so, I want to comment on what happens in Committee. I also put on record my thanks to the Committee staff and to the departmental officials who come along to brief us and keep us up to speed with what is going on. A word of thanks has to go to them, because it is not always that easy to understand exactly what we have in front of us. They have made the process very easy.

One thing that needs to be improved urgently is early intervention during monitoring rounds to ensure that money that cannot be spent is brought forward early enough so that it can be reallocated. That needs to be done so that we do not have to send back money because it was brought back far too late to allow it to be spent. In this mandate, to date, no moneys have been returned. That is good. On many occasions in the past, tens of millions of pounds had to be handed back to the Exchequer because of a lack of funding commitments.

Some benefits have been brought forward. As a region, from a business perspective, we probably benefit from some of the lowest rates in the United Kingdom.

The average business rate in Northern Ireland is £10,554. I cannot give you an exact figure for Wales and Scotland, but the payment in England is about £15,000 — 50% more than in Northern Ireland — plus an average water bill of between £334 and £388 a year. So, there have been major benefits for the Northern Ireland economy, and businesses have been able to avail themselves of that.

11.15 am

One commitment in the early stages of this mandate was to grow our economy. In doing so, we have probably boxed well above our weight on inward investment and attracting new business. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is not here, but I congratulate her and her Department for their work in encouraging and bringing forward new business through Invest NI, which has turned its game around in recent years from being a business promotion organisation to delivering numbers. In recent months, its predictions have gone far beyond expectations.

There will be a decision on the devolution of corporation tax, which will impact on us in future years. A decision will be made this autumn, and hopefully we can use that as another tool in the box to grow our economy and ultimately ensure that we benefit from it.

Invest-to-save schemes have been helpful in Departments, although each Department seems to have a slightly different interpretation of a saving. It is not a cut. It is sometimes about ensuring that better use is made of resources, thereby increasing efficiency in those Departments. Some Departments have been very good at that and others have not. I encourage each Committee to scrutinise invest-to-save schemes to see where they can be of

benefit to make more money available for delivery on the ground.

Much has been made of how we can influence the way forward. There are a number of variables. The previous Member who spoke mentioned welfare reform and the difficulties of not having everything pinned down. We got concessions with provisions that have been implemented in GB, but we must focus on moving forward and resolving the matter before it has a very major impact on the delivery of services to the wider public. The Executive will also have to focus on that to ensure that we progress the matter to a good conclusion.

There has been much positive media spin on the tourism aspect of the Giro, and we can take advantage of that. That will probably not happen this year, but, for years to come, there will be benefits from the people who watched the shots filmed from helicopters of the wonderful scenery. People will want to come to see the wonderful sights of Northern Ireland. We probably have some of the greatest scenery that the world has to offer, and we should be selling that as a positive as opposed to not selling our Province. Some people ask, "Why would you want to go there?", and I have heard people say, "There is nothing to see here", but, when you start to focus on where they live, you see that there is a lot more to see there than in many other places in the world that claim to be tourist attractions.

Everything is right on our doorstep, and we should be taking full advantage of that. Northern Ireland is a very small country, and you could go from one end of it to the other in two hours — depending on what you are driving, but that is beside the point. It is vital that we get the benefit from selling Northern Ireland as somewhere that you can get around relatively quickly to see what you need to.

I have a real interest in air passenger duty because Belfast International Airport is in my constituency. It is vital to have air links to encourage tourists from other areas and so that we have business links that we can develop. That has to be looked at. I believe that the British Government implemented APD as a green tax to deal with carbon offsetting. I do not see that they have not done very much with it. Under a European directive, doing away with the duty, if we decide to do that, could be classed as state aid. That is among the arguments that could be brought forward. However, the Republic of Ireland seems to do what it wants and ask for forgiveness later. We are unique in that we compete directly with an airport that is two hours down the road and can

offer flights with zero APD. I see the uniqueness of us having to look at addressing some of those areas.

We have been successful in dealing with the band of APD for long-haul flights, which ensured that we retained our only link to North America. It is vital that we encourage more long-haul flights. Conversations are ongoing to deal with the matter, and Northern Ireland could benefit greatly from it.

I have spoken with many business owners over the last year who said that we have got many things right. Fifty per cent of all businesses in Northern Ireland are availing themselves of a 20% reduction in their business rate. Many of them are asking, "Can we be sure that this will continue?" It is good that we have been able to facilitate that until now, and there is work ongoing to ensure that we can extend the business rate relief programme. It is vital that we do that, especially in this time of economic austerity and given the difficulties that many businesses are having.

It is also encouraging that we are using some of our major capital investment to deliver projects that are creating employment and ensuring that we can bolster and support our construction industry. Major schemes are under way, and I appreciate that many things have been happening in certain areas to ensure that we move forward in a better way. That includes reviewing how we deal with planning and ensuring that the planning process is more streamlined. Some of the benefits of that work are coming through, and we are finding that applications get through the system more quickly.

Under RPA, there will be more of an opportunity for those who are involved at a local level to have some influence in the development of area plans, which will mean that there is some opportunity to ensure economic development in those areas. The Deputy Speaker is smiling. I appreciate that we have enterprise zones, and Coleraine happens to be one of the areas that has benefited from having an enterprise zone. We now need to focus on setting those up in areas where there are difficulties in attracting business to ensure that that happens across the board.

I put on record my thanks to the Minister and his predecessor for the good work that they have done in ensuring that we have our voice heard in Westminster, have a lobby in Whitehall and get our message across. We do not necessarily get all the money that we would like, but I would like to ensure that we get

everything that we can. I appreciate that our Ministers and the Executive do that to the best of their ability. I know that we receive a lot more back than we pay in. Some people think that we should be getting a lot more, but I believe that, when the Barnett formula is calculated, we do not come out too badly.

I appreciate that people have mentioned how welfare reform might have an impact. A lot of people say that it will cost this or that, but we will actually receive more moneys; our welfare budget will increase, as opposed to reduce. Some people are not willing even to look at that matter. I appreciate that we need to ensure that we get the best deal for those who require the benefits, who are probably the most vulnerable and needy in our society. That is what we are doing.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, as an deis cainte sa díospóireacht seo ar an Bhuiséad. Thanks very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to participate in this debate on the Budget.

As I mentioned in yesterday's debate, for the SDLP, using other means of levering further expenditure to invest in the local economy and in sectors that could improve the life of people here is the whole purpose of devolution. However, in Northern Ireland, we are again looking at one section of the Budget in isolation and neglecting the opportunity to be more holistic and strategic.

A yearly Budget, as opposed to the current four-year Budget that we discuss in part today, would provide the opportunity for our economy to be more flexible. It would give us better opportunities to provide solutions for childcare funding, assist small businesses and reprioritise capital spending to boost our economy; all things that the SDLP has been highlighting the necessity of for some time. An annual Budget process, which the SDLP has continually proposed, is nothing new; it is the case, largely, in most countries.

As I said, an annual Budget process would enable us to adjust policy priorities, where required, to best support our population. It is all the more necessary, given the holes in the Budget. The Minister did respond to the points that I made on this issue yesterday, but I was not convinced by his answers. He said that an annual Budget would involve his officials working on a Budget for most of the year. One would assume that it was the job and the responsibility of the officials of a finance Department to work on budgetary matters constantly. I believe that an annual Budget

would provide much more accountability and ensure that projects are moved forward much more rapidly than they are, in many cases, at the moment.

When this Budget was published, the SDLP outlined some key reasons why it was necessary for Northern Ireland and the Executive to be more ambitious in their thinking.

All these reasons are more pressing now than they were in 2011.

11.30 am

When the Executive published this Budget, they did so without an accompanying Programme for Government. As I said at the time, the cart was placed before the horse. Such budgetary management without strategic planning is far from ideal, and perhaps we are now seeing the legacy of that bad planning, particularly in our health service. My colleague Mr McKinney has spoken in detail about the lack of transparency and assessment of the strategic priorities in the health service, and it strikes me that the rot set in when this four-year Budget was signed off without a Programme for Government.

Today, 20% of our young people are still out of work, yet the Budget did little to prioritise job creation. Yes, it is true that some jobs have been announced recently, which I very much welcome, but it is not enough to stem the tide of migration. Quite often, the jobs announced are Belfast-centric.

Again, last week, there was controversy in the Assembly regarding the Education Minister's plans for area planning and the decision not to proceed with the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). This is another demonstration of the problems caused and the money wasted when a strategic government programme, supported by adequate budget lines, is not agreed. The 2011-15 Budget did not truly recognise that public expenditure is the major economic lever here in the North.

Just as the coalition Government are now proposing with their Infrastructure Bill, in 2011 the SDLP proposed a number of options to prioritise capital expenditure to better stimulate the economy. This included increasing capital expenditure for social housing construction. In this context, we should bear in mind the 9,878 households that are accepted as homeless by the Housing Executive.

The final reason why the SDLP voted against the 2011 Budget was its absolute failure to

identify any new revenue streams. We published two distinct documents with, potentially, billions in proposed spending alternatives, but those proposals were shouted down. Given the economic climate, and for all the reasons I have just outlined, it is imperative that the Minister and the House look at those proposals again to be imaginative for the future. It is imperative that we properly assess alternative proposals from the SDLP and from other sources.

We can do things differently to benefit the people of the North, and the SDLP will champion the necessity to do so. I fail to understand why the Minister has been so resistant to such an approach. Why not assess, as I and others have suggested, the establishment of a Scottish-style commission, the options to extend devolution and the opportunities to take control of additional fiscal levers? As I said previously, if this were to be done we could get a clear picture on an evidence base of which fiscal levers are available to us and which will add to our economic development.

It is not sufficient to say that we have all the good powers already available and that the rest would be of no benefit. Such an argument does not fly. Only last week, we were debating the air passenger duty levy. As currently set, the levy penalises Northern Ireland business travellers, who are unfairly taxed on every journey to England. We heard earlier from the Chair of the Finance Committee the effect that the duty has on the tourism industry. A reduction of air passenger duty on all flights, international and internal, would help reduce the competitive disadvantage faced by Northern Ireland industry, especially the tourism industry.

Why not provide an evidence-based argument to the London Government? Why not assess all the available options that would allow us to use our small size to be nimble in the global market? We must be bold, brave, ambitious and take reasonable risks in the development of the Budget, including budgeting annually, to benefit industry, business development and, consequently, wider society.

Go raibh míle maith agat as an deis cainte. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to participate.

Mr Cree: It seems no time since we were talking about budgets yesterday.

The Executive's top priority during the Budget period 2011-15 was to develop the economy. As we are now finalising the figures for the last

year of the Budget, it is useful to look at what has been achieved. In 2011-12, the public sector accounted for 36% of all jobs, compared to 28% in Great Britain. Public expenditure in Northern Ireland accounts for 63% of output compared to 39% in Great Britain. As a result of the large public sector, gross value added (GVA) per capita in Northern Ireland has been significantly below that in the rest of the United Kingdom, at around 80%.

What progress has been made over the period? What special measures are included in this Budget to advance the Programme for Government target?

At the start of the Budget period, we were told that up to 30% of existing Northern Ireland Civil Service accommodation was in poor or very poor condition, with substantial investment required or replacement sought within five years. Again, I wonder what the current situation is. The reduced maintenance budget may well have exacerbated the condition of the estate. Perhaps, the Minister can advise us.

Yesterday, I referred to the Hillsborough agreement sites — the Minister will note that I put in the word "agreement" there to make it easier this time — and the cost of £1.3 million that has been included in the Estimates for security and maintenance.

Looking back at the first year, 2011-12, again, we see that Ministers recognised the importance of the regeneration sites which had been gifted by Her Majesty's Government. But what has been done during the intervening three years? Mr Wilson correctly stated yesterday that the outcome of the four-year Budget is before us now and indeed that is the case, but how successful has it been? On the capital side, £547 million was expected in receipts during the four years of the Budget. A further £100 million was anticipated to come from asset sales through the capital assets management unit. Were those moneys realised or is there a balance to be achieved this year?

I will now turn to the reconciliation of the Estimates with the Budget. The Committee for Finance and Personnel was supplied with a table, annex A, which was most helpful. Again, I congratulate the staff for their forthrightness in coming and attempting to answer our questions. It certainly makes life a bit easier. In that table, we could see that the Department of Education was allocated an extra £75 million to increase its budget. What was that sum for and has it indeed been spent? DCAL was given £16.8 million for regional stadia. Is that

sum likely to be spent in the remaining Budget period?

Yesterday, I referred to resources that are held in the centre. The Minister advised that the sums would be disbursed shortly. However, on the capital side, there is reinvestment and reform (RRI) borrowing of around £300 million. Included in that figure is £50 million that relates to Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC). I ask the Minister why that is necessary when there was £80 million in the social investment fund last year. There is reference to £44 million of unallocated borrowing from T:BUC which is at risk by the Treasury. Again, can the Minister clarify that situation?

Finally, I note that there is an unallocated sum of £34.8 million that relates to financial transactions capital. This is a fairly new form of investment, and I believe it has a great future. Is that £34.8 million the final figure for the year? Are there projects which that capital can service and have they been identified at this stage?

Colleagues will raise other questions about various Departments later in the debate. I look forward to hearing from the Minister again in due course.

Mrs Cochrane: Following the Assembly's approval yesterday of the Supply resolution for the expenditure plans of Departments and other public bodies as detailed in the 2014-15 Main Estimates, I welcome the opportunity to now contribute to this stage of the Budget Bill. On the surface, the Budget Bill is quite dry. However, it is crucial legislation for every public service provided for under the authority of the Assembly, and we must ensure that our plans fit within the context of the current economic climate.

The past financial year has seen some economic growth, which has not been seen for some time. That is a testament to our private sector, which continues to innovate and perform in domestic and international markets. However, we should also recognise the role that our public sector has played in providing the conditions that have aided the recovery. The jobs and economy initiative directed resources to areas to help educate young people, upskill workers and resource businesses, whilst, at the same time, ensuring that we continue to care for the vulnerable and the elderly. Unfortunately, however, much of that good work could stop due to the current impasse on welfare reform.

During yesterday's debate on the Main Estimates, concern was expressed about the public expenditure consequences of non-delivery of welfare reform. I, too, share that concern. The forecast penalty for 2014-15 is £87 million, which simply cannot be met through the reduced requirements that usually materialise in the three monitoring rounds. Cuts to all Departments will therefore be required. In some ways, that makes a farce of us debating today a Budget that we know will be reduced in the weeks and months ahead.

We are already seeing Departments retreating into their silos, trying to simply manage their individual budgets and protect themselves from the inevitable cuts that will result from the fines that will be imposed. This is not good for Northern Ireland. Our budgetary process needs to be handled maturely and innovatively, and collaboration between Departments is imperative.

We spent months in the Social Development Committee scrutinising the Welfare Reform Bill for Northern Ireland. A number of variations for Northern Ireland have been secured. Of course I agree that we must do as much as we can to protect those in our society who rely on the benefit system, but I believe that the time has come to implement the Bill and to stop cutting our nose off to spite our face. All that we are doing by delaying the legislation is reducing the money that we have to spend on our public services — the very services that are aimed at helping the most vulnerable to escape from poverty.

It is not just the direct financial penalties that we need to concern ourselves with. There are other adverse impacts upon service delivery and the wider economy that cannot be ignored. For example, the Department for Social Development currently employs 1,400 people to provide child maintenance and social security services to people in England on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). DWP has been very clear that, should Northern Ireland not maintain parity and, consequently, no longer have staff experienced in using the IT systems, it will have no option but to relocate those jobs elsewhere. The loss of those jobs would be a huge blow to the local economy.

We owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to maximise the outcomes from our Budget. Therefore, we need leadership from all parties on this issue so that we can focus on service delivery, protect our most vulnerable and bring people out of poverty. We need to continue to reform our public services to ensure that we have the right components in place to continue

on the path to economic recovery. I know that party colleagues will raise some other issues in the Budget today, but I think that this is one of the main things that we really need to focus on.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to today's debate as the Chair of the Regional Development Committee.

I start by thanking my colleague the Finance Minister for bringing this motion to the House today. I noted yesterday that the level of the Main Estimates for the Department has reduced by a mere 0.43% from last year, so it is positive that, despite continued pressures, the amount of investment available to the Department has, to all intent and purposes, remained static.

11.45 am

Colleagues on the Committee for Finance and Personnel received a briefing on the Main Estimates from DFP officials on 28 May 2014, during which they summarised the Regional Development allocations. There is a revised asset management unit capital receipts allocation of £17 million; £30 million for the A8 Belfast to Larne project; £2 million for land and compensation costs; £13.6 million for the Magherafelt bypass; £11 million for road structural maintenance; £8.1 million for the Glarryford A26 project; £5 million for the local transport safety measures and road safety improvements; £2.5 million for bus procurement and the completion of the 2013-14 orders.

On the resource side, I note that there is £7.6 million for the moratorium on increasing car parking charges, which was a result of the economy and jobs initiative and is welcomed by the Committee. However, I will lay down a bit of a marker for the Minister. The Committee was briefed on 4 June about the proposed legislation for the transfer of off-street car parks and was quite rightly shocked to hear that there were no proposals to introduce safeguards to provide for the future sales of those assets. Officials were not in a position to indicate the value of the assets and have been asked to forward that information to the Committee. I have since been advised that, based on 2010 figures, the total asset being transferred is £233 million or £256 million at today's prices following inflation. The Committee will not allow those assets to be transferred unless there are substantial safeguards in the legislation to ensure that the public purse does not lose out in the event of any future sale of part or all of those assets, and I hope that the Minister for

Regional Development will take note of that position.

The total additional allocation to the Department in the financial year is £96 million, and that is a welcome bonus to a very tight budget. Obviously, we are not in a position to see outcome figures, but I am confident that the Minister for Regional Development and his officials will achieve their spend targets, as has been the experience in recent years.

Investment in the strategic roads infrastructure has a significant impact on our economy and in contributing to confidence in the construction and ancillary industries. For every £1 million invested in our roads, some 28 jobs are sustained. The economic knock-on that those works have in our construction industry and to the suppliers in the industry is immense. Every £1 invested in construction generates £2.84 in total economic activity, and, of course, completion of those roads will allow for faster and more efficient freight operations and for more and better tourism infrastructure and will help to link our most remote communities.

The Committee continues to be concerned, however, about the huge backlog that is accruing in the road structural maintenance programme and is sitting at £830 million. The current departmental budget for the programme is £56 million whilst the independently assessed structural maintenance funding plan (SMFP) level is £133 million, leaving a shortfall of £77 million.

While my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Executive colleagues have been very generous in recent years, it would be wholly inappropriate to expect the SMFP level to be continually maintained through future monitoring rounds. Additionally, that method of topping up the pot at monitoring rounds is not necessarily the most efficient, given that the report 'Maintaining strategic infrastructure: roads', issued by the National Audit Office at the end of last week, stated that because the Department for Transport had to bid in year for additional moneys, that resulted in most maintenance being carried out:

"in the autumn and winter, which is less efficient because materials can be more difficult to handle in cold and wet conditions and daylight hours are shorter. As a result of the additional funding for emergency repairs, which is made available at the end of the financial year, almost all highways authorities need extra capacity from the market at the same time, which makes it less likely that they will get value for money".

That was supported by departmental officials presenting to the Committee on the June monitoring round. They stated in their briefing papers:

"The early allocation of additional funding would provide best value for money by allowing more resurfacing work to be done in the summer months during longer hours of daylight leading to traffic management and safety benefits."

It is our opinion that the Minister for Regional Development and his officials need to argue for greater funding certainty for capital projects and maintenance budgets, thereby increasing the potential to achieve better value for money.

It is not all about the roads infrastructure. Importantly, it is also about the sewer and waste water infrastructure. We are all aware of the seriousness of the governance issues and arrangements in Northern Ireland Water, and I thank the Minister of Finance for his continuing discussions with Treasury to try to bring about greater governance and financial flexibility for Northern Ireland Water. However, the Committee has concerns about Northern Ireland Water's long-term budgets, particularly as a number of waste water treatment plants are either at or approaching capacity, increasing the risk to the Northern Ireland economy of infraction proceedings from Europe, which would see significant penalties applied.

We have only to look at the Department of Agriculture and the penalties that it had to pay because of the farm maps issue. Of huge significance to our economy is the overspill into Belfast lough. That not only brings the potential for more infractions but could result in businesses that want to locate in Belfast being refused because its systems cannot take any more capacity. Only yesterday, we heard about future developments planned for Belfast harbour and the positive benefits that that new investment will have on our economy. We cannot and must not jeopardise such investment.

Those are matters that the Minister for Regional Development and his Department need to address urgently in order to protect and grow our economy in order to bring about meaningful and strategic investment in our construction and service industries and to put a plug firmly into the very real potential flow of infraction penalties away from investment in our economy and into the black hole of Brussels. I can assure the Minister and his officials that he will

have the support of the Committee if he does so.

I expect that other Committee members will contribute to the debate and may cover areas that I have not touched on. I again thank my colleague the Finance Minister for bringing the motion to the Chamber, and I assure him and the House that the Committee for Regional Development will continue to hold the Department to account for its use of moneys granted to it.

Before I draw to a close, Mr Deputy Speaker, as a Member of the House, I will raise an issue that was spoken about yesterday, when the Deputy Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister spoke on behalf of that Committee. I want to put it on the record for clarity. At last Wednesday's meeting, the Chair told the Committee that the June monitoring papers had arrived only a couple of hours before the meeting. It was quite apparent that he and the Deputy Chair, Mr Lyttle, who spoke yesterday, had done a side deal and decided that neither of them would chair the meeting. Initially, nine members of the Committee were present, including the Chair and Deputy Chair when they were there. I have to say, for the record, that, although other members had not seen the papers —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I hope that the Member will be able to tie this in with the Budget Bill.

Mr Spratt: This is to do with the Budget, Mr Deputy Speaker, because it shows how the Budget could have been held back or stymied in some way as a result of it. I want to put it on record that I was elected as Acting Chair after the Chair and Deputy Chair had left, and the officials who were waiting to speak on the June monitoring round were questioned very effectively by the seven members from the three parties who were left, including the Chair's colleague Mr Cree, who remained and asked very effective questions. So business was done, stunt politics failed to work, and we were able to continue, today and yesterday, with the Budget debates.

I hope that that ties in, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it is important to put on record what happened last Wednesday at the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Weir: I will try to follow that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please do not.

Mr Weir: As a — hopefully — reasonably responsible MLA, I will try my best not to stymie the Budget, the Budget process or the debate.

Arguably, one of the pitfalls of being a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee is that, although we have a certain level of additional insight and involvement with the budgetary process, each year we rise on the Budget and try our best to find something novel to say about it. I assure Members that I will not burden them with anything novel but will keep to the same well-trodden script of previous years.

The budgetary process has been criticised, and it has been said that it should be every year. All of us, from the youngest Member to the oldest, can remember days when Budgets, particularly those written across the water, were delivered amid high levels of fear or expectation.

I have just spotted the honourable Member for West Belfast coming into the Chamber, so I hope that that does not mean that we are soon to have an hour or two of his dissection of the Budget. We shall see.

With traditional Budgets, there was fear and expectation. It was almost a roller-coaster feeling: would it be a giveaway budget or one that was more geared towards austerity? From an economic perspective, the end result, whether in Northern Ireland or across the UK as a whole, was that there was a roller-coaster quality to it. It meant that it was very difficult for organisations and Departments to effectively plan in a more strategic manner over time.

Over the last 10 to 15 years, an important development, although it is criticised for dullness or inflexibility, is that we have been able to set longer-term Budgets. That is an advantage, and I welcome the Bill as part of the process. An encouraging element in the economy is that we have seen a certain level of economic revival and confidence that we can move forward.

However, there is no doubt, as I will say later, that there is a great shadow hanging over the Budget. It has been touched on by others, and it is the shadow of the failure of some parties to deal effectively with welfare reform and the major implications that that will have.

12.00 noon

There is also a wider challenge. It is one that the Minister is embracing very effectively but to which our government system is perhaps a little

slow to react. There is a challenge to ensure that there is stability, but there is also a need for innovation and fresh thinking on public expenditure. Take, for example, the delivery of services. Ultimately, people care about is ensuring that they get the best possible service at the best possible value. That is not simply a matter of saving money. There are issues with opportunity costs. If you fail to save money in one bid, it means that fewer resources are available in another section. The innovative work on public sector reform — the Minister pioneered that as part of the budgetary process and as part of the priority of delivering high-quality and efficient public services in the Programme for Government, which is fed into the Budget — and the creation of the public sector reform division are a step forward. As part of looking at reform, we should consistently look at how we can better deliver.

I remember, going back to a previous Finance Minister who is now the First Minister, one of the criticisms. I am paraphrasing, but, at times, one of the problems was that Departments tended to look at the 3% of new money available or the changes required and, effectively, take for granted 97% of their budget and not examine it. A positive aspect of Departments' savings delivery plans is a much more critical examination of their own budget. I join others in expressing regret that one Department, namely the Department of Education, has not embraced that. Constantly looking at innovation is very valuable in trying to deliver through the Budget. To that extent, the move largely precipitated by actions across the water on a new attitude to financial transaction capital is to be welcomed, but it is an area in which we, collectively as an Assembly, need to do better.

We should realise that whatever the position of the economy as a whole and whichever party wins next year's general election at Westminster, regardless of whether it is dependent on help from outside, we will still be in a situation of tightened financial circumstances for Northern Ireland. I think that, if anything, as there is further work to clear the Budget deficit, we will find that that will get tighter. Despite that, it is good to see the projected figures for capital spend. The Chair of the Committee for Regional Development mentioned the benefits of capital spend. He mentioned the multiplier effect and the impact on our economy, particularly the construction sector. Even with all the constraints, we still project a capital spend for next year of around £1.1 billion. That will be of benefit, and we can supplement it with financial transactions capital. It is, perhaps, a little disappointing that,

although good projects have come forward, there is still a large pot of money that could be spent through that route. It is a question of the right projects coming forward. I appreciate that that deals much more with partnership with the private sector, but it is a key challenge that needs to be put in place.

I turn now to one other aspect, which is an area that I have been involved in for some time. I certainly welcome the provisions made in the Budget for the implementation of RPA. It is important that, as we move towards a more efficient system of 11 councils, which will better deliver for all our citizens, we do not have the unfortunate, unforeseen circumstances of some citizens being left with a steep rise in their rates bill. Consequently, in addition to the support given, there was provision for rates smoothing and an allocation to ratepayers to ensure that they would not lose out. The £30 million set aside by the Executive is very useful. Of course, we always look at the negative side of the coin. However, there is a realisation that, for quite a large number of people across Northern Ireland, rates convergence will mean that they go from a higher rates level to a lower rate; that is to be welcomed. In the priority of the Executive, particularly the Finance Minister, to aid the economy, ensuring that people have money in their pockets to spend is very helpful.

There is also a realisation, which, again, is encompassed in the Budget, the issue of support for businesses. The Minister can correct me if I am wrong, but approximately 50% of businesses now have some relief support. That is important as we face a much more global market in which businesses face pressure not simply from downturns in spending but from the greater availability of capital and movement of trade and the consistently increasing opportunities for both exports and imports. It is not said often enough that efforts to provide that support for businesses, particularly new businesses — small business rates relief, industrial de-rating, empty shop rates concessions and empty property rate relief — have helped to spread the burden of rates a lot better, with the end result that, on both the domestic and non-domestic side, ratepayers in Northern Ireland pay an awful lot less than their equivalents across the water. In difficult economic circumstances, that can only help our businesses and enterprise, and it can only help people to retain money to spend on those services.

There is no doubt that, despite all the good work that is being done, a major challenge lies ahead. It is one that, I have to say, two of the parties in the Chamber have effectively ducked

so far: welfare reform. I agreed very much with Mrs Cochrane when she spoke about the direct cost to services and the long-term implications for jobs and the parity issue. The potential impact on the Budget is estimated at about £100 million. We cannot simply pretend that we can take that sort of hit without it impacting on front line services for vulnerable people. Those at lower levels in the Civil Service may ultimately not get the pay rise that they were hoping for. There may have to be cuts to vital services. I suspect that there will not be a great deal of sympathy for saying, "We wanted to ensure that we did not have a cap on welfare spending so that someone who is on the equivalent of £35,000 gross is capped at that point". There are some decisions that have to be made. I await someone making the case and saying, "We will spend all that money on welfare and make the cuts in Departments", but there is not that level of honesty or transparency among those who oppose this. There seems to be a belief that the welfare reforms can simply be ignored and that there will be no consequences whatsoever. There are clear consequences. I would have more admiration if someone were to say, "Actually, to preserve this level of welfare spending, I am prepared to make the following sacrifices and cuts in other Departments". At least that would be an honest position. I am not sure that it would be a particularly wise or financially prudent position, but at least it would be honest.

In yesterday's Supply resolution debate, it was mentioned that the current subvention was calculated at something in the region of £9.6 billion. I know that there are arguments that it could be a little bit higher or a little bit lower. However, there is a wider issue beyond simply the implications over the next few years of failure to grasp welfare reform. If we were foolish enough to go down the route of breaking parity on welfare, we would break parity on taxation and, ultimately, the block grant and would face a situation in which any Chancellor would simply say to the Assembly, "Well, if you want x, y and z, raise more money yourself". That would mean either higher taxation or much lower expenditure. The reality is that, as a region of the United Kingdom, we benefit from parity, as other regions do. Going down a line that threatens that parity and that opportunity to protect the lowest paid in our society by having that parity is a very short-sighted approach. If, in doing so, some of the parties opposite find some fig leaf to hide behind and if that provides comfort to them in signing up to what needs to happen, I am happy with whatever fig leaf they get in that regard.

The reality is that there are tough decisions to be made. As an Executive, we need to move forward on the basis of practical realities, such as the very fine Budget in front of us today. No Budget supplies every penny to every project that all of us around the Chamber would like to see, but, overall, this is a balanced and good Budget. Let us not throw away the good work of that Budget by going into a land of make-believe and pretending that some of the implications of the wider financial bid cannot be faced up to.

I hope that I have not engaged in what the last Member talked about — stunt-ery and taking actions of that nature. We need to send out a responsible message that faces up to reality but also says that we have a good Budget today that the House should back.

Mr P Ramsey: I look forward to participating in the debate on the Budget. The SDLP did not support the 2011-15 Budget for important reasons that my colleague Dominic Bradley has already outlined to the House. That, however, is no direct criticism of the present Finance Minister, Simon Hamilton, who is probably one of our more effective Ministers in discharging his duties. His task was made greater because the Department for Employment and Learning — I am a member of the Employment and Learning Committee — was asked to make a resource saving of nearly £400 million across the four Budget years. In that regard, there is no direct criticism of you, Minister, but it is clear that we did not vote for that Budget at that time.

I want to reiterate some of the points that I made earlier about the legislation that Stephen Farry has brought forward on the blacklisting of workers. Our party is very content to support the Department for Employment and Learning's legislation. I hope that we will outlaw, once and for all, the blacklisting that occurs right across Northern Ireland. I reiterate that the SDLP was the only party in the Assembly that voted against the increase in pension age for public servants and the reduction of redundancy payments for civil servants. In doing so, the SDLP clearly demonstrated our commitment to protecting the interests of hard-pressed households and trade union members. It would be welcome if the rest of the Assembly were to do the same.

I reiterate that, in recent times, following on from some of Peter Weir's comments, we have seen an increase in zero-hour contracts in the volatile job market, which has meant that low-paid workers and those on short-term contracts find it harder than ever to pay the family bills. That is clear and obvious. In this budgetary

process, we should consider ways to legislate on and provide funds to tackle that most important issue. It is imperative that the issue of zero-hour contracts is adequately addressed to protect workers.

Our students — a most important subject — are now in a worse place than they were in 2011, when the Budget was set without providing clarity on student finance, student fees or the education maintenance allowance. Additionally, we are yet to see a rise in the student cap, which would, undoubtedly, create jobs and limit the brain drain and the emigration from Northern Ireland, to which my colleague Dominic Bradley made clear reference. That is happening more often in this area today.

12.15 pm

I will now address some issues relating to my constituency, particularly one that would prove a great boost to Derry and to the north-west region of Ireland. There are plans for a substantial university campus in Derry: the Minister will clearly be aware of the One Plan. The key driver of the One Plan is the delivery of the expansion of the campus at Magee. However, we have not seen any funding for the One Plan. We have seen no long-term goals for achieving it. Nearly every citizen in the city participated in the consultation on the One Plan. The most important infrastructural development that could occur in Derry is the expansion of the Magee campus. Economically, socially and culturally, it would make a huge difference.

I was disappointed to find out recently that a call was made for funding, under Together: Building a United Community, an initiative through the Treasury as part of the economic package for Northern Ireland, that resulted in substantial moneys being allocated to the relocation of University of Ulster from Jordanstown to the centre of Belfast. However, a small project involving a new teaching block at the Magee campus that was to cost £10 million was denied. Who ultimately determined the outcome of that application? Who determined that almost £40 million would go to Belfast when a small project involving a teaching unit, which would have helped Magee evolve and create more classrooms, was denied?

The Magee campus has made a huge expression of interest in lands at the Foyle and Londonderry College. Its plans include the creation of a new institute for sustainable technologies, the expansion of business and professional services, the creation of an

institute for health and well-being and the expansion of computing electronic and software courses. That is where the jobs are. Clearly, the new future lies in the creative industries, the IT sector and finance, yet we are denied this in the north-west. Jobs in that sector are those that modern business and industry will require.

Was it the Minister's Department that appraised the business case? Was it the Department for Employment and Learning, the Exchequer or the Northern Ireland Office, which were part of the Together: Building a United Community project? The Minister and the Executive must face up to the fact that, during the intervening period between this debate and the implementation of the massive cuts in the Department for Employment and Learning's resource budget, real people will be unable to take advantage of the services that we, in this House, are trying to allocate every day.

Questions have to be asked about youth unemployment. Why did the Department for Employment and Learning surrender £1 million, when every Member in this House knows the history of increasing youth unemployment and the 44,000 NEETs across Northern Ireland. Why are we surrendering money?

I reiterate to the Minister that my constituency has yet to see any real commitment from the Executive to Magee. Would he be minded to support the One Plan regeneration plan? There have been massive funding injections for the move of the University of Ulster from Jordanstown to Belfast and it is no wonder that the people of Derry in my constituency feel that Stormont is doing nothing for them. I understand the apathy that they have towards Stormont, when time after time, decisions are made that clearly put the city and the young people in my area at a disadvantage. We need to prepare and have a real regional Budget, one that recognises the intrinsic need for deprivation and historical indifference to be given the attention that really addresses the non-existence afforded to my people by the Executive when it comes to providing a fair, regional, balanced Administration that will provide opportunities for all.

That is what we are here for. We all enter politics to try to improve the quality of life, but that is becoming much harder when we represent areas that are continuously deprived of infrastructure, jobs and education. The Budget needs to be looking regionally and subregionally in order to have an impact.

I have met the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Employment

and Learning about an economic inactivity study that they carried out. The study will result in trying to create pilot programmes or projects across Northern Ireland. It came about as a part of a Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) report that it gave to the Employment and Learning Committee in November of last year.

Having the City of Culture brought great things to the north-west. It brought a sense of great worth. People were feeling confident about themselves and very proud of the city. However, even given the City of Culture year and the amount of money — good money — that was invested by a lot of Departments, the level of unemployment rose in Derry. We all thought that the legacy of the City of Culture would be greater employment opportunities. It has failed.

We have an economic inactivity report now. How much money is allocated to it? Again, there are no budget lines. I make it clear that the report has to look at hot spots across Northern Ireland. Those hot spots have been identified as being in parts of west Belfast, wider Belfast and urban areas, but clearly the biggest hot spot is Derry and the north-west, where there are high levels of unemployment and youth unemployment but, most importantly, very high levels of economic inactivity.

We have to prioritise the Budget. Dominic Bradley and our party have consistently said that you cannot provide a four-year Budget plan without renewing it every year when circumstances change and when we are clearly not hitting targets that other places, such as England, are hitting when it comes to creating greater employment opportunities. Even in the media yesterday, the big story was that Northern Ireland is not hitting targets.

The Minister for Employment and Learning recently brought forward legislation in the form of the Work and Families Bill. Again, it is legislation essentially inspired by Westminster. The Bill must dovetail with other key policies and strategies, including those for early years, childcare, play, leisure, and cohesion, sharing and integration. Similar consideration must be given to how it impacts on the work of DETI, the rural development plans and, most importantly, poverty reduction strategies. There are too many people in Northern Ireland on the breadline. The terminology that we are all now using is the "working poor". We have to address that need, so we need to have an injection of investment into science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

We had a huge event recently in the Long Gallery promoting science, technology, engineering and maths. That is the future. We need to provide those subjects, and not just in secondary and grammar schools. We have to promote and advocate STEM, but we need to invest in it in primary schools in order to generate interest.

The Committee for Employment and Learning carried out an extensive inquiry into careers. The Careers Service across Northern Ireland has failed, because we are not appropriately addressing future needs, such as what our young people need; what jobs they require; and what third-level education they should undertake. Parents' greatest choice in life is for their son or daughter to become a teacher, but what is the point in promoting that now when we find that so many hundreds, if not thousands, of them are not in work? Future jobs are going to be in the creative industries, and that is why, Minister, there has to be investment in the Careers Service across the board, and collaboratively, so that good money is spent and good investment is made to save money. We must promote and progress them consistently, as they are essential for the development of a strong knowledge-based and skilled workforce. Without such investment, our young people and students will be disadvantaged — they are continually disadvantaged — and our economic growth will be hindered precisely as we prepare to take advantage of the beginnings of what I spoke about: a global financial upturn that we have not yet seen.

The Minister has to respect and value other parties' contributions to the debate. We are meaningfully playing our part in the Executive and in stable Government, but, at times, it becomes so difficult and frustrating when people ignore us and do not listen to points about those regional disadvantages. It is about time that people lived up to the mark. The Executive are there to provide a future for everyone across Northern Ireland.

Mr Kinahan (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): I am grateful to speak in the debate. Initially, I will speak as the Chair of the Audit Committee and then, if I may, touch on some education matters.

On behalf of the Audit Committee, I wish to confirm that the provision for the Northern Ireland Audit Office in the Budget (No. 2) Bill corresponds with the amount that was agreed by the Audit Committee and laid before the Assembly earlier this year. Those amounts were also included in the Audit Office's

corporate plan for 2014-15 to 2016-17. The plan identifies three key areas in which the Audit Office believes that it can add considerable value to the Northern Ireland public sector. Those are encouraging further improvement in financial management; promoting the proper conduct of public business; and promoting improvement in the efficiency and quality of services that are provided to the taxpayer. The Audit Committee endorses those key areas.

While there have undoubtedly been improvements in the quality of public sector financial management, good governance and propriety, and the delivery of services in recent years, there remains significant scope for improvement. We want the Audit Office to use its influence across the public sector to assist in identifying opportunities for reducing costs and improving productivity, efficiency and service delivery.

The Audit Office's valuable service comes at a cost, and the Committee welcomes the fact that it has been steadily diminishing that cost to the public purse. During a period of prolonged financial pressures, in which securing the maximum benefit for every taxpayer pound has never been more important, the Northern Ireland Audit Office has reduced its net resource requirement year on year, all the while maintaining and even adding to the quality and breadth of service it provides to the Assembly. Specifically, the Audit Office's 2014-15 Estimate provides for a decrease in its net resource requirement of 1.5% in cash terms from its Estimate for 2013-14 — £8.2 million compared with £8.327 million. What is more, that represents a cash terms reduction of 12.7% from its 2010-11 net resource requirement of £9.397 million.

I want everyone to keep it in mind that the Audit Office saves the taxpayer an average of £26 million a year through its work, and that is only the work that can be measured in financial terms. We anticipate further reductions in the Northern Ireland Audit Office's net resource requirement of 1.7% in 2015-16 and a further 2.2% in 2016-17. If realised, those reductions would represent a cash terms reduction of 16.1% from the 2010-11 baseline.

The Audit Committee endorses the provision in the Main Estimates for the Audit Office, commends the Audit Office for the efficiencies it has achieved and looks forward to the continuing valuable support that it provides to the Assembly. I remind everyone that a saving of £26 million a year is not to be sniffed at.

I will move on to education. I keep in mind the words I used in speaking about the Audit Office and highlight the need for value for money. At times such as these, it is essential that we find the most efficient way of spending every penny. Sometimes, I wonder, Minister, whether we are making the effort to do so.

The job of every Committee is to scrutinise all the actions of its Department and Minister, but there are two blocks to this happening. One is that the Department or the Minister does not provide the figures in time and there is a lack of training of Committee members. The other, as the Minister knows, is the lack of transparency because of the jargon that it is all written in. I ask whether the Minister is considering looking at how accounts are presented so that we get them in a way that we and the public can understand, and everything is totally transparent.

12.30 pm

I know that the Minister of Education wants flexibility, and there is no harm in that, as long as we know all of the figures and they are fed to us. We have been told in Committee that the Department of Education is the worst at making efficiency savings, yet that seems hard to believe when you compare it with what we get from OFMDFM. Will the Minister consider setting in place guidelines, incentives and maybe even penalties so that total transparency is possible in all Departments, but especially in Education? I am told that this may be going on, and I wonder whether the Minister will update us on whether we are getting to a more transparent system.

I return more specifically to education. Yesterday, the Chair of the Committee for Education said, quite rightly, that the Minister does extremely well on capital spend, but I would like things to be done better in many other areas. While we are on the subject of capital spend, I know that the Minister loathes the term "shovel ready", but I push the point again that every school's plans must be financially sound, properly designed and ready for purpose. When I was in council, you used to see, every quarter, a list of all of the roads and pavements and where they were in the line of priority. If the same thing could happen with schools, they could at least see the future and when their school will be rebuilt, or even that it is on the list. Something like that would give hope to the teachers and pupils.

We have a disastrous system of area planning at the moment. I wonder whether the Minister has taken on board in his budget that, if the

Treacy judgement runs the way that it is going, there could be an extra cost from legal challenges to what has already happened in area planning, in which we have seen very little movement towards sharing. As I pointed out the other day, only 16 applications to share came from 1,200 schools. We all need to do a whole lot better, and I hope that the Minister will use the money from his budget to encourage it to happen more and more and in a much better way.

Yesterday, the Chair said that we need to make sure that the controlled sector has its own body and that it will need funding. However, we also need funding for the voluntary grammar sector and, indeed, the integrated sector to give them the same powers and the same bodies. I do not think that anyone is looking at budgeting for that. We need to start moving towards the single shared education system that we want to see.

Another concern is special needs. As we know, legislation is looming, and we have seen in the Estimates from the Minister that an extra £10 million is being spent —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Can the Member indicate whether he will conclude in the next couple of minutes, because we need to finish for the Business Committee meeting?

Mr Kinahan: I have a good bit more to say, so I will not conclude, Deputy Speaker, in the next three or four minutes. If you would like me to conclude now, I will start again later, or are we finished?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that we will leave it until after Question Time. The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.34 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Health Service: Financial Pressures

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the current financial pressures facing the health service. (AQO 6302/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): My Department faces a considerable financial challenge in 2014-15, with some £160 million of additional resources estimated to be required in order to balance the books. Of that £160 million, £115 million of the deficit is rolling forward from 2013-14, much of which was dealt with through the non-recurrent measures in 2013-14, including additional allocations for the in-year monitoring rounds and managed slippage/deferral expenditure.

The remaining deficit relates to new service developments that are essential to sustain current policies and to provide new cost-effective therapies. Together with cost pressures, such as pay and demographic changes, those amount to £305 million in 2014-15 and are offset by £90 million of Executive funding and £170 million of further savings.

Financial deficits are allocated in all five integrated trusts due to front line service pressures in a range of areas, such as unscheduled care, elective care, nursing levels, specialist services, mental health, learning disability and childcare. Unfortunately, despite the additional Executive funding and our demanding savings plans, we still have a funding gap of £160 million, which means that we have submitted a significant number of bids in the June monitoring round. I strongly recommended that the Executive lend their support to this critical investment in health and social care services.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his response. At a recent meeting of the Health Committee, officials from your Department informed the Committee that, if the £160 million of extra funding that you have in for is not

provided, waiting times will be compromised, safety and quality of services will be compromised and, indeed, the Programme for Government will be compromised. Surely, Minister, that is a dreadful state of affairs. Do you still maintain that the health service is not in crisis? If you do not get the funding, how will you provide a good, decent service for all our constituents?

Mr Poots: I would have thought that the Member would be appropriately saying that the health service needs to get that funding, as opposed to looking at the prospect of not getting it.

Mr McCarthy: You did not get it last time.

Mr Poots: We did get money in each of the monitoring rounds, and I greatly appreciate the support of the Finance Minister in that. However, this is not a matter for the Health Minister and the Finance Minister; this is a matter for the entire Executive. It is important that the Assembly and the Executive recognise that the financial pressures that are faced by health and social care in the coming year will do serious damage to the health service if we cannot go some way to meeting them.

Mr McKinney: Will the Minister outline how the demonstrable underfunding of Transforming Your Care has affected its implementation in terms of initiatives started, not started, held up, completed and time taken?

Mr Poots: It is critical that Transforming Your Care happen, because it will ensure that we save money and have a health service that is fit for purpose as we look to the future. To make that happen, however, requires an investment in the first instance. We have invested money in it, but not enough. Therefore, we require further funding for Transforming Your Care, and we require further assistance to ensure that that goes forward.

A gap of £160 million in a budget of over £4.5 billion is significant, and we really need to look at filling it. When, on top of that, I am requested to find a further £50 million to fund welfare reform, that puts us in real difficulty. For example, at this moment in time, the unions are asking me to proceed with the pay rise. I want to proceed with that pay rise, which is very modest, but how can I with a £210 million gap? The remarkable thing is that we have people who are earning considerably less than £20,000 a year to whom I cannot give a 1% uplift. That is because people on the other side of the House want to ensure that no cap is put on

welfare, which is the equivalent of £35,000 gross. So, because they are starving us of the funding through welfare reform, they want people who are not working to be receiving over £35,000 and they do not want to give a pay rise to the auxiliaries, the porters, the domestics — those low-paid staff in our health service.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given this £160 million gap in health funding, was Michael McGimpsey right when he said that there was inadequate funding of health?

Mr Poots: I suspect that had he been right, we would have been paying off 4,000 staff three years ago. We would have been moving into chapter 11 three years ago. The health service would have been in crisis day after day, and we would not have been able to do things like the satellite radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin. We would not have been able to provide the 24/7 cath labs that we are about to. We would not have been able to provide drugs for nine months to people with arthritis. We have reduced that to three months. We have done a whole series of things. We would not have been able to take on the additional nurses, doctors and allied health professionals. So he was not right.

We are in a different situation now. Demographics have moved on. There are new drugs and challenges, and we need to address that. I need the support of the Assembly to address it.

Health Service: Innovation

2. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to promote innovation across the health service. (AQO 6303/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am committed to healthcare innovation, and a number of actions are already well developed. These include the drive to implement Transforming Your Care that has innovation at its core; the clinical research networks across all trusts that to date have enabled some 25,000 people to participate in clinical trials of potentially beneficial new disease-prevention strategies, diagnostics, treatments or care practices, and our continuing support of Health and Social Care (HSC) R&D.

Our memorandum of understanding on connected health and prosperity with Minister Foster's Department and Invest NI has led to the Northern Ireland Connected Health ecosystem, engaging organisations from health,

academia and industry to consider the development and procurement of innovative solutions for the health sector.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Does he agree with me that research and development are an important aspect of our health service? To what degree is he focusing on this?

Mr Poots: Again, we are now part of UK-wide research and development. That involves an investment of some £2 million, but it has already released far greater multiples of funding to Northern Ireland for research to take place here. We have also established an ecosystem that involves health and social care, our universities and business. We identify the issues and problems; the universities identify potential solutions, in conjunction with our clinicians and specialist staff, and business can then go out and make that a viable sales proposition. In that respect, we are moving those ahead in Northern Ireland.

Clinical trials are an important income stream for our trusts, enabling further investment in research and development and innovation activities. Our achievements to date, through HSC R&D support, include Province-wide clinical research networks that enable patients with any of 13 different diseases to participate in clinical trials of potentially beneficial novel prevention strategies, diagnostics, treatments and care practices. Clinical trials are an important magnet for the attraction of investment by government, including the EU, charities and businesses. To date, some 25,000 local people have participated, and this is a major source of evidence for beneficial innovation.

A Northern Ireland public health research network is also in place, driving innovations that involve the HSC and the wider local communities to provide evidence for improved population health.

Mr Gardiner: What discussions have taken place in the Executive in relation to applying for EU Horizon 2020 research and innovation funds?

Mr Poots: We have spent a lot of time developing our European links, specifically with the idea of targeting Horizon 2020 funding and bringing it to Northern Ireland. Therefore, Northern Ireland winning three-star reference region status — and only 13 countries achieved that status — is significant. We now chair the

group of premier league countries on that work in Europe.

As a consequence, we have developed relationships with European Commissioners and key people on the potential for Northern Ireland leading the way in many healthcare innovations. I believe that this will deliver significant benefit to our population, bring investment to Northern Ireland and help to ensure that we retain people who have real quality and skills in health and social care.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. What advances have been made in e-health initiatives in the last couple of years?

Mr Poots: E-health is an area that we in Northern Ireland are leading on. For example, the only place in the United Kingdom to have a robot working effectively at a hospital is at Daisy Hill, in conjunction with Craigavon Hospital, where the intensive care doctor is able to do a ward round in the high-dependency unit in Daisy Hill remotely. That ensures that we can care for and support greater numbers of people in the high-dependency unit in Daisy Hill.

We have set up a programme for 20,000 people who are able to self-monitor, feed that information back into the central data at Fold in Holywood, where there are specialist nurses. If they identify that someone's readings are outside the norm, they will telephone them, talk to them and give them advice. We have found that this is a great means of keeping people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and other chronic illnesses in particular out of hospital.

There is a whole series of other things that we are doing. We have virtual clinics so that you do not have to go to the big hospital very often to see the specialist; you can do it from another hospital. Indeed, some people are doing it using Skype at home. We are doing a wide range of things in e-technology and I think that there will be massive opportunities for the health service moving forward in that direction.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 8 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Blueprint for Change

3. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the findings from the British

Association of Social Workers 'A Blueprint for Change' report. (AQO 6304/11-15)

Mr Poots: I attended the launch of a report by the Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers (NIASW) on 12 May and welcomed the spotlight on good social work practice and the important role of social work in the provision of adult services. The report highlights challenges being faced by social workers, with a particular focus on bureaucracy, and makes 24 recommendations, calling for a reduction in unnecessary paperwork and bureaucracy as well as better workload management and support for first-line managers. My officials are meeting the association in the near future to discuss these findings.

Social workers work with some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in our society, and it is a difficult and often stressful job. I want their skills and knowledge to be deployed where they are best utilised. The report provides information from a practice perspective on the barriers to social workers using their skills and knowledge to best effect. This information will usefully inform work that is being led by the directors of social work from the five trusts on reducing bureaucracy, which is an identified priority in the Department's social work strategy. The NIASW is playing a key role in supporting the implementation of this strategy.

Work is also under way, as part of the social work strategy, to look at the workload management and role of first-line managers in supporting social workers. Again, this report will usefully inform that work.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Does the Minister agree that the level of bureaucracy and paperwork impedes the face-to-face duty of care for social workers?

2.15 pm

Mr Poots: I am very sympathetic to that idea. When we are taking cases and social workers are taking cases, we have to be very careful that those cases are robust. Therefore, it is not something for the Department of Health to address alone. The Department of Justice and the courts also have a key role to play. We have been having discussions with them, and we want to identify a means by which we can have that robust presentation but reduce social workers' paper workload. It is very important that we do that, because, when social workers are spending a disproportionate amount of their

time on paperwork, they are not spending time with the vulnerable people whom they need to be supporting.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. He will recall that, some time ago, he announced that his Department was commissioning a value-for-money piece of work and an audit. Is he in a position to update the House on the outcomes of the report?

Mr Poots: There are, for example, 800 social workers employed in adult services. The benchmarking shows that social workers in Northern Ireland spend more time on client work than their UK counterparts, with approximately 81% of their time being spent on client-specific work. The majority of social workers have a caseload of fewer than 40 cases, which appears to be higher than that of their UK counterparts. However, owing to ambiguity around the definition of "caseload", it is difficult to draw robust conclusions. Of the social workers surveyed in Northern Ireland, 95% considered the level of supervision that they receive to be adequate, with 72% receiving supervision monthly or more frequently.

Mrs D Kelly: The report refers to staff morale in the social work profession. You may well be aware that some trusts are using agencies to recruit social workers. Those social workers are getting paid between £6 and £7 an hour, and the agency is getting substantially more than that.

Will the Minister undertake to review the employment of social workers across the trusts to ensure that young recruits and graduates who come out this year will get a full-time job instead of having to suffer the poorly paid agency regime?

Mr Poots: If the Member has evidence of that, she should put it in writing to me so that I can follow it up. We need to be very careful that what we present is accurate, and, if what she says is the case, it is something that we will seek to address.

Nursing: Investment

4. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he is investing in the nursing profession. (AQO 6305/11-15)

Mr Poots: I recognise the important role that nurses play across the health service,

particularly in the context of pressures across the HSC.

In March 2013, over 14,000 whole-time-equivalent qualified nurses were employed in HSC, representing an increase on the previous year of more than 300 nurses.

I have approved the tool Delivering Care: Nurse Staffing Levels in NI, which is being used to determine nurse staffing in general, specialist, adult medical and surgical units. That tool will result in more nurses, reduce the usage of bank and agency nurses and enhance the role of ward sisters or charge nurses to enable them to time to fulfil their ward leadership responsibilities. Furthermore, my Department is reviewing the nursing and midwifery workforce and will provide a workforce plan to ensure that it is fit for purpose over the next five years.

To ensure progress on Transforming Your Care, I have increased the number of health visitors in training from 18 in 2011-12 to 61 for the incoming year. I have also increased the numbers of district nurses in training from nine in 2011-12 to 23 for the incoming year. I held a round-table meeting with representatives of the Royal College of Nursing in June 2013, and I am actively addressing all the concerns that they raised, particularly those on the nursing and midwifery education commissioning budget, which is being transferred to the Chief Nursing Officer.

Mr Girvan: In his answer, the Minister mentioned workforce planning. Will he outline the next steps for workforce planning in the framework for nursing and midwifery?

Mr Poots: The framework will be further developed in a phased approach in an effort to address all areas of clinical practice, such as emergency departments, district nursing, health visiting, and mental health and learning disability care settings. The range will not prescribe the staff numbers that should be on every ward at every point in time; rather, a normative range will be developed in discussion with staff, managers and commissioners. That is dependent on a range of factors that influences the planning process.

The planning processes will include the triangulation of findings from recognised workforce planning tools, alongside key performance indicators for safe, effective and person-centred care. Normative staff will have a phased implementation when resources become available. It is expected that HSC

trusts will take account of the recommended staffing ranges in the framework in developing proposals to meet the objectives in Transforming Your Care, in supporting new proposals for additional resources and when developing efficiency and productivity plans. Commissioners will be able to use the framework, within which they can agree and set consistent ranges for nursing workforce requirements for providers of health and social care in Northern Ireland.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. During last year's crisis — for want of a better word — in A&E, you committed to upskilling some nursing staff so that they would be able to take a more leading role and discharge patients if necessary. Will you outline how many of those nurses are in place and whether their pay scales have been re-banded up to that level?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. She was not at the Nurse of the Year awards this year because of ill health, but I made a significant announcement at the event. We are transferring training to the responsibility of the Chief Nursing Officer. That has been very well received and is very positive. Consequently, we are upskilling more staff than before as specialists — for example, as emergency nurse practitioners, in mental health services, in paediatrics, in district nursing and in health visiting. Across the range, we will train more and more nurses to practise at a very specialist level, which makes absolute sense. We will get better results and better value for money, and patients will get better care. It is win-win all round. The nursing staff are up for it. They want to do the job and are ready for the challenge. That is hugely positive. Over the past year, we have seen an increase in our nursing staff of some 316 full-time equivalents. We put our money where our mouth is: when people say that they want more nurses, we deliver more nurses.

Mrs Overend: The Minister's flagship policy, Transforming Your Care, points towards empowering GPs and more specialist nurses to treat patients at an earlier stage, away from a hospital setting. I welcome the recent increase in nursing development funding, but will the Minister explain why the funding was cut by about 10% during 2012-13?

Mr Poots: We got some additional funding throughout 2012-13, but we also overran our budget that year. That is very significant. We could not live within our means. We did not

overrun the budget by a large amount, but, while others believed that it was better not to carry out welfare reform and spend the money there, we were running short of money to provide health and social care. When it comes to that, Members need to look at their conscience. If they think that welfare is a higher priority than health, they need to examine their conscience. I think that health is a higher priority. We need to ensure that we can provide the healthcare that the public expect. We need to support our staff who provide that care, give them reasonable remuneration for the job that they do and ensure that they work in reasonable conditions. None of those expectations is too high. However, if we starve the health budget of funding, those expectations will be unmet.

Mrs McKeivitt: Minister, you just mentioned supporting nursing staff and referred to remuneration in particular. Would you support a 1% pay rise for nurses here, as is being discussed in England and Wales?

Mr Poots: I am very supportive of it, but I explained earlier that there is a £210 million budget gap: an existing £160 million and an additional £50 million because we did not proceed with welfare reform. That is because your party and Sinn Féin believe that it is more important, for example, to keep resisting the cap of £26,000 that is coming in in England, Scotland and Wales, which is the equivalent of £35,000 for someone who is taxed on their pay, than it is to give a 1% pay rise to workers who earn less than half that. I do not think that that is a justifiable position, and we really need to look at that again. I want to give nurses and other staff a pay rise, and I hope that Sinn Féin and the SDLP will assist us in doing so and stop starving the health service workers of money by ensuring that it goes to welfare instead of health.

Health Service: Payroll Issues

5. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an assurance that payroll issues within the health service have been resolved. (AQO 6306/11-15)

Mr Poots: I assure the House that my Department, the Business Services Organisation (BSO) and the trusts are committed to ensuring that the payroll issues affecting Health and Social Care staff are addressed and resolved as a matter of urgency. This means individual staff, managers, payroll departments and the payroll system supplier

working together and learning lessons when mistakes are made.

Members will be aware that there have been three key issues: the receipt of enhancements such as overtime, incorrect national insurance deductions and the incorrect application of emergency tax codes. In addressing the issues involving the enhancements to basic pay, I highlight the fact that the new payroll system puts an emphasis on employees and managers submitting claims for additional payments in a timely and appropriate way. The BSO and the trusts therefore continue to re-emphasise the importance of adhering to these protocols and providing further training and support. In addition, we have recently approved further expert support for the HSC payroll functions over the coming months. All employees affected by incorrect national insurance contributions have received payments to address the issue, and a corrective fix has been applied to the system to prevent the issue recurring. Finally, on the application of emergency tax codes, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) has reviewed the tax codes of all affected staff and, where appropriate, revised them in time for the May pay run. HMRC has confirmed that some staff will remain on an emergency tax code in line with normal business, and these are being considered case by case.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire le haghaidh a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. After listening to it, I would like to ask him this: has he considered suspending the roll-out of the payment delivery scheme until he has a guarantee that there will be no repeat of the recent debacle, or is he happy now that all the issues have been resolved?

Mr Poots: The Minister is far from happy. There are 70,000 people on our payroll, and, in the last round, I understand, roughly 500 did not receive the appropriate pay, so I am far from happy about that. However, it would be an absolute disaster if we dismantled that process and went back to what happened before. We are almost there, and we can only apologise to people who have not received their pay. They are entitled to their pay and should get it. We can apologise to them, and we can ensure a second pay run in the month to enable things to move forward. As of 5 June, only a fraction of staff — we are down to fewer than 10 members of staff — still need a fix to the amount owing to them. We are almost there, albeit that we should never have had to go through all the difficulties in the first place.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for questions for oral answer. We now move on to topical questions.

DVA: Job Relocation

1. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following similar questions to his ministerial colleagues, including those who are his party colleagues, considering the jeopardy that so many people are facing with their future employment, what proposals he is bringing forward, in line with the good example set by Minister Durkan, to relocate health jobs to Coleraine in order to mitigate the horror of the decision imposed by London. (AQT 1241/11-15)

Mr Poots: Of course, those jobs were not lost on the DUP's watch; when it was in the DOE, the jobs stayed in Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, the Member asks a valid question. The answer is simple: I have asked my staff to write to each of the trusts and arm's-length bodies (ALBs), indicating that, if administrative jobs are available, Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) staff should be made aware of them. Where there are jobs available in the health and social care system, I encourage DVA staff to apply for them.

Mr Attwood: I want to say to the Minister in respect of his opening comments that, if he asked people in Coleraine, the unions and the workers which party and which Ministers went over the wall for them, they would not look favourably on him and his colleagues.

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

Mr Attwood: He should ask that question rather than smirk at the experience of people in Coleraine whose jobs are now in jeopardy.

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

Mr Attwood: People in Coleraine and the DVA will not be impressed —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Can we have a question, please? If not, we shall move on.

Mr Attwood: Given what people in the DVA in Coleraine are about to experience, do you think

that writing letters at this stage is an adequate response from you as Minister?

Mr Poots: I was not the Minister who failed the people in the first instance. Those pressures were on when Sammy Wilson, Arlene Foster and I were in that Department. We did not fail. Given the fact that failure has now happened, I have responded. I am asking trusts and arm's-length bodies to see whether they can assist and provide jobs for the people in Coleraine and other areas. We care very much about those individuals. We care about people having jobs. Jobs have always been a top priority for the DUP throughout its tenure as the lead party in the Executive. From 2007, in the most difficult times, we have always sought to bring jobs to Northern Ireland. It is my party's policy to give people a hand up as opposed to a handout. I am seeking to ensure that we can provide employment for them. If we can provide jobs for those people at all, we will certainly do so. I am asking the trusts and the ALBs to look at that.

Legal Highs: Speckled Reds

2. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the process that his Department is following to make drugs such as Speckled Reds illegal and whether he believes that the response is timely and speedy enough, given that he will be aware of the coroner's comments last week about the Speckled Reds link to 18 deaths. (AQT 1242/11-15)

Mr Poots: Unfortunately, the Department cannot make them illegal, as it is a reserved matter. When it came to light last year that a large number of people had died as a result of taking such drugs, we did some work on that. We have corresponded with the Home Office, which has the responsibility. Subsequently, the Home Office carried out a review, and I expect something to come forward on how it can respond better to that in the next few weeks or months. I asked the Home Office to look at places like the Republic of Ireland and New Zealand, where reactions are perhaps sharper. We can do more to ensure that those drugs are taken off the streets. The PSNI has been lifting the drugs, not because of some of their content but perhaps because of other things in them. That has enabled the police to confiscate them. However, a lot of the materials produced may be "legal", in spite of the fact that they are very dangerous substances.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra.

I thank the Minister for his answer and, indeed, what he outlined. I made the point to the Minister of Justice that Belfast City Council used by-laws around the regulation of products. I just wonder whether there is now an opportunity for the Minister of Justice, you as the Minister of Health and perhaps the chief executives of the new councils to come up with some swift way of dealing with this type of issue as it arises.

Mr Poots: Councillor Gavin Robinson pressed that issue, and it was a very successful move. I know that counterparts in Scotland and Wales are looking at what went on in Belfast to see whether they can apply that in their cities.

The Executive discussed the matter at last Thursday's meeting, and it was agreed that we would ask the Attorney General to take a look at whether we can provide more flexibility in closing down on these things. We need to be aware that a new drug could be produced every day of the week for the next number of years, so we need to be as fast in responding to what comes forward as the criminal fraternity is in producing the drugs.

Mental Health Capacity Bill: Under-16s

3. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what safeguards are in place for under-16s who are excluded from the draft Mental Health Capacity Bill. (AQT 1243/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is a series of safeguards under a series of Orders, including the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and other Orders and legislation. A considerable amount — a raft — of legislation covers that area as things stand.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. How will the Minister address the criticism of the Children's Law Centre and others that this legislation will disadvantage one of the most vulnerable and least resourced groups, namely the under-16s?

Mr Poots: Considerable advice has been taken on that from the Office of the Legislative Counsel (OLC), the Attorney General's office and the Departmental Solicitor's Office. This

will be the largest piece of legislation to come before the Assembly. We have not been convinced of the added value of doing this at this stage. The Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 will be retained specifically, and that will cover under-16s. Interestingly enough, the Republic of Ireland Government have decided that they will set the age at 18, so other states are doing the same as Northern Ireland.

Social Work: 24/7 Access

4. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what efforts are being made to improve access to 24/7 social work expertise. (AQT 1244/11-15)

Mr Poots: We have been working quite closely with the social work community on this. In the past year, we have provided 24/7 access to social work teams in each trust across Northern Ireland. So, if you require or someone requires a social worker, 24/7 access is available. That has been developed over the past year, and it is a significant advance.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his answer. How can the greater availability of social workers help our emergency departments?

Mr Poots: Social work and healthcare go hand in hand. We are very fortunate in Northern Ireland to have health and social care under the one roof. We have our Northern Ireland regional emergency social work service, which provides a response outside the 9 to 5 times. By doing so, it often ensures that people with mental health issues can be dealt with outside a hospital setting in their own home. The service provides the care and support that such people need to get through a time of crisis in their life. Our social workers carry out very important work, which ensures that fewer pressures are applied to our emergency departments.

Pay Issues: Belfast Trust

5. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on any progress that has been made to resolve the pay issues faced by health workers in the Belfast Trust area. (AQT 1245/11-15)

Mr Poots: I think that I indicated that to the House when answering previous questions. We identified that the numbers are now very small, and we are thankful for that. I am not happy about anybody not receiving their pay on

time, and I will continue to heap pressure on each trust to ensure that they make sure that all staff are paid on time. There is a responsibility on staff as well to get their time sheets in on time and to ensure that their managers put them in on time, but there is also a massive responsibility on those who have introduced the new system to ensure that it works effectively. That was not the case, but it is working much more effectively now. I want to see it working perfectly.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. A few days ago at a protest, Conor McCarthy of Unison said that, every week, even up to last week, members were holding their breath waiting to see whether they were going to be paid at all and that, even the ones who were paid, did not know whether they were going to be paid correctly. Does the Minister believe that the system is fit for purpose?

Mr Poots: I think that the system is fit for purpose. It should have been fit for purpose from the outset. In every pay run in life, somebody will not get the pay that they expected to get because something has not been cleared, such as time sheets to apply for overtime and so forth. That was not the issue here. There were multiple cases, of course, but we are now getting down to a situation where it is much more marginal and is affecting much smaller numbers of people. I want it reduced right down to single figures.

Transforming Your Care: Sinn Féin U-turn

6. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he welcomes the U-turn from the Chair of the Health Committee who, in yesterday's Main Estimates debate, stated that funding for Transforming Your Care should be designated a priority bid. (AQT 1246/11-15)

Mr Poots: I certainly do, because, a few weeks ago, people on the other side of the House were suggesting that we should not proceed with Transforming Your Care but did not produce any alternatives. I am glad that they now recognise that they are incapable of producing alternatives. Therefore, we need to progress with the well-thought-through proposals that have been put forward and ensure that we properly and appropriately finance them. I trust that the Executive will decide to ensure that health service reform can

happen so that we can absorb the additional workload that will arise as a result of demographics and greater levels of chronic illnesses. The greater availability of quality drugs will ensure that people can live much longer, and we need to respond to that. Transforming Your Care is the best means of doing that, but it needs to be supported financially.

Mr I McCrea: Does the Minister not find it somewhat ironic that, in calling for the funding to be made available, Sinn Féin and others continue to block welfare reform? Will he outline the impact that not taking welfare reform would have on providing the much-needed funding for Transforming Your Care?

Mr Poots: What is being asked of us would buy us well over 1,000 nurses or allied health professionals. It would buy around 10,000 hip replacements. That is the scale of what is being taken out of the healthcare budget to support welfare reform. However, what galls me most is that, at this moment in time, we are struggling to find a means of giving people on low pay in health and social care a pay rise that they deserve and should get while others who are not working are receiving considerably more money. Members opposite — Sinn Féin and the SDLP — are making the case that that should be the case and that people who are not working should receive more money than people who are working. Those parties are denying me the opportunity to give those people who are working but are on low pay the rise in their salary that they should be entitled to.

2.45 pm

Justice

Crown Court Remuneration

1. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on his proposals for Crown Court remuneration. (AQO 6316/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I have just completed an extensive period of consultation with the Bar Council and the Law Society following the public consultation on Crown Court remuneration. I listened carefully and sympathetically to their representations and, where possible, made adjustments to my proposals, which have recently been made available to the Justice Committee. I have agreed to protect the fees in some categories of cases and types of fee.

The impact of the proposed new fees will be an overall reduction in levels of remuneration for solicitors by 27% and for counsel by 22%. When fully implemented, Crown Court remuneration will be more in line with that in England and Wales.

The high spend on legal aid continues to have a significant impact on my Department's budget. The reforms that I have put forward need to be implemented to minimise the impact on other areas of justice delivery.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he accept that the proposals will have an adverse effect on solicitors' firms in rural areas and a negative impact on his equal access to justice strategy?

Mr Ford: No. There is no evidence to suggest that the changes being made will have a particularly adverse effect. The position will remain that fees will continue to be paid at a slightly higher level than is the case in England and Wales, despite the fact that lawyers in Northern Ireland have referred to the lower cost of running legal services in Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan: The Minister will be acutely aware of the forecast overspend already for legal aid of some £35 million this year. At what point will he decide to bring forward concrete proposals, given the fact that it is unlikely that he will get agreement from the Law Society and the Bar Council for a unified proposal from the Department and the legal profession? Ultimately, there needs to be a point at which the Department brings forward proposals for the Committee to take a decision on.

Mr Ford: I entirely take the Committee Chair's point. Firm proposals are on their way to the Committee, and I trust that it will give them a favourable hearing, given what the Chair has just said about the very significant excess expenditure likely in this financial year compared with the budget. There is a real issue of costs being taken from other key aspects of the justice system in order to pay legal aid fees at a higher rate than is payable anywhere else in these islands.

Mr A Maginness: I have listened very carefully to what the Minister has said. He places his reply in the context of what has happened in England and Wales. Does he not recognise that, as a result of severe cuts in England and Wales, there is, in fact, a crisis in accessing justice? Does the Minister wish to replicate that

here? Would he not prefer to enter once again his Department into negotiations with the Law Society and the Bar Council to reach an amicable agreement?

Mr Ford: I thought that lengthy negotiations with the two branches of the profession were exactly what had been happening over the past several months since the formal consultation closed. I have made the point that the fees that will be payable in Northern Ireland under my proposals exceed those currently payable in England and Wales, from which the Justice Secretary has made proposals, which he has withdrawn temporarily, to make further cuts. Therefore, the reality is that, in circumstances in which solicitors and barristers say that they can run their legal practices cheaper in Northern Ireland, we will still be paying more than in England and Wales and significantly more than what is proposed for England and Wales.

Mr Cree: Having listened to the Minister, I wonder why he will not undertake a full review of costs in the overall judiciary and identify efficiency opportunities.

Mr Ford: Anybody who does not think that, for the four years since the devolution of justice powers, we have been seeking to ensure maximum efficiencies in every part of the justice system really has not been following comments that I have made in the Chamber in the four years since I became Minister. As the Committee Chair highlighted, the reality is that the budget for legal aid is exceeded by the anticipated expenditure for this year by approximately 50%, and the issue clearly requires significant attention.

Mr Deputy Speaker: David McIlveen is not in his place for question 2.

Magilligan Prison

3. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the progress made on the proposed newbuild programme for Magilligan prison. (AQO 6318/11-15)

Mr Ford: Prison Service officials are nearing completion of the outline business case for the redevelopment of Magilligan prison, which will be submitted for approval within the next two months. It is DFP's decision as to whether to grant approval for the capital funding for the project. That decision will determine the timeline for the development of the new prison at Magilligan.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm whether the newbuild will create additional and permanent employment opportunities at HMP Magilligan, which could help to alleviate the unemployment situation in the surrounding area?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that, at this stage and without the approval of DFP, I cannot guarantee that the project will go ahead as I would wish, and nor can I guarantee that there will be additional employment, since one of the key issues for any newbuild will be to ensure that it is manageable in the most efficient manner possible. However, when we talk about employment, we should recognise that we have now completed the voluntary early retirement scheme, with a significant number of officers being able to leave with dignity from the services that they performed in the past, and the introduction of a significant number of new operational staff who will help to implement the planned reforms of the Prison Service.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí. I thank the Minister for his answers. Will he outline what meetings have taken place with local stakeholders about the location of Magilligan to ensure that there is no negative impact on the need to create good community links?

Mr Ford: Members will remember that one of the initial recommendations from the prison review team was to look at rebuilding Magilligan elsewhere. Following good discussions, in particular with councils in the north-west, we are able to see how better community links can be established to ensure that we provide opportunities for prisoners for outside work, in particular, to ensure connections with local businesses. As a result of that, we have been able to proceed with plans to rebuild at Magilligan.

Mr Dallat: Will the Minister arrange for Members to spend a day in jail in Magilligan — that might be welcomed by the wider world — so that they can see and understand fully the transformation among inmates, particularly with educational opportunities.

Mr Ford: The Prison Service has arranged a number of visits in recent times for Members of the Assembly and, indeed, for members of the Oireachtas, who have also visited Maghaberry prison. I have no doubt that, if Mr Dallat wishes to make a personal visit, he will be welcomed through the gates and possibly back through the gates as well.

Fuel Laundering

4. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on any discussions he has had with the PSNI, the Department of the Environment and other agencies in relation to illegal fuel laundering. (AQO 6319/11-15)

Mr Ford: The law enforcement and policy lead for fuel laundering is with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and my Department is in regular contact with HMRC. The Organised Crime Task Force has a cross-border subgroup devoted to fuel fraud. It is chaired by HMRC and includes members of the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland. The group meets regularly.

In addition to the ongoing operational work of HMRC, there was an announcement earlier this year on the introduction of a new marker for rebated fuel, and market testing is ongoing. My Department has also introduced legislation on the unduly lenient sentencing in this area, and, as I informed Members recently, I have been in correspondence with the Economic Secretary to Her Majesty's Treasury about legislation affecting the naming of filling stations that have been found to sell illicit fuel.

Fuel laundering affects the environment, legitimate businesspeople and the money available for public services. All areas of the justice sector will continue to fight it in every way possible. It must, however, be recognised that it is a crime sector that exists as a result of demand, and it is in the hands of the public to remove that demand and bring laundering to a halt once and for all.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that response. He will, however, be well aware of the long line of illegal fuel laundering plants discovered in recent months. It seems to go on and on, unabated, and, as you rightly said, it causes huge damage to the environment and is a huge cost to the public purse. Does the Minister agree that the full cooperation of the National Crime Agency (NCA), locally, would be a major help in trying to tackle illegal fuel laundering and that there is a need for all parties in the Chamber to give the agency their full support?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr Anderson that we require the National Crime Agency to have full operational powers in the devolved sphere in Northern Ireland. However, the NCA does have powers on the specific issue of excise evasion because it is a non-devolved

matter. Of course, it operates those powers without any accountability to the institutions in Northern Ireland because of the refusal of those who are so concerned about accountability to allow the NCA to operate in the devolved sphere.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister referred to a new marker being tested. Can he indicate when it will eventually be applied to fuel?

Mr Ford: The best advice that I can give to Mr Bradley is that, when the announcement was made in February, it was estimated that it would be 12 to 18 months before it was fully operational. I have had no updates since.

Mrs Dobson: I am sure that the Minister will agree that the livelihoods of hard-working and law-abiding families are being put at risk by illegal fuel laundering. Why is the conviction rate so pathetic?

Mr Ford: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am not sure that it is appropriate for me to answer, because that is, effectively, an operational question. I should, however, make clear to Mrs Dobson and others that, effectively, many laundering plants operate without any personnel present. If it were possible to pick people up, it would be solely at the point at which a delivery was being made and fuel taken out. Given the way that they operate, it is extremely hard to arrest those who are directly responsible. However, in the potential for the referral of unduly lenient sentences, we have the opportunity, when arrests are made, to set a clear sentence that will set down a marker to others.

Hate Crime

5. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Justice, given the marked increase in violent hate crime attacks, whether the Unite Against Hate campaign should be re-launched. (AQO 6320/11-15)

Mr Ford: Hate crime, whether it manifests itself in verbal abuse, intimidation or violent crime, is deplorable and has no place in a modern society. I am determined that my Department will continue to do everything possible, through the delivery of the community safety strategy, to tackle hate crime and the harm that it causes.

Unite Against Hate was previously launched in 2009 as a multi-agency campaign to raise awareness of the impact of hate crime, challenge negative attitudes and perceptions,

create a climate of zero tolerance and promote diversity. With an estimated 110,000 migrants having come to live and work in Northern Ireland, and in the context of recent events, it is clear that there remains work to be done.

On 19 May, I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister seeking an update on discussions that their Department led in 2012 on the scope for a renewed Unite Against Hate campaign. I am waiting for a response. In the meantime, my Department will continue to chair the multi-agency working group set up to deliver a range of practical actions, as set out in our community safety strategy, to tackle hate crime.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. I welcome the fact that he has raised the issue with OFMDFM, but I can only hope that a response comes faster than the seven years that we have been waiting for the racial equality strategy. In the meantime, will the Minister give the House a sense of what his Department is doing to tackle hate crime?

Mr Ford: I thank my colleague for his question. I certainly share his hope that it will be significantly less than seven years before we see some action on hate crime, which is clearly becoming a major issue. I will list some of the issues that are the direct responsibility of the DOJ and which my Department is implementing. We partly fund the hate incident practical action scheme, which provides protection and security to victims. We are consulting victims' groups on developing third-party reporting systems for people reluctant to approach the police about hate incidents and crimes. We have reviewed the capacity of advocacy services and are considering investing in that scheme. We part fund an initiative to identify the key elements of the Belfast City Council tension monitoring model, with a view to using PCSPs to roll it out elsewhere. We are monitoring the review of legislation in England and Wales to see whether there are lessons we can learn. We have delivered initiatives to prevent reoffending through early stage intervention, working with PCSPs, the Probation Board and the Youth Justice Agency. We hope that they will address offending behaviour, including community and restorative approaches. We are planning workshops with key victims' groups to raise awareness of the work of the hate crime delivery group in delivering our community safety strategy so that we can develop it and ensure that we provide the best possible services to people in Northern Ireland.

3.00 pm

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that, regardless of the campaign in place to combat racism, those in positions of leadership must never, by their actions or words, create the conditions in which racism flourishes?

Mr Ford: I agree entirely with Mr Lynch. As I said in an interview when I was asked about comments made by Pastor McConnell and the First Minister, people need to be very careful, not about the precise intellectual justification for the words they use but the potential atmosphere created among those in this society who are only too ready to indulge in hate crime and do not hear the words; they just hear the sense.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister include hate crime against sections of the indigenous community, such as damage to Orange and church halls, in any campaign?

Mr Ford: As I have already said, the Unite Against Hate campaign is led by OFMDFM. It certainly applied to all kinds of hate crime in the past. I trust that, if it is resurrected by that Department, which will certainly be with the full assistance of my Department, it will cover all forms of hate crime again.

Hydebank: Secure College

6. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the progress made towards the establishment of Hydebank Young Offenders Centre as a secure college, as recommended by the Prison Review. (AQO 6321/11-15)

Mr Ford: In October last year, I announced that Hydebank Wood College would be delivered through the creation of a task force, whose responsibilities included designing, developing and delivering the college ethos. It is, of course, crucial that we get the supporting structures and processes right to deliver the right outcome for those in custody. The Prison Service has therefore established a dedicated secure college oversight group, whose current membership includes senior officials, the governor and deputy governor, and which will soon be extended to include external providers and agencies, including learning and skills experts.

A review of supporting structures has taken place, with significant changes being implemented to the management structure and specific roles, coupled with the introduction of free-flow movement of prisoners, revised scheduling arrangements and a review of

security classifications, all of which are aimed at supporting the creation of a college-based ethos. Work is now also under way to ensure that a comprehensive induction programme is completed for each committal, which will inform the development of a personal development plan based on individual strengths, risks and the need to support effective rehabilitation. An interim contract is in place with external providers, who are working alongside existing staff to improve the provision of learning and skills, with programmes tailored to meet individual needs, complemented by a daily regime that timetables activities in an innovative way.

In September 2014, the prison oversight group will receive an update on the vision action plan and timelines for the delivery of the Hydebank Wood College.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the progress made by the Minister of Justice in relation to the establishment of Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre as a secure college, given the importance of skills and employment to rehabilitation and the reduction of reoffending. Does the Minister have a timescale for the completion of the project and what key differences does he think it will make to our society?

Mr Ford: At one level, the project will not be complete ever because it will be an ongoing project. We are certainly looking to have the work being done on external skills provision well in place and fully implemented in the next academic year. We will be doing the ongoing changes to regime, timetables and so on, which I mentioned, over the same kind of timescale. The important issue is that we provide those in Hydebank Wood with the best possible opportunities to make progress while in prison and to link them in when they return to the community to keep them involved in whatever learning and skills opportunities they have developed in custody to ensure that they have a better chance of employment when they leave.

Mr Eastwood: I welcome the limited progress made around this. It is very important that rehabilitation is at the forefront of our minds when we are looking at these issues. Can the Minister assure us that all inmates will be given opportunities to access training and education suitable to their needs?

Mr Ford: That was awfully begrudging — "limited progress". It is work that is well under way, and I think that, when Members see the work that is being done overall on the prison

reform programme and the amount that has been done in two years, they will perhaps acknowledge that it is a very significant programme. It is taking time to implement: I grant that. I assure Mr Eastwood that all those in custody in Hydebank Wood will be given the opportunity to avail themselves of appropriate learning and skills opportunities.

For example, we have seen work on developing the horticultural unit, and there is other work going on. I hope to sample the food that is being cooked by prisoners in a new development that will provide additional opportunities. All of those are small steps which, when joined together, will show that we are providing a much better opportunity for prisoners than has been the case until now.

Mr McGimpsey: What does the Minister estimate the cost of the provision at Hydebank to be? Has he had any discussions with the Department of Finance about when he will bid for funding for this facility?

Mr Ford: The cost of implementing the scheme is relatively little, because it is coming out of existing budgets by way of reallocation to ensure that services are provided in a more efficient way. There are, of course, other issues at the Hydebank Wood site, such as accommodation for women, which are under discussion with DFP as part of the capital programme, but there was no need to involve that Department on the specific issue of the secure college.

Parading Season

7. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the discussions he will have with the newly appointed Chief Constable in relation to working with local communities to ensure a peaceful and inclusive parading season. (AQO 6322/11-15)

Mr Ford: First, I publicly congratulate George Hamilton on his appointment as Chief Constable, as I have already done in person. I look forward to working with him in my role as Justice Minister. I have had regular meetings with Matt Baggott on a range of issues, including parading. Naturally, I hope that these will continue when Mr Hamilton formally takes up his post at the end of the month.

As for the parading season, I encourage all to play their part in finding a solution to bring about a peaceful conclusion to the issue. The reality is that neither the police nor I can solve the issues around parading. Resolution can

only come through local dialogue in an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect. I am thankful that the weekend parades passed off without incident and hope that this will set the tone for the coming weeks.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he outline what discussions the Chief Constable intends to have with local community groups and what his engagement has been with those communities in the lead-up to the parading season?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that I cannot say what the Chief Constable plans to do, since that is an operational matter for him, but I assume that some of the discussions that have recently been led by ACC Will Kerr about a variety of issues in Belfast that impinge to some extent on parading will continue. I am aware that there has been some local engagement in the north and east of the city in particular. Really, the issues as to exactly how the police will operate are issues for the Chief Constable, whether current or future.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the money being used to police the illegal protest camp at Twaddell is money wasted, and furthermore it is money that is lost to other policing priorities?

Mr Ford: I agree, and I made exactly that point at the last Question Time, when I highlighted the fact that the cost of policing the Twaddell Avenue protest has now exceeded £9 million. The reality is that that money, which could have been used to address policing priorities in other areas, is now lost. It could have been used on a variety of ongoing community policing projects that I suspect every MLA could identify in their constituency. However, it has, sadly, been expended for no good purpose whatsoever. It really is time that those who are involved in that particular camp recognised the reality of the law, recognised where the Parades Commission's lawful determinations have led them, accepted that point and gave up their protest.

Mrs D Kelly: The question uses the phrase "inclusive parading season." Does that definition of inclusivity mean that the parades should be open to all, regardless of race, religion, community background or sexual orientation? Would the Member agree that that would be a step forward?

Will the Minister also outline to the Assembly what steps he has taken, if any, to press the

British Secretary of State to introduce legislation, which has already been addressed as having been weak by the Secretary of State herself?

Mr Ford: On the first point that Mrs Kelly made, I have to suggest that she ask the questioner, not me, what she meant about an inclusive parading season. I am not necessarily sure that many of those who organise parades would wish to have others who parade on different days, in different places and perhaps wearing different items all involved.

The Member raises a serious issue on legislation, but, as far as I am concerned, the best solution to dealing with parading problems in legislation is when we get agreement among the five parties of the Executive and ensure that we can carry legislation forward in this Assembly and not rely on the Secretary of State doing it at Westminster. I trust that what we will see over the next few weeks will ensure that we do not have to make that request of the Secretary of State.

OTRs: Administrative Scheme

8. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any discussions he has held with the PSNI in relation to the administrative scheme for on-the-runs. (AQO 6323/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have not had any discussions with the PSNI about the administrative scheme for on-the-runs, nor would it be appropriate for me to do so.

Mr Kinahan: Was the Minister aware that there were three on-the-run letters cleared in March this year?

Mr Ford: My understanding of that particular position is that Sinn Féin has said that that was the case and the Northern Ireland Office has denied that it was the case. It is not my responsibility in any event.

Mr McGlone: Just to clarify, will the Minister indicate what discussions he has had with the Attorney General on the on-the-runs legislation?

Mr Ford: I am sure that Mr McGlone will be well aware of the convention that Ministers do not discuss legal advice that they have sought or received, including advice from the Attorney General.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Does he agree that all parties and individuals in the House should be open about their experiences in relation to the on-the-roads debacle? Will he therefore agree that it is an absolute scandal that Sinn Féin refused to appear in front of the House of Commons Select Committee this week in this place?

Mr Ford: Again, whatever view David Ford might have about people who ought to be honest and open and take the opportunities that are presented to give evidence before a Select Committee of the House of Commons, I am not sure that it is for the Minister of Justice to say what others should do in front of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, save to say that I did my best to answer their questions this morning.

Prison Service: Sickness Absence

9. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the levels of sickness absence in the Prison Service. (AQO 6324/11-15)

Mr Ford: During 2013-14, absence in the Prison Service totalled 13.8 days per member of staff against the DOJ target of 9.7 days. That is a provisional figure, and the official figure will be finalised by NISRA later this year. At present, the projected figure for 2014-15 is 10.6 days per member of staff against a DOJ target of 9.2 days. I am not complacent about the progress to date, and every effort continues to be made to reduce the level of absence further. Management is committed to continuing that work with staff and their trade unions.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he see staff morale in our prisons as something that impacts on staffing absence levels? Is he satisfied that everything is being done to ensure good working conditions in our prisons?

Mr Ford: Although I recognise that prisons can be very difficult places in which to work, it is not always easy to say that everything possible is being done. However, I take significant heart from the fact that the projected level of absence for uniformed staff in prisons for this year is around 11 days, whereas in the preceding four years it was between 15.1 and 17 days. I think that is an indication of good work being done and perhaps of higher morale among staff than was suggested by the question.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis

an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answers. Does he feel that, perhaps now that the voluntary redundancy scheme is over and complete, the reduction in absenteeism is directly related to the new intake of recruits?

Mr Ford: Mr McCartney may be drawing inferences a bit further than the evidence suggests. There was a significant reduction this year, but a number of new staff were in last year and a number of old staff had already left last year. It is difficult to suggest that it is directly related, but I have no doubt that elements of those who were, shall we say, of more advanced years might have been more likely to take sick leave, owing to the natural health pattern as people age. That is something of which I am increasingly aware.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends questions for oral answer. We now move on to topical questions.

Criminal Justice System: Public Confidence

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any concerns about the state of public confidence in our criminal justice system, particularly in the Omagh area, following the BBC 'Spotlight' programme on the behaviour, attitude and conduct of the PSNI in Omagh towards young people. (AQT 1252/11-15)

Mr Ford: I appreciate the question that Mr McElduff has raised. I was in the US last week, so I did not see the 'Spotlight' programme to which he refers. I am aware that the district commander, Chief Superintendent Dunwoody, has said that he is working to address some of the issues raised and that the ombudsman has been made aware of some of the issues and is investigating a number of cases. Beyond that, I can make no particular comment on the points raised by Mr McElduff.

Mr McElduff: Will the Minister of Justice show a personal interest in making sure, in the time ahead, that there is public confidence in the criminal justice system, particularly in the Omagh area arising from the reported incidents, and that the damage is repaired?

Mr Ford: I certainly take a personal interest in ensuring the highest possible community confidence in policing and other aspects of the justice system, not just in Omagh but in 25

other districts. In doing so, however, I need to be careful that I do not seek to take over the role of the ombudsman or the direct management responsibilities of the district commander. I expect that I will meet Chief Superintendent Dunwoody for other reasons in the near future, and I have no doubt that this will feature on the margins of that meeting.

Legal Highs: Speckled Reds

3. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Justice whether he is aware of the rise in the use of the drug serotonin, also known as Speckled Reds, and some other tablets, with Speckled Reds linked to some 18 deaths in the North of Ireland, and, even though he will also be aware that there is some sort of process to find out how to bring forward legislation to make these drugs illegal, whether he agrees that it is time for the Department of Justice, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the councils to come together to try to find some way to close down the supply of what should be an illegal drug. (AQT 1253/11-15)

Mr Ford: I note that a very similar question was asked at the end of health questions a few minutes ago. As Members are generally aware, the reality is that drugs policy is a reserved matter and is therefore not for us. I am sure that most Members will be aware of the practical work that was done by environmental health officers (EHOs) in Belfast using consumer product safety legislation to tackle some of the premises that were selling such drugs. I understand that the advice has been spread, at least to Omagh, and has been shared between environmental health officers. The Department of Justice offered its assistance if required, but I believe that the EHOs have been communicating anyway. I know that those lessons have been picked up in other parts of the UK.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. He may have made this precise point, although I did not pick up what he said at the end. Will he elaborate on what collaboration is happening? Using by-laws to close down so-called head shops was a very good move while we await the other process. Will the Minister elaborate on the collaboration that he is talking about?

Mr Ford: I believe that the specific legislation that was used was product safety legislation. I am not aware of the exact detail of that, as it was taken forward by environmental health officers working for the city council. Its use

certainly appears to have been successful in closing down at least some so-called head shops in Belfast, and I understand that others, at least those in Omagh, have considered using similar legislation. Clearly, there are situations in which the current law can be used, but, as the Minister of Health said, the Executive have asked the Attorney General to look at the issue to see what further powers may be available to strengthen the law in the devolved sphere.

Racist Attacks: DOJ Action

4. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Justice what steps his Department is taking to tackle the rising level of racist attacks. (AQT 1254/11-15)

Mr Ford: In answering an earlier question, I highlighted some of the issues relating to hate crime and the work that was being done. There are significant issues about ensuring the best possible cooperation with the police and that bodies such as the PCSPs use their opportunities. A lot of work is being done to consider the implications of the Unite Against Hate campaign and issues for which the Department of Justice has responsibility, which I outlined to Mr Lunn. The key issue is to ensure that we spread the message that that sort of hate crime is utterly unacceptable and ensure that there is a policy of no tolerance for it.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for that response. Will he reissue a call to all those in political and civil leadership not to say or do anything that would encourage racism in our society?

Mr Ford: I will certainly repeat the point that I made to Mr Lynch a few minutes ago: it is not necessarily the precise intellectual words that individuals use but the culture that is created and the danger that those who are willing to resort to hate crime in this society will half hear a message rather than listen to the words that I fear may help to drive the sort of crime that we have seen in recent weeks. I welcome the fact that we have now seen statements from Pastor McConnell and the First Minister that have made their position clear, but I believe that everybody in public life needs to be very careful about the language that they use.

Community Safety College: Desertcreat

5. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Justice, at the risk of sounding like a broken record on

the issue, to provide an update on the building of the Community Safety College at Desertcreat outside Cookstown. (AQT 1255/11-15)

Mr Ford: Once Mrs Overend said "broken record", she did not need to say any more. At this stage, I cannot give any specific further information on the Community Safety College. Work is ongoing on the programme board, and I am not in a position to give any more specific detail other than to say that the work is ongoing and I am looking forward to seeing the next response. I believe that the Justice Committee will have a hearing on this on 2 July.

Mrs Overend: I must say that I am disappointed by that response. It seems that mistakes have been made along the way, right from the design process. In fact, if we take it back to basics, I understand that the land at Desertcreat has been badly planned since the Department of Agriculture milked goats on it and that, more recently, the weeds have not been managed and the rental of the land have not been managed.

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

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister tell me what he is doing to restore confidence to the people of mid-Ulster and ensure that the college will be completed at Desertcreat?

Mr Ford: I fear that neither the control of weeds nor the management of goats, beyond a couple of them, is within my remit, and nor is the overall issue of providing confidence solely for my role in the Department of Justice. Issues have to be addressed by the programme board, which, as Members will be aware, has connections to two Departments because the Fire and Rescue Service comes under the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. In that context, it is impossible for me to give specific assurances on what the outcome will be. I assure the House that the programme board is examining arrangements in detail, looking at overall costings, seeing where costs can be taken out and whether it is possible to deliver the project on a slightly reduced scale to provide value for money. That detailed work is being done, and I cannot report on the outcome until it is completed.

On-the-runs: Ministerial Briefings

6. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Justice whether, when he took up office, he asked for

or was offered briefings on the outworkings of Weston Park, the outworkings of Peter Hain's on-the-runs legislation that did not make it through the House of Commons or, indeed, on the on-the-runs letters. (AQT 1256/11-15)

Mr Ford: I did not ask for a brief on any of that. Given that I did not know that letters were being issued, it would have been a bit difficult to ask for a brief on them. As far as Peter Hain's statement to the House of Commons is concerned, I am afraid that I had the naive presumption that, when a Secretary of State stands up in the Chamber of the House of Commons and says that nothing is happening, that meant that nothing was happening.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Where does the buck stop with this matter?

Mr Ford: I fear that we will all have to wait for the outcome of the review by Lady Justice Hallett, the inquiries by the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee and the Assembly's Justice Committee, the work being done by the Police Ombudsman and the internal PSNI review of the status of the letters. We will find out where the buck stops on a number of factors, but, at this stage, it does not stop with the Department of Justice and never did.

Legacy Inquest Cases

7. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Justice what evidence he can provide to show that he has made a demonstrable commitment to ensuring that legacy inquests are held, meaning that we are not called again before the EU courts to face criticism, given that he will be well aware of recent comments from the senior coroner, who criticised the Minister and his Department for their failure to provide expert investigators and for the fact that funding has been given on a drip-feed basis to the outstanding Stalker inquests into the murders of six men in Armagh, the murders of three police officers by the IRA and the murder of 17-year-old Michael Tighe, who was shot by state forces. (AQT 1257/11-15)

Mr Ford: Mrs Kelly raises a complex and difficult issue. There are currently something like 46 outstanding legacy inquest cases relating to 75 sensitive and contentious deaths. That is clearly a very significant backlog that has huge resource implications for a budget that, as I said earlier when we talked about legal aid, is under severe pressure. The individuals to whom she has referred, who are needed to carry out some of the investigations,

are not DOJ employees, and I understand that there is difficulty in getting the relevant expertise to carry out that work. I have had recent meetings with officials and have commissioned an internal review of how we can more effectively use the resources that we have to ensure that we are more article 2-compliant than is currently the case. However, until we can find some way of resolving the difficult issues of the past rather than relying simply on coroners' inquests and the other work by the ombudsman and the HET, we will continue, as a society, to be in difficulty. That is why there is such a need to ensure that the five-party talks succeed.

Mrs D Kelly: I am not saying that we should not deal with the past in a comprehensive and ethical way. Nonetheless, this is a matter of concern and has been before the European courts a number of times. The men were killed in 1982, yet, some 32 years later, inquests have not been held and their families have not been able to move on. Minister, since you took office, have you, in any of the previous monitoring rounds, sought additional resources to facilitate the request of the senior coroner for an expert investigator? That matter has been before you or your Department for the past three years.

Mr Ford: Part of the issue is the sheer technicality of the way in which monitoring rounds operate, with the DOJ having a ring-fenced budget separate from the normal DFP-led process. To the best of my knowledge, no specific request has been made for funding for such an investigator to be considered in the DOJ internal monitoring proposals. If that is not correct, I will write to the Member and correct it. If that is the context, it is not specifically the Department's responsibility. The responsibility lies elsewhere — in our arm's-length bodies — to see that the investigations are done. I will ascertain and communicate to her the exact position.

Rural Crime

8. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Justice whether he agrees that it could be said that neither DOJ nor the PSNI has a strategy to deal with rural crime, given that the recently published policing plan for 2014-17 makes absolutely no reference to agricultural crime. (AQT 1258/11-15)

Mr Ford: The reality is that much of the work of the PSNI does not feature specifically in the policing plan, to some extent because it is regarded as business as usual. Had Mr

McIlveen been here, I would have had a response specifically about some of the rural crime and agricultural crime initiatives in the Ballymena area. That will be published in Hansard shortly. However, I assure Mr Hazzard that a lot of work is ongoing, including work by the rural crime unit, which is part-funded by NFU Mutual and the Department. The unit works with the police on identifying trends in agricultural crime to ensure that we get the best possible response. Over the past two or three years, I have also had the opportunity to visit not just the Balmoral show but other agricultural shows, where the police have engaged, sometimes in conjunction with PCSPs and sometimes on their own, in order to look at these wider issues. We hope to announce further initiatives in the next couple of weeks.

3.30 pm

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Irish Language: Assembly Criticism

1. **Ms McCorley** asked the Assembly Commission how it plans to address the recent criticisms of the Assembly, in relation to the Irish language, contained in the report by the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (AQO 6326/11-15)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. The Assembly Commission has not given any consideration to the report by the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Nor was the Assembly contacted to provide information on its procedures, which were subsequently mentioned in the report. The Commission considered legal advice in May 2013, which indicated that, until such time as the regional and minority languages charter is translated into domestic law and given direct effect in Northern Ireland, it creates no rights or obligations on the Commission.

Draft language guidance has been under consideration by the Assembly Commission. The views of all parties were sought following a meeting of the Assembly Commission on 27 February 2013. Those views will be considered at a future meeting of the Commission. However, I think that it is fair to say that this is

an area on which the Commission has so far been unable to reach political agreement.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his answer. There may not be a complete obligation on the Commission to fulfil the requirements of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Nevertheless, there are requirements on public authorities, and I contend that there is a moral obligation on us all to comply with the obligations because, in fact, the Irish language does not receive equality of treatment. How would the Member respond to that?

Mr Weir: Above all else, the Commission will ultimately be guided by its obligations. That is the legal requirement. To that extent, we must realise as well that, when we are talking about minority languages, there is a range of minority indigenous languages in Northern Ireland, minority ethnic languages and British and Irish sign language. It is a question of ensuring that the Commission meets its obligations. As such, what is the principal guiding bit? I think that that would be our obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. From that point of view, any position that we have to take has ultimately to be guided by our legal obligations. Indeed, the Commission has received legal advice on what its obligations are, and it is important that we fulfil them. It is not for me to say, one way or another, what counts as a moral obligation.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank Mr Weir for his answers thus far. However it is now almost two years, I think, since the Commission consulted. This party responded on the formation of a language policy by the Commission. Is the Member telling us that this is yet another issue that will be left on the shelf, unattended, because of failure to reach agreement?

Mr Weir: The indications are that, at some stage, the Commission will come back to this issue. I correct his timescale, because views were sought, I think, arising from a meeting in February of last year. So, it is a little bit over one year rather than two years.

There is obvious difficulty around this issue, and the Commission, where possible, strives to reach consensus or, failing that, at least a majority position. There is no doubt that there are sensitivities around this issue. Consequently, reaching cross-party agreement

has been difficult, but it is an issue that will be returned to in future.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Commission member advise the House whether there is any statutory requirement to consider the information in the report by the Committee of Experts? Will he also advise whether there is any mention of some people's inability even to speak English?

Mr Weir: I am not going to comment on the linguistic skills of anybody in connection with this. As I said, the Commission operates on the basis of its legal obligations.

Indeed, legal advice has been sought in terms of our obligations. The Commission will always operate within what it is legally required to do and its legal obligations and will fulfil those. At present, we believe that we are within our current obligations.

Parliament Buildings: School Visits

2. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the schools that have visited Parliament Buildings since April 2014. (AQO 6327/11-15)

12. **Mr Byrne** asked the Assembly Commission for an overview of the schools and organisations that have visited Parliament Buildings in 2014. (AQO 6337/11-15)

Ms Ruane: A LeasCheann Comhairle, le do chead, ba mhaith liom ceisteanna 2 agus 12 a fhreagairt le chéile. Gabhaim buíochas leis an dá Chomhalta as ucht a gceisteanna. Maidir le ceist an Uasail Uí Fhlannagáin, ón 1 Aibreán 2014 go dtí 9 Meitheamh 2014 ghlac 88 grúpa ó 61 scoil — thart faoi 3,500 dalta — páirt sa chlár oideachais i bhFoirgnimh na Parlaiminte. Orthu seo, bhí 25 bunscoil agus 36 meánscoil.

Mar fhreagra ar an Uasal Ó Beirn, is é cuspóir Choimisiún an Tionóil Foirgnimh na Parlaiminte a dhéanamh oscailte agus inrochtana do chách. Thug 983 scoil agus eagraíocht cuairt ar Fhoirgnimh na Parlaiminte sna chéad sé mhí den bhliain 2014.

Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I propose to answer questions 2 and 12 together. I thank both Members for their questions.

In relation to Mr Flanagan's question, from 1 April to 9 June 2014, 88 groups from 61 schools — approximately 3,500 pupils — participated in the education programme in Parliament

Buildings. Of these schools, 25 were primary and 36 secondary.

In response to Mr Byrne, it is the aim of the Assembly Commission to make Parliament Buildings open and accessible to all. Thankfully, we have schools coming from all sectors, including Irish-medium. I would just like to distance myself from some of the previous comments in relation to the Irish language. The Irish language should be treated with the utmost equality. Unfortunately, to date the Assembly Commission is not doing that, but that is an issue I will continue to take up in the Assembly Commission.

Since the start of 2014, 243 groups visited the Assembly through the Assembly education programme. Of those, 67% were school groups, 9% universities and the rest youth groups, those from further education colleges, exchanges and adult groups. Through Assembly Community Connect, 96 organisations from the voluntary and community sector have taken part in free training in Parliament Buildings to improve their understanding of how they can engage with the Assembly. A total of 223 businesses have visited the Assembly through their involvement in Assembly and Business Trust events, which improve business and the private sector's understanding of how the Assembly works and policy and legislation are developed.

Fifty organisations have visited Parliament Buildings from across the world through the parliamentary outreach service to learn more about the role of the Assembly. The events office hosts a range of schools and organisations within Parliament Buildings. Since January 2014, the events office has welcomed 36 school groups which have taken part in a tour of Parliament Buildings.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that there are two minutes to reply to a question.

Ms Ruane: OK. In conclusion, 335 organisations have attended a function.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for her answer. Can I ask the Member to provide a list of areas that schools have come from? I am predicting that there is going to be a deficit from my constituency. Will the Commission consider expanding the number of visits the outreach and education teams conduct in schools in rural communities?

Ms Ruane: I will certainly forward to the Member a list of all the schools that have attended the Assembly, but the Member will be glad to know that schools from all 18 constituencies have visited Parliament Buildings since 1 April 2014, along with five schools from outside the North. I can certainly provide the Member with the list, and we will consider any requests on how we take forward the schools or outreach programmes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Joe Byrne is not in his place.

Centenary Commemorations

3. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on any events planned to commemorate centenaries over the next seven years. (AQO 6328/11-15)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. In April 2012, the Assembly Commission agreed a policy which established the "Perspectives On..." series to deal with the handling of significant anniversaries in Parliament Buildings during the decade of centenaries. The policy provides for the package of anniversaries that are to be commemorated to be agreed early in each mandate and for the first Commission meeting of each year to agree the events and anniversaries to be marked that year. For example, in the current mandate, there have been commemorations of the Titanic, the Ulster covenant, women's suffrage and the rise of the labour movement.

In September, a lecture and reception will be held on behalf of the Commission to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. In January 2016, the Commission will agree events to commemorate the Easter rising of 1916 and the battle of the Somme of the same year. Those will be timed to take account of the dissolution of the Assembly for the elections in that year.

The anniversaries to be officially marked in the 2016-2021 mandate will have to be agreed by the Commission early in that mandate. Therefore, questions about events in that period are not for the current Commission. However, all events agreed have to conform with the 10 principles set out in the policy, which include that they are of a sensitive and inclusive nature, are based on historical fact, and provide an opportunity for differing views to be expressed.

Mr Kinahan: I thank Mr Weir for his answer. For the events that we are responsible for in

this term, have budgets been prepared, and have we looked at utilising funds that are available from Westminster and Europe?

Mr Weir: Obviously, the events are organised with budgetary constraints in mind, and events in Parliament Buildings are not seeking to compete with other larger headline events. There is an educational and academic quality to them.

It is anticipated that the remaining four events in the rest of the mandate will cost in the region of £5,000. So, it is a relatively small budget. If there are other sources of funding, I am sure that the Commission will be happy to look at them, but the financial burden is relatively small given the nature of the events.

Mr McMullan: I am sure that the Member agrees that it is important to include inclusiveness and diversity in these events.

Mr Weir: Sorry, I did not catch that.

Mr McMullan: It is important to include inclusiveness and diversity in these events.

Mr Weir: I certainly agree. Part of the aim is to try to ensure that different perspectives are produced. As I indicated, there were 10 principles established, which are the key criteria for the events, including that differing views and perspectives are to be given, that events are to be inclusive and that they are to be sensitive in their nature.

In this part of the world, there is a level of ignorance at times about historical events on which there is a range of understandings. Part of the aim is to try to increase understanding of, and education in, those events. So, the aim is to embed historical significance and understanding, things not always fully utilised when celebrating a range of events.

Mr Dallat: I thank Mr Weir for his answers, and I appreciate that we are discussing centenaries. Does he agree that one of the most important events in Ireland was the Irish famine of 1845, and can he assure us that people will not have to wait until 2045 to commemorate an event that was inclusive and affected all the people of Ireland, North and South, and in which two million people died?

Mr Weir: Obviously, it was a very significant event. When the Commission was looking at things, it was looking specifically at the decade of centenaries. Outside that decade of centenaries, there is a wide range of vital and

significant events that have had profound effects on our history. At some stage, there may need to be a look at how these can be best reflected.

There was concern about particular sensitivities around the overall centenary of events that were coming up. That is what the focus was on, and it was why the policy was developed; but that is not to exclude consideration of other events in our history at a different stage.

3.45 pm

Parliament Buildings: Community Inclusion

4. **Mr Maskey** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on how it is making Parliament Buildings more inclusive for all communities. (AQO 6329/11-15)

Mr Cree: I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission has taken a wide range of steps to ensure that Parliament Buildings is inclusive for all communities. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act requires all public authorities designated for the purposes of the Act, including the Assembly Commission, to comply with two statutory duties. The first duty is the equality of opportunity duty, which requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between the nine equality categories. The Assembly Commission's 2012-16 equality scheme is a statement of the arrangements for fulfilling the statutory duties and is also the plan for their implementation. It meets both the legal requirements of schedule 9 to the 1998 Act.

The second duty is the good relations duty, which requires that public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion and racial group.

The Member may wish to note that a letter from the Equality Commission in October 2013 stated:

"It has been encouraging to note that the Northern Ireland Assembly has sustained consistent progress in the implementation of their Equality Scheme and there is evidence of effectiveness in meeting the S75 duties. There has been sustained engagement and consultation with those directly affected by

the policies and this has been a key achievement of the Northern Ireland Assembly's scheme. A clear culture exists in the organisation that fosters co-operation with other parts of the public sector and those affected by statutory duty."

In addition, the Assembly Commission has taken a number of steps to promote inclusion in Parliament Buildings through the following projects, initiatives and plans: Action on Hearing Loss accreditation; the autism initiative; the disability action plan; gender equality research; Assembly Community Connect; tours and educational visits; the Speaker's art group; and the good relations action plan.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind all Commission members that their reply should be made within two minutes.

I call Alex Attwood. Sorry, I call Alex Maskey.

Mr Maskey: I have been offended before, Mr Deputy Speaker. Your apology is accepted.

I thank the Member for his response. Notwithstanding some of the progress that he referred to, notwithstanding the equality obligations that the Assembly Commission operates under and, equally, notwithstanding the rather modest ambitions of the Equality Commission, as laid out in its response to you —

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

Mr Maskey: The question is this: will the Member advise the House what particular steps the Commission is taking to ensure that those of us in the broader community who are Irish speakers will have their rights enshrined in all aspects of the Assembly precincts?

Mr Cree: My answer will be shorter on this one, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Commission is committed to the promotion of good relations and has a place in the good relations action plan. However, the Commission recognises that, on language, symbols and emblems, further work is required.

Mr Eastwood: Will the Commission member tell us about some of the further work that he envisages might be required around language, symbols and emblems? There was not much detail in his answer.

Mr Cree: I thank the Member for his question. The reason that there was not much detail is that it is ongoing work. Some work has been done, but it was necessary to clear all the bread-and-butter issues, if I can call them that. The easiest things have been resolved, but a few difficulties are still in place. As I said, further work needs to be done in the area of language, symbols and emblems. I accept that.

Lord Morrow: I am sure that most of the House would agree that inclusivity and accessibility run hand in hand. Are we getting to the stage in this Building at which we are going to put up "No entry" signs at our gates? With the configuration of yellow lines all around this place, are we putting up unwelcome signage and telling people, "Stay away, please, we would rather you did not come, but, if you should come, you might be welcome?"

I understand that the Commission has responsibility for everything inside the railings, but responsibility for outside the railings lies elsewhere. What consultation was there with the Commission and the Department before all these yellow lines were put down to prohibit people from coming into the grounds of Stormont?

Mr Cree: I thank Lord Morrow for his question. He is quite right; the land outside the railings is the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel. There have been ongoing negotiations with it about the restrictions that are in place. We have had a measure of success on the provision of additional car parks. In fact, there is no reason why parking could not be provided on one side of the road from Carson's statue down to Massey Avenue. So far, unfortunately, despite our best endeavours, DFP has not helped, but we shall continue on.

Mrs Overend: What information is contained in the Commission's equality scheme?

Mr Cree: I thank the Member for her question. The equality scheme outlines the Assembly Commission's arrangements for a list of things, which I shall gallop through quickly. It has arrangements for assessing its compliance with section 75 duties; assessing and consulting on the likely impact of policies on the promotion of equality of opportunity; monitoring any adverse impact of policies on the promotion of equality of opportunity; publishing the results of such assessments; training staff; and ensuring and assessing public access to information and services provided by the Commission.

Gender Action Plan

5. **Ms McGahan** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the gender action plan. (AQO 6330/11-15)

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for her question. A gender action steering group was established in June 2013 at the request of the Clerk/Chief Executive to discuss how the secretariat might examine the existence of any barriers, whether perceived or real, in relation to gender in the Northern Ireland Assembly and to consider what actions might be necessary.

In late 2013, a questionnaire was developed by the gender action plan steering group in consultation with the Equality Commission and the Assembly's internal communications group. The questionnaire was also sent to the secretariat management group for information. In February, the questionnaire was circulated to secretariat staff, with a closing date of 3 March 2014. There were 192 respondents to the survey. The draft report on the questionnaire's results was completed and discussed by the group at its meeting on 2 April, and a copy was issued to the Clerk.

The gender action plan steering group has since examined the questionnaire's themes and comments against current policies, along with the organisation's decision-making structures, and is in the process of writing its final report. The group's report will make a number of recommendations, which will be presented to the secretariat management group and then to the Assembly Commission.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for her response. When will the report be completed?

Mrs Cochrane: The full report, which will include the details of the questionnaire as well as the subsequent gender action plan, will be made available after it has been presented to the Assembly Commission. It is anticipated that that will happen this autumn.

Parliament Buildings: Disabled Access

6. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Assembly Commission to outline its efforts to improve access to Parliament Buildings for people with a disability. (AQO 6331/11-15)

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission is

determined to make Parliament Buildings accessible to all, and strenuous efforts have been made over the last number of years to improve access for people with disabilities. In order to comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, a major project was previously undertaken that included alterations to staircases, handrails, toilets and lifts as well as the installation of an additional lift at ground-floor level. Further to that, facilities in the Chamber were upgraded to include level access to the Floor of the House, hoist access to the Galleries and a viewing area suitable for wheelchair users.

In summer 2012, the Commission installed front-ramped access to Parliament Buildings to ensure that all visitors are able to use the primary entrance to the Building. Parking for people with disabilities is provided in the east and west car parks adjacent to the Building.

On the ground floor of the Building, a "changing places" facility provides fully accessible toilet facilities for people with profound disabilities. The Assembly Commission also holds the Louder than Words Charter Mark, which demonstrates its commitment to improve access and services for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. In November 2012, the Commission became the first organisation to receive the National Autistic Society autism access award. I hope that the Member will agree that the Commission has demonstrated its commitment to making Parliament Buildings accessible to all.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Commission member for her response and welcome the wide range of work undertaken by the Commission to make Parliament Buildings accessible to people with disabilities. What arrangements are available to assist disabled visitors in getting from their parking space into the main Building?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. If disabled visitors make their visit known to the head of Usher Services in advance, parking arrangements can be made in either of the upper car parks adjacent to the Building entrances, subject to availability. The parking spaces reserved for disabled users are adjacent to the access ramps and accessible lifts at the side entrances to the Building. If access via the front entrance is preferred, there is also now smooth level access from the parking spaces to the front access ramps.

Mr G Robinson: Can first aid facilities be better marked so that visitors and Members know exactly where to go?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for that very helpful suggestion. We can look at that. There are first aid facilities where security staff are situated at the different entrances. However, we can take on board the point about making them more visible.

Mr Flanagan: When we look round the Building, we see that it is not very accessible for disabled people, particularly the Chamber. There is no room in the Chamber for a Member elected to this place if they are in a wheelchair. We had a situation in which a member of a Minister's advisory staff sat blocking a door for two days because they were in a wheelchair and there was nowhere for them to sit in the Officials' Box. Will the Member bring that to the Commission to try to resolve the problems in the Chamber?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his point. I said that some changes had been made in the Chamber to allow some access, but, obviously, there are still some difficulties. We can take that away and look at it again.

Mr McKinney: I acknowledge and welcome the good work that has been done. Can the Member explain why there was such a delay in repairing the east lift recently, which specifically affected access for disabled users?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member. The lift at the east side of the Building suffered a mechanical breakdown in May 2013. The service engineers concluded that it would not be safe to bring the lift back into operation until essential repair and refurbishment work had been done. That was due to be carried out during the 2013 recess. However, the operators of the service contract, DFP properties management branch, were not content with the appointment of the contractor for the proposed refurbishment at that time, so the works had to be re-tendered. The contract was subsequently re-tendered, and the contractors successfully completed the works during the Easter recess. We apologise for the delay. However, throughout that time, access for disabled users continued to be available via the West Door.

Parliament Buildings: Carbon Footprint

7. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the current carbon footprint of Parliament Buildings, including the measures in place to reduce it. (AQO 6332/11-15)

Mr Cree: I thank the Member for her question. I have another fulsome answer, so I will probably have to clip it a little as I go along.

The sustainable development office works closely with DFP's energy management unit to ensure that appropriate measures are in place to reduce our energy costs and carbon footprint wherever possible. The current display energy certificate gives the Building a D rating — I am sure that you knew that — which equates to around 155 tons of carbon a year. That is a creditable achievement for a building of its nature and age. In the past, we worked with the Carbon Trust, which made a number of recommendations, the majority of which have now been implemented.

The roof refurbishment project, which is under way, will incorporate a range of measures that will positively impact on the Building's energy performance. They include replacement of the existing insulation, refurbishing or replacing the existing roof-mounted mechanical and electrical service plant and the addition of renewable technologies, including — I know that you will like to hear this one — solar thermal panels and photovoltaic panels. I will leave it there, Mr Deputy Speaker.

4.00 pm

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill 2014: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill 2014 be agreed. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: I invite Danny Kinahan to conclude his remarks.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I will remind Members of where we were. I had just made a point about asking for funding to make sure that we encourage shared education. I just want to thank the Minister because, in the intervening time, I noticed that, in one of his responses to me, he pointed out that there will be part funding through Delivering Social Change. It is good to know that that will happen. That makes it worthwhile asking

questions for written answer and speaking today. So, thank you, Minister.

I want to move on. Before we finished, we were discussing the special needs area of education. Legislation is looming, and, although the special needs budget is meant to be ring-fenced, I am not convinced — I got this from school principals whom I have met in the last few weeks — that there is a thorough system in place to make sure that we know exactly what the needs are in the special needs area. Many schools are limited to assessing only five children a year, but more may need to be assessed. So, Minister, I am asking you today to ensure that there is funding in the Budget to make sure that we have the correct figures before we embark on special needs allocations in a Bill in the future. I know it is extremely important.

I want to move on to the common funding formula. Every school feels under threat at the moment because they only know that their funding will stay as it is for this year. Will the Minister take action to make sure that the Education Minister knows his budget as soon as possible? I know that politics are being played with the Welfare Reform Bill at the moment, but schools are expected to budget for three years, and yet the Department cannot do so. So will the Minister look at giving the Education Minister even a bottom-line budget or some indication of his budget so that we can allow schools to properly budget for the next few years?

I will move on to a different matter: transport. At the moment, there is an under-the-radar consultation on school transport, which does not seem to be listening to parents and pupils, although it is talking to many other stakeholders. Once again, will the Minister make sure that funding is in place in the budget system to ensure that we have proper school transport in the future? From a meeting that I was at two or three years ago, I know that one company felt that it could take on the whole school transport cost itself at a very different and lower figure.

I will move on to early years education. At the moment, we have a split between OFMDFM and the Department of Education, with each carrying out work in certain areas of early years education. I wish to highlight the Bright Start proposals, which were brought to my notice in my constituency recently. If we go ahead with the proposals, those who are only paying £3.60 or £3.80 an hour may well find themselves paying, through a statutory system, £7.90, which is a huge cost for working parents. So

will the Minister make sure that there is funding so that we can look into how OFMDFM and the Department of Education are going to work together? That is just one of the areas in early years education. We need to find a way for the Departments to work much better together.

I will move on to health in schools. Again, principals raised with me the point that they are teachers, not nurses, and that there is no joined-up thinking about how health services should be delivered in schools, be that through a matron, a nurse or someone else. Again, will the Minister make sure that, when he is working out the budget with the Education Minister, there is money there to help? For health and special needs, we need to make sure that we know what is needed in and amongst schools. Another area that is not properly assessed — again, it needs money sitting there and waiting — is the newcomers. Many schools now have much larger numbers coming in, and the present allowances do not help them where there are larger numbers of those who cannot speak English. We need to find a way to make sure that the schools can function properly, because if you have too many pupils with special needs and too many newcomers, it can be very difficult to teach your class effectively.

Minister and Deputy Speaker, I know that it has been raised by others, but I will reiterate the point: we saw £16 million-plus being wasted on ESA as it did not get there. I know that we opposed it and, therefore, are partially to blame, but so much money was put into a policy before it had even got there. Can we please put something in place that allows people to look at what spending is actually necessary in each Department? I come back to my point before Question Time that we need to find an effective way of being able to scrutinise what Ministers and Departments are doing.

The same could be said about assessment. We have had computer-based assessment, Key Stage assessment and large amounts of money being spent when, in fact, the teachers and principals know their assessment world much better than the Department. We need to find a more effective way of using our money. The same matters come up when we look at Protestant underachievement. We come back to the same problem I have raised about health and special needs. Will we look at putting funding in place so that, if we are to have focus groups, action zones or transformation zones working in areas as pilot projects, we do not just have the pilot but have funding in place so that we can deal with that matter effectively with joint working between Departments?

I will move on to an area that I always feel we do not budget for enough; it is not quite in the curriculum, but it is. That is learning for life and learning how you can fit in in society when you leave school, whether it is learning how to carry on your own finances or, at a different end of the scale, as been very pertinent in the last few weeks, learning about race and learning to admire and understand each other. That applies not just to racism but to sectarianism. People can begin to understand who everyone else is and that their rights and cultures are just as important as our own, and we need budget to be put into the system somewhere so that all children in every school learn about everybody else. It is phenomenally important, and we have seen that in the last few weeks.

Minister, I have thrown in a whole lot of little points and bits and pieces, and I have been trying to link them to the Budget and the budgeting that is going on rather than just having a gripe about the education system. However, £114 million went through to the Department with further funding from the draft Budget process, and, as yet, we do not know what that is being used for. So, again, I come back to the point about transparency and having the right figures in front of us so that we know what we are scrutinising. There is a great deal that could be done better in giving us information and a great deal that could be done better in having budgets in the right place. I look forward to it all working better in the future.

Mr McCallister: Just in case anyone thought that Mr Wells was my new colleague and was doing a runner there, I can assure the Minister that he has not joined just yet.

Mr McNarry: You must be used to everybody running now.

Mr McCallister: I am well used to it now.

I will start by looking at some areas that may cause the Minister some problems and some of the areas of disagreement within this Government. The big one, as I mentioned yesterday, is welfare reform, and virtually every Member has talked about it today. You also have disagreements in education now that the ESA has bitten the dust. There is all the debate around what to do with the Maze project and the stopping and moving away of the European money to other projects. There is the ongoing debate about health and TYC and whether the Chair of the Committee is right in saying that TYC is dead.

Look at other policy areas. Looking at agrifood and delivering the agrifood strategy, I think it is widely accepted that the agrifood industry was one of the things that kept our economy going through a very difficult period. We had the ongoing debate about CAP reform. We have the power derogated from Europe to make decisions on different regional policies with the single farm payment. I draw Members' attention to my declaration of interest on single farm payments. I also stress the issues around modulation and the Minister's court action last year against his colleague the Agriculture Minister.

There are other government policies around what was to be the A5; the Haass talks — or whatever is following on from that — delivering on the T:BUC strategy; and all the issues around policing, parades and dealing with the past and what we are doing with that. All those issues could throw the Budget almost into irrelevance. This is one of the big challenges that the Minister faces. Any one of these issues could derail the Budget in such a comparative way.

I will pick up on some of the issues around welfare reform. The Sinn Féin Member for North Antrim, Daithí McKay, talked about trying to make changes to welfare reform, while all the Government parties in Northern Ireland have bought into the idea of corporation tax. So, you throw all those things together: how is it going to work? The parties in Government agree on corporation tax. It is no great secret that I have concerns about its volatility and the economic data. The Minister said in response to a question yesterday that he is not concerned about the economic data. With regard to volatility, I will point out what he said yesterday about corporation tax. He talked about Lord Strathclyde's report and said that it was a politically motivated document. The one thing that I will credit Lord Strathclyde with is that he was doing it for the benefit of the Union. I do not think that anyone could question Lord Strathclyde's unionism or commitment to keeping Scotland in the Union.

So, even when we talk about not only corporation tax but having a commission to look at the various tax powers that we might want to have and the various fiscal responsibilities that we might want to devolve to the Assembly, be it income tax or not, we need to move away from looking at these purely through the prism of unionism or republicanism. We need to look at whether they are good for Northern Ireland. Do they deliver for Northern Ireland and the very citizens that we are all elected here to represent? Is it advantageous?

Yesterday, Mr Wilson talked about some of the capital allowances. He was right in his point that there is an allowance up to £250,000 at the moment. That ends in 2015. If that were proven to be useful, to work and to be meaningful, we would have the power to change it if we had tax-varying powers here. We would have the power to extend it, reduce it or move it to whatever was deemed to work best for Northern Ireland.

As I have said before, one of the challenges facing Northern Ireland and the entire UK is that we need to rebalance the Northern Irish economy, but we also need to rebalance the UK economy in that we are desperately London-centric and south-east-centric. Our entire economy is dependent on the UK economy and must deal with the difficulties that it faces. Even when you look at housing in London, the bubble mentality is starting again, and that could have a knock-on effect on the economy. It could change the level of interest rates that might have to be set to deal with housing in London at a very difficult time when Northern Ireland is only just starting to come out of recession.

We have heard from a Sinn Féin Member about welfare reform. When Sinn Féin said all that about tax powers and a commitment about being signed up to corporation tax —

Mr Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: In a second. We hear all that from Sinn Féin, yet there is a refusal even to look at and be serious about welfare reform.

From where does Sinn Féin think that the money that the Minister of Finance needs to fulfil all those commitments will come? I give way to Mr Maskey.

4.15 pm

Mr Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. I listened to him yesterday and again today, and he referred to welfare reform on quite a number of occasions. However, he clearly does not listen to others — certainly to no one on this party's Benches — who have spoken about it.

This party has made it very clear. We are not satisfied at all with the cuts agenda in the Welfare Reform Bill, and that is why we are currently blocking it. Yes, we want to work with all the other parties, including you as a Member of the House, to try to get a better deal for all the people whom we represent and, presumably, the people whom you represent.

The Member is quite happy to criticise and take potshots at every other party. He talks about the Government. Will you advise the House as to whether you want the Welfare Reform Bill as it is currently constituted imposed? It might help the debate for us to know where you stand. It is all right to criticise somebody else, but tell the House and the people out there what you want to do about the Welfare Reform Bill. Impose it or not? It is a simple question.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for bringing that up. I am very happy to say that. *[Interruption.]* It would be very easy for me to sit here and vote against welfare reform. It would be easy for me to vote against pension reform. It would be easy for me to vote against everything that you, as a Government, bring up.

Mr Maskey: No, we do not bring it up.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McCallister: But would it be responsible governance if I were to do that, even as a Member sitting on the opposition Benches? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McCallister: The very point about welfare reform is this: like it or loathe it, it is a policy by a mandated Government of the United Kingdom. Whether you like that Government or support it, it is the coalition Government in Westminster that voted the policy in. *[Interruption.]* The DUP and the Finance Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask that all remarks be made through the Chair, not across the Floor.

Mr McCallister: The Finance Minister and his colleague the Minister for Social Development have to deliver on some of those policies. The alternative that Mr Maskey suggests is that we do not do welfare reform, or that we design our own welfare system. The question that Mr Maskey and Sinn Féin have never answered is this: how are we going to pay for it? I do not detect from the Finance Minister that he is finding a lot of extra money that Sammy Wilson left him as a legacy.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate your time on this. Some time ago, we tentatively reached a deal on certain mitigating measures, including, for example, that this Executive would pay for the bedroom

tax. That is one example. You are a Member, and the Assembly and the Executive will underpin the bedroom tax. We are not going to pass it on to your constituents, even though you want us to do so.

The point that I am making is that you can find ways of mitigating welfare reform, because the Executive parties have already tentatively agreed to mitigate some of the measures in the Welfare Reform Bill. My party argues that we can mitigate a lot more, if we have a direct and serious discussion with the British Government and seriously put our minds to it. However, bear this in mind: imposing the Welfare Reform Bill, as it stands, including the measures that we have tentatively agreed, will still cost the Executive tens of millions of pounds. We are supporting that. We are prepared to find other moneys to support those most vulnerable out there.

All I want you to do is give us a simple answer. Are you happy enough to impose the cuts that your Union Government wants to impose on us? Are you happy enough to do that? Just declare your hand and tell the people out there that you want the cuts imposed. We are saying that we do not.

Mr McCallister: I think that I have been pretty straight with the honourable Member on this. He is in this position: he is saying no to welfare reform and yes to corporation tax. I am saying that to hold those two positions is completely inconsistent.

He talks about the bedroom tax. I do not know all the details of the deal that was done between the DUP and you or about all the mitigation measures. Would I rather not have to do welfare reform? Like probably every Member of the House, of course I would rather not do it. Would it be fiscally responsible to oppose it? No. There is no choice. Either oppose it, say where you are getting the money from and try to get the mandate to back that, or get on board and do the deal with your coalition partners. Those are the choices that Sinn Féin has to make. It needs to face up to the reality that it is the second-largest party in the Government, and it has to face up to what it needs to do. It cannot be constantly locked in a place of wanting to give only good news. That has wrecked the Assembly for many years now. We want to deliver only the good news, the sweeties and the trinkets. We never want to face up to the difficult choices.

The Minister has to face those choices as he cuts and top-slices every budget in Northern Ireland. He will take money off the Health Department. Does Sinn Féin want a Health

Department that, by the Health Minister's admission, is £160 million short? That is starting to sound much closer to the shortfall that Michael McGimpsey warned about. If the Finance Minister has to top-slice the health budget, then add another £68 million, I think. Where does he think that that will hit the hardest? It will hit the Department of Education and every Department in the Northern Ireland Executive. Do I think that saying no to welfare reform would be much easier? Absolutely. Do I think that it is the fiscally responsible thing to do? No.

Sinn Féin, as a party of government, has to face up to that challenge. Either it wants to be in government and make the tough and unpopular decisions that sometimes go with that, or it should not be in government at all. That is the point and that goes right through so many of our problems; we do not face up to any decisions. We do not get a deal. There is no collective responsibility among the partners in this Government, so Government policy tends to be all over the place, with Ministers doing solo runs if they are not in the bigger parties. There is no agreement on welfare reform. There is no agreement on education, whether it is the ESA, rebooting the library boards or transfer. Mr Kinahan talked about the model of sharing education, and there is no agreement on that.

Look at the relationships with the Maze development. What is happening there? What about the Agriculture Department's new base at Ballykelly? There are disagreements and problems with contracts and strategy in the Government on the new police and fire training college at Desertcreat. All those problems are hitting this Administration.

I sat on the Health Committee for a number of years. Look at the difficulties and the relentless rise in demand on the health service, and then look at the £160 million. Many parties warned that that would be a problem at the start of this Budget cycle. In fact, if memory serves me right, it was one of the reasons why the Ulster Unionist Party did not vote for the Budget in 2011.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Yes.

Mr F McCann: I am sorry that I am late; I was in a meeting. Alex just reminded me that you have made a litany of complaints without a solution to any of them. That is quite typical of you, John, and the likes of the Ulster Unionists.

When they were in power, along with you when you were in that party, they did absolutely nothing. I was going to say this to the Minister: there will be between £500 million and £750 million of cuts here because of welfare reform. It will hit those most in need in society. It will hit the disabled and the elderly. It will hit housing. People will end up homeless. What is the solution to that? You are going to lose more out of the economy through welfare reform. The DUP plucks figures out of the air and cannot back them up.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to address the Chair so that they are picked up by the microphones.

Mr McCallister: I will let the Minister answer the question of where the DUP plucks its figures from. However, I say to Mr McCann, using his figure of £750 million, although there would be some debate over the accuracy of that —

Mr F McCann: It came from the NICVA report.

Mr McCallister: I am aware of the NICVA report. He proposes to add maybe £400 million to that £750 million through corporation tax. That is what I have difficulty with: the inconsistency of the two approaches. That is the problem that Sinn Féin has with this debate: it cannot ride these two horses at once, wanting to give a tax break to large businesses while saying that welfare reform is a non-starter. In those two policy issues alone, and using their figures, you are talking about over £1 billion. Where does he think that Mr Hamilton will find that?

Mr Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he not understand that the issue is simply that the Executive have agreed that, if we have discretion on corporation tax, that may be — may be — a tool to generate greater foreign direct investment, which will enable us to create more jobs? On welfare reform, we all agree on one thing, which is that it is critical to realise that the best way to take people out of poverty is to give them a decent job. Does the Member agree?

There is no contradiction in saying that we should look at discretionary powers to use corporation tax as a measure that might help us, as part of a toolbox, to generate extra employment that would reduce the requirements for benefits and welfare support. Therefore, there is no contradiction at all in saying that we want to be able to find other tools to allow us to create employment and a

bigger, better economy and that, at the same time, we are opposed to the kind of cuts that will be devastating to many people, including those in the Member's constituency, whom he seems to keep ignoring.

Mr McCallister: That is the very point that I am making. I have no objection to any Member wanting to equip the toolbox that Mr Maskey talked about. The problem that the Minister will have is this: who will pay for the toolbox? Nobody is putting up their hand to say that they want to pay for both. We do not want welfare reform; according to Pat Ramsey, the SDLP voted against pension reform; and we do not want to do anything on tuition fees. We do not want to do any of these things, but we still want corporation tax powers.

The Minister will know my concerns about corporation tax. I am in favour of a commission looking at the whole idea of devolving tax-varying powers. That could be a real game-changer for Northern Ireland. The particular difficulty with corporation tax is the data, especially the volatility of the level of tax, which, in some years, could leave a shortfall that the Minister would have to find.

One of the big dangers of devolving tax is that we would have to change the structures here to suit that. We have to get back to what I have talked about before: we need a road map to a proper, normal, functioning democracy with a proper coalition Government, an opposition and all of the structures that go with that. To devolve tax-varying powers here, we would have to change the Assembly, because we could not devolve those powers to an Assembly and Executive that are, quite frankly, so dysfunctional and have no sense of collective responsibility.

I think that it was Mr Bradley who said that there was no link between the Budget and the Programme for Government and the priorities set out in it. Read through some of the strategic aims of the Programme for Government: we are not meeting any of them. We are not doing the Maze, we are not doing the A5, or we are doing bits of it and not other bits of it. No one really knows where we are going. The procurement for Desertcreat is a mess. Is it needed? Is it a strategic option? Has any of that been discussed and agreed with Executive colleagues? That is what has to change. This Assembly needs to reform into a proper, functioning Assembly with collective responsibility and a mandated Government, rather than just writing a highbrow Programme for Government that bears no relation to this Budget.

That is the crux of where we get into so much difficulty.

4.30 pm

I turn to other comments that Members have made. Yes, the Northern Ireland economy is growing slightly, but that is mainly due to the effects of Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Mr Weir talked about the rates issue and said that Northern Ireland had the lowest rates — or the equivalent — in the UK. We are also the part of the UK with the lowest disposal income, and that makes us vulnerable to any increases. How is the economy going to grow out of that?

On the health issue, there is a shortfall of £160 million in health spending. Where is that going to come from if the Finance Minister has to keep top-slicing? Mrs Cochrane gave us the figure of £87 million to find. That will be very difficult to find throughout the year, and that problem will increase every year that we put this off.

One issue that has probably saved the Northern Ireland Executive in budget terms is the fact that the coalition Government in Westminster had ring-fenced health and protected education spending, which, with the Barnett consequential, protected the Northern Ireland block grant to some degree. What happens next year, when whatever colour party is returned to Westminster? It seems clear that we are a long way off double-digit increases in public spending. We are many years off those types of increases. Even to balance the books has taken the Chancellor of the Exchequer significantly longer than was initially projected. That will be a struggle for Conservative, coalition, Labour or whatever it happens to be. It will be very difficult for any Government and for this Executive to face up to.

I am also looking at some of the issues in my constituency. It is fair to say that we need to make sure that the Minister, the Budget and all the Government focus on growing the economy. For a Member like me in South Down, that means tourism, agriculture and aerospace. We have concerns over the factory down in Kilkeel, getting a better connection to the electricity grid and the fact that we have no competition in that marketplace, which causes difficulties for companies of that size. In our fishing industry, we need money and investment in places like Kilkeel harbour. I am fairly certain that the next Member to speak will support some of those aims and objectives. We need that collective responsibility between Governments, not only the Northern Ireland

Executive, but between the new super-councils and industry to see whether we can progress and deliver on some of those projects. Can we use European funding? Can we tap into that?

Look at the dereliction in many of our small towns and even some of our larger towns. Some of our high streets are really struggling. What can we — the Assembly and the Finance Minister — do around rate relief and changing policies to encourage small businesses in our town centres? I look at towns like Rathfriland, Kilkeel or Downpatrick right across the board, and I see too many vacant properties. I know that the Minister sees that in his constituency. We need to look at other things and at where we are moving. Where is the newbuild for Down High School? Those are things that I want and need to see in budgets going across to the Department of Education. As an Assembly, we have to be realistic about what we can do. Effectively, at the minute, we are just spreading the jam as best we can, but we could do better if we had a more collective and more strategic approach to how we spend and what we do, instead of sometimes spending millions on reports or sending millions back to Europe. We look at some of the lost opportunities with the Narrow Water bridge project. I know that, at least, it was not this Minister who was to blame for that, but there have been missed opportunities.

I also want to touch on the European funding aspect and how it ties in with our budget process. The last couple of times that Pat Colgan from the SEUPB has appeared before the Committee with departmental officials, he has told us that there is an age-old problem that we in Northern Ireland are too slow in responding to European funding applications. We are gold-plating them. Programmes that start off in Brussels get slightly gold-plated in London and even more gold-plated when they get to DFP. That is something that the Minister has the direct power to challenge. If the European average is 26 or 30 weeks to get approval, why is it 56 weeks in Northern Ireland? Why oh why can we not do better?

I will quote briefly from Mr Colgan's remarks about the need for economic appraisals at one of the last Committee for Finance and Personnel sessions:

"The requirement for economic appraisals is a Northern Ireland managing public money requirement. It is not required by EU regulations. It is not required by our programme requirements. It is not required by the Dublin Government. It is not required by the Scottish Government. It is a

requirement of the Northern Ireland accountable Departments, and the question we have to address is how we meet that need and that requirement in an effective and an efficient way and how we stitch that into the design of the programme management and implementation structures."

We look at how that links in with our Budget, European funding and a strategic approach to how we deliver some of that. There are requirements in Europe for economic appraisals when you hit spending limits of €50 million, yet we seem to do them on nearly every project. The Minister has the direct power and responsibility to challenge that, to make a difference and to dramatically speed up that process. There are many things that we can learn from our colleagues in the Republic and in Scotland about how they do it and how they speed it up. I am keen that the Minister should take that up and see how all that ties in with a much more strategic approach to the way that we do government.

I would also like the Minister, in his response, to tell us where he sees us going on issues such as the agrifood strategy. Is that going to be built into some of the budgets? Is there agreement on that between the Minister, the Agriculture Minister and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister? Where does he see CAP reform and single farm payment going? Does he see any place for negotiation between him and his colleagues in Sinn Féin to deliver that? That will have a major impact on our farming communities. That will have a major impact, and we should move to at least a two-tier system of payments to make sure that we target that money where production in agriculture is. That is the key point, and I know that the Minister's colleague Diane Dodds MEP would support that approach. I am interested in hearing whether the Minister thinks that that is deliverable.

There are many thorny issues that this Administration face. We are heading back into a summer of parades. There are some signs that we might have some sort of post-Haass talks to look at parading and the costs associated with parading, flags and all of that. This Minister can probably ill afford to be spending huge amounts of resources, but he has to balance the rights of everyone, from those who want to parade to those who do not. We have to look and be realistic about the resources that we have in difficult times. If we do not move on welfare reform, that will put even more pressure on an already stretched Executive and give this Minister difficult

decisions to make, including, indeed, whether the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which is already £160 million short, can be sustained or will be heading for meltdown or almost bankruptcy at that point.

Mr Wells: Never believe an MLA from NI21 when he tells you he will speak for 10 minutes. That was quite articulate, but it was certainly an awful lot longer than that. I could not agree with much of the content, but at least the presentation was fairly useful. Unlike the other Member for South Down, I will not come with a shopping list of my favourite projects for south Down, although I support him on the harbour.

I will concentrate on health, because the Health Department, as we know, is the biggest Department in the Executive by a long shot. It takes £4.7 billion, and that is before monitoring round money. Needless to say, the budget for health basically dictates everything else because it is such a dominant factor. Some of the statistics around the health budget make difficult reading, and that is putting it mildly. Last year, the Department came in at £120 million overspent. Fortunately, efficiencies were then implemented, and the carry-over was pared down to £13 million. So, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has lived within budget over the past three years. That has been a remarkable performance because, as Members will know — the statistic is often quoted — the actual increase allocated under the CSR to the Health Department was 1.9%. That covered only the health element, as opposed to the social care element. Therefore, social care basically stood still, but, of course, demand rose. The actual increase was implemented on the medical part of the Department's budget, which is about three quarters of the budget.

While all this was going on in the past three years, demand has risen inexorably. Some of that is due to an ageing population, and some is due to the fact that many in our community have a lifestyle choice that leads them to poor health. Indeed, it is reckoned that about 40% of the people who present themselves at A&E are there as a direct result of their lifestyle choice. Some of the demand came from left stage, as it were, for instance the increase in the number of overseas people living in Northern Ireland who are giving birth. The Southern Trust, for instance, has a very large number of Portuguese, Lithuanian and Polish people giving birth. It was very difficult to predict that happening, and it puts incredible stress on the maternity units in that area. We have no idea who is coming, what stage they are at in their life cycle and whether they are likely to have

children. It looks like an awful lot of them have had children very successfully delivered at Craigavon and Daisy Hill hospitals but at a cost that has to be borne by the taxpayer of Northern Ireland.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The Minister, having basically balanced the books successfully for the past three years, has also in that period achieved, depending on what way you look at it, either £600 million or £770 million of efficiency savings in the Department. That was because the Minister looked rigorously through every line of the budget and found items of expenditure that could be frozen, reduced or cut entirely without affecting front line services. There was low-hanging fruit there. He inherited a situation where there were budget lines that could be dealt with and were dealt with very effectively. The Minister has been rigorous in bringing about massive savings, savings, by the way, that are more than two or three of our smaller Departments combined. He has achieved that.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: I certainly will.

4.45 pm

Mr McCallister: Would the Member care to give us the figure for the savings from the Department of Health in the previous CSR period? I may be able to jog his memory. I think that the Department of Health contributed around £750 million, even though his list of excuses sounds very much like the reasons that we used to give the DUP for more money.

Mr Wells: I am very surprised that the honourable Member for South Down, having jumped ship to NI21, spends most of his life defending Ministers and colleagues in the Ulster Unionist Party. That is quite strange, to put it mildly. Maybe a tentative transfer bid has been put in to bring him back to the fold. Maybe Wayne Rooney is being considered in part exchange, and the Member will be restored to his position in the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mr McCallister: No transfer bid has been required or requested by either side.

It is important to put on the record the truth about the £750 million and the difficulties that we all warned that health services would face. You are now finding difficulties in managing that Department.

Mr Wells: There is a fundamental difference here. I notice that he did not say that he would refuse any transfer bid, which is quite interesting. It is worth saying that, when the present Minister took over, he was able to find massive savings in his own Department that the Ulster Unionists, in the form of Mr McGimpsey, had not been able to tackle. The current Minister was able to go into that budget and take out issues that were of use and benefit to the Health Department but that it could do without, the savings from which he could then channel to the real pressures, which, of course, are A&Es, GPs, prescriptions etc. Therefore, money was in the kitty and available at the time, and the Minister has been rigorous and fastidious in finding that money.

However, the problem is that the low-hanging fruit has been picked. There is very little in the way of additional savings that can be achieved in year 4. Indeed, in order to stay within budget, the Minister established further savings of £170 million through various efficiencies in the Department. That will be extremely challenging to achieve. I think that we all realise that. When you consider the control of acute beds, the reduction in waiting times, and the tackling of no-shows for elective surgery and GP appointments, you can see that it will be very difficult to achieve £170 million savings. However, the Minister is determined to tackle it. After all of that has been achieved, the prediction is that the Department of Health will be £160 million short in the 2014-15 financial year. That is bad enough. However, this is where I do not understand where Sinn Féin is coming from. It will say that the next figure that I quote is made up, is fictitious and does not exist. The Finance Minister is building this figure into his budget, yet it does not exist. The Department will have to find at least an extra £50 million to make up for the intransigence of Sinn Féin and the SDLP on welfare reform.

I actually agree with Mr McCallister. Nobody in the Chamber, not even perhaps Mr Allister, wants to be in this position — none of us does. None of us wants to inflict pain on our community — we do not. We are in a very difficult position. However, the UK Budget holder, who is the Chancellor, is saying to us, "You can do what you like, Mr Northern Ireland, but you will pay for it". He will simply deduct anything extra that we have off our block grant. We have no control. It has been over 50 years since Northern Ireland was a net contributor to the British Exchequer, and, if we were in that position, it would be fine. However, we are totally at the mercy of the Chancellor on the issue, and he is saying that he is not giving us the money. Sinn Féin has a sort of whimsical

wish list, in that we will go to the Chancellor and demand more money. Let us just say that George Osborne were to listen to the articulate views of Mr Maskey or whomever and say, "That is fine. We will give you the extra money. You do not have to implement welfare reform". How long would it be before Scotland, Wales, the north-east of England, inner London, Devon and Cornwall were knocking on the door demanding exactly the same treatment? You could not have someone in Basingstoke being treated less favourably than somebody in Belfast. It just could not happen. Therefore, the Chancellor, by the very nature of the process, cannot discriminate in favour of Northern Ireland.

On top of that projected overspend of £160 million, the Department of Health has to find —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly.

Mr F McCann: At the outset, the Minister for Social Development said that there was no way that we would be treated any differently on welfare reform than Norwich or Manchester. However, when a bit of pressure was put on, he went away, then came back and said that he had got some movement on split payments and the bedroom tax. So if you put pressure on, you can get things to deal with the worst excesses of welfare reform.

Mr Wells: There is a fundamental fallacy in that argument. We are paying for those minor technical changes and amendments. That is the point. The Chancellor did not say, "Brilliant idea, Mr McCausland; here's an extra dollop of money". That money is already coming out of our Budget.

When you move to the really big-ticket items, such as personal independence payments, we have to pick up the tab for all that. The figures that the Minister of Finance is giving are accurate. You will know that they are accurate when Departments, including Sinn Féin-controlled Departments, start to take a slice out of their budgets to pay for it. That means that Education, Agriculture and DCAL will have to face those cuts as a direct result of the intransigence of the two parties on the Benches opposite.

Technically, given the constitutional arrangements for Northern Ireland, you have a right to do what you are doing in the sense that, technically, you can block this, but have you thought of the implications for the future of the

Northern Ireland Departments? There will have to be very severe cutbacks in all Departments to pay for it.

In former days, there was an arrangement whereby health was treated differently because it was seen as a special case. I think that we all accept that. The Minister might correct me on this, but, given the magnitude of what we are facing and the huge segment of the Budget that health represents, I do not believe that the Minister can give the Department of Health a by-ball. I do not think that it is possible because it is such a big budget. If he were to do that, he would have to absolutely savage the other Departments to achieve the savings required.

To make matters worse, we are getting only a small insight into the problem this year because it builds and builds. I am hearing figures of £800 million or £900 million being quoted — I could be wrong — as the final outcome of this process. If the Department of Health is being asked for its cut of that, it is about £360 million, and that is on top of the £160 million shortfall that we have this year and, perhaps, in following years. Where on earth could health possibly get that? It is absolutely impossible. That means that doctors' surgeries, clinics and hospitals will suffer because the low-hanging fruit has been picked.

Mr McKinney: Thank you very much for giving way. Does the Member accept that the transformational plan at the heart of the health service for producing savings and making the difference in health for years to come needs significant measurables and targets? Will the Member acknowledge that they are simply not there?

Mr Wells: If the Minister — the Minister? Hopefully not for a long time. If the Member genuinely feels that he is not getting adequate information from the Department on the implementation of Transforming Your Care, the one thing he has to say is that the present Minister's door is always open. At every opportunity when he is asked to come before our Committee to give evidence on that issue, he has come. I believe, in fact, that the Health Minister has come to his Committee on more occasions than any other Minister has come to theirs. Therefore, if the issue is a lack of information, I am sure that the Minister is more than happy to deal with that.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Member for "an" answer, but it is not "the" answer. That is a perfectly logical way of proceeding, but we have asked. There have been three or four debates

in the House, and all parties are agreed on this issue. Is it not time for his party, the Minister and the Department to accept that the mechanism that they are using for these changes to evolve is not measurable, is not working, is underfunded and does not have an implementation plan at its core?

Mr Wells: I have no doubt that the Minister has taken into consideration the points raised in the most recent debate on the issue and the comments from the Committee. Knowing the Minister as well as I do, I think that he will come back with an answer that most in the Chamber will find to be more than adequate.

I accept that there is some merit in what the Member says. There is merit in having more information on the table and in people being made more aware, but we are in a perfect storm as far as health is concerned because we need to have that —

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: May I just finish this sentence? We need this significant change in how we deliver healthcare to prevent the system, in my opinion, crashing in 20 years' time because we simply cannot afford to continue the way we are going. However, we need the money to do it, and it is being done in a very difficult financial situation.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Member for indulging me, and I would like to progress the point. You say that we need to go elsewhere for the money, but the arguments put forward so far and accepted by the House surely point in the direction of further interrogation of efficiencies, not just financial efficiencies but process efficiencies, to achieve better outcomes. In other words, we need to make sure that the plan is working fundamentally before we reach out elsewhere. If we are reaching out elsewhere at this stage, we are reaching out in panic.

Mr Wells: I am content from what I have seen in the Committee that the Minister has been rigorous in achieving massive efficiencies in his first three years. No one has been able to criticise him for the sheer scale of what he has been able to achieve. Now that the Minister has achieved that, most logical people would accept that it is highly unlikely that anything like a similar scale of efficiencies is available in the future. Even after achieving the £600 million, he has set himself the target of a further £175 million in one year. You have seen, in the report that the Committee got for the June monitoring round, that the issues that he has

decided to tackle are extremely challenging. They are not simple ticket items such as making a certain drug unavailable, freezing the building of a hospital, pay cuts or a reduction in new pay grades in the health service. The Minister is looking at fundamental processes and trying to make them more efficient. That is extraordinarily challenging; even the Minister admits that.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Member for giving way again. Has the nature of the course that the Minister has chosen — not funding the community side of the proposals and instead taking money out of the expensive side — not led to further pressures on the expensive accident and emergency side? Were he to follow the TYC plan logically and in its originally conceived way, would he not be properly spending to save?

Mr Wells: The Member fails to recognise that, even if TYC did not exist, the Department would be under the same pressures because of the inexorable growth that he and I have no control over: an ageing population, lifestyle choices and immigration. We simply have to deal with that; it is demand-led. Therefore, it is wrong to say that TYC has led to the difficulties that health faces. There are other trends that the Minister can do very little about. He cannot stop us ageing; it will be very difficult to turn the tanker of people adopting lifestyle choices that are extremely deleterious to their health; and we cannot predict how many people will seek to live in Northern Ireland and perform very important roles in manufacturing or whatever.

We have gone off on a bit of a tangent. What I am fundamentally saying is that you cannot blame TYC. You can blame forces that are completely outwith the control of the Assembly. The Department faces a difficult time in the future, and we have to face up to that unless the economic situation in the rest of the United Kingdom rapidly improves and the Chancellor says, "I got it wrong. Growth rates are much higher. I can loosen the purse strings". Remember, though, that he has a £1 trillion debt to pay off. Somebody told me the other day that, if he continues to pay it off at the same rate, it will take about 2,000 years. I am absolutely certain that George Osborne does not want it to be repaid on such a long-term basis. Therefore, I do not think that we will have a knight in shining armour coming over the hill in the form of extra cash from the Government at Westminster. As a community, we will have to prioritise and ask whether health is worth protecting. I believe that it is. As far as the public are concerned, it is the most

important Department, and we will have to work very hard.

5.00 pm

The last thing that we need is this huge millstone around our neck of lack of agreement on welfare reform and the rapid growth in demand that it will place on health through budget reductions. We have to crack this. The only thing that I agreed with Mr McCallister on was that we will have to start taking difficult decisions in this Assembly. It is dead easy to introduce free public transport, abolish prescription charges and not move on water charges. That is dead easy, and we all take our day in the sun. The measure of any form of government is its ability to take the really difficult decisions, and they do not come any harder than welfare reform — I accept that. We will have to be mature and sit down and explain to our community, "We don't want to do this, but we have no option. We will have to bring it in. Please understand why we are in the position we are in. We will do our best around the edges to reduce its impact on you, but we're stuck with this and we have no choice". At least then we can go forward without our Departments having a year-on-year reduction because of a decision that has been taken for party-political purposes so that we do not offend our community. We need to grow up, and we need, jointly as an Assembly, to take the criticism that will undoubtedly come our way because we have done this. We cannot start closing essential health services to pay for someone's difficulties with a UK-wide decision.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Listening to Mr Wells and Mr McCallister, I thought that they agreed on everything, not just one or two things. Obviously, the Tories are alive and well and living in Stormont.

As I listen to all the rhetoric about welfare reform, it seems to me that there is a lot of talk about the economic cost and very little talk about the human cost. If we look at statistics in Britain, we can see that quite a few people have already been driven to suicide by the imposition of the bedroom tax. Mr Wells talked about England, Scotland and Wales and the effect there. A Sheffield University report estimates that at least £750 million would be taken out of our economy by welfare reform. How would that affect our economy? In Belfast, £840 would be lost per year per adult of working age. That would also affect Newry, Derry, Strabane and other places. In Britain, the figure is

approximately £450, so we would pay double. You need to get your facts straight.

Everybody else has talked about welfare reform, so I might as well talk about it. The welfare reform legislation is not about tackling poverty; it is about tackling the poor. We need to be straight about that and not go around the houses. That is what it is about: cuts that affect the vulnerable.

We talk about health, but what about the unforeseen consequences of welfare reform, such as the knock-on effect that it will have on those with mental health issues and on people with disabilities? The benefit cap, if introduced, would put approximately 4,000 more children into poverty. Child poverty is something that the Assembly has vowed to eradicate in the shortest time possible. When we talk about the consequences of this, that and the other, let us look at the real consequences of welfare reform.

The change from DLA to the personal independence payment will mean that 20% to 25% of people will lose their benefit. Those are people who are vulnerable, people who are disabled and people who rely on that extra money to give them a reasonable quality of life.

You talk about savings in the health service. You were a member of the Health Committee, as I was, last year — I think it was last year — when a health economy expert, Professor Normand, gave evidence. He said that any health service like ours could save between 8% and 10% without cuts just by being more efficient. I assume that that has not really been looked at. You talked about the Minister making efficiency savings. If we were being cynical, we would see Transforming Your Care as a shift not to the left but towards privatisation. That would presumably save some of the money that you are talking about. Let us get real about these things.

We have been told that welfare reform has to be imposed. Where it has been imposed in Britain, it is not working. In the pilot scheme for universal credit, they have already written off £142 million for their IT system. At this stage, there were supposed to be over one million people on the system for universal credit: there are approximately 11,000 on it. The only reason they are on it is that they are single males, who are the easiest to put on. It simply is not working, so why should we impose something here that does not work and has been proven not to work? Again, we need to get real about these things.

The DUP voted against welfare reform in Parliament, but its Members are obviously not going to vote against it here. We need to present a united front. We have been told about all the mitigating measures but have not been given the detail on them unfortunately. We were told that the bedroom tax would save £18 million — *[Interruption.]* Maybe the lights going out is an omen. Obviously the Assembly is already starting to save money. I am sure that the Minister has already spoken to the people who control the lights. Have you? Saving a few quid on electricity. Maybe that will go towards the bill that Mr Wells and Mr McCallister have been talking about.

The point I was making is that we need to present a united front. Concessions or mitigating measures can be achieved. We were told that the bedroom tax would save £18 million. Then we were told that it would cost £21 million to implement. How is that a saving? It is absolutely ridiculous, because it costs more to implement, in many cases. In Britain, in some of the London boroughs, following the imposition of the bedroom tax they pay up to £100,000 more a week for bed and breakfast, because people have had to leave their home.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: Yes, I will.

Mr Wells: It would have been good if your five MPs had gone to Westminster and made those very points. Whilst I do not agree with them all, they are legitimate points. However, the horse has well and truly bolted. That decision has been made. MPs voted against welfare reform, but now we have it. What does he propose to do if someone goes to George Osborne and he says that there is no extra money? What on earth does he expect the Finance Minister to do in that situation?

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention. Your MPs did not seem to make much difference, to be perfectly honest. Do not preach at us. We have a principled stand of abstentionism. The fact is that your MPs are in Parliament and really do not seem to make a huge difference. You talk plenty about it, but, as somebody once said in the House of Commons, the poor are often talked about in this House but never entertained. That could also apply to this House. I think that it was Isaac Butt who said that in about 1864, but do not quote me on that.

The Finance Minister has been throwing about figures: £5 million a month; £1 billion over four

or five years. The British Treasury, as far as I am aware, has not actually given us definitive figures, unless the Finance Minister knows what they are and —

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Do you want to hear them?

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have comments through the Chair.

Mr Brady: Give us those figures. To date, we have not got them. They have been coming up with all sorts of figures, going back over years.

I will move on from welfare reform, because I think that I have said enough about it. Everybody else has preached ad nauseam about it today, and I am sure that other people will before we finish the debate.

I particularly want to talk about housing. In the Programme for Government there is a commitment to build social housing. On 24 March, in the CSR, 4,000 additional houses were mentioned. In the monitoring round, the Minister asked for £15 million for co-ownership. That would provide approximately a further 360 homes. There is a waiting list for social housing of about 40,000 people, and over half of those are in housing stress. There was no bid for social housing. About £7 million was handed back by DSD which should have been put towards planned maintenance. In 2009, the Savills report said that, here in the North, we had some of the best housing in Europe. That was five years ago. Obviously, you need to maintain those houses to maintain that stock, otherwise it will go into disrepair. That has consistently happened. The Minister has, in the past financial year, handed back —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: Of course.

Mr F McCann: That is a very important and valid point, as the Minister will know, because he sat on the Social Development Committee for a while. There is a serious problem in the allocation of funding in the Budget towards co-ownership. Co-ownership may be good for a number of people, but, let us face it, there was another application for £10 million to go towards it and you may find that, over the past couple of years, upwards of £100 million has gone in that direction. There is a waiting list of 600 people for co-ownership, and yet not a penny extra has been bid for to deal with the 40,000. In my constituency, over 4,000 people are on the waiting list, many of them in hostels and many

in stress. Not one house extra has been bid for or built.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention. Certainly co-ownership helps people who want to get on the housing ladder, but it certainly does not go any way towards alleviating the plight of the over 40,000 people on the social housing waiting list or indeed the people, particularly in areas such as Belfast, who have been in hostels for three to four years. That is an issue that needs to be addressed. The Minister seems obsessed with co-ownership. In the June 2013 monitoring round, there was a bid for £15 million for co-ownership, and in the October 2013 monitoring round there was a bid for £10 million. However, very little has been done to alleviate the social housing situation. That is maybe something that he needs to concentrate his mind on.

I will move on to neighbourhood renewal, which is transferring to councils. There are issues around the budget for that. In a recent presentation to the Committee for Social Development by DSD officials, some Committee members were of the view that this has not been fully thought through. We are not convinced that there will be a transfer of staff in order to carry out what is required effectively. We accept that it needs to be cost-effective, but it also needs to deliver.

OFMDFM has committed to draw down an extra 20% of EU funding across Departments, and four more desk officers have been appointed. I ask the Minister to give us feedback on this and advise the House how the money is being drawn down and how it will be used.

Mr McCarthy: I will not detain you very long, Mr Speaker. I will try to be as brief as possible, as most of the important subjects have been covered.

Although today we are discussing the Budget (No. 2) Bill for the 2014-15 financial year, the debate could be described as being a somewhat artificial discussion because this Budget may and probably will have to be revised significantly come the end of this month unless there is political agreement on the regrettable but inevitable implementation of — guess what — welfare reform in Northern Ireland.

There is a choice for Members and society to make. We must recognise the constraints within which we operate and acknowledge that what we are being asked to do on welfare is not of our making. Equally, for us to pursue the

current course of not addressing the reality of welfare reform will bring significant cuts in public services and in our ability to create jobs and, in doing so, will hurt the very people whom we are trying to help and protect.

Already, Departments are hamstrung by the uncertainty of what may or may not happen with the Budget. If further cuts are required, it will surely impact on services, including early years education, public health initiatives, mental health services, job programmes and training initiatives. All these measures have a positive impact on people's life chances, including life expectancy, educational opportunities and attainment and, indeed, employment prospects.

The Executive have recognised this reality through their Delivering Social Change framework. I agree with Mr Wells's comments in that I regard health as a priority. If you have a healthy population, you have a prosperous and peaceful population. We know that our health service is already under severe pressure with respect to performance and the finance available, and we heard harsh realities from the Health Minister at Question Time earlier today. There is a real challenge to ensure that Northern Ireland keeps up with other regions and jurisdictions in investing in new diagnostics, new drugs, new treatments and technologies and funding for specialist illnesses such as multiple sclerosis (MS), diabetes, cancer and many more. We had a full room of people with us yesterday representing those with muscular dystrophy. Their needs are as excessive as anyone else's, and we must do our best to cater for that.

We have funding shortfalls in spending per head in key areas such as mental health, despite a much higher incidence of mental health conditions. There are major structural issues relating to health inequalities and poor public health relative to other regions. We have emerging pressures from changing demographics and particular pressures around social care. There are ongoing crises in the performance of accident and emergency departments and the efficiency of waiting lists. How, indeed, are we to provide for our elderly and infirm?

Alliance continues to recognise that the status quo in our health service and social services sector is not sustainable. We continue to support the broad thrust of Transforming Your Care while expressing, like others, growing concerns as to how it is being delivered.

No one should be left behind.

5.15 pm

Transforming Your Care offers the potential for a much more strategic and integrated approach to the population's changing health needs. The Health Minister and the Executive as a whole have a balance to strike between ensuring that the future direction of the health service is properly resourced while addressing the more immediate challenges. Many investments in reformed service delivery have the potential to produce savings, or, rather, to free up existing resources to reinvest in new areas. The Alliance Party believes that there is a strong case for full benchmarking of the profile of health and social services expenditure in Northern Ireland against other neighbouring jurisdictions. There are areas in which Northern Ireland will be shown to be spending proportionately more than other regions and some areas in which we are spending much less. Such an analysis should guide further spending priorities as the local Budget is rebalanced.

I note that the Health Minister is currently making perhaps the largest and most comprehensive set of bids for the June monitoring round, which ironically comes at a time of greatest stress on Executive budgets. By contrast, the implications of even a 1% cut, never mind a much greater cut, on the health service, especially when taking into account its current configuration, would be catastrophic. Already stretched services would be forced to breaking point. We must do all that we can to avoid that fate.

In conclusion, I want to speak on a few constituency matters. First and urgent is the ongoing saga with Exploris, the Northern Ireland Aquarium in Portaferry. That regional facility, situated on the edge of Strangford lough, has provided Northern Ireland with a fantastic aquatic experience. As the name "Exploris" suggests, it is an exploration of the Irish Sea. For almost 30 years, the facility has been owned and managed by Ards Borough Council and has brought the wonders of Strangford lough and its environs to a great many people. It has been of tremendous educational benefit to a great many schoolchildren.

The Minister will know of Exploris, as it is his constituency also, and of how Ards Borough Council has now sought regional support through funding from the Executive. The council has now provided the Executive with a sound business case to ensure the future of Exploris. The Minister of the Environment, Mark H Durkan, local councillors, Friends of

Exploris and others have worked extremely well and hard together. Mr Durkan has agreed to secure the seal sanctuary into the future and has supported the capital funding required to modernise Exploris. We now await approval from the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive.

Today, I appeal to Minister Hamilton to support the business case through the Executive at the earliest opportunity. Exploris has been a major tourist attraction in Portaferry and the entire Ards peninsula, Strangford and the Lecale district, right into Downpatrick and further afield. Given its importance, it goes without saying that so many jobs in the hospitality industry depend on a successful conclusion to the present upgrading of all activities around Exploris.

On funding for the Department of Agriculture, I want to say that we recently had in our constituency severe flooding and a breach of the sea defences around Strangford lough. The Minister is aware of the desperate plight — in fact, he visited the site — of residents around Rowreagh and Lisbane outside Kircubbin and further along the coast at Bishop's Mill. The Minister visited the Saltwater Brig, the old church and local dwellings that had suffered the breach of the sea wall early in 2014. Some investment has to be made to prevent a similar occurrence taking place. There was a similar event in Antrim last weekend, happening for the fifth time. I am pleading with the Minister to do his utmost to ensure that Strangford residents do not have to wait until a breach happens five times for something to be done.

I have to say how devastated locals were when the Agriculture Minister replied with sympathy but said that her Department's Rivers Agency could undertake works only where they were cost-effective. In other words, she is walking away from those people. If flooding occurs again, too bad, because she and her Department have nothing to offer.

I ask the Finance Minister not only to have sympathy for his constituents but to offer investment to the Rivers Agency to prevent further breaches of the sea wall, to give people peace of mind and to prove that a local Assembly acts for local people.

Finally, I appeal to the Finance Minister to make further progress on what started off a few years ago as my Apartment Developments' Management Reform Bill. The Law Commission produced a report, but it did not go as far as I would have wished. Apartment owners and dwellers want real improvements to be implemented sooner rather than later.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to today's debate as Chair of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I think that we can all reflect on the many pressures that are across many Departments and on those that are very clearly across the Health Department. However, it remains the case that the Transforming Your Care agenda now has a funding gap of £42 million, which is needed for the transition of that initiative.

As I advised the House yesterday, the Committee held a briefing with departmental officials on 28 May to explore some of the challenges facing the Department of Health in the 2014-15 Budget. The Department told the Committee in no uncertain terms that, this year, it is facing a funding shortfall of £160 million. The Department told the Committee that, if that £160 million is not forthcoming through the monitoring rounds, it has a number of options to bridge that gap.

The first option is to see whether any more savings can be extracted across the health and social care service. Savings of £170 million have already been delivered in 2014-15, so it is difficult to see where further savings might be made.

The second option is to introduce charges for services, such as reintroducing prescription charges. However, the Department has acknowledged that that would not generate a huge amount of money and that most of the revenue generated would not be realised until 2015-16.

The third option is to impose pay restraints on staff. That would obviously have implications right across the public sector.

The fourth option is to reduce the range of services offered to the public. However, there was no real detail provided on what services are seriously being considered under that heading and how much they would deliver in savings.

The fifth option is that the Executive provide the Department of Health with additional recurrent resources, which would obviously impact other departmental budgets. However, it is not clear which of those options the Department favours, should the current shortfall of £160 million not be met through the monitoring rounds.

I acknowledge the budgetary pressures that the Department is under this year. We realise that some changes are more difficult than others to make and that there are some short-, medium- and long-term savings to be made, but we need to know more about the options available to the Department for the time period in which the savings could be realised, whether those options require a policy or legislative change and, importantly, the impact that they would have on front line patient care and safety.

Mrs D Kelly: As Mr McCarthy said, at this stage, it is very difficult to add anything new, but I will try to reflect on some of the First Minister's comments when the Assembly was reinstalled after the elections in May 2011. He said:

"there is no mistaking the message of the electorate; it is as plain as a pikestaff. The electorate made it very clear to all of us as we went around the doors that they wanted to see us create and safeguard employment. They want us to help the vulnerable in our society and improve front line services. However, they also want to see us unite this Province and create a shared society. In short — my party managers would not forgive me if I did not say this — they want to see us moving Northern Ireland forward."

He later said:

"Four or five years from now, we will not be judged on the size of our first preference votes but on what we have done to make life better for the people whom we represent. We will be judged on delivery." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 64, p11, col 1].

Three years on, if a critical eye were cast over the mandate thus far, we would have fallen far short of the expectations, not only of the First Minister but, more importantly, the electorate. We have fallen short in the creation of a shared society and in dealing with contentious issues, and neither the Budget nor the Programme for Government has any resource allocated for dealing with the past.

Earlier today, when I asked the Justice Minister about expenditure on resources required by the coroner to deal with the Stalker report, I found that there had been no request for resource in the monitoring rounds. I do not know whether the Finance Minister would look favourably on such a bid in the monitoring round, but he has not been asked.

We have also failed. It is only in the last few months that we agreed a sort of, kind of childcare strategy. We see a lot of hand-wringing in the Chamber by political parties in relation to tackling poverty and social exclusion, but the Executive, when forced and embarrassed into moving on a childcare strategy, published one that puts most of the money towards social enterprises. That is a laudable effort, but, unfortunately, that has a track record of not being sustainable. A lot of money has gone into rural areas but nothing to the private sector, yet we hear, particularly from the party opposite, that we should grow the private sector and reduce the public sector. There has been little evidence of that in the childcare strategy, and we all know the importance to working families, and to people trying to get out of poverty, of accessible childcare that is affordable and near home, including preschool places. That has not been good.

In terms of fuel poverty, the introduction of assistance for our older people is another anti-poverty measure on which we are falling behind GB and the South of Ireland. In Britain and the South, they have set aside a fund to help older and vulnerable people to pay their electricity bills. There is no talk about it here and no innovation in this Budget or this Programme for Government. Of course, when we settled on the Programme for Government and Budget some three years ago, it was set out, as my colleague Mr Bradley said earlier, as a four-year Budget. So it is very difficult to make any inroads on that Budget. Of course, at that time, welfare reform was not on the agenda.

Before I leave fuel poverty, on average, pensioner households in the North spend £1,602 a year on heating. That is something like £400 more than their peers elsewhere, yet we are the only jurisdiction that has done nothing to help to target that group of people. Earlier today at the Social Development Committee, we learnt that the issue of an alleged overpayment of some £18 million on a maintenance contract has still not been settled. The contract was signed to allow maintenance to resume on 1 May, but no work will be on site potentially until late autumn. We all know that much of that work is improving insulation and windows by, for example, installing double glazing. Therefore, many people face another winter of rising fuel costs and heat loss because of substandard housing. That is a great disappointment to us.

I do admire Sinn Féin for, on the one hand, wringing its hands about the health budget, but Sinn Féin signed off on a health budget three

years ago, something our party pointed out that it was wrong to do. That Budget took some £600 million out of the health service, yet we saw the display by the Chairperson of the Health Committee about how dreadful it all is. It is a pity that it did not think of that three years ago. Unfortunately, Mr Wells is not here, but I recall very vividly, as, I am sure, do you, Mr Speaker, the shouts and cries and abuse faced by the previous Minister of Health when he was told that he had enough money to manage the health service within his budget. We all know now how false that accusation was. We know that the health service is in dire straits, as we see, in each monitoring round, more and more money going towards the health service.

5.30 pm

The First Minister referred to employment. We see rising inequality among middle- and low-income families. That is not a fact that I have established; it is one that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has established. It has the graphs and evidence to show it, if one would care to look up its website. So, we are seeing wages being held well below the waterline for many in our society against a backdrop of rising costs. It is not enough to say that it is in and around welfare reform and then talk about the health service as if there is no correlation between poor health and poverty. Poor housing and low income inevitably lead to poor health outcomes because of the high levels of poverty and, particularly, childhood poverty in the North.

It had to be Westminster that brought forward legislation to force this jurisdiction to publish an anti-poverty strategy, which was only laid before the House on near enough the last day that it could be laid. I think that, at that time, we were in recess. We always know how to bury bad news by publishing at a time when there are not too many watching.

Others have referred to the failure to spend on social housing. I have to say that I have many concerns about the management of that portfolio by the current Minister for Social Development. I think that there is a lot of evidence gathering apace about his management and his refusal to acknowledge his obligations under the equality legislation. We hear from others how equality legislation and moving forward on equality has been one of their main achievements, yet we see the rollback of many of the equality provisions. In fact, whether it is race relations, general equality provisions or provisions for older people for equality in goods and services, we are behind the other jurisdictions on these islands.

We are far from doing the job that we were encouraged to do. With regard to the transformation of the society that had held so much promise and was endorsed by the people, any reasonable, objective observer could only conclude that we have failed. I urge the Minister and the Executive to get round the table and start doing some collaborative partnership work, putting the people at the core of their decision-making and not ensuring that it is something for your community and something for my community, because that is not going to move Northern Ireland forward.

Mrs Overend: As Ulster Unionist spokesperson for enterprise, trade and investment, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. I will take this opportunity to raise some questions about the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's spending priorities at the start of this financial year of 2014-15, in the context of the five-year Budget for 2011-15, which was voted through by the Assembly but not by the Ulster Unionist Party in March 2011.

It is interesting to check the estimated 2014-15 Budget published figures in the 2011-15 Budget document with the just published Budget position in the Main Estimates. Not surprisingly, the big spending Departments of Health and Education have seen an upward revision in their budgets. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, on the other hand, has gone the other way. Originally, there was an estimate of £205.5 million in the resource budget that is current expenditure and £29.2 million in the capital budget, but now we have £190.2 million in the resource budget for the current financial year and £35.6 million in the capital budget. So, resource allocation has gone down, while estimated spend on capital projects has gone up. I wonder whether the Minister has an explanation for that.

Invest Northern Ireland has traditionally consumed about 65% of the DETI budget. There have been complaints in previous years that Invest NI has been unable to spend its budgetary allocation and has had to return money to the centre. In 2011 and 2012, considerable criticism was directed at Invest NI and DETI when money had to be returned to the centre. The explanation for the underspend was that firms were postponing their investment plans due to the difficult economic climate and, therefore, moneys set aside for Invest NI grants were not being drawn down during the economic downturn. It seemed at the time hard to understand, from a layperson's point of view, how that body, charged with attracting and

encouraging business activity, could not spend its allocated budget during a period following a recession. Today, however, we see in the June monitoring round that Invest NI is now seeking reinstatement of £7.7 million resource budget along with a further £2.8 million resource allocation, making a total resource bid of £10.5 million, due to the economic recovery.

I assume that the Minister will confidently point to that as an indication that we are on the up economically. I hope, in advance, however, that the Minister will temper his remarks in the knowledge that the latest statistical release by the Office of National Statistics shows that we have the lowest regional gross disposable household income in the whole of the United Kingdom, with the average person having only £13,902 per annum. That is less than two thirds of the figure for London, which has the highest gross disposable household income per head. Northern Ireland has the weakest growth, at 2.7% per head of population between 2011 and 2012.

As we look forward to better economic prospects for Northern Ireland, albeit they will arrive somewhat more slowly than in rest of the UK, it is important that an ideal environment is created to enable businesses to access advice and support to grow exports, innovate and achieve DETI's *raison d'être*, which is:

"to promote the growth of a competitive and export-led economy".

Talking about exports, the agrifoods industry has been recognised as the key driver of Northern Ireland's economy, with great potential for exports. However, I am concerned that the Going for Growth strategy remains stuck in the Executive. Detail of funding for the Going for Growth strategy in the 2014-15 Budget would be welcome, if the Minister could provide it.

Turning to tourism, in the Main Estimate for DETI, grant-in-aid provision includes just under £22 million for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and £13.9 million for Tourism Ireland Limited. I was disappointed in yesterday's debate on the Main Estimates. Tourism was dragged into a party-political dispute about flags, parades and protests. Suffice to say that we all need to recognise that tourism is the major potential growth sector for our economy, and anything that sends out negative images of our country should be avoided.

The latest figures for external visitors to Northern Ireland, which were published on the 29 May, show that Republic of Ireland visitor numbers were down by 7% and numbers of

holidaymakers were down by 15%, along with a decrease of 18% in spend from Republic of Ireland tourists in 2013. In the 2014-15 Budget, £3.4 million has been allocated for tourism development, arising from a bid from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board against the events fund. That will cover another major event, the Tall Ships Races 2015. Again, this is another prestigious international event, following on from the recent Giro d'Italia, which really put Northern Ireland on the map for all the right reasons.

When investing in prestigious events in Northern Ireland that have huge potential to encourage visitors and holidaymakers from outside Northern Ireland and the UK, those spending the money must be careful to invest properly and make sure that work is done to inform people and promote events worldwide that will result in an increase in the numbers of holidaymakers and tourism spend in Northern Ireland. Yes, from a worldwide point of view, Northern Ireland is only a small corner, but we have much to sell and celebrate.

The Minister may have heard the doubt that the Justice Minister expressed during Question Time regarding plans for the Community Safety College at Desertcreat outside Cookstown. It will be interesting to see the outworkings of the current analysis of the plans, and I wonder whether the Finance Minister can enlighten us any further on that.

I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr Attwood: I will start with Mr McKay's comment of a few hours ago about the Finance Committee getting the monitoring round paper on Tuesday, in advance of its meeting on Wednesday.

I raise that because the Minister will obviously be very protective of the accountability mechanisms of the Assembly, not least around monitoring rounds and the input of various Committees to that process. Mr McKay, on behalf of the Committee, said that he regretted the fact that the paper had not been provided a wee bit earlier so that it could have been circulated to other Committees. He was right to make that point. How telling is it that, last Wednesday, two hours before the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister met, the monitoring paper from that office was received by the Committee? Two hours before the Committee met. As a consequence, the Chair and Deputy Chair excused themselves from chairing the session on the monitoring round paper from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

There was a good understanding in the Committee of why the Chair and Deputy Chair excused themselves from chairing that part of the meeting.

Mr Weir: That is why it carried on.

Mr Attwood: I missed that comment; do you want me to sit down?

Mr Weir: The Member says that there was good understanding. My understanding is that the Committee carried on and that there was vigorous discussion. Indeed, Mr Spratt, who chaired that part of the meeting, praised the work of the members. That is maybe slightly at variance with the "good understanding". Whatever our feelings about the late delivery of papers, surely it is the duty of any Chair or Deputy Chair to carry on and do their duty by chairing the meetings that they are paid to chair.

Mr Attwood: I admire the skills of Mr Weir. He is pretending to the House that he can explain what happened at a Committee meeting at which he was not present.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will let you through in a minute. I was present, and I will give you my understanding. More than one member of the Committee said that they understood why the Chair and the Deputy Chair excused themselves. They were concerned that, if they discussed a paper, given their status as Chair and Deputy Chair of a Committee, they would then be culpable for things that might not have been fully understood or interrogated because the Committee —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: In a second. The Committee received the paper two hours — two hours — before the meeting. Is that what accountability now means to the Chamber? That an office of the Executive can hand over a paper two hours before a meeting. In order to try to have some threshold of accountability, the meeting proceeded and questions were asked. Let me read into the record of the House the record of that Committee meeting. Questions were asked about why the paper was not received in good time. Hansard shows that questions were asked on a number of occasions —

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I appreciate that there is a wide range of

discussion in any Budget debate. However, even the Member has admitted that his point is about the June monitoring round, which has nothing at all to do with the Budget. We are now delving into details of a Committee meeting about the June monitoring round rather than the Budget. I appreciate that we may well have a fairly lengthy submission from Mr Attwood, but surely he should at least stick to the Budget.

Mr Speaker: In taking the form of the point of order as it was raised, I have to say that the debate yesterday and the debate today have been wide-ranging. All Members have had the opportunity to bring almost anything into the Budget debate. I agree with the Member slightly: we are now treading very much into Committee business. We have to be careful, but, when it comes to the Budget, it is wide-ranging.

Mr Attwood: It seems to me that when Members cannot win an argument on material grounds, they try to intervene on procedural grounds, and it says an awful lot about those who make the argument rather than those who try to face up to the substance of the point. I will now read the substance of the point into the record.

5.45 pm

A senior official from OFMDFM is asked why an important paper, whether a monitoring paper, some other budgetary paper or whatever — in this instance, it was on a budgetary matter, which is relevant to this debate — came to the Committee so late. He was asked:

"Was the delay at an official level or a political level?"

Answer:

"The delay was in the Department."

Question:

"Was there any delay at an official level?"

Answer:

"There were delays in the broader process in the Department."

Question:

"You are the senior official responsible for the monitoring returns, are you?"

Answer:

"I am."

Question:

"Was there a delay at your desk?"

Answer:

"As I said, there is a whole range of processes that have to be gone through, and that involves —"

Question:

"I understand the processes... Do you think that you are responsible for the failure to get papers to the Ministers quickly enough and, thereafter, the failure to get papers to the Committee quickly enough?"

Answer, and listen to this one:

"It is about all aspects of the process. There are parts of it which perhaps could have been done more quickly, but circumstances were difficult, and, unfortunately, we were not able to get them to the Committee on time."

Can anyone explain to me what the Committee was being told about why we got a paper about an important budgetary matter two hours before the meeting convened? Quite clearly, the officials could not give an explanation. The point is important: we do not have a full, annual Budget process in this House and, as a consequence of what happened at the Committee last week, we do not have a full and proper process to assess monitoring bids. I ask the Minister today, in the light of all that, whether he will comment on it if he feels capable of doing so; whether he can confirm when monitoring papers were meant to be submitted to his office about the June monitoring rounds; and whether the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, or, for that matter, any other office of the Executive, failed to do so?

To conclude on that matter, and before I go back to what others might view as more substantial questions, yesterday, I asked the junior Minister during questions for oral answer whether she could explain it, given that the official at the Committee clearly could not. The junior Minister replied:

"I will certainly look into it". — [Official Report, Vol 96, No 1, p22, col 2].

I am sorry to refer to Mr Weir in these terms, given his clearly quite anxious state of mind, but he talked about the delay around welfare having an impact on the most vulnerable. There was another Member — I cannot remember who, although I think that it was a Member of the Sinn Féin Benches — who replied, "Whether it is £500 million or whether it is £700 million, that is impacting on those who are most vulnerable and most in need in our society."

I want to try to reconfigure the whole discussion around welfare in order to try to get a better conversation going at an Executive and political level about where the issue is going. I am not going to pretend innocence. This party has said before that, at this stage, we are prepared to accept the £5 million a month of budgetary pressures arising from the London Exchequer around welfare reform. However, we will not ignore the fact that London continues to impose that and threatens us with more regardless.

The responsibility on Ministers and on this House is to try to interrogate the issue in a way that brings some clarity and some better conclusion. That is the responsible political position. For all the toing and froing in this Chamber today, that is where we have to get back to. In my view, that is where the Finance Minister has to go, given that he has failed to go there since the Final Stage of the last Budget debate on 24 February of this year, when various points, questions and requests were put to him, and, as far as I can work out, none of them has been taken forward. I will come back to that.

So, what are the conclusions that we have to draw? The first is that, if we want to learn about the impact of the bedroom tax, we should look to where it has been in place now for over a year. We only have to look to Scotland, because they are already living with the consequences of the imposition of the bedroom tax. The Scottish Government, which, as I tirelessly and tediously say, are the best Government in these islands, set up a Committee to keep the passage of the UK Welfare Reform Bill under review and monitor its implementation as it affects welfare provision in Scotland, and to consider relevant Scottish legislation and other consequential arrangements.

So concerned was that Committee about the impact of the bedroom tax that it published an interim report in recent times in relation to that impact. The membership of the Committee comes from across the House of the Scottish Parliament. SNP, Labour and Conservative all

sit on the Committee. It published its interim report, which, as far as I know, was passed with consensus. If we want to anticipate what is going to happen with the bedroom tax in our more severe circumstances in Northern Ireland, we should look to what they are saying in Scotland today about the experience a year after it was imposed there. They said:

"The Welfare Reform Committee believes that the under-occupancy charge, also known as the 'bedroom tax' is iniquitous and inhumane and may well breach human rights."

"Iniquitous and inhumane", yet there are people in this House and outside who say, regardless of something that is iniquitous and inhumane, let us impose it anyway. I will come back to that.

The report also says:

"It is having a real and harmful impact on people's lives, and often the most vulnerable in society — those with disabilities, children in separated families etc."

"Many people are 'trapped' into paying the 'bedroom tax' in that there are not enough one bedroom properties available to down-size to."

That is what the Housing Executive told us about the profile of housing and social housing stock in Northern Ireland: people would be trapped into the bedroom tax because of the consequences of the profile of our housing.

The report continues:

"Although the 'bedroom tax' will reduce the housing benefit budget, it introduces a number of new costs to tenants, housing associations, local authorities, the Scottish Government and others — the tax may cost more than it saves."

It concludes:

"The Welfare Reform Committee believes that the only way to deal with the 'bedroom tax'...is to abolish it."

The Welfare Reform Committee notes that the power to do so remains reserved to Westminster. The Committee therefore calls on the United Kingdom Government to abolish the 'bedroom tax' immediately."

If it does not, the Committee believes that the Scottish Parliament should be given the powers and resources to abolish it."

Are we going to carry on regardless and ignore the experience of Scotland, where a cross-party Committee of the Scottish Parliament draws those conclusions just a year after the tax is introduced? That is the point I will make to the Finance Minister.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mr Weir: Whatever the implications regarding welfare reform, there has already been agreement for mitigation among the parties in the Executive to ensure that anyone who is currently a tenant will not actually be subject to the bedroom tax. There are specific measures that are ready to be put in place. I agree with a lot of the criticisms that have been made of the bedroom tax but it is something that, to be fair, the Executive have faced up to and are ready to deal with. In many ways, the Member, while being rightly critical of the bedroom tax across the UK, is raising a red herring in the debate.

Mr Attwood: The reason why it is not a red herring is that the Welfare Reform Committee of the Scottish Parliament says, "abolish it"; it does not say, "mitigate it". The Scottish Parliament calls for the power and resources to abolish it because mitigation does not do all that it is meant to do. I will come back to the point, because the Member makes a fair point about mitigation so far.

I am saying to the Minister that it is not a matter of mitigation in part; it is mitigation in full. If he cannot convince London to abolish it, he should mitigate in full, for not just existing tenants but future tenants. That is the point that I am making to the Minister. Given that the bedroom tax arguably costs more financially than it saves and that it is now politically more bother for London than it is worth, this is the moment to strike it down. That is what the Minister should have been doing since February, when I and others outlined to him a strategy for dealing with that issue at an Executive level and at a Government to Government level, given the fact that DWP has the measure of the DUP and DSD on the matter. It is not any longer a matter of mitigation for existing tenants. It is a matter of mitigation for all tenants. It should be one of the templates against which we judge whether that is going to be achieved.

More than that, our Finance Minister should be sitting down with John Swinney and the Welsh Finance Minister so that they can go to London and say collectively what the Scottish Government have already said: if you are not prepared to give us sufficient discretionary funds to mitigate the bedroom tax in full, we will, on a pound-for-pound basis, compensate those tenants who have to pay for it.

That is the second thing that I am saying to the Minister. We in Northern Ireland should say that we will mitigate the bedroom tax for each and every tenant on a pound-for-pound basis. We should seek from London that approach, which it has apparently agreed with the Scottish Government and which, as I understand it, the Scottish Government intend to implement over the next period. More than that, all three Finance Ministers should now go to London and say that, because the costs may be greater than the savings and because the proposal has politically run out of steam, now is the time to strike it down. Think laterally and imaginatively. Do not just do the bidding of the London Government on the matter.

Yesterday, the Finance Minister made a number of comments at the end of his contribution that touched on welfare. I want to go back to those comments, because they were significant and could be game-changing if you were to draw a conclusion from the Minister. The Minister said:

"we stand to lose over 1,400 jobs at service centres in Belfast and Londonderry, as DWP, I am certain, will relocate that work if we fail to make progress on welfare reform."
— [Official Report, Vol 96, No 1, p69, col 2].

I want the Minister to confirm to the House that that is his view and why that is his view. Who said that to him? When did they say it to him? Where did they say it to him, and did they put it in writing? Those are very severe words that carry a very severe threat, and they were said unambiguously by the Finance Minister, without any doubt or any lack of conviction. The Finance Minister told the House that there are 1,400 jobs that, to use his words, "we stand to lose" and that he was "certain" that those jobs will be relocated if:

"we fail to make progress on welfare reform."

That is a very serious matter to state with such a lack of ambiguity and such certainty. I ask the Finance Minister — I will give way — to confirm to the House who said that, where it

was said, in what terms it was said and whether it was put in writing.

6.00 pm

I know a bit about this because, when I was in DSD, we fought to get more back-office social security jobs in Northern Ireland. We won that argument because of our cost base, our service delivery, the quality of our staff and the efficiency of our response. Those were standards against which DWP allocated work to Northern Ireland, and it was done very successfully and against very proper standards. We need to know whether those standards have been thrown out the window and whether DWP is now saying that the cost base, the service delivery, the quality of our staff and the efficiency of the response by our social security staff are not relevant and that you will lose your jobs if you do not do welfare reform. From what the Minister said yesterday, I can only draw the conclusion that that is what London is saying. If that is what it is saying, that is arbitrary government. That offends against due process and is bad practice. It is legally questionable that work that is awarded against proper standards to a devolved Administration is then somehow overturned on the whim of a DWP Minister who says that, if you do not do welfare reform, you do not get the work. We need some clarity today, given the unambiguous nature of what was said in the House yesterday. I look forward to that reply when the Minister responds because he did not take the opportunity of my offer to give way.

When the Minister was summing up yesterday, he said that there were serious concerns in Northern Ireland about our ability to deliver welfare if we did not do London welfare, given the IT impact. He was right to make that point. As I understand it, it is not conceivable and not financially sustainable that we would create our own IT system, given the costs involved, so the Minister made a good point. However, a point that he did not make, and the reason why he should be going to the Executive to make arguments to go to London with, is that the IT system in London is failing anyway, and evidence is growing about how it is failing.

Let us go through the timeline. In November 2010, a welfare White Paper was published. In January 2011, the project's design-and-build phase commenced. In mid-2012, following concerns that had been raised by a number of third parties, Iain Duncan Smith sent in what he referred to as an "emergency red team", revealing later:

"I was concerned that the relationship between the security and the online aspects wasn't going to work."

In February 2013, the Major Projects Authority (MPA) in Britain did a review that expressed serious concerns about DWP having no detailed blueprint and transition plan for universal credit. In response, the head of the MPA was asked to conduct a 13-week reset between February and May 2013, which was not made public until September. So, a situation was developing whereby, on the IT and implementation side, questions began to be raised about the viability of the IT system and other processes on universal credit.

Look at what has happened since last summer. In September 2013, the National Audit Office released a report that stated that universal credit was beset by:

"weak management, ineffective control and poor governance."

It revealed that Ministers had already written off £34 million on failed IT programmes and that the Department might be forced to delay a national launch beyond 2017. In November, a London newspaper revealed that Ministers had been presented with a radical plan to restart universal credit and write off work that had cost £119 million over the past three years.

In January 2014, minutes of a Whitehall meeting revealed that friction between DWP and the Cabinet Office was causing high-level risks to the delivery of the programme. A Cabinet Office elite team pulled out of the project, leaving DWP urgently searching for new IT specialists. In May 2014, the true ramifications of the Major Projects Authority reset emerged when it revealed that universal credit is now considered to be a brand new project. That was last month.

The point of all of that is as follows. We are being asked to buy a pig in a poke, because, for all the ambition of universal credit to make work pay, which is a proper ambition, universal credit is falling on its face because of the difficulties of trying to create a system that, on a rolling real-time basis, can assess people's income against their need for benefit. That is what has happened.

The Audit Office report and the MPA commentary tell us that, two or three years after the welfare universal credit programme began to be deployed, it is still only the pathfinder areas that administer universal credit. The number of people is still measured in the low

thousands, and it deals only with the easiest claimants — people who are, by and large, single, childless, unmarried or unemployed. So we are being asked by the Minister and by others in the House to endorse universal credit when, for the only time in the MPA's history, it said that a programme's delivery was in such jeopardy that it had to be reset. Yet we are being told that we must accept this imposition.

My question to the Minister is simply this: if it is the case that the implementation of universal credit has slowed so much in Britain, if the full roll-out of universal credit is moving to 2016-17 in Britain, and if, only last month, the MPA warned the Government about the IT concerns in the deployment of universal credit, why are we in a rush to do welfare reform legislation? Why is it that when London tells us how high we have to jump on welfare, we jump as high as it wants? That is the only conclusion to draw. You and your colleagues in the Executive are asking us to accept welfare reform legislation when its deployment in Britain is, in many respects, falling in on itself. Given the serious concerns articulated in places of great authority, I ask the Minister to use this opportunity to tell London, "We note where you are. You should suspend the penalties being imposed." Between now and when a moment arises when we have to introduce welfare reform, if that moment arises, let us negotiate further to get it right.

I say to the Minister that, in the Budget debate on 24 February, I asked him to think about a number of projects. To date, I have not heard a reply in respect of those. The first was this: if it was feasible to negotiate at an Executive level for the Presbyterian Mutual Society, and if it is necessary to negotiate across Departments at an Executive level in respect of corporation tax, why has the opportunity not been taken to ask London to negotiate at an Executive level when it comes to welfare reform? If the issues of corporation tax and the Presbyterian Mutual Society are so central to the lives and experience of our citizens and communities, as the Finance Minister and the person who comes here and threatens us with Treasury penalties, why are you not saying to the Executive, "Let's go and have a further discussion with London, at an Executive level"? Use the template of corporation tax and the Presbyterian Mutual Society to say that to London, on the basis of the Scottish experience and the warnings about IT problems in London in deploying universal credit.

Why are you not taking the opportunity to have another conversation? If your colleague Mr Weir was right when he said that they do not

like the impact of welfare reform on so many citizens in Northern Ireland — if that is correct — why not have a further roll of the dice? Why not escalate the negotiation with London to the Executive level as opposed to leaving it at DSD level, where, as I outlined, DWP has sometimes indicated that it does not think that there is much fight over there? Why do you not, just on the basis of good governance and hard politics, say, "Let's take this opportunity to drive home the experience of Scotland, and that of London in the collapse of IT around universal credit"?

I also asked the Finance Minister to meet an alliance of anti-poverty groups in Northern Ireland. I do not know whether that opportunity has been taken up. He has a very busy diary. The reason why I asked —

Mr Hamilton: No invitation.

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

Mr Hamilton: I cannot accept an invitation that I did not get.

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

Mr Attwood: I am not surprised. I read into the record the commentary from a range of anti-poverty groups in Northern Ireland. Among other things, they rely on information published on the OFMDFM website about child poverty in Northern Ireland. A report commissioned by the highly reputable Institute for Fiscal Studies said, as far as I can recall, that rather than having child poverty down at 10% by 2020, it would be, in real and absolute terms, up at 31% and 38%.

I do not know about you, Minister, but I found the argument that is up on the OFMDFM website and the lobby from anti-poverty groups so compelling that I would not wait for an invitation. I would go and get the information. I ask you, again, to go and take up that opportunity because, if it is published officially on our government website about where we are going on child poverty, and mindful of what came out in Britain yesterday about where it is going with child poverty, I think that that would bring a sense of reality to some of this debate. It would galvanise people to go and have the conversation with London that we have long argued needs to be had to ensure that there is the potential for fresh light to be focused on the approach of DWP and Treasury. I ask the Minister to take that forward.

Before I move on to one or two final matters, I will say this. We have argued for that approach in the new talks process that, we hope, is about to commence. We have argued that not only should we have a further conversation around the three issues in the Haass talks but there should be parallel negotiations in respect of the National Crime Agency and welfare. We argued for that because the view of the SDLP is that, given the character of politics and where our citizens and communities are at the moment and given the sense of disillusionment, alienation and despair, we need a paradigm shift to rectify all that. That shift is around the Haass issues, the NCA, welfare and all the other unresolved issues at the Executive table that Members have spoke about. If we need a paradigm shift, its character needs to incorporate welfare. I trust that the Minister will, on this occasion, take forward some of the opportunities that were mentioned.

6.15 pm

I have a number of questions for the Minister. I do not expect him to be able to answer them all, but I ask that he might get officials to respond in the fullness of time. Firstly, I concur with Mr Ramsey's comments about the north-west and the issue of Magee. In the Budget debates in February, Mr Ramsey and I, and, I think, other people, spoke about the strategic imperative of securing the 10,000 places at the Magee campus. I support Mr Ramsey in making that call again today.

In understanding that issue, Minister, it needs to be understood that, certainly from my experience over the past four months going around Northern Ireland, especially in parts of Belfast, the north-west, Fermanagh, Strabane and Omagh, there is a sense of abandonment and anger. We as a political constituency have to recognise that in a lot of local constituencies that is the sense of things, that when it comes to government and Belfast, there has been abandonment and there is a growing sense of anger.

You can sense that up in Derry when it comes to the issue of Magee. You can sense that in Fermanagh when it comes to jobs and the roll-out of broadband. You can certainly sense it in Omagh, where the chamber of commerce told me that it had no sense of recovery coming across as far as Omagh, whatever might be happening in eastern parts of Northern Ireland.

We have a responsibility, Minister, to recognise that there is that sense of abandonment and anger. How do you respond to it? You must respond by having, as a strategic outcome in

the budgetary period coming up, the argument and resources for the 9,000 or 10,000 places at Magee. However, that would be only an expression and representative of a subregional strategy. Whilst this is somewhat outwith the Minister's responsibility, the decisions about resourcing, especially in the Budget period 2015-16, and more generally in the subsequent Budget period, are the strategic questions that need to be interrogated in the next year or two in order to have the right answers in 2015-16 and 2016-17.

I am asking him again, as I asked him on that occasion in February, to deploy his efforts and wisdom to ensure that there is a subregional strategy when it comes to Invest NI and other investment in Northern Ireland. That sense of abandonment and anger that is felt in many parts of the community needs a political response, which is to have a subregional strategy for investment.

It is not just about Magee. It is about areas of Belfast that do not benefit from investment in the way that the corridor between Queen's and Titanic clearly does. I ask the Minister to have that approach at the heart of his thinking and decision-making over the next two years.

Why do we still have three economic units in government: in DFP, DETI and OFMDFM? My sense of things is that too many cooks spoil the broth, and some of that effort and the money around it is not well deployed. So why, six years after the SDLP raised the issue, do we still have three economic units in government?

Why, three years after the Budget, are we investing, as I heard earlier, £43 million in an asset management strategy? What is the rationale and the resource requirement for investing £43 million in an asset management strategy to see how we dispose of public sector accommodation? There may be a very good argument for doing so. If so, I look forward to hearing it, or at least reading it in Hansard, as I may not hear it in person —

Mr Hamilton: I have to listen to you.

Mr Attwood: Sorry?

Mr Hamilton: You may as well stay around for the answer.

Mr Attwood: That is the job of a Minister. I never once complained about any Member speaking to me during a debate. I am a bit surprised that the Minister —

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Attwood: It is the duty of a Minister to listen, even if you do not like it, and clearly the Minister does not.

Why do we not have any progress on the issue with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, which is still the most profitable organisation in the Northern Ireland economy and is still making one third of gross profit on annual turnover? Why have we not had any material progress in respect of the Harbour Commissioners, its assets and its reserves in a way that could better help the workings of government in the public interest?

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: I think it was about two years ago that there were proposals to merge DEL's functions with the Department of Education and/or DETI. Those proposals seemed to fall by the wayside. There was also a review of the Assembly and its membership, which was prioritised for December 2011, and that has fallen by the wayside. Those are just two examples that come to mind of failure in the delivery of promises.

Mr Attwood: With the Harbour Commissioners, there seemed to be unanimity around the Executive table — at least I thought that there was unanimity — that the issue with the organisation, its income and reserves needed to be dealt with. I am inquiring where the issue is three or four years after it was first raised, when there appeared to be unanimity about an approach that might be taken.

Where are Departments in respect of the government commitment to 500 placements? Whether they were in Steps to Work or other placements in Departments, there were meant to be 500 placements. Where are they, given that DOE has led the way?

Where are we in respect of further moneys for heritage-led development? In the October monitoring round, the Minister allocated £4 million to heritage-led development, which was a strategic and worthwhile investment. Does the Minister anticipate further moneys being released for heritage-led development? Does he think, without telling the Environment Minister how to do his job, that heritage-led

development might become part of the baseline in the next full budgetary round?

Finally, Minister, could you give us some information about where we are in respect of the 2015-16 budgetary cycle and where we are with the budgetary cycle for the years thereafter? I can only imagine that the Treasury and the people whom you and your officials deal with in the Treasury are in discussions about the budgetary situation post 2016, given that the Chancellor has said that he anticipates £25 billion more of cuts, £12 billion of which will be in welfare. At the time of a Budget Bill, it would be useful to get his thinking on what he anticipates might be the case, in the 2015-16 Budget round and in the budgetary CSR thereafter.

Mrs Dobson: The Budget (No. 2) Bill will give effect to the 2014-15 Northern Ireland Main Estimates, and the health and well-being of the community generally, particularly the most vulnerable in our society, should be catered for in any Budget agreed in the Assembly.

I wish to highlight the inadequacy of the health settlement in the Budget. Some £2.117 billion of resources were approved on account for Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the earlier Budget Bill. This Bill would authorise a further £2.347 billion, giving a total of £4.464 billion of resources for the Department of Health. Whilst we all must recognise that that is a huge amount, it is clear that it is insufficient to meet the needs of providing safe and sustainable healthcare to the local community.

Why do I say that, Mr Speaker? The facts show that most health costs occur when we are very young and when we are older. We do not need study after study to show us what we already know: Northern Ireland's population is increasingly ageing. If we are to provide a top-class health service and look after those who have worked all their lives and need help and care, it is beholden on the House to prepare our Budget to meet demand. We have the statistics. We know the facts. However, when we look at the 2011 settlement for Health, we see that it is totally devoid of any plan to prepare for the future. It has been said many times, inside and outside the House, that there is a crisis in the health service. Those are issues for debate. However, when the reality of poor, failing or delayed healthcare is presented to families who have worked hard all their lives, it really does bring home to people the problems that we have today.

My colleague Michael McGimpsey, the former Health Minister, warned of the growing funding

gap as a result of the 2011-15 Budget settlement. I will give some examples. At the end of March this year, the total number of people waiting for a first outpatient appointment had risen by over 27,000, or 27.4%. The number of patients waiting longer than 15 weeks for an appointment had also risen, from 5,573 in March 2013 to 19,173 at the end of March this year: a 344% rise.

Indeed, during the first three months of the year, Craigavon Area Hospital, which I know has one of the best records of any hospital, dipped below 70% of patients being admitted or treated within four hours. I remind Members that the NHS target is 95% and that, overall in Northern Ireland, we achieved 70.5% in March this year. The difference is that, as Minister, Michael McGimpsey ensured that in-year monitoring could cope with changes. I note that, last year, despite over £100 million from in-year monitoring — a record amount — the Health Department estimated a deficit of £14 million. Three years on, the Department and the Minister are now warning that they need an additional £160 million to maintain services. In a letter to the Health Committee dated 29 April, the Minister said that, without that level of additional funding, we face cuts to services or charges for health. I note from his letter that the Minister described that as an unresolved funding gap. He goes on to say:

"In light of the scale of the financial pressures facing DHSSPS in 2014/15, it is clear that they cannot be resolved entirely within the Department's existing resources."

Those existing resources are a result of the 2011 Budget settlement, which we on these Benches opposed. The Minister then goes further in his letter. He lays out, as he sees it, the five implications if that unresolved funding gap is not plugged: increased savings across the health service, although he admits that the scope is narrow; imposing charges on patients, including the possibility of ending free prescription charges, which raises many more questions than it answers and, indeed, would be contrary to the Minister's party's own canvassing guidelines at the recent election, which describe free prescriptions as a "Good decision" of the Assembly; imposing pay constraints on health service staff, which could further increase pressures on already hard-working front line staff; reducing services; or providing additional recurrent resources to the Department.

All of this is to be achieved without compromising the safety and sustainability of service. That is an incredibly difficult, if not

impossible, tightrope act for the Minister to perform.

6.30 pm

Three years on, it is clear that there are health pressures exceeding the 2011-15 Budget settlement and evidence that this Budget contains an inadequate health settlement. Surely we should fix the Budget, such is the scale of the problem. The track record proves that in-year monitoring cannot be relied on. What a way to run a health service; what a way to organise a Budget. In all, it is a DUP fail to prepare, prepare to fail approach to our health service. The 2011 settlement was short-sighted because it failed to allocate the funds that were necessary to support young and old alike, and it has failed the people of Northern Ireland.

Perhaps, in his summing-up, the Minister will inform the House whether he will carry out what his predecessor Sammy Wilson MLA said he would do in his final statement on the 2011-15 Budget on 4 March 2011:

"in the event that it" —

the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) —

"concludes that additional funding is needed and, indeed, required, I will happily bring proposals back to the Executive to top-slice all Departments to provide the established level of funding." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 62, p419, col 2].

The Minister's clarification on this statement would be very welcome.

Our health service is in crisis, and I remain to be convinced that £160 million is nearly enough to bring the service back to full health. The Health Minister has received his iceberg warning since 2011. A steady-as-you-go approach when in stormy waters is not what you expect to hear from the captain of the Titanic. It is now beholden on the Finance Minister to steer the Health Department to calmer waters before we see yet more hard-working families fail to receive the care and attention they have worked all their lives to pay for and have the right to receive.

Mr McNarry: It has been a far-reaching and, at times, far-stretched debate. Having sat through much of it for two days, I wonder which party, out of the five Executive parties, actually supports this Budget. Indeed, one would ask this question: why are some staying in the

Executive if their opinions of the Budget as transmitted here yesterday and today are so low?

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

This event, the most important in the calendar year, is close to becoming a ritual rather than the inspirational, visionary, confidence-building debate it should be. It is a debate of stutter, punctuated with the "If onlys" and the "What might have beens" — a doing of one's best in trying circumstances — and it all has been caused by other or outside influences. It has been a nauseating blame game with, it seems, no self-inflicted or party-political stunts.

Of course, the Minister is doing his best. His presentation demonstrates his obvious skill in allocations, and yet, as this day has gone on, it is abundantly clear that the easy come, easy go attitudes of the spending Ministers remains entrenched in their protectionism, self-centred on a financial carve-up of individual priorities, not, as one would expect it should be, a focus on the corporate priorities and spending policies for the most urgent and needy areas in government.

Yet, in the midst of it all, one issue drawn to my attention indicates this cavalier attitude in, I suspect, all Departments, but is clearly shown by the example of the Department for Regional Development. The example illustrates that DRD has loads of money to throw away or, in this case, give away. I refer to the proposal supported, I am reliably informed, by all parties and Ministers in the Executive: to give away over 350 off-street car parks. Millions of pounds' worth of land assets across the country and their revenue-earning car-parking charges are to be handed over free of charge to the super-councils with no conditions, allowing those councils to flog them off if they so wish, because, as one departmental official told me, they can do what they like with the car parks. There we have an example that illustrates that easy come, easy go attitude. Unfortunately, we have come to expect it from too many Ministers.

The Finance Minister has said that he was proposing a 1.5% cut across all Departments because of a failure of the Executive to implement welfare reform legislation passed by Parliament on 1 March. Let me underscore the wording "failure of the Executive": if the five-party coalition cannot agree, it is a corporate failure and not down simply to the blocking veto of one or two parties.

The Minister is also reported as saying that £105 million will have to come off departmental

spending. If that happened on a simple pro rata basis, the Department of Health would lose between £40 million and £50 million, the Department of Education would lose around £20 million and DETI would lose between £2 million and £3 million. That overall loss has been equated to 2,500 nurses or 2,100 teachers. Of course, neither 2,500 nurses nor 2,100 teachers would be dumped on the streets. However, in times when it is clear — we hear this almost daily — that medical staff are needed, where is the provision for recruitment?

Given that yesterday's Estimates debate indicated that it is to be presumed — let me assume that I am right to presume — that the overall £105 million that is spoken of has already been taken off the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates. It is gone. It is irretrievable, lost and cut from the budgets. In his absence, I ask that we have a categorical assurance from the Finance Minister that health funding is ring-fenced. Surely that, at least, would make sense to the public and be a welcome statement of where some of the Executive's priorities lie.

Clearly, an overall reduction of £105 million prompts us to discuss the matter intelligently and in the informed way that is relative to a Budget. We need to know about the different models for implementing that reduction that are being discussed at the Executive table. I presume that an agreement to alter significantly the Budget as it stands has been discussed. I would like the Minister to confirm that it is the case that alternatives have been discussed, because I suspect that such discussions have produced models to cope with the reductions. Let us be pretty blunt about this: we are calling them reductions, and they are everybody else's fault, but what we are talking about in this category are cuts caused by Sinn Féin, the SDLP and no one else. Therefore, we need to know about all the potential impacts. We need to have this spelt out: when does crunch time actually mean crunching the numbers?

Quite recently, I publicly suggested that only the Departments whose Minister refused to implement welfare reform should be affected. I hold to that because it is only fair that the Ministers blocking welfare reform in Northern Ireland should pay the price for their folly and be publicly denounced for doing so by the Assembly, not with silly motions but with outright condemnation of Sinn Féin. That party has been caught again in the headlights because of its headline-grabbing policies about attempting to unify Ireland against cuts when, here in the United Kingdom, it is instrumental in

causing cuts. Cuts should not fall on the Departments whose Minister is willing to progress the welfare reform demands, but the cutters — DARD, DCAL and the Department of Education — should pay. That also includes the DOE, which is run by the SDLP, because it is also adopting an unrealistic approach to welfare reform. As usual, the SDLP is fence sitting and prevaricating over health funding while being willing to punish patients.

Obviously, there would have to be protections. The single farm payment needs to be protected. Clearly, no school budget should be hit. However, what principally needs to be hit are the costs of bureaucracy — the cost that we cannot handle or get our heads around. Should the Culture Department, for instance, be abolished or merged with another Department? As was said previously, why is the Department for Employment and Learning still afloat, when, ages ago, agreement to remove it seemed likely? These are Poundstretcher Departments, where the pound gives no real value in return. Perhaps this failure to live within a budget — that is what it could be — presents us with an opportunity to trim down and restructure our Departments.

London may be showing signs of economic recovery, and good luck to it. We will all benefit from that. However, although we are seeing improvements here, we are a long way from the growth that we require to meet people's expectations and deliver good government. The issues from last week, last month and last year about individual prosperity, which we know about from our constituents, in our homes and from our families, remain by and large the same because costs are not reducing, services are not improving and some are worsening, pay is not increasing and people are still feeling the pain.

I believe that the Minister of Finance understands the situation. However, the question out there — perhaps it is unfair to ask him — is this: although he understands it, are all his ministerial colleagues on the same message? Yesterday, we heard of contingencies held in the Education Department. Can you believe it? I now know what Minister O'Dowd meant, when, after being challenged by me, he spoke of back-pocket money. He keeps the contingency in his back pocket. No one else knows how it got there. What is the position of this Department on holding contingencies? How is it that any Department can hold on to cash as a contingency when the surplus cash, as I understand it, should have been returned

whence it came and recycled for all to benefit from?

6.45 pm

I want to hear the Finance Minister's view on contingencies held in a spending Department, not for the purpose for which it was originally given but for a purpose decided, it must be said, unilaterally — to hell with everybody else — by the Education Minister in his Department. Is the practice that I describe authorised by the Executive? Worse still, could it be or is it carried out by any other Ministers? It is shambolic if a Department holds in its back pocket, so to speak, contingency money for its own purpose and own use. It is despicable, and the House needs to know what the situation is.

I believe that the Finance Minister and the Health Minister have the toughest jobs in this place. The Finance Minister needs, quite clearly, the support of all Ministers, and might I suggest that — he is young enough to do it — he needs to crack a few heads, not just on policy issues but on securing value for money and, more importantly, distributing that money for priorities? He is in for a rough time, but he has grown well into the job, and I wish him well over the next few months, especially when he needs his Ministers.

Mr I McCrea: I agree with many of Mr McNarry's comments. He made a number of the points that I intended to make. It is not necessarily a bad thing, given that we have agreed on many of the issues.

People can bury their head in the sand on welfare reform and expect that it will go away. Mr Attwood went on and on and on and on and on and on and kept going on, but he eventually got to the point and said that the penalties should be suspended. His view has slightly changed from the one that he took during a previous Budget debate, and it is important to put his words on record once again:

"I want to put the SDLP's point of view on the record. If a penalty of £5 million a month is imposed by the Treasury arising from the failure to bring the Welfare Reform Bill back to the Chamber, that is a price that should be paid." — [Official Report, Vol 93, No 3, p14, col 1].

I am not so sure that the people in Northern Ireland picked up on that. I am not sure that he even had it in his European election manifesto that he was content for the block grant in Northern Ireland to continue to be penalised at

£5 million a month. The Minister has declared the amounts involved: it was around £13 million last year and will amount to over £100 million as this year goes on. I have to be honest and say that I am disappointed that he has left, because I would have been happy to take an intervention from him, maybe to explain how he has gone from the point of view that it is definitely a penalty worth paying to asking for the penalties to be suspended.

He is not here, and, unfortunately, we will, no doubt, hear from him in the future, and he will maybe answer that point. It is unfortunate that there is no one here from the Sinn Féin Benches because the reality is that they can bury their heads too. It is not going to go away. The only way that they are going to get this sorted is to sit round the table, thrash it out and get it sorted once and for all.

We can look at all the negatives of all the aspects of the Budget. I had intended to refer to the good aspects of the Budget, but if I do that I will go against the grain in respect of what everybody has said. However, it is worth referring to the point that, in my constituency of Mid Ulster — I see Mr McGlone across the Chamber — we have not done too badly over the years in respect of capital funding that has been put in to the constituency. It is probably more so in the education sector where St Pius X College, Sperrin Integrated College, Magherafelt High School, Magherafelt Primary School and Magherafelt Nursery School have all had newbuilds. Mind you, he and I and others will continue to fight the good fight for the Rainey Endowed School. Maybe, at some point, we will get that.

It is also worth pointing out the funding that has been finally approved. On behalf of the people of Mid Ulster, and more so Magherafelt, I want to put on record that we are getting our Magherafelt bypass at a cost of around £40 million. That is a good news story out of the funding and the Budget allocations for my constituency.

It would be remiss of me not to mention Desertcreat College. It is in a bit of a mess, but let us hope that things move forward. I have heard that other constituency MLAs, and I am not necessarily pointing the finger at any in my own party, have been jumping on the bandwagon suggesting that the college should be placed elsewhere. I am not so sure that I agree with that. In fact, the wording that I have here is "they can get lost". I am glad that the Justice Minister is still on board. I hope that the other Departments involved are on board and we can get it built once and for all.

It is important that we move the Budget process forward. Given that Mr Attwood is not here, he will not divide the House, so maybe that is a good news thing. I support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: My notes say "thanks" to Members. I am not sure whether that is appropriate or not, but I thank the Members who, at least, have stayed to the end of the debate. There may be fewer still as I read through all the notes that I have made. Mr Maginness is nodding very enthusiastically, which suggests that he will be one of the first out of the door. In all seriousness, I thank the Members who contributed and, particularly, thank Chairs and Deputy Chairs who contributed during yesterday's debate and today's Second Stage debate on the Budget (No. 2) Bill. It is very useful for me, as Finance Minister, to hear the views of the respective Committees and sometimes even find out things that I did not know and find out a little bit more about their views on the important financial and economic issues that face this Administration.

I have noted down many of the issues raised by Members. I do not think that I will get through all the issues that have been raised or we could be here very late this evening, but I will endeavour to respond to as many as possible in my closing comments. I will try to do it in sequential order as people spoke.

Mr McKay spoke first on behalf of the Committee before speaking in a personal capacity. I thank him and the Committee for their work in not only scrutinising my Department's budget but playing that overall, overarching oversight role for the entire Budget and, particularly, for granting accelerated passage for the Bill. As the House knows, without accelerated passage, the Bill would not be through in time, and there would be serious issues in terms of legislative cover for our Departments to spend in the rest of the year.

Mr McKay raised a number of issues, and I want to come to one in particular, which he has raised before. That is the issue of air connectivity. He reminded us this morning that he had come from a breakfast that was hosted by Belfast City Airport. When he said he had come from breakfast, it was fairly current. Breakfast had only been a couple of hours beforehand. It is now closer to supertime, as I get around to addressing the points that he said were raised at that breakfast.

Air connectivity is an issue that I am, of course, interested in, and the Enterprise Minister and I

initiated an air connectivity study, which is due to report by the summer of this year. I come at this issue from the simple, basic point of view, which is that, as Westminster is responsible for causing the problem — and I accept that there is a problem — why should Northern Ireland be asked to pay the price? And a price would have to be paid. It would be approximately £60 million initially, rising very rapidly, like an aircraft taking off, to £90 million annually. That is the price that would have to be paid by this Administration.

It would mean £90 million worth of reductions in spending on public services, and that would be on top of other taxes that we have already devolved, including long-haul APD, and other taxes that we desire to have devolved to this Administration, including corporation tax, which would, of course, be significantly higher in price than £90 million. The figure of £90 million is, of course, close to the cost of welfare reform, a topic that I will come to in greater substance later. So, even in terms of affordability, it is not easy to devolve something that costs £90 million when we are losing more than £90 million this year as a result of the penalties for non-compliance with welfare reform.

I have laid out consistently, in this House and elsewhere, the fact that I am not against devolving more tax-varying powers to the Assembly, but for me a couple of tests must be met, and APD has to be judged against them. They must have clearly defined economic or social benefits and they must be affordable. We can take a decision that £90 million is affordable if we are prepared to take the commensurate reductions in public services as a result of that. Whether there are defined economic and social benefits is something that, I hope, the air connectivity study will look at in detail.

There are about five issues that I think have to be considered in respect of air connectivity. If we eliminate air passenger duty, there is no guarantee that the price reduction will then be passed on to customers. There is little evidence that that would be the case, and probably, in a lot of cases, it would be used to make routes that are borderline profitable or more profitable. There is no guarantee of new routes, then, because of that.

I take on board the points that Mr McKay made that there are certain routes to hub airports, the likes of Frankfurt, Berlin, Amsterdam or Paris, from which there is better conductivity, particularly into the Middle East and the Far East. It would be good to attract more of those routes; I want to see more of them attracted. I

know that, even without having air passenger duty for short-haul flights devolved, the Enterprise Minister is keenly and actively involved in trying to attract more of those routes. I know that she has been involved in that in person over the last number of weeks. An argument could be mounted for doing something to reduce APD to attract those sorts of good routes. Other routes — not bad routes, because they are the sort of routes that take people like me and others on summer holidays — do not have the same easily-defined economic benefit that routes to somewhere like Berlin, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, Paris or other airports in central Europe might bring to Northern Ireland.

There are also questions for the airports themselves about what they are doing to attract new routes. If you look at the long-haul APD issue as an example, you will note that that power has now been devolved for close to two years. Unfortunately, not a single additional route has been added as a result of it. In my view, this weapon or tool has been handed, principally in this case to our international airport, to go out to try to attract other airlines into Northern Ireland, and it has not done that so far. I appreciate that it is making efforts in that regard, but the point is that it shows that having no tax, in and of itself, does not attract new airlines and new routes to Northern Ireland. There are other factors at play.

One of those is what the airlines themselves could be doing about their price structure. I have had conversations with at least one airline about its price structure. Whilst it would describe the Northern Ireland situation as unique, it is not prepared to price flights in Northern Ireland in a unique way. They keep customers in Northern Ireland on a UK pricing structure, which is different from the Irish pricing structure. That means that it is more attractive for people to drive to Dublin to fly to Heathrow to connect to somewhere else in the world instead of going from Belfast to Heathrow to do the same.

There is work that not just our airports but the airlines could do. If they recognise that Northern Ireland's air connectivity situation is unique, our airlines could be doing things with their pricing structure to make it more attractive for people to fly out of Belfast City Airport, Belfast International Airport or City of Derry Airport.

7.00 pm

I turn to Paul Girvan — he is escaping; he has run away at the very mention of his name. He

made many points, but he dwelt, as did Mr Weir later, on the issue of rates and what we, as an Executive, have done over the last seven years to assist businesses in Northern Ireland through some very difficult times. We have tried to help them in probably the best way that we can through trying to soften the blow of rates.

There are quite a number of positive things that we, as an Executive, have done and continue to do, including the introduction of the small business rates relief scheme. That scheme has been extended not once but twice, to the extent now where over half of all business properties in Northern Ireland are getting at least 20% off their rates bills. Industrial derating was something that the then Finance Minister, and now First Minister, ensured remained in place. Many manufacturing firms have to pay rates for only 30% of their total liability. That has ensured that over £300 million has been kept in the coffers of many local firms, which has allowed them to thrive over the last number of years.

The business regional rate has been frozen in real terms throughout this Budget period. That has given a degree of certainty to many local businesses. I am very pleased to report that more than 250 new shops have opened across Northern Ireland as a result of the introduction of the empty premises relief.

It is not just through business rates that we have offered assistance. Domestic ratepayers in Northern Ireland pay the lowest household taxes in the whole of the UK. That ensures that more money is kept in people's pockets for them to spend or to ensure that they can offset some of the rising costs of living that many people across Northern Ireland have experienced. Whether it is small business rates relief, industrial derating, freezing the regional rate, introducing empty premises relief or having the lowest household taxes in the whole of the UK, it is a record that we are justifiably proud of.

Dominic Bradley, who has returned to the Chamber, re-rehearsed many of the issues that he rehearsed yesterday during the Estimates debate, but Members raising the same issue time and again is nothing new in the House in these types of debates. He dwelt for a time on his and his party's belief that a one-year Budget process would be better. As I said to him yesterday, I appreciate the point and understand where he is coming from, particularly having greater transparency and openness and having greater involvement of the House in the Budget. If you were in entirely

different political circumstances, that might be something to which we would aspire. However, as Mr Weir pointed out, it is interesting that the last Labour Administration moved to multi-annual Budgets and spending rounds to give a degree of certainty. That is the most important point, particularly in respect of capital. If you have three- or four-year Budgets, as we have had in the past — we are in the last year of a four-year Budget — you can give Departments a degree of certainty about expenditure that might not be the case in single-year Budgets. I think that many Members would find that, if we moved to that situation, organisations uncertain about what the next year's Budget was going to mean for them would lobby Members on an ongoing basis. With multi-annual Budgets, at least we can give some certainty to them, even if it is not always good news. But we are not in a position because of the politics of this place and having the problems of a five-party coalition — Westminster has agreed a one-year Budget to get through the election, and it has only two parties in its coalition Government. It is much harder for us to agree one across five parties. Although it may not be a perfect excuse, it is, nonetheless, a valid reason that the time devoted to doing that would be better spent.

Mr Bradley criticised our multi-annual Budget process because, he said, it had no flexibility. I beg to differ with that conclusion. If you take the financial year that has just concluded, 2013-14, and look at the monitoring rounds included in our Budget process precisely in order to allow us to have a degree of flexibility where public money is spent, you will see that, where Departments find that they cannot spend money either on the current or the capital side, it can be recycled and spent elsewhere in order to address pressures in Departments' budgets. In that one year alone, we have been able to recycle over £500 million on resource expenditure and over £280 million in capital. That means that not far off £1 billion of last year's Budget has been moved from one Department to another or from one priority in a Department to another. I would argue that, far from being inflexible, our process of having three monitoring rounds in a year permits flexibility when close to £1 billion can be moved around or within Departments inside a year.

Mr Bradley encouraged me to go back and look again at the proposals that the SDLP put forward in a document that I think was called 'New Priorities in Changing Times', or something like that. No matter how many times I look at that document, the City of Derry airport is still not ours to sell. It does not matter how many times I look at it, that asset does not

transfer from the ownership of Derry City Council to the Executive, so I cannot sell it and raise any revenue for this Assembly, unfortunately. In fact, I struggled to find the document on the party's website. It seems to have mysteriously disappeared.

Mr Bradley and Mr Cree mentioned revenue raising and capital receipts in the Budget. The 2011-15 Budget incorporated £900 million of additional revenue raising, including additional capital receipts. To date, of the £611.4 million that was forecast to the end of the last financial year, 2013-14, I expect that £577.4 million will be realised. When added to expected EU income, that will represent a significant injection of additional funds into the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Bradley also raised issues around tax-varying powers, some of which I have addressed in response to Mr McKay's comments on air passenger duty. However, I remind the Member that the June 2013 'Building a Prosperous and United Community' document includes a commitment between Her Majesty's Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to examine the potential for devolving specific additional fiscal powers over and above corporation tax following the completion of an initial scoping exercise. That is being taken forward by my officials, and the deciding factor will be whether the benefits to the people of Northern Ireland from devolving a tax and moving away from a national system of rates or allowances will be sufficient to clearly outweigh any costs. The recommendations from this analysis should be put to the Northern Ireland Executive and Government Ministers by this autumn.

To conclude on what Mr Bradley said, he also mentioned something positive in passing about recent economic news and job announcements. He was then a little more down in the mouth about our economic prospects. I remind Mr Bradley and the House of some of those recent job announcements: 107 jobs were announced at Spence and Partners; 130 by the Wright Group; 400 by Capita; 241 by Schrader; 333 by Convergys; and 486 by Ernst and Young. Over the last two months, close to 3,000 new jobs have been announced around Northern Ireland.

Invest Northern Ireland reported a record year of business in 2013-14, with over £1 billion of investment and the promotion of 11,000 jobs. That has helped to create thousands of new jobs across Northern Ireland. Although unemployment is still high and causing concern, particularly around youth unemployment, our claimant count has now gone down for 15

consecutive months. Although work is still required, I think that that is something that we should be celebrating as an Executive and an Assembly. Only the doom merchants and doom merchants of the SDLP could see the downside of news like that.

Mr Cree mentioned the office estate. My Department is working in partnership with the asset management unit of the Strategic Investment Board to transform the management of the Northern Ireland central government office estate in order to improve asset management and increase efficiencies in the strategic use of land and property assets.

In addition to increased efficiency, that reform will also ensure that the standard of the overall estate is improved.

Mr Attwood, who is, as he promised, absent at this stage, asked why bids of £40 million were being made by my Department specifically for asset management. He can hopefully pick this up in Hansard tomorrow. That is targeted at doing things such as, for example, buying ourselves out of expensive leases and PFI contracts such as the contract for the Invest Northern Ireland headquarters, which we have bought ourselves out of. That then releases resource expenditure savings, which is where the real pressure is moving forward. So, we are using, in an invest-to-save way, capital money, which is, in relative terms, more abundant than resource expenditure, to ensure that over the longer term we make savings on the resource side. It is using capital wisely to save money where money needs to be saved moving forward.

Mr Cree mentioned that £75 million for the Department of Education is included in the Budget. The £75 million given to the Department of Education in 2014-15 is the final-year allocation of a package discussed and agreed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and the Education Minister in January 2012. The first year of that was agreed by the Executive in the January 2011-12 monitoring round, and the subsequent years were confirmed in the allocations agreed by the Executive on 7 November 2012. The rationale for the allocation is to help address pressures on school budgets, protecting front line services as far as possible whilst the Minister of Education moves ahead with implementing strategic reform aimed at creating a more efficient and effective education sector. The Education Minister is confident that his Department will utilise the full £75 million.

Mr Cree mentioned our Hillsborough sites, which, we have established, are the sites gifted to the Assembly as a result of the Hillsborough Castle Agreement and not sites located in Hillsborough, County Down. I will address some specifics in respect of those sites.

A parcel of military housing associated with the St Patrick's Barracks site in Ballymena has already been sold for use as social housing. The remainder of the site was subject to a trawl among public sector organisations in early 2014, which resulted in a number of expressions of interest that are currently being evaluated.

A working group has been established to consider the development and planning options for the St Lucia site in Omagh. I understand that that group has met on several occasions.

A soft market test on the Shackleton Barracks site at Ballykelly concluded on 24 January this year and over 40 expressions of interest were received. Although options are being considered, the site continues to be used for outdoor activities, with motor sport events approved for 6 July and 3 August and a countryside fair planned for August.

I will address a final issue raised by Mr Cree, who has a habit of raising a list of issues. If I fail to address any of them, I am sure that he will pick them up in correspondence or in questions. He referred to the £50 million RRI borrowing for the capital projects being taken forward under Together: Building a United Community and asked why that additional borrowing was required when there was £80 million in the social investment fund last year. To clarify, the £80 million allocated to the social investment fund is profiled across the four-year Budget period. Of that, £15 million of capital funding was available to OFMDFM for that area last year.

Turning to the RRI borrowing available for projects aligned with Together: Building a United Community, I do not see any risk to that funding. Indeed, the First Minister and deputy First Minister are in the process of finalising an additional borrowing arrangement with the UK Government.

I will turn to comments made by Mr Jimmy Spratt in his capacity as Chair of the Regional Development Committee. He is behind me. He mentioned the issue of the transfer of off-street car parks to local councils, which I think Mr McNarry also mentioned, if I am not mistaken.

With respect, I caution the Committee a little and encourage it to consider wider opportunities presented by the transfer of off-street car parks to our new councils. I think I understand the point that the Chair of the Committee made — and, again, I think it was echoed by Mr McNarry — about the transfer of an asset and perhaps the loss of the value of that asset. Car parks, particularly off-street car parks, can present development and regeneration opportunities. Huge-surface car parks in prime redevelopment sites have the opportunity to regenerate our towns and cities if used properly. We have to remember that, whilst we are transferring car parks in this instance, we are transferring responsibilities. We need to be cautious about handcuffing our new councils in respect of the transfer and saying that they cannot sell those assets or use them in a particular way. That could stifle or, indeed, stop regeneration or development opportunities.

7.15 pm

On structural maintenance — an issue that Mr Spratt has raised with me on several occasions in his capacity as Chair — I understand the points that have been made about when money is spent in-year, and, in a perfect world, I would attempt to address that. The issue, of course, is that I do not always have at the start of the year all the money that the Department for Regional Development thinks that it could spend on structural maintenance and road repairs. I also, to be perfectly honest, like previous Finance Ministers, I have relied to an extent on the likes of the Department for Regional Development, which has a very good record of spending money quickly towards the end of the year, and I have given it money that other Departments give up, sometimes unexpectedly.

Whilst I understand the points that have been made about value for money and efficiency, I am concerned that front-loading that expenditure might soak up the capacity that there is in the industry and the sector and that we may not be able to spend all the additional money that becomes available through the in-year monitoring rounds. It is a fine balancing act, but I seek some solace in the fact that the past four years have been record years for expenditure on structural maintenance by the Department for Regional Development. It has spent over £400 million on structural maintenance in the past number of years, even though it has perhaps started off the year with an initial allocation that seemed quite low.

Mr Pat Ramsey raised a range of issues that primarily focused on the Foyle constituency. He asked me a couple of questions that I am going to try to answer. He asked whether they were my responsibility or somebody else's. An answer that it was somebody else's responsibility would be very short, so I will try to give him a slightly more elaborate one.

He asked me about Magee College and its hopes to become a university. The new Magee College teaching block project was included in the initial set of proposals that were submitted to Her Majesty's Treasury under the Together: Building a United Community borrowing proposals that I addressed when dealing with Mr Cree's comments a few moments ago. Unfortunately, that particular project was not agreed by the Treasury for inclusion in the package of shared education and housing projects that were eligible to access the additional borrowing power under the pact. Therefore, that was not a decision taken by my Department but by Her Majesty's Treasury, which felt that that did not tick the box of being a shared education project.

Treasury deemed that there was no clear link between a teaching block and the promotion of a shared society. Of course, it is the ultimate paymaster in that respect, so we have to heed what it says. It also deemed that the wider objective of interaction with schools in disadvantaged areas did not sufficiently contribute to the wider shared society objectives. The final package of projects will be announced once agreement has been reached with the UK Government, and it will be for the Department for Employment and Learning to prioritise the new teaching block at Magee in the first instance and to table bids as appropriate in future Budget and monitoring round exercises. I will, of course, look at those in the same way in which I look at any bids that are put forward to me.

Mr Ramsey also raised the issue of youth unemployment and the surrender of, I think, £1 million in 2013-14. The Minister for Employment and Learning is better placed to give you the minutiae of that situation, but I understand from his Department's monitoring return last year that the uptake for the youth employment scheme in its first year was slower than expected, and that resulted in a surplus provision of £1 million in 2013-14. The Department anticipates that the need for future years' allocation will not be affected by that, and I understand that it will invest £15 million to address youth unemployment in 2014-15.

I now turn to Danny Kinahan, who almost had split sites in his speech. He briefly mentioned the words "shovel-ready". He at least provided a caveat by saying that he knows that I abhor the phrase, but he was right to talk about the greater prioritisation of projects. I know that the Member could not be here for Question Time yesterday, but that issue was raised in response to a question from Stephen Moutray. I have endorsed recommendations from the subgroup of the procurement board that I set up, including the establishment by the Executive of a list of prioritised capital projects. That would, of course, include schools if the Minister of Education wants to get on board with the proposal. I think that it is important to have a list of capital projects across the board — whether in education, health, roads or whatever else — that are warmed up and ready to go should the money arise in-year or in future years. If something like what happened with the A5 were to happen again, that would allow us to spend that money quickly, and on strategically important projects.

That is not to say that we spend our capital money, when it becomes available, on projects that are not important. Every project has an importance and a value, but there are, as you will appreciate, much bigger projects that have wider economic significance for the whole of Northern Ireland, and it is important that we concentrate as much of that money on those strategic priorities as we possibly can.

I agree entirely with Mr Kinahan that there is a need for greater budget transparency across the board, particularly with the Department of Education, an issue that Mr McNarry also raised. It was hoped that this greater transparency would be delivered through the review of financial processes, but that has been held up by the Minister of Education. My predecessor and I have tried to address that by compromising on our position to try to meet the concerns of the Minister of Education only to find that he has a whole new set of concerns. It is a frustrating situation, which is why we are here for a second day debating exactly the same issues four months after they were previously debated. It is unsustainable to continue with financial processes that we inherited from direct rule and that, ironically, are being supported by Sinn Féin Ministers. It is an opportunity for us to show that we can do things and reform things in Northern Ireland.

Whilst I am talking about education, I will address Mr McNarry's points about contingency funds and ignore the fact that he called for an Executive-wide contingency fund to be established roughly five years ago and seems

to have changed his tune a bit. It is not, in my view, good practice to hold surplus funding in a Department, and it should be surrendered to the Executive for reallocation. However, I have to be exceptionally careful about micromanaging other departmental budgets, as tempting as that may be from time to time, and be careful about what exactly is meant by such a fund and the circumstances surrounding its creation. If it is surplus funding, it should be returned to the Executive table for reallocation as quickly as possible.

Mr McCallister spoke about his concerns. He spoke at length and had a bit of a ding-dong with Sinn Féin about corporation tax and welfare reform, which found its way in somehow, as it did to most contributions today. To be fair to him, he is consistent in raising his concerns about corporation tax, although I am still passionately in favour of its devolution to Northern Ireland. Over the last number of months in particular, we have been able to attract new investors to Northern Ireland and to encourage existing investors to expand their investment. Even with all our economic difficulties, we have been able to achieve those successes in the last number of months.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

If, on top of having great skills, good infrastructure and a world-class telecommunications infrastructure, we were able to sell the fact that we have a low corporation tax base, I think that the opportunities to transform our economy would be pretty clear. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's economic advisory group estimates that around 58,000 jobs could be created by 2030 in addition to the jobs that would otherwise be created as a result of devolving and reducing corporation tax. I am still exceptionally positive about it. I am pursuing it vigorously with the Treasury and hope for a positive outcome in the autumn. The concerns that the Member tried to raise are not new and are not issues that have not come across my desk or Minister Wilson's desk when he was in post.

Clearly, there will be a price to pay. I never thought that I would use Alex Maskey's comments to defend this sort of position, but whilst there would be a sizeable cost to pay, clear economic benefits would derive from devolving corporation tax, which would get many thousands of our people back into work. That would help to address the welfare reform situation.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister for giving way. Has there been any assessment of the uptake of the patent box across the UK, geographically or otherwise? If that research has been done, are particular regions benefiting from the 10% corporation tax rate that is attached to the scheme?

Mr Hamilton: I am not aware of any specific analysis of what has happened in Northern Ireland. It is an interesting question to which I might be keen to find an answer.

Many of the tax changes that Her Majesty's Government have brought in over the past number of years, including a likely reduction in the headline rate of corporation tax to 20%, their expansion of capital allowances, the introduction of enterprise zones — we now have our first pilot enterprise zone — and the patent box, which, you are right, allows the payment of corporation tax at a rate of 10% for anything patented and developed here in the United Kingdom, are good initiatives. It is an interesting question, and I will take it up with officials to find out exactly what has happened in Northern Ireland.

The point that Mr McCallister raised about the downside of corporation tax being that we would incur a cost is not new to us. We know that that will be the case. It does not affect this year's Budget, and it will not even affect next year's Budget. Therefore, if a positive decision is taken in the autumn — we hope that it will be, because we made a very good and robust case — that gives us plenty of time to plan for it. However, his point about welfare reform was exactly right: if you throw money back to the Treasury to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds in future years as a result of non-compliance on welfare reform but want, at the same time, to reduce spending in Northern Ireland by hundreds of millions of pounds to pay for corporation tax, it makes my job and the job of the entire Executive incredibly difficult, and it makes the job of the Assembly in agreeing those Budgets incredibly difficult.

I found it hard to reconcile the Member's doubts about corporation tax with a headline on the BBC website from 16 November last year. It was a report on NI21's first party conference — perhaps its last party conference as well — and the headline was "Give Stormont Tax Powers".

Mr McCallister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Let me make the point, and then you can try to come back.

Mr Basil McCrea, still the party leader of NI21, said:

"So I pledge today that NI21 will pursue the devolution of more powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly including, but not restricted to, income tax and stamp duty."

One of the arguments that Mr McCallister threw up against devolving corporation tax was the volatility of taxes, and that, of course, is a reality. I use the word "against", and he can correct me if I am wrong, but yesterday, and more so today, he sounded as though he was against the idea of devolving corporation tax. It is not fully understood in the House that, once you take on those powers, there may be benefits, but there will also be the downside of volatility, and that will affect public spending in a way that the block grant system insulates us from. However, look at the HMRC estimate of income tax raised in Northern Ireland and the change from 2008-09 to 2009-2010. Income tax receipts, according to HMRC figures, went down from £2.746 billion in 2008-09 to £2.350 billion in 2009-2010. NI21 advocated the devolution of income tax, but, in that year alone, the shortfall that the Northern Ireland Executive would have picked up was £396 million, a drop of 14%. There was a fall in stamp duty between 2007-08 and 2008-09, and that figure encapsulates pretty much the economic crisis that we went through in Northern Ireland. Stamp duty/land tax receipts fell from £290 million in 2007-08 to £70 million in 2008-09, a drop of £220 million, which was a 75% reduction in that tax take in a single year. The volatility of corporation tax is a valid point, but NI21's stated public position is that it wants the devolution of income tax and stamp duty and not just those two. Those are two examples of where volatility, which is the argument that the Member puts forward against devolving corporation tax, would have seriously damaged the Northern Ireland budgetary position. I will give way now.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister. Perhaps he will also give us the estimate of what the cost of corporation tax would have been. I am pleased that he accepts that there is volatility in all taxes, particularly corporation tax. That is why Lord Strathclyde, in a recent report for the Scottish Conservatives, said that it should not be devolved. Yesterday, the Minister said that the reason was politically motivated. However, the Calman commission, which was set up to look at the issue in Scotland, reported the same finding: corporation tax is, because of its volatility, a difficult one to devolve. That is why it is an important argument. We have consistently said

that we should have a commission to look at these issues, because we are behind the rest of the country in even having the debate.

7.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: I am happy to compare Scotland with Northern Ireland, Wales with Northern Ireland or anywhere with Northern Ireland, but, if you are going to compare them, you have to compare like with like. If you want to compare them on the issue of corporation tax, you are not comparing like with like; you are comparing apples with oranges.

I reiterate that I would have been incredibly surprised had a Tory commission led by Lord Strathclyde recommended the devolution of corporation tax for Scotland. That is never going to be on the table, certainly in the short term, for political and economic reasons and the reality that there would be of businesses in England transferring to Scotland to avail themselves of lower corporation tax in a way that I do not think they would in Northern Ireland.

One of the reasons why even Calman rejected the devolution of corporation tax in Scotland was that the cost was so much more than it is in Northern Ireland. That is because the economy, particularly the industrial and manufacturing base in Scotland, is infinitely different from that in Northern Ireland. Scotland is the UK average or slightly better, whereas we are, in economic terms, one of the lesser regions in the United Kingdom. The impact of reducing corporation tax in Scotland from 20-odd% to 12.5%, 12% or even 10% is hugely greater than it would be in Northern Ireland. Yes, there is volatility in corporation tax. Even in those years that I quoted, there was a dip in the corporation tax take in Northern Ireland, but it was nowhere near as severe as the dip in stamp duty or income tax, both of which the Member's party advocates. There would not be the same other benefits in having those two powers. Whilst volatility means that there would be a hit to public spending, with corporation tax there are other economic benefits in that people are in work and paying income tax and other things. For income tax alone and not corporation tax, there are not the other spin-off economic benefits. In fact, I can think of very few economic benefits solely from having income tax devolved to Northern Ireland. That is unless you want to radically reduce it, which I do not think the Member would want to do either because of the impact that that would have on public spending.

I will move on to other comments made by Mr McCallister. Mr Wells assured us that he would

not give a long list of projects in his constituency, not least because Mr McCallister seemed to. He wants a newbuild for Down High School, something that I support; a new electricity grid; and more money for high streets and town centres. He wanted the Narrow Water bridge. There was a fairly lengthy list of projects and schemes. I have to say that some of them are meritorious, but he offered nothing as to how I or the Executive should pay for any of them. Yet, he went on to lecture us in the Government on tough decisions, and he went on to lecture others on fiscal responsibility, after giving a long list of projects that he wants to see but no other side of the ledger in how he wanted to pay for that.

Mr McCallister and, indeed, Mrs Overend mentioned the agrifood sector, which has done incredibly well during the downturn and could do better as well into the future. The sector has performed extremely well in economic conditions. As I have said on many occasions, the Agri-Food Strategy Board's 'Going for Growth' development plan has my full support. It will be important to ensure that the ambitions set out in the 'Going for Growth' document are translated into actions by the relevant Ministers to ensure that we exploit the huge potential in Northern Ireland's agrifood sector.

I turn to other comments made by Mrs Overend. She mentioned the DETI budget and made reference to changes in the DETI capital and resource departmental expenditure limits for 2014-15 since the position reported in the 2011-15 revised Budget document. The Executive agreed the revised 2011-15 Budget on 7 March 2011. Since then, the Executive have agreed a number of exercises that adjusted departmental expenditure limits. For example, the Invest NI resource budget was reduced by £7.7 million in 2014-15 as part of the Budget realignment exercise in January last year. As, I am sure, the Member will understand, in managing a four-year spending plan, it is inevitable that minor adjustments will be required.

Mrs Overend and Ian McCrea raised issues about the Northern Ireland Community Safety College. I am not sure that I can add much to the position outlined by the Justice Minister earlier. My understanding is that, despite extensive engagement, the preferred bidder, who was appointed in December 2013, was unfortunately unable to demonstrate that they could offer an affordable and compliant bid. In light of this, the Northern Ireland Community Safety College programme board discontinued the preferred bidder process. While this is disappointing, it is not the end of the process. I

understand that the programme board remains totally committed and supports the development of integrated training for the three services. The programme board commissioned a review of the project. The main elements of that review have been completed and are being considered by the programme board. The future progress of the project will be determined following a full analysis of the review's findings. The review considered the college design, education and training functions and procurement strategy. On the basis of the analysis of the results, the programme board will make recommendations on the overall timescales for any next steps. That work will also inform the business case and the procurement processes.

I turn to Kieran McCarthy's comments about Exploris. My Department has already approved the economic appraisal for Exploris. Any decision to allocate resources is, though, for the Executive to consider. The mechanism for the Executive to consider bids for capital investment and other allocations is the in-year monitoring round process. If a bid is submitted by any Department for the redevelopment of Exploris, it can be looked at by the Executive in the June monitoring round, when it can be considered in the context of the overall public expenditure situation and against competing pressures.

Dolores Kelly began her comments by quoting the First Minister, the leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, when he said at the 2011 Assembly elections that we should be judged on delivery and not on our first-preference vote. I am sure that the SDLP themselves would have the hope that they should not be judged on their first-preference vote, given that the recent European election result was the worst ever SDLP election result. Yet Mrs Kelly comes here today and lectures us — the Executive — on our performance. She lectures my party on our performance. She lectures the Executive, of which her party is still a member. You would think, to listen to her excoriating the Executive, that they had nothing to do with the Executive, yet the Environment Minister remains in post in the Executive, as guilty of poor performance as any other member of the Executive on her barometer. She comes to the House after the worst European election result for the SDLP — not even European election but the worst election result ever for the SDLP — with no humility and continued conceit.

Talking about no humility and continued conceit, I want to move to Alex Attwood, the man responsible for delivering the SDLP's worst ever election result. It really was Groundhog

Day stuff, the same contribution, by and large, as he made to the Budget debate back in February. He did a bit of a run through aspects of welfare reform. He stood up and, like Mrs Kelly, lectured me, my party and the Executive as a whole on, first of all, the bedroom tax. He gave us a bit of a lecture about a report published in Scotland about the consequences of the bedroom tax. Whilst the report was alarming in its detail, it would have been worth pointing out to Mr Attwood, had he stayed in the House — some of us had to stay to listen to him — that in Northern Ireland we have negotiated an exemption, which, of course, we have to pay for, so that anyone deemed to have a spare room will not be impacted on by the bedroom tax. He is lecturing us about a report in Scotland when we in Northern Ireland have ensured that people already in social housing and deemed to have a spare room are not affected by the bedroom tax. He seems to be enamoured of his beloved Scotland and is oddly infatuated with John Swinney, so gushing are his comments about the Scottish Financial Secretary. John Swinney and the Scottish Government are green with envy. They are jealous of what we, as an Executive, have managed to wring out of the Westminster Government and what Scotland has not. Every time I go to Finance Minister quadrilaterals, it is an issue that the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers raise with me because they are jealous of what we have been able to do and the benefits that we have been able to accrue through having social security responsibility devolved to this Assembly. He accuses me of sitting on my hands doing nothing, when, in fact, what we have done in this Executive is achieve exemptions. So, while we are achieving exemptions to the bedroom tax, the Scottish Government are writing reports. Unlike Northern Ireland, they have not achieved a single exemption from anything in the welfare reform package.

Of course, Mr Attwood knows a lot about welfare reform — the current process started on his watch while he was Minister for Social Development. So concerned was the SDLP about welfare reform that it avoided the Department for Social Development in 2011 when d'Hondt was run after the election. What concessions or exemptions did Alex Attwood wring from the Department for Work and Pensions when he was Minister for Social Development? It is an easy answer: none. Not a single exemption or concession did Alex Attwood, when he was Minister for Social Development, get from the Department for Work and Pensions on the Welfare Reform Bill. We had to wait until Nelson McCausland took over as Social Development Minister to get

exemptions on payments and the aforementioned exemptions on the bedroom tax. Mr Attwood has the cheek to come to the House and say that DWP has the measure of the DUP when he got absolutely nothing from DWP when he was Social Development Minister.

Of course, Mr Attwood has experience of welfare reform, having been the Minister responsible for the last Welfare Reform Act. Sometimes it is forgotten that the SDLP was responsible for social security in Northern Ireland for four years. The last Welfare Reform Act was shepherded through first by Margaret Ritchie when she was Social Development Minister and was finished off by Mr Attwood when he was Social Development Minister. I cannot remember who it was, but someone from the Sinn Féin Benches yesterday was outlining the various concerns about that welfare legislation. I used to rely on Mr Brady when I was Chair of the Committee for Social Development as a bit of an oracle on the finer details of social security legislation. He can correct me if I am wrong, but I think that that legislation moved people off income support or incapacity benefit onto either jobseeker's allowance or employment and support allowance (ESA). It was responsible for the work capability assessments, which have been raised time and time again as a cause for concern. That was welfare reform legislation brought through the House by Alex Attwood when he was the Social Development Minister. He stands here as if he had clean hands on welfare reform. He puffs out his chest and says how terrible this welfare reform legislation is. A lot of the people who are experiencing pain today as a result of welfare reform legislation have him to thank for it, because he was the Minister who brought it through the House in 2010-11.

Mr Attwood accused me of not raising the issue of welfare reform with Her Majesty's Government. I have done so repeatedly, and the message that the Social Development Minister and I get back is loud and clear: there will be no changes. Why would there be changes when you have a Government who are ideologically committed to welfare reform in the way that our Government in Westminster are? Why would they make changes for Northern Ireland above and beyond those that we have agreed with them and have to pay for? Why would they do that when they are enforcing these draconian things on their own constituents?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury told me that one of the pilot areas for universal credit is

Inverness, which is his constituency. It is happening to his constituents before it happens to anyone else. Why does anybody think that he has any concern for the people of Northern Ireland? Why does he give a damn about our constituents, when he is happy to push this onto his own constituents? Why would we expect any change from the Government in Westminster?

As well as speaking to Her Majesty's Government, I have spoken to the Labour Party. It is clear that Labour would make no changes to welfare reform legislation above and beyond eliminating the bedroom tax. So nobody on the opposite Benches should be crossing their fingers and hoping for a Labour victory next May in the hope that they will do anything radically different. Aside from the bedroom tax, Labour has said that it will continue as the current Government have.

That leads me neatly into welfare reform, which was raised by the bulk of Members who spoke today. There are serious consequences of non-compliance with welfare reform for the Assembly and the Budget.

7.45 pm

The first of those, and probably the one that concerns me most in respect of my job, is the financial penalties that the Executive is not facing, but now actually having to live with. Suggestion has been made by the party opposite that I and my party are making up the figures. These are not my figures. They are figures from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

On 31 March, I received a letter from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. To prove that I am not making the figures up, that they are not things that I have plucked from thin air but figures that are coming from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to me, I will tell you that he points out in the letter that he wrote to my predecessor in June 2013, confirming the Government wanting to support us taking forward welfare reform legislation. He also points out how he made it clear that the delay in implementing the reforms is having a negative impact on the Exchequer and that the UK Government would be entitled, as it is, under the principles set out in the statement of funding policy, to seek to recover any such costs.

He points out in the next paragraph that it is necessary to begin making adjustments to our departmental expenditure limits to offset the foregone AME savings. He goes into the detail of how that will be done and, in a helpful table

that he provided in the letter, points out that the adjustment for January to March of last year is minus £13 million and, for 2014-15, the current year, minus £87 million, and that the proposed reduction for 2015-16 is £114 million. So, it goes back to the point that Mr Wells made in his contribution. This is not something that we are living with this year — £100 million combined that we have to take out of our Budget this year. A further £114 million is to be taken out of our Budget next year, and that will go up and up and up and up as welfare reform, whether we like it or not, is implemented incrementally across the water. As the savings that the Treasury should be deriving from Northern Ireland do not materialise, it is going to have to find that money from somewhere.

Mr Wells: I thank the honourable Member for giving way. I am glad that he raised that point, because the Members opposite, including Mr Brady and Mr Maskey, accused Members on these Benches of making this up and clutching fictitious figures out of the air. Given the import of that letter, is there any way that it could be made available to Members, or at least the gist of it made available, perhaps by means of a question for written answer? It is absolutely essential that the honourable Members opposite know exactly the implications of where they are going and where you are getting your figures from.

Mr Hamilton: I suspect that I have probably read enough of it into the record that it is no longer private correspondence. The Chief Secretary of the Treasury himself is on record saying that this is going to happen. However, in the face of the accusation that was made by Members opposite — that we were making the figures up — I thought it important that I point out precisely where the figures are coming from. They are not figures that have been made up by me. They are not figures made up by the Minister for Social Development. They are figures coming from the Treasury. Whether we like it or not, the Treasury wants its money and it is going to get its money. It has the means to get its money. Already this year, the Treasury has reduced our baseline for the year by the £13 million that we did not save last year. It will reduce it further, later in the year, by £87 million, and it will do that, year on year on year, by adjusting our baseline by whatever it is that it expects to have saved as a result of welfare reform.

There are many aspects of welfare reform that I do not like and my party is not supportive of. That is why, again as Mr Wells pointed out in his contribution, our MPs were in Westminster voting against the Welfare Reform Bill, in the

appropriate place to do so. It is not as though we are wholly enthusiastic about it. However, it is a reality that we are being penalised already and will continue to be penalised, to the tune of £114 million next year, rising and rising to about £1 billion over the next five years. That is a lot of cash to be taking out of any Government, but particularly a Government such as Northern Ireland's, with all the social and economic problems that we have. As we pursue corporation tax to try to transform our economy and get people into work, we will be hit with reductions as a result of that as well.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will.

Mr F McCann: Just a comment I raised when Jim Wells was talking. You are talking about a £1 billion loss to the economy over the next couple of years, but when you take into account the loss in benefits and the people that it will impact on, that could come to a total of about £3 billion over the next four years.

Mr Hamilton: That is the point that is always thrown back by the Members opposite; that money is going to be lost to the economy as a result of welfare reform. Whether we like or not, that money is gone, because the reductions in benefit levels have already been implemented by the Government across the water. That money is gone. That is money that no longer exists. If the Member is arguing the point that the Executive should now be starting to pay all the benefits that were previously in place, that would amount to hundreds of millions of pounds on top of the hundreds of millions of pounds of penalties that are there.

It is also wrong that, as is often the case that is made by the parties on the opposite Benches, welfare spending in Northern Ireland is going to be cut. It is not planned to increase at the same rate as it did in the past, but it is worth pointing out that in 2014-15, without welfare reform in Northern Ireland, spending was to be £5.8 billion and by 2018-19 that was to rise to £6.2 billion. With welfare reform, spending this year will be £5.7 billion, rising to £6 billion in 2018-19, so it is less than it was, but there is still a £300 million increase in our welfare spending by 2018-19, which is £273 million less than it would have been without welfare reform. However, there is still a £300 million increase in welfare spending in Northern Ireland planned for the next number of years, so it is not accurate to say, as is often the case, that welfare spending itself will go down.

The second consequence and fear that I have about not moving forward with welfare reform is the risk that there is to 1,400 jobs in social security offices and service centres in Londonderry and Belfast. When Mr Attwood was here, he asked me to outline what I thought this was based on and whether I had correspondence on it. It is, of course, an issue on which the Minister for Social Development will deal directly with the Department for Work and Pensions. However, you do not have to have a letter. He wanted a letter that told me, or spoke to me, or something like that. You do not have to have that; you just have to apply logic and common sense to the situation.

If we have 1,400 people in those service centres in Northern Ireland doing work on welfare spending for a region in England but do not have the same system — which we will not have — and if our people are not trained to work the other system, why would any Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions want to keep those jobs here? It makes no sense. We do not have the system and they are not going to spend the money on the system for us. I am sure there are many English MPs, particularly Conservative MPs, who would quite fancy taking those jobs back to their constituencies. If we have thumbed our noses at them and said that we are not going to do their welfare reform here, and if we do not have the same system and training in place, why would they keep those jobs here? You have only to apply logic and common sense to the situation.

The third consequence is that of the IT system. That point was also made to me by Danny Alexander in his correspondence about developing and maintaining a separate IT system. We have estimated that the cost of a replacement IT system is £1.6 billion — £1.6 billion that this Executive could ill afford on top of the penalties that we would face for non-compliance on welfare reform. Nobody on the opposite Benches is telling me where I am to get that £1.6 billion from to pay for an IT system that we do not need if we just comply with welfare legislation from across the water.

To be fair to Mr Attwood, he said:

"it is not conceivable and it is not financially sustainable that we would create our own IT system".

I agree with him on that. With a price tag of £1.6 billion, it is not conceivable nor financially sustainable for us to have our own IT system. The current UK system, as Mr Attwood said, is failing. It is over 20 years old and it would be

preposterous for us to take that on board and pay for the maintenance costs of that. It would probably be knackered, to use the vernacular term, fairly quickly anyway.

The fourth consequence that I fear is if we were left with a situation where we had to develop our own IT system. Mr Attwood outlined some of the significant problems that they have had across the water in developing their IT system. It has taken them much longer than they expected and it has cost them much more to develop than they initially anticipated. That would be something that we in Northern Ireland would face as well.

Do not forget that DWP does not require its old IT system any more. We rely on that old system and when DWP starts to switch it off in 2016 it will be gone and we will no longer have access to it. That means that we will be unable to pay people in Northern Ireland the benefits to which they are entitled. What that means in reality is this: the fear is that, by the end of 2015, 207,000 low-income families will no longer receive the help to which they are entitled through family and child tax credits, because those will have been abolished and incorporated into universal credit. By the end of 2016 —

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for giving way. Is he confident that the IT system that he is talking about will be fit for purpose, considering that £142 million has already been written off in the pilot scheme in the north-west of England because it is not fit for purpose? As I mentioned earlier, at this point in time, there were supposed to be over one million people on the universal credit system. Initially, there were 3,600 people. There are now around 11,000. They are all single males, because they are the easiest to put on the system. I think that the Minister is being slightly over-optimistic when he talks about it being fit for purpose by 2016.

Mr Hamilton: The actual delivery of it is not a concern for us. That is a concern for DWP, which is the owner of the system. It has to develop a system that is competent and workable and can be transferred to Northern Ireland. There is no cost to us in its being delayed. If we pass the legislation, and there is any delay in implementing welfare reform or the IT system that underpins it across the water, the costs are not passed on to us in Northern Ireland. However, the cost of non-compliance will be passed on. If we have to develop our own IT system for Northern Ireland, the cost will potentially be billions of pounds, or hundreds of millions of pounds at least. There is the very real prospect that not only will those 207,000

low-income families be affected, but, by the end of 2016, around 34,000 claimants will not be able to claim housing benefit, because it will also have been rolled into universal credit by that time, or whenever the time will be.

Therefore, without our own IT system, which would take years and years to develop and would prove incredibly expensive, we face a gap period in which vulnerable people in Northern Ireland who are entitled to benefits will not be able to receive those benefits. I am not in politics to go out to people and say that there is money that they are entitled to but that we are not able to pay it.

People can dismiss the figures. I have tried to show that they are not my figures but Treasury figures — money that it is taking off us. There is a fear and a risk that jobs will be lost. There is the real prospect that we will have to develop our own IT system. We can debate and talk about those things around the edges all we want, but when you face a situation in which hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people in Northern Ireland may not get the benefits to which they are entitled, there are serious questions for Members from the party opposite.

Mr Ian McCrea pointed out the comment that was made by Alex Attwood in his contribution to the previous Budget debate, and that was that the penalties were a price worth paying. Now, Mr Attwood is not here to answer, but I wonder whether he thinks — or, more importantly, his constituents in West Belfast, never mind the rest of the people of Northern Ireland think — that it is a price worth paying to have almost £1 billion taken out of public services over the next five years, affecting vulnerable people through reductions in health services, education services and other public services; to build our own IT system at a cost of £1 billion; to lose 1,400 jobs; or to have people in Northern Ireland not get the benefits to which they are entitled. I do not think that it is a price worth paying, and I think that most sensible people in Northern Ireland would agree.

Of course, all that reality around welfare reform did not prevent Members opposite in Sinn Féin and the SDLP from coming forward with a long list of public spending requests. They ran from Mr McKay, who, as I mentioned before, wants us to devolve air passenger duty for short-haul flights at a cost of £60 million to £90 million. He wants us to do all sorts of things for cycling. Good idea, but it still comes at a cost. He wants us to develop tourism and particularly events in Northern Ireland. He wants us to bring the Tour de France here. That is another great idea, but it does not cost thin air — it costs money.

Pat Ramsey, as I said before, wants a new university for Derry/Londonderry. Dolores Kelly wants fuel poverty measures, including a fund to pay people's electricity bills. Maeve McLaughlin, who is in the House now, echoed her suggestion yesterday that the £160 million shortfall in the health budget should be plugged in its entirety. I have not been able to tot up the exact cost of all of that, but it runs into hundreds and hundreds of millions of pounds. Plugging the shortfall in health, attracting new events such as the Tour de France and building a university in Londonderry whilst addressing fuel poverty are all noble aims.

They are exactly the sort of things that Members should bring to the House and be calling on me to fund for other Ministers to deliver. Do those Members think that my job in funding other Ministers to bring more events, to develop our university infrastructure and to address shortfalls in funding for health is helped or hindered by the fact that we are squandering tens and tens of millions of pounds because we are not agreeing welfare reform legislation?

8.00 pm

As I come to the end of my response, I will turn to Alex Attwood's and Mr McNarry's comments. I thank Mr McNarry in his absence for his very fulsome and kind remarks about me, which I noted were kinder than any remarks by my own Back-Benchers during the debate. He gave his view that only Ministers who are not complying with welfare reform should suffer. I understand the superficial attractiveness of such a proposition. It would be better if those Ministers were paying the money, but, in reality, it comes from the budgets and the areas of public spending that they are responsible for: education, agriculture, culture and the environment. Although I understand where the Member is coming from, I ask him to think again about the impact that it could have on vulnerable people, particularly through the education system, and also on our farming community and others if we were to follow through on that.

Mr McNarry and Mr Attwood asked me about future Budgets. This is the last year of our four-year Budget that is agreed, and we have yet to agree a 2015-16 Budget. I hope to present that in draft in the autumn and have a final Budget agreed by December. I am ever the optimist. Future Budgets are unclear until after the next general election and the expectation that Her Majesty's Treasury will conduct another spending review.

Whilst it is unclear what our situation in Northern Ireland will be, this much is clear: times are getting tougher, especially on our resource side, which is the money for running our hospitals, schools and many of our public services. All the projections from the Office for Budget Responsibility and everything that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is saying make it clear that the switch from current expenditure to capital expenditure is permanent and that the proceeds of growth in the economy in the UK will be applied against paying down debt as well as investing in our capital. So there will be continued pressure on the resource side of our Budget, and whilst the platform in Northern Ireland may not be burning, it is definitely getting warmer, which is why there is a need for continued reform in improving our public services and in how we deliver those and achieve value for money.

I will attempt to end on some better news; I do not want Members to go home in a gloomy mood. I mentioned the attraction of new jobs into Northern Ireland, which we should celebrate, but the better news, even since the Budget debate earlier this year, is about the recovery in our economy and the embedding of growth in our economy.

The Northern Ireland composite index, which is the indicator of growth in our economy, was published recently for the year to quarter 4 of 2013, and it showed growth of 2.6%. The Northern Ireland residential property price index, which is published by Land and Property Services in my Department and is an authoritative view of house price sales and housing sales activity, showed that, over 2013, house prices in Northern Ireland rose by 4% and that there were record levels of sales since 2007.

The recent Ulster Bank purchasing managers' index (PMI), which was published yesterday for the month of May, showed that, encouragingly, the private sector is driving economic growth in Northern Ireland. It showed record increases in new orders, and our construction sector, which has been much beleaguered over the past number of years, is also improving. It showed increases in employment across all sectors. Danske Bank's consumer confidence survey, published in April, showed the highest levels of consumer confidence on record since the survey began.

I appreciate that the recovery is not being felt in every part of or by everyone in Northern Ireland, and I note the comments made by many Members about Northern Ireland having

the lowest disposable income in the UK. However, look at the composite index and the residential property price index and listen to what the Ulster Bank is saying through the PMI and what Danske Bank is saying. Look at our unemployment figures and our attraction of foreign direct investment over the past number of months. It is clear that better days lie ahead for this economy. It is encouraging that the private sector is driving growth in the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Wells: That is all excellent news. We should all pay tribute to the work of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who has done so much to achieve those results, but I am intrigued to know how any of it helps his position. The extra income that will come through corporation tax, VAT, income tax and national insurance is, I am sure, very welcome, but none of that comes back to Northern Ireland. Does any of it help the very difficult financial situation that he finds himself in?

Mr Hamilton: I was trying to end on a positive note. *[Laughter.]* My next two words were "in conclusion". Mr Wells is, of course, right that it does not benefit me per se in my job of being responsible for the stewardship of public finances in Northern Ireland. He is absolutely right: as the economy grows, more businesses pay tax and more people are employed, so there is more income tax and VAT etc to swell Treasury's coffers, but it does not necessarily come back to us in Northern Ireland.

The Executive entered this mandate with the objective of growing our economy and set it as our number one priority. Much maligned as Invest Northern Ireland has been — I have heard much criticism in the House of it and its strategy — it is very clear that what the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest Northern Ireland have been doing is starting to pay off. Confidence is being restored to our economy. I hope to be able to use increasing capital expenditure to boost our construction sector even further to assist the economy in Northern Ireland to employ more people. In that respect, we are achieving our number one goal as an Executive, which is to grow and start to transform our economy, and, hopefully, with the devolution of corporation tax in the next number of years, we will have a step change in the economy and grow it even further. It does not benefit public spending, and there will be challenges for us as a Government, which is

why I have been preaching the message of reforming our public services so that we continue to improve how we do things and change how we do things so that we can get more for less. However, I still think that the House should celebrate the growing and transforming of our economy in the way that those figures show.

I could continue debating the issues, but, listening to the noise behind me, I do not sense that there is much appetite for me to do that. I see that the Minister of Health has arrived, which is a gentle nudge that he wants to conclude his business in the House. Tempted as I am, I will draw my remarks to a close.

I have tried to respond to as many of the relevant issues raised as possible. I am sure that, if I have failed to respond to an issue, Members will pick it up with me in other ways. As always, the debate was, at times, lively, and many significant points were raised. I am thankful to Members for that. It is imperative that the legislation debated today continues its passage through the Assembly so that public services here can be delivered without delay or interruption. I ask Members to support the Bill, thereby authorising spending on public services by Departments in 2014-15 beyond the provision in the Vote on Account passed in March.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 36/11-15] be agreed.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Cancer Services: South Belfast

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. All other Members who wish to speak will have up to eight minutes.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to bring this Adjournment debate to the House. At the outset, I thank the Minister for staying so late to contribute. This is a very important issue, and, first, I wish to highlight the positive work going on in my constituency of South Belfast in cancer treatment and research.

One of the seminal reports dictating the nature of cancer services was the Campbell report of 1996. It made a number of key recommendations, including the establishment of a cancer centre, appropriate training and action to tackle waiting times for cancer sufferers. We have come a long way since then. If we look at the achievements that have been made, we can see that, throughout the last 10 to 15 years, the calibre and range of treatment have constantly been expanding. In 1993, breast cancer screening was established throughout all of Northern Ireland; in 1994, the first cancer registry was established; in 1999, the first cancer incidence data was compiled; in 2004, the Northern Ireland Cancer Network was established; and in 2006, the Cancer Centre was opened. All these are evidence of a progression that must be welcomed and one that is ever more important, given the prevalence of cancer here and across the world.

I would like to touch on incidence and mortality rates. Whilst incidence rates are going up, and this is a trend that is not confined to Northern Ireland, mortality rates have gone down here. In the 15-year period to 2009, mortality rates decreased by 1.3% for males and 0.6% for females.

Some of the facts around cancer point to why we must do all we can to halt its progression. Cancer is the leading cause of premature death in 28 out of 53 European countries, and it is projected that by 2035 someone will die from cancer every 10 seconds in Europe. That is a startling forecast. Here, nearly 13,000 people are diagnosed with cancer every year and just over 4,000 lose their battle with the illness.

It is against this backdrop that the improvements in research and innovative treatment in Belfast are heartily welcomed. From a clinical perspective, the Cancer Centre, which opened in 2006 and is located in the City Hospital, has made a huge difference to cancer provision here. It offers an extensive range of specialist treatment, including radiotherapy, in a modern and professional setting.

Additionally, the centre for cancer research has played a pivotal role, as has Queen's University as a whole, in improving cancer treatment here. The research centre has a wide array of core competencies and is filled with the expertise of over 300 cancer clinical and basic researchers who specialise in techniques such as bioimaging, tissue processing and bio-banking amongst others.

We have seen recently how the research taking place here can have a demonstratively positive effect. The work of Almac has produced information that will improve treatment of ovarian cancer. I would also like to commend the role that Invest NI played in that particular piece of work in terms of capital.

Professor Paddy Johnston of Queen's University and others have begun to set a real ambition for extending the focus of having south Belfast as a real centre not only for local but for global health innovation. I have been particularly struck by that global ambition articulated by Professor Johnston. We can achieve that by excelling in a research capacity. I have also been struck by the prospect of the local benefit that there should be in jobs as highly-qualified local people achieve excellence in their field. One example of this is the molecular diagnosis research currently ongoing, and this is where clinicians can point out, through analysis, which treatment will work on certain individuals, thus attaining great accuracy in treatment.

There is, however, a huge gaping hole in the provision of cancer services here. I have already stressed the good and positive work that is being initiated and which is sustained by both the medical and academic sectors here, but the current policy in the provision of cancer drugs is a source of great emerging inequality.

The UK as a whole, in recent times, has had varying positions on cancer drugs provision. The coalition Government established the cancer drugs fund. That was put in place to eradicate the difficulties in access to drugs that had previously existed. While others may question the motive behind the fund, it was a

significant step nonetheless. In response to that, the Scottish Government also moved to eradicate the difficulty in access to cancer drugs. There, the peer approved clinical system or PACS has replaced the individual patient treatment request. It is estimated that that new system, which incorporates increased patient/clinician engagement, will help up to 1,500 people in the first year.

So, England and Scotland have moved significantly to enhance cancer drugs provision, but here we have not. I appreciate that the Minister has indicated that he intends to review the process, but we still operate within the individual funding request system. The problem with this, as has been highlighted by charities, clinicians and the Rarer Cancers Foundation, is that it operates with an exceptionality clause. That means that, unless your strain of cancer is uniquely different from others, you will not receive a drug that is not approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE).

That inconsistency is given further weight when we realise that many of the drugs are developed and trialled here but are subsequently not available here. It is an issue of equality of access, and we are dragging our feet.

8.15 pm

Additional funding of £40 million has been spent here on cancer, and that is to be welcomed, but, if we put it into perspective across the jurisdictions of the UK, it pales in comparison. The Minister has indicated that he is taken by the Scottish model. In this and other ways, we are assuming that the principle has been won. I wonder whether he is aware of how the Scottish model was paid for. He often mentions prescription charges as a method of funding cancer drugs. As far as I am aware, the Scottish Government did not need to do that, so why do we? Furthermore, through research into the topic, we have become aware of what is called the pharmaceutical price regulation scheme. That is one of the ways in which the Scottish Government paid for their new cancer drugs provision. That scheme is a voluntary arrangement to control the price of branded drugs. It is negotiated between the Department of Health, acting on behalf of the UK Government and Northern Ireland, and the branded pharmaceutical industry, which is represented by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI). I am sure that the Minister is aware of that scheme and the agreement therein that stipulates that money

must be returned to each Government for use on new drug treatment. I have a number of questions in that regard. How much money, if any, has been returned? Is it being used for new drug treatment? Could it be the basis on which to create a cancer drug fund model?

I know, through discussions with clinicians and cancer patients, that doctors are being placed in a difficult position of a moral and ethical scale when it comes to prescribing treatment for cancer. They know the gravity of any potential diagnosis. They know the chances for survival. Most importantly, when they talk directly to a patient who is very sick, they know that they are not giving them the most up-to-date information and that they are not about to give them the most up-to-date treatment. I will be writing to the professional bodies involved to ask them about their thoughts on the moral and ethical considerations that current health service policy imposes on them. It is unacceptable. It is primarily unacceptable for the patients, but it is also unacceptable to put clinicians in the position in which they know that the best outcomes cannot be assured as the treatment will simply not be made available.

We have heard a lot in the past few days about welfare reform. Let us look at it in relation to this topic. Substantial work has been done by the Macmillan cancer group and others. Research has shown the financial impact of receiving a cancer diagnosis, with some, on average, £290 worse off each month in Northern Ireland as a result of their illness. Let us look at the Department's logic and how it will not work for people here. First, the cancer patients are not getting the drug. Secondly, when they are diagnosed, they know that they are nearly £300 worse off each month as a result. As a solution, the Minister wants a more punitive welfare reform system before he considers giving them the drugs. They are worse off with cancer, and they will certainly be worse off with welfare reform. It just does not stack up. Contrast that with the exciting developments throughout the 1990s and the vision and ambition of developing cures and life-extending drugs.

There is a humble constituency out there burdened by cancer and its impact. When that constituency speaks out singularly or collectively, society almost instinctively reaches out to help. I argue that it is the responsibility of the health service to underpin that instinctive reaction with a strategic vision and ambition for cancer infrastructure here.

Mr Spratt: I intend to be brief with my remarks. I appreciate that Mr McKinney brought the topic

here today, but it was a debate for the whole House. Cancer does not affect just South Belfast; it affects every area of the Province and further afield.

Nobody knows better than me in the past two years of the fantastic cancer service in this Province, from the clinicians, consultants, oncologists and everyone who works in the cancer centre, which is in South Belfast, to those involved in the research that goes on in Queen's University. However, when it comes to cancer treatment, I have been treated in every part of this city — north, south, east and west — indeed, I have been around every place. Someone suggested to me that the only place that I had not been treated at was the Royal maternity hospital. The bottom line is that I believe that, when someone gets into the critical area of cancer, which, sadly, I have been, you suddenly find that all the stops are pulled out when it comes to cancer treatment in Northern Ireland.

I appreciate that there are some issues around drugs, but, in fairness to the Minister, and I thank him for being here tonight, he is very willing to address that. He has suggested the possibility of having a minimal charge for prescriptions or something similar. My understanding is, from looking at replies that he has made recently, he has already submitted a paper to Executive colleagues about issues around cancer drugs.

Treatment is changing. Drugs change on a regular basis, but I think that it would have been better had Mr McKinney brought the debate before the entire House so that we could have brought the Minister along to a wider and full conversation about it, rather than the four of us being stuck in the House this evening to discuss the matter.

I want to record my very deep appreciation to all those whom I have been involved with. Over the past two and a half years, I have journeyed along with many other folks who are suffering from cancer. Mind you, you do not hear too many complaints about the treatment that the people you meet as you travel through radiotherapy, chemotherapy and the various treatments available get, either as individuals or families. I think that it is incumbent on all of us to try to find a solution to help the Minister. You heard about the financial difficulties that he is facing because of the many issues in the health service. I think that it is incumbent on all of us to help him to create some sort of fund.

I feel extremely bad about one thing, and I spoke to a consultant the other day who told me

exactly the same: whenever I go to the chemist to get prescriptions, which I do on a regular basis, I do not have to pay anything. I recognise that there are folks who cannot afford it and I recognise the issues that Mr McKinney raised in relation to people who suffer from cancer, but there are many who can afford to pay a minimal charge. If there was a minimal charge on a prescription for those who can afford it, and that money was being ring-fenced for cancer drugs, I think that that would have wide support from those who can afford to pay. I am not suggesting that anyone who cannot afford to pay should pay; there should and could be exemptions.

I do not want to take the debate any further tonight because I think that it is a wider debate that concerns areas outside South Belfast. It is a debate to be had Province-wide and probably beyond.

Thank you to all who helped me on my journey.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Conventionally, we thank the Member for bringing a local constituency-based Adjournment debate, but, like Jimmy Spratt, I also believe that this is a debate better placed for a wider audience, because it is a wider issue above and beyond the constituency. I echo Mr McKinney's congratulation to those involved in the regional cancer facility at the City Hospital for the tremendous work that they do day and daily. Each and every one of us, regrettably, knows far too many people who have had the burden of cancer inflicted upon them. Many of us have journeyed with some people to the end and have seen the devastating effect it has on them, the courage of the people who have been afflicted by cancer and the absolutely wonderful work carried out by everybody from the clinicians to the nurses.

Only down the street, we have the Marie Curie organisation, very close to this Building, which, along with Macmillan and others, tends to people who are going to their deathbed, basically, with such care to give them the maximum dignity that they can and to support their families through a very traumatic experience. So, like Mr McKinney, I congratulate and commend all those involved in the medical side of things and the clinical side of things in support of patients and their families. Of course there is also, as I have said, the likes of Queen's University, which is an internationally renowned institute for doing the type of research that has been referred to.

I think this evening's debate is one that needs to be had in a wider format because of all the

issues that the Member has raised about funding, which I do not want to go into this evening. Clearly, there is an issue around drug availability and the costing of all that. I do not know enough detail about that, so I do not want to enter into it, but I do think that the Minister has a job of work on his hands. I do not know whether it is just that the older you get, the more people you know who have suffered from cancer. We all know that cancer is an ongoing plague on many people.

I think that the health service, by and large, does a tremendous job in how it cares for people with cancer. As Jimmy Spratt pointed out earlier, once you are diagnosed and into the system, it seems to be all systems go on your behalf. I sometimes see examples of people waiting too long to get a diagnosis. None of that is specifically pertinent to our local constituency, and that is why I am making a wee bit of a distinction. I have not heard anybody suggesting that there is a deficit of services available in South Belfast as opposed to anywhere else. Clearly, the City Hospital is in South Belfast, and the nature of the facility in itself adds to the employment of people living locally, but, overall, I think the topic is a wider and broader issue.

I thank the Member for bringing our attention to the cancer services. He has raised issues like drug availability and the funding needed for that. I am interested to hear the Minister's response, but, again, like Mr Spratt, I think it is a matter for a wider debate for people who are involved in the wider health portfolios.

Ms Lo: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the important issue of cancer services. First, I would like to praise the hardworking staff of the cancer centre at the City Hospital. Every two minutes someone in the UK is diagnosed with cancer. More than one in three of us will develop cancer in some form during our lifetime. The cancer centre provides treatment for people living in Belfast as well as a number of specialist regional services for people throughout Northern Ireland. Our community has greatly benefited from the expertise of the staff at the cancer centre, and people have drawn strength from the care they receive as they cope with that awful disease.

According to a recent Cancer Research UK survey, the majority of people asked said that getting cancer was their number one fear. As legislators, we need to ensure that our community has full access to all the support available. The Alliance Party supports the full implementation of the service framework for cancer prevention, treatment and care. It is

vital that Northern Ireland has speedy access across the lifespan to cost-effective, top-class surgery, radiotherapy and medicines, including new advances. In our last manifesto, Alliance called for parity of treatment and access to treatment with those available in the rest of the UK, including equity of access to drug treatments. Every person with cancer should have access to a clinical nurse specialist, a personalised comprehensive benefit and advice service and better post-treatment care. Earlier cancer detection is a priority. Increased public awareness, uptake of cancer screening, access to new and existing means of diagnosis and cancer research should be supported.

8.30 pm

Through the cancer drugs fund that was set up by the Government in 2010, a total of 36 treatments have been made available, but only to people living in England. The cancer drugs fund costs £200 million a year and, three months ago, was extended for another two years. Forty-two thousand patients in England have benefited, and that success has resulted in plans for the fund to be extended to Scotland and Wales by the Rarer Cancers Foundation so that cancer patients there have the same access to the drugs. In Northern Ireland, cancer patients have to apply through an individual funding report for any of the drugs on the list, and statistics show that only one in eight who applies is given access to the drugs. Unfortunately, most are refused due to costs.

Research by the Rarer Cancers Foundations shows that 278 patients in Northern Ireland would benefit from the fund every year at a cost to government of £5.7 million. That breaks down to £3.20 per person a year in the Province. A cancer patient was quoted in a recent newspaper article as saying:

"When you are dying of cancer the last thing you want is to have to fight the system – it should be working for you not against you."

I urge the Health Minister to do all he can to rectify this gross inequality.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I would like to thank the Member for securing the Adjournment debate. The contributions have raised issues about cancer, and I hope to respond to the points that have been raised during the debate if time allows.

Cancer is a particular challenge to our healthcare system. However, it is recognised

as a global problem and not one that affects only patients in Northern Ireland or, indeed, in South Belfast. Around 9,600 cancer cases were newly diagnosed each year in Northern Ireland between 2008 and 2012, and almost 54,000 people in Northern Ireland were living with cancer between 1993 and 2010. So the challenge is significant.

A growing ageing population means that the numbers of people who will require cancer treatment in the future will continue to rise, with consequent cost pressures to the health service. The ever-increasing number of new technologies and treatments for cancer, whilst good news for early diagnosis and treatment, also contributes to those pressures. Although accepting the reality of the constraints we face in the current economic climate, I look to the Health and Social Care Board to work with the trusts to ensure that we are delivering the most efficient service that we can for all cancer patients, including those in South Belfast.

Cancer services were reorganised and are now provided on a regional basis. All the evidence tells us that regional specialist centres with highly skilled professionals supported by multidisciplinary teams will provide the best outcomes for patients regardless of their age or where they live. The improvements in cancer services have been brought about by significant investment in cancer services and a major refocusing on how the service is delivered. The Belfast Trust and the services it provides in South Belfast has been at the heart of that transformation.

There are now five cancer units in Northern Ireland for the management of patients with more common cancers and the provision of local chemotherapy services. Those are the Belfast City Hospital and the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children; Antrim Area Hospital; Altnagelvin Area Hospital; Craigavon Area Hospital; and the Ulster Hospital.

The Belfast Trust's regional cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital in South Belfast includes the regional radiotherapy services and serves as a tertiary centre for the population of Northern Ireland. Through Queen's University, it is also home to a huge amount of academic research into cancer and its treatment, with many significant efforts being made to make breakthroughs in the treatment of cancers.

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is one of the largest in the United Kingdom. It has approximately 2,000 beds and provides cancer services across four hospital sites: Belfast City Hospital; the Royal Victoria Hospital; the Mater

Hospital; and Musgrave Park Hospital. The trust delivers local cancer care to approximately 340,000 citizens in Belfast and part of the Castlereagh area.

The regional oncology service is delivered from the Cancer Centre and employs a team of more than 35 consultant oncologists. The centre acts as the hub for cancer services throughout the Province. The team provides an oncology service to the local Belfast population, including south Belfast; oncology chemotherapy services for the core tumour sites, such as breast, lung, genito-urinary (GU) and colorectal at the four other HSC trusts on a hub and spoke model; and regional/specialist services for patients across Northern Ireland. In recent years, we have seen further major changes in how we deliver cancer treatment and care through the launch of the cancer services framework in 2011. To date, there have been a number of achievements in implementing the framework within existing resources. We will continue to work towards the full implementation of the framework.

South Belfast is also home to the Centre for Cancer Research and Cell Biology, which is a major cancer research centre of international repute. The centre includes academic and clinical studies, and its work is funded from a wide range of government, business and charity sources. The Northern Ireland Cancer Trials Centre and Network, collocated with the Centre For Cancer Research and Cell Biology in south Belfast, enables patients and others from across Northern Ireland to participate in clinical trials of potentially beneficial prevention strategies, diagnostics, treatments and care. The new HSC R&D strategy for Northern Ireland will seek to build on the excellent work that is being taken forward by cancer research institutions to benefit patients in Northern Ireland.

Although those positive developments in service delivery are to be welcomed, with more to come that I will talk about shortly, they have been delivered only through significant public expenditure in cancer services. I want to see that investment continue, but, as I said, we face significant pressures on the health and care budget, and we therefore have tough choices ahead if we are to make the best possible use of resources. Access to cancer drugs is an area in which we must be particularly vigilant about gaining maximum benefit from expenditure for all patients. New specialist drugs, which include cancer drugs, place significant pressures on the health service budget. New drugs are emerging every year, usually at a high cost. Many of them also

require an expansion in service provision to ensure that they are delivered safely and effectively and that patients using them are properly monitored and reviewed. Both the HSCB and the NHS commissioning bodies in England are guided by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in determining what cancer drugs should be routinely available. It is important to note that all NICE-approved cancer drugs that are routinely available in England are either recurrently funded or available via a cost-per-case mechanism in Northern Ireland. The Health and Social Care Board has a clear process — the individual funding request (IFR) — by which unapproved cancer drugs can be made available to patients by means of an individual funding request setting out the clinical circumstances that support that request.

The issue of access to specialist drugs, including cancer drugs, is very much a priority for my Department. Although the IFR process for accessing unapproved drugs is working, I have instructed my Department to evaluate whether the process is meeting its objectives. The evaluation will take account of the measures that other devolved Administrations are considering in their approach to access to unapproved specialist drugs. The terms of reference are being finalised, and the evaluation will be complete later this year.

In considering where to prioritise expenditure, it is important to note that prevention programmes and awareness campaigns have an important role to play. The Public Health Agency (PHA) is developing a programme aimed at improving the awareness of cancer in our population. As part of that programme, the PHA will include specific messages about tumour sites such as ovarian cancer. The PHA recently hosted a stakeholder workshop to ensure that key individuals and organisations, including cancer charities, are fully engaged in planning and supporting the cancer awareness programme.

There has been major progress, not just for South Belfast but for all of Northern Ireland. Cancer services have moved from a position in which fragments of treatment were provided at all our hospitals in a way that was not ideal for providing a uniform standard of care to a position in which we now have a network of dedicated cancer units staffed by specialist multidisciplinary teams delivering high-quality care to recognised international standards of excellence.

I am pleased to say that one of the benefits of the planned opening of the new radiotherapy

centre at Altnagelvin Hospital in 2016 will be the further improvement of capacity at the regional cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital. Delivery of the Altnagelvin centre is a high priority, and the Executive have made the necessary funding — £66 million for both current and capital — available. That includes an investment of some €19 million from the Republic of Ireland towards the capital costs of the project, which will provide services for patients from the adjacent border areas in the ROI.

As Health Minister, I have met patients who have undergone the trauma and stress related to cancer treatment. I empathise completely with them and their families, and I assure everyone that I want our health service to strive to be the very best in the cancer services that are available to them. That is my clear aim for South Belfast and right across the Province.

Adjourned at 8.41 pm.



Published by Authority of the Northern Ireland Assembly,
Belfast: The Stationery Office

and available from:

Online
www.tsoshop.co.uk

Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail

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ISSN 1463-7162

Daily Editions: Single copies £5, Annual subscriptions £325
Bound Volumes of Debates are issued periodically during the session: Single copies: £90

Printed in Northern Ireland by The Stationery Office Limited
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