

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 9 June 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Dunloy Farming Tragedy

Mr Speaker: Mr Jim Allister has been given leave to make a statement on the farming tragedy in Dunloy, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. Other Members will know that, if they want to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order or discuss any other matter until this item of business has been dealt with by the House.

Mr Allister: I am sure that we all recall the great cloud of despair and sorrow that descended on the Province in the autumn of 2012, when three members of the Spence family tragically lost their life. Sadly, on Saturday afternoon, we had a revisiting of such horrendous circumstances, this time in the constituency of North Antrim and made all the more poignant by the fact that the primary victim of the tragedy was but an eight-year-old boy who lost his life. His father is fighting for his life after they were overcome by the unseen killer of noxious gases from a slurry tank. I am sure that the hearts of us all go out to that family: to the devastated mother, Simone, and the boy's two elder sisters, Isobel and Alice, and, of course, our thoughts are very much with the father, Bertie, as he struggles to overcome what has beset him.

I am sure that it is the prayer of us all that he will recover because that family will need the strength and support of a father in the coming weeks and months.

Our thoughts today are also with the community in the Knockahollett area and the Ballyweaney Church community, the Presbyterian church to which the Christie family were attached. Tomorrow it will host a very sad event.

Our thoughts are also today with Knockahollett Primary School, which faces the first of many

sad days. Yesterday, when I spoke to the principal and he talked about young Robert, it was clear that he was exactly the sort of young boy that any one of us would be privileged to have as a son or grandson. A great void will be felt in the family, first and foremost, and in the wider community and in the school community, where they will also have to cope with the fact that the two elder girls are pupils. When they return to school, they, too, will need all the pastoral care and love that a country primary school excels at. I have every confidence that that will be provided to them.

I am glad to have the opportunity to raise this issue. It is also important to reflect on the scale of losses on our farms. Many take farming for granted but it is a dangerous occupation: 40 people have lost their life in six years. That is a sobering statistic, and I think that we all would exhort that the maximum care and attention be given to all things in the agricultural field.

Mr Storey: It is with a great sense of sadness and loss that we stand in the House today to recall the tragic events that unfolded on Saturday morning on a farm on the Ballynalooob Road in the constituency of North Antrim.

How true are the words of scripture:

"Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow."

As a community in Ballymoney, we were being thankful and appreciative of our farming community at the annual agricultural show. It was only as the news began to pass through the show that the sheer horror of all that was taking place began to descend upon us. Little did we think what was going to be the story that would unfold.

At the outset, I extend my sincere sympathy and that of my colleagues to Bertie and Simone on the death of their much-loved and cherished son, Robert Thomas Stephen Christie, and to his sisters, Isobel and Alice, and the wider Christie family circle, we offer our sincere sympathy and our continued prayers.

I worked with Robert's mother, Simone, prior to coming to this House, in what was then the Lovell and Christmas bacon company. Many happy days were spent there. I know that, today, as a mother, her heart is breaking. We continue to pray for Bertie's life to be preserved as he makes, we trust, a recovery. As a parent and a grandparent, I cannot begin — nor can anyone in this Chamber today — to imagine the sorrow and the heartbreak that have descended on the Christie home.

I had the opportunity yesterday afternoon to spend some time with the principal of Knockahollet Primary School, Mr Gerry Black. I pay tribute to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, in the person of Mr Ray Gilbert, for all the help that he gave yesterday afternoon in ensuring that the staff of the school, in the best way possible, could prepare for what they had to deal with this morning as they visited the classroom in the absence of Robert. I pay tribute to and remember in our thoughts the minister and congregation of Ballyweaney Presbyterian Church as they prepare for the funeral service tomorrow, and those members of Ballinaloob Gospel Hall whose afternoon Sunday school Robert attended.

Let us not be unmindful of the huge work and dedication that was shown by our emergency services: the Coastguard, Fire Service, Ambulance Service, Police Service, Post Office service staff, and the Causeway and Royal Victoria hospitals. We are very quick, sometimes, to be critical; it does us all well to be thankful for what they have done.

I want to leave the House with words that we would all do well to contemplate, even as we consider the funeral tomorrow and the days that lie ahead. Human comfort is so many times limited, but when we turn to the word of God, it tells us in the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 33:

"The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms".

It is our prayer that the Christie family may know those everlasting arms today and in the days, weeks and months that lie ahead.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I rise to add to the messages of condolences for the Christie family. The events of the weekend sent shock waves throughout the north Antrim area, the local community in Knockahollett and Dunloy, and the farming community across the North. The tragedy echoes the accident a number of years ago involving the Spence family and highlights, as

the proposer of the debate said, how dangerous farms can be.

Many people do not realise how dangerous slurry tanks are. I spoke recently to a constituent whose father was overwhelmed when dealing with slurry and has been shaken and nervous about carrying out that farm duty ever since. Nobody should underestimate how dangerous the farm place is.

Like other Members, I commend the emergency services for their swift actions and efforts on Saturday, and for their ongoing efforts to save the life of Bertie in hospital. The small community in Knockahollett is tightly knit. I travel through it frequently. The Ballynalooob Road is a short road from Dunloy and The Drones to Ballycastle that I frequently use. It will forever be etched in my memory for, unfortunately, the events of the weekend.

They will be in all our thoughts and prayers as the school and Church community there struggle to deal with what is an unimaginable loss for many of us, particularly those of us with young families. It must be an unbearable loss for any family to suffer. Our thoughts and prayers are certainly with the family and community in Knockahollett in the time ahead.

Mr Byrne: As agriculture spokesperson for my party, I very much sympathise with the Christie family on the tragic loss of young Robert and hope that his father will recover. I commend Mr Allister for bringing this notice to the Chamber.

Obviously, farming is a dangerous business. One of the sad things is that young boys love to be around the whole farming enterprise, and that is what is so heart-rending for those in the farming community. All I can say is that our prayers and sympathy are with the family and community in the Dunloy area. Going forward, I hope that these farm accidents will lessen. The Farm Safety Partnership offers some hope for the future, but that is for another day. We totally support the expressions of sympathy and condolences to the family.

12.15 pm

Mr Swann: I thank Jim for bringing the matter to the House to allow us all to express our sympathy and support for the Christie family.

No family should ever have to go through the pain of the loss of a child in any circumstance, and especially not in circumstances like this. Our thoughts and prayers will be with the Christie family in the difficult days that lie

ahead, and tomorrow, at the funeral of young Robert in Ballyweaney Presbyterian Church, where the family will get a chance to say a final farewell to their son.

However, we have to bear in our thoughts that, at that time, Simone, Isobel and Alice will be going through a very difficult day without the presence and guiding hand of husband and father, Bertie, as he recovers. Everyone in the House hopes that Bertie recovers to full strength and can come back to his family. We all must realise just how fragile the thread of life is when we are talking about somebody as precious, bubbly and vivacious as young Robert was, as has been described by his headmaster and the pastor who looked after his Sunday school. As we all recognise, farms are a dangerous place, but, as we all know in Northern Ireland, they are also a family place. We remember and think of the Christie family at this time.

Mrs Cochrane: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I echo the comments that have already been made and extend our sympathy to the whole Christie family following the terrible circumstances at the weekend. We hope that Bertie can make a full recovery. Yet again, we are focused on a farm tragedy, made all the worse because a young child was involved. We have had similar tragedies in recent times, and many ask how these accidents are still able to happen. Unfortunately, the situation is that there is no such thing as a safe slurry tank, and we all need to recognise the dangers that our farmers put themselves in on a day-to-day basis. Our thoughts and prayers will remain with the Christie family and the wider community in the days, weeks and months ahead.

Mr McCallister: I want to associate myself with the very many comments and expressions of sympathy that have been made in the Chamber, from all sides. Mr Allister, quite rightly, in bringing forward the matter, highlighted several things, including the support that the family will need, tomorrow at the funeral and in the days, weeks, months and years that lie ahead. We hope and pray that the husband and father makes a full recovery.

The statistic that Mr Allister quoted to highlight the dangers of farming was that 40 lives have been lost in six years. That is a startling statistic, and I say that as someone from a farming background who was in full-time farming for a number of years before coming to the House, and I say it as a father.

The pain and sense of loss that the family must feel today is something that no one should have to face. There is a break in the natural cycle of things when burying a child, particularly a child of such a tender age. It must be devastating for any family and community to face up to. As colleagues have said, it is vital that the schools, the Church and all the surrounding community stand with the family and support them in the time ahead. I am sure that the family is very much in the thoughts and prayers of the entire House. On my part, I will keep them in my thoughts and prayers in the months and years ahead.

Mr Frew: I commend the Member for bringing this forward as a Matter of the Day. My heart, my thoughts and my prayers are with the Christie family today. They are a very well-known and respected family in the area and in the wider north Antrim area. My thoughts and prayers go to Bertie as, hopefully, he will recover, along with his wife Simone and daughters Isobel and Alice. I pray, Lord, that they get through this not only in the next few hours and days that follow, with the help and support of the community and everyone joining with them, but in the lonely times when, hopefully, Bertie will recover and everyone is away from the house and they are left with their own thoughts. They still have to work the farm, and our thoughts and prayers will be with them always. Their wider family circle reaches far, even to my home village of Broughshane, where they have extended family who have also experienced tragedies of the same ilk. Our thoughts and prayers go out to them also at this very sad time.

Our thoughts and prayers should be with the emergency services who were able to react but, sadly, were not able to save eight-year-old Robert's young life. We should commend their work and their professionalism. Our thoughts and prayers should also go to the professionals and the workers of the Health and Safety Executive because they will have to investigate this incident. We should also acknowledge the work that the Ulster Farmers' Union has done lately with the farm safety partnership in trying to raise awareness of the dangers of the farm. This is one of the most difficult and most lethal health and safety issues on-farm. This is a killer that sneaks up and which you cannot see, smell or hear.

Although questions will be raised, we should reflect on the loss and pain that the family must bear now. Our thoughts and prayers will be with them forever.

Mr McMullan: Today is a day of tragedy. As my party's agriculture spokesperson, I want to convey our deepest sympathies and condolences to the Christie family, who have lost an eight-year-old child only on the threshold of life. That child had everything to live for, and now we have lost him. It is every parent's worst nightmare to have to bury your own child. I had the experience of that with my sister.

We know the dangers of working on a farm. It is one of the most dangerous places that anybody could work and here we have another example of that. We pray that Bertie Christie makes a full recovery and returns to the family, because they will need the head of the house there for guidance in the days, weeks and years ahead. My party's deepest sympathies and condolences go out to the family today.

Mr D McIlveen: I, too, rise to extend my deepest sympathies to the Christie family at this time, when I do not think that any of us can fully see the depths that this family has now been plunged into. For all of us who live in a rural constituency and who represent a rural constituency, whenever we hear of an incident on a farm such as this, our hearts always sink when we think of the impact that it has on a farming community, which is more than a community; the relationship that farmers have with one another is more like a family, particularly in an area such as this. To hear that it was affecting the North Antrim constituency made it all the more poignant for those of us who have the privilege of representing that area.

We wish Robert senior a speedy recovery. We hope that he will return to full health and strength as quickly as possible.

We extend our deepest and sincerest sympathies to Simone, Isobel and Alice as they try to get on with life in the aftermath of this terrible and immeasurable tragedy.

My colleague Mr Storey quoted scripture as a form of comfort. I do not believe that, in my three years here, that is something that I have ever done. However, when I thought about the family and the depths to which they had been plunged, one verse came to mind. It is Psalms chapter 116, verse 15, in which David says:

"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."

I believe that little Robert, although his life on this earth was cut far too short, is now with his God in heaven and has an eternity to enjoy in a

much better place than here. Although the Christie family's lives on this earth will never be the same in the aftermath of this terrible tragedy, I hope that they can take credit and comfort from the fact that their little boy is in a much better place.

Mr Irwin: My sympathy goes out to the Christie family on the tragic death of their son, Robert. I, probably more than most in the House, know the awful pain that comes from losing a child, having lost a young son myself just over 17 years ago. My thoughts and prayers are with the family in the days ahead. They will be very difficult for the family. We hope and pray that the Lord will be with them and be their guide through those difficult days.

Mrs Foster: I just want to add my voice of condolence and sympathy to the Christie family. I did not know little Robert Christie, but when I looked at the photographs of him, I felt as if I did, because I, too, have a young boy who is mad about farming and who would spend all his days on the farm if he could. When I looked at the little photograph of him sitting on a tractor, my heart just broke as I thought of the pain that the family is going through now. He is the youngest child and the only son. There will be very many difficult days ahead. I hope that the Christie family find great comfort from their faith. I hope that they find great comfort from the fact that the community will rally around them. I pay tribute to the school, the board and the emergency services.

As Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I also want to pay tribute to those from the Health and Safety Executive who will investigate the matter. I never like to get a phone call from the chief executive of the Health and Safety Executive at the weekend. Unfortunately, that is what I got on Saturday afternoon. When I saw his number, I knew that there had been a tragedy somewhere in Northern Ireland. When it involves a child, it is always much more difficult to take in and deal with.

Children on farms can be particularly vulnerable. We will continue to work with local schools and the Farm Safety Partnership. This is not a day for looking at what needs to be done about farm safety. However, I will say this: there is a lot of information and advice out there on safe farming. I ask that people stop for a moment and think safe, because the consequences are too painful to think about, as indeed the Christie family have to deal with now and for the rest of their lives.

Ministerial Statement

Consumer Representation in Northern Ireland: Public Consultation

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will inform Members of the outcome of the public consultation on future consumer representation arrangements in Northern Ireland.

In October 2012, DETI commissioned an independent review of the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland to ensure that the council's consumer advocacy role in Northern Ireland is delivered by the most appropriate body or bodies; is structured and positioned correctly in government or otherwise; is operating efficiently and effectively; and is fit for purpose in moving forward with the Executive's consumer and wider economic aims.

During the review, a number of stakeholders were consulted on their views of the council and areas for potential improvement. The review concluded that the Consumer Council has been responsive to consumers and effective as an organisation. However, it also concluded that the political and consumer landscape has changed significantly since the council was formed in 1985 and that the continued existence of the Consumer Council may no longer be essential to consumers, nor may it be the most cost-effective mechanism for consumer representation in Northern Ireland.

12.30 pm

The review recommended the abolition of the Consumer Council and the transfer of its functions, apart from the regulated industries function, to Citizens Advice NI. That recommendation is reflective of the recent changes that have been made to the consumer landscape in Great Britain, where Citizens Advice has assumed responsibility for consumer representation.

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

Following consideration of the review report and its recommendations, I decided that there should be a public consultation on the future arrangements for consumer representation in Northern Ireland. I launched the consultation with a statement to the Assembly on 14 October.

Three main options for the future delivery of consumer representation in Northern Ireland were presented for comment. Those were: the continuation of the current Consumer Council model of an arm's-length body of the Executive to represent the consumer; the establishment of an independent consumer representative body outside government; and the abolition of the council and the transfer of the consumer representation role, including the regulated industries role, to an existing non-government advice body or bodies.

In addition to seeking written responses, six public meetings were arranged at venues across Northern Ireland. The consultation closed on 17 January 2014, and I can now advise the Assembly of its conclusions. A total of 286 written responses were received during the consultation. I thank those who took the opportunity to provide their views either in writing or at the public meetings. I have now had the opportunity to consider carefully the issues that were raised. The consultation responses, records of the meetings and a report providing an analysis of the issues that were raised are being made available on the departmental website.

Overall, the consultation demonstrated strong support for the retention of the current non-departmental public body (NDPB) model for the delivery of consumer representation in Northern Ireland. There was minimal support for the transfer of the consumer representation function to Citizens Advice, as recommended in the independent review of the Consumer Council.

Concern was expressed that the changes that have been made to the consumer landscape in Great Britain, with the transfer of the consumer representation role to Citizens Advice, have not had the opportunity to bed down yet and that an assessment of their impact and effectiveness would be required before Northern Ireland should consider adopting a similar approach. However, while there was support for the retention of the NDPB, there was also a view that there was scope to improve the current representation model, and respondents highlighted the need to reform and streamline its role and approach.

Some concerns were raised about the Consumer Council's visibility and accessibility, particularly outside greater Belfast, and about the level of awareness on the part of the consumer regarding the current consumer representation roles and structures in Northern Ireland. The need for greater collaboration and partnership among advice and consumer

representation bodies in Northern Ireland was also raised.

Strengthening the consumer representation body's independence was a recurring theme in the consultation, with some respondents asking that Northern Ireland's consumer representation body be given the same powers of access to information as those enjoyed by Consumer Focus in Great Britain, though without being specific about what advantages such changes could bring. Suggestions were also made regarding the departmental sponsorship of the body and the status of the body as a possible non-ministerial Department.

Taking into account the responses that were received to the public consultation and the issues that stakeholders raised during the review of the Consumer Council, I have decided that Northern Ireland's consumer representation role should continue to be delivered by a non-departmental public body and that the Consumer Council should continue to operate as that NDPB. However, that does not mean that there is no room for improvement. On the contrary; the review report and the subsequent consultation exercise identified areas for improvement where changes could be made to ensure that the consumer is better served when it comes to representation and advice. Therefore, in retaining the Consumer Council as Northern Ireland's regional consumer representation body, my Department will take forward a number of improvement actions, which I will now outline.

The council's key priorities and objectives, structures and funding for 2014-15 and subsequent financial years must be focused on issues that are of regional significance to the Northern Ireland consumer, with a clearer focus on the outputs that are to be delivered.

Detailed annual work plans will be agreed with the council to support the funding provided by DETI and DRD. The size of the Consumer Council board will also be reduced to levels consistent with the size of the boards of many other NDPBs. A communication strategy for consumers will be developed to explain and raise awareness of existing consumer representation bodies in Northern Ireland and to provide clarity on their respective roles and responsibilities.

My Department will work with the Department for Social Development to ensure greater collaboration between the consumer and advice sectors, with the aim of improving effectiveness of representation and value for money. An operating protocol will be agreed with the

council in consultation with DRD and DSD to reflect and underpin the new operating arrangements.

In conjunction with my Executive colleagues, I will give further consideration to the sponsorship arrangements of the council. However, I am not aware of any situation in which the council's representational role has been compromised as a consequence of the current DETI sponsorship role.

I have noted the desire expressed for the council to be given similar statutory powers for access to information as enjoyed by Consumer Focus in Great Britain. The council currently has such powers for energy, water, sewerage, postal and transport services. During the consultation, no specific evidence was presented to indicate that the council has been impeded in its role through inability to access information or by a lack of cooperation by organisations that it has investigated. In the absence of such evidence, there is currently no basis for pursuing the legislative powers being sought. Furthermore, the introduction of such a statutory power could be viewed as counter to the general approach to deregulation and the easing of red tape burden.

All arm's-length bodies are subject to periodic review to ensure that ministerial priorities and statutory commitments continue to be delivered in the most cost-effective manner. The review of the Consumer Council and the outcome of the consultation on the future delivery of consumer representation has been a continuation of that process of ensuring value for money in the use of public funds. The council will continue to be subject to periodic review over time, and we will continue to learn from the experiences and evaluation of the reformed consumer landscape in Great Britain and from developments elsewhere.

I recognise that the review and consultation has created uncertainty for the staff of the Consumer Council and for its board, and I commend their commitment in continuing to serve the needs of Northern Ireland consumers during this time. I commend the statement to the Assembly.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for her statement. In her concluding remarks, she referred to the uncertainty that the review has created among staff. We in the House should

take this opportunity to place on record our compliments to those staff for their work.

That leads me on to my next point: resources. As we know, in times of recession and difficulties, issues such as poverty, fuel poverty and general consumer issues become much more of a priority and a focus for many families. Indeed, people are getting it very tight at the moment. Therefore, what guarantee will the Minister give about financial resources for the Consumer Council to carry out that work?

The statement refers to statutory powers and that there was:

"desire expressed for the council to be given similar statutory powers for access to information as enjoyed by Consumer Focus in Great Britain."

The Minister referred to the absence of such evidence. Could she please clarify what attempts were made by her Department or those acting on behalf of her Department, including Mr Simpson, who conducted the review, to look at the role of Consumer Focus and its responsibilities and duties and how those could be read across to the Consumer Council in the North?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chair for his questions and comments. We say to the staff and the board of the Consumer Council that we very much appreciate that this has been an uncertain period for them.

We look forward to moving ahead with the appointment of a substantive chief executive. The post has been vacant since last August. Aodhan O'Donnell has been acting up and doing a very good job, but I am sure that we will now want to move to the point at which we have a substantive chief executive in place.

Resources for the Consumer Council rely on two parts of its functions. First, for its statutory functions, it has to have enough resources to comply with the needs there. As I stated, those are energy, water, sewerage, postal and transport services. So that will come as a matter of course. We will look at how best to get value for money in terms of the consumer advocacy role. In the past, we also funded other bodies to provide advice and assistance, and we will look at which is the best-placed body to deal with those issues moving forward.

I said that no evidence was put forward for more statutory powers. The reason is that it was one of those issues about which people

said that we should have the same statutory powers as Great Britain but left it at that and did not look at what they actually wanted. That is why I do not believe that there is any evidence for widening the scope of statutory powers. Indeed, I argue that the Consumer Council really needs to focus now on the powers that it has.

One of the criticisms levelled when the review was taking place was that the Consumer Council tried to do too much instead of focusing on the issues that it really needed to be engaged in. I have already discussed that with the chair and deputy chair of the Consumer Council, and I am sure that we can work together to provide a very clear work plan so that consumers, who are the most important part of this story, know exactly whom to go to and where to go when they need advice and assistance. So, instead of widening the powers, I think that the Consumer Council needs to focus on the powers that it has at present and how it can best deal with those.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that Members will appreciate that Committee Chairs are given some latitude. There is now an opportunity for Members to ask the Minister a question on her statement.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement. I trust that it will go some way to ending the uncertainty over the future of the Consumer Council. Does the Minister recognise the need for improvement in how the Consumer Council interfaces and communicates with other bodies, such as Citizens Advice and other financial/debt advice groups?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. That was one of the key elements of Mr Simpson's review. He found that the whole landscape had changed since the Consumer Council was set up in 1985 in that a number of bodies now undertake an advice and consumer representation role, be that Advice NI, the citizens advice bureaux, the Trading Standards Service or many other organisations.

DSD recently set up the Northern Ireland Advice Services Consortium, principally to ensure that there is engagement right across the field with the Department. I believe that the Consumer Council should be part of the consortium so that we get a holistic view of what is happening in this whole area. I hope that there will be more partnership working. I understand that, in some cases, bodies compete against each other for funding

applications and what have you, but it is important that we have a very clear focus on what is to be delivered for the consumer. I hope that there is more partnership working in the future through the Northern Ireland Advice Services Consortium.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht do ráitis agus as an deis a thug sí dom agus do chathaoirleach an choiste chun an ráiteas seo aici a phlé. The Minister states that the key priorities and objectives are to be agreed with DETI and reflect regional consumer issues. However, a priority for DETI might not be a priority for consumers, which will be determined in the forward work programme and will have been publicly consulted on. How will the Minister's Department address the tension between the two and respect the independence of the Consumer Council and its role to tackle consumer issues?

12.45 pm

Mrs Foster: The Consumer Council has, of course, operational independence and that is something that will continue into the future. As I said, a number of options were put before me in relation to consumer representation. I believe that NDPB status is the best way forward because NDPBs retain their operational independence, but, at the same time, are accountable to Ministers for what they do. I think that that is important, because, at the end of the day, the Consumer Council is funded through public funds, and, if there is no ministerial accountability, where is the accountability for the use of public funds? Of course, the Consumer Council will want to bring forward its work programme. It will discuss what it wants to do in future with DETI and DRD, and that will be agreed. That is a good, collaborative way of moving forward. If issues arise during the year that need attention, the Consumer Council will address them, as it has, quite effectively, in the past. So, I do not think that there is any tension between its operational independence and the fact that it is accountable to DETI and to me as Minister.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome the continuation of the General Consumer Council as a non-departmental public body with a somewhat reduced size but with improvements to ensure that consumers are better represented and better served. The issue relating to the perceived independence of the Consumer Council will continue, especially considering the scrutiny that the body carries out on energy

affairs, which are under the responsibility of the sponsoring Department. In her statement, the Minister refers to giving further consideration to the sponsorship arrangements for the council. What will the nature of those further considerations be?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. The only reduction in respect of the Consumer Council will be in the size of the board. At present, it can have a board of up to 16. That is not where it sits at the moment; I think that it sits with 10, with the chair and the deputy chair. I do not believe that a board of 16 is required, especially when you look at other NDPBs, particularly those in my Department. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has a chair, a deputy chair and eight members, and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has a chair and six members, but, in July, that will rise to eight members. We are talking about a reduction to around that size.

Some consultation responses indicated that, perhaps, another Department would be better placed to be the sponsor Department. We shall certainly be looking at those alternatives — the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, for example, or the Department of Finance and Personnel. Those are things that we will consider.

One of the reasons why we decided to keep the NDPB and not move to an abolition was that so many changes have occurred in Great Britain recently, and we want to see how they bed in. We particularly want to see how the consumer representation role moves ahead with the work of the citizens advice bureaux in Great Britain. Of course, any NDPB is subject to review, and the Consumer Council will be subject to review again in future.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the statement and the confirmation of the continuation of the Consumer Council, even in its slimmed-down role. The statement indicates, and the Minister has already indicated, that, frankly, we have more than enough advice services in Northern Ireland. Are we moving towards a situation in which the Consumer Council will maintain its role under its statutory responsibilities, but, perhaps, have it extended at some stage, and where Citizens Advice will do the casework?

Mrs Foster: Those were some of the issues that we had to grapple with during the consultation. For my part, I hope that the Consumer Council can complement the work that is carried out in other bodies like the citizens advice bureaux, Advice NI and Trading

Standards. That is why I am keen for them to work in partnership with those bodies so that they are not doing the same things, because that would not be a good use of public money. I think that the Member will accept that.

There is not a slimmed-down role here; there is a more focused role. There is no reduction in staff numbers. The only reduction that I think should be made is in the number of board members. I think that most people will welcome the fact that we need to be more focused and, indeed, that we need to communicate better with those all-important consumers on where they access the appropriate level of consumer representation.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her statement today on this important issue. Of course, all arm's-length bodies are subject to periodic review. Does she have anything in mind regarding the periods between reviews? How will she monitor the performance of the Consumer Council in between times?

Mrs Foster: He is right to say that all NDPBs, at least those under my Ministry, have to be reviewed. We had the review of Invest Northern Ireland. We are currently finishing off the review of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The Health and Safety Executive chief executive has asked me when he is going to be reviewed. It is important, when we are dealing with public funds, that we carry out these reviews periodically.

The last time the Consumer Council was reviewed was 1999. We have been a little tardy in looking at the Consumer Council. I think that fifteen years is too long a period of time; perhaps every five to seven years would be a good time, and then it would not be such a big deal. I recall that some in the House indicated that I had a predetermined view about what was going to happen to the Consumer Council. The conspiracy theorists were having a great time with what was going to happen, so much so that one of our papers had a campaign to save the Consumer Council. In fact, what we were doing was to make sure that the correct use of public money was taking place. That is what we endeavour to do. If we move forward in a focused way, we will ensure that that is the case.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for the statement today. Quite clearly, there is a discrete regional socio-economic profile, and the Minister reflected that in her response. The issue for any body that enjoys funding from the public purse is accountability and efficiency.

The normal value-for-money requirement is well stated.

I note the Minister's comment about red tape. In considering the matter of more Departments becoming involved in sponsorship, there is the possibility that that will not contribute to efficient line management. In fact, it could be quite the opposite. I hope that the Minister will give careful consideration to that. The —

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

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Yes. Thank you. The key question for me is: if we have the situation of ongoing review, is it possible that the Assembly could be advised of the different remits of the Consumer Council as is and Consumer Focus in Britain, to see what the issues that the Minister was not able to respond to on this occasion might be? If that information is not available, I am quite content for the Minister to reply in writing.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his questions. I do not envisage there being two sponsor Departments. I envisage, perhaps after discussion — I am not suggesting that this is the case, and I am certainly not predetermining the discussion. Is DETI the right sponsor Department? Should we move it to DFP or OFMDFM? I am not suggesting more than one sponsor Department, because that I do not think that that would work. It would add more bureaucracy. I am more than happy to be the sponsor Department and to move forward on that basis.

The roles of Consumer Focus have been transferred to the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux in Great Britain. That was taken into account by Paul Simpson in his work. It probably largely influenced the review work that he carried out. We want to wait to see how that beds in in Great Britain to see whether there are any advantages in that mechanism. I certainly believe that, here in Northern Ireland, we should move ahead with a partnership approach to make sure that the consumer has the correct level of representation. Some good work has been carried out by the Consumer Council in the past. We want to build on that good work and have more of a focus on outcomes in the future. That is where I hope we will be.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for her statement, which expresses concerns about the visibility and accountability of the Consumer Council outside the greater Belfast area.

Minister, how do you intend to address that issue in order to ensure that there is equality across the Province and that every citizen has an opportunity to make use of the Consumer Council?

Mrs Foster: That point was raised during the consultation and, as a rural MLA, I take it very seriously. I think it is a perception more than a reality. As someone who uses the Consumer Council on a constituency basis, I know that it travels west when asked to do so. However, it raises a very interesting point about perceptions and communication, which I hope the board and the Consumer Council team will tackle. It is not a Belfast organisation, it is an organisation for the whole of Northern Ireland, and, if there are difficulties and problems that need to be attended to across Northern Ireland, then it should be available in those areas just as it is here in Belfast.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister for her statement. There is a theme emerging around the issue of review. While the Minister acknowledged that the report into the Consumer Council has, in itself, injected a considerable degree of uncertainty around its future, can she assure the House that the review process that has been talked about does not provoke some uncertainty given the scope within which she has already reflected, and that there is a need for a very strong and robust Consumer Council, not for its own sake but for that of the consumer?

Mrs Foster: I am happy to agree with the Member's last point. The Consumer Council is there for a reason; the consumer. Therefore, that should be where the focus is and not on institutional bodies. That was always at the front of my mind when we were looking at this review and is why I came up with the determination that I have.

Going forward, I want to bring stability and certainty to the staff and board of the Consumer Council, which is why I am making this statement today. Its existence will continue, but now we need to move forward and work together to be more focused and work with the other institutions that I mentioned so that we can have a more joined-up and complementary approach to providing advice and assistance to the consumer.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for her statement, which I welcome. The report says that the review showed that the Consumer Council was responsive to consumers and was certainly effective as an organisation. I concur

with that. The Minister mentioned the chief executive officer vacancy, and I know that the chair and vice-chair positions are coming up later in the year. What are her views on that?

Mrs Foster: I hope to move, along with colleagues on the board and particularly the chief executive, Rick Hill, to start the process to appoint the new chief executive as quickly as possible. I bear in mind that Rick's term comes to an end in December and I have spoken to him about that issue. He has helpfully said that he will help with the transition, so, if there are difficulties, he will remain in post until the new chair is appointed.

I want to have the substantive chief executive appointed as quickly as possible so that we can then move to deal with the other issues around the board.

Executive Committee Business

Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2014

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 be approved.

The uprating order is an annual order which sets out the rates of contributory and non-contributory benefits together with the various allowances and premiums that make up the income-related benefits.

Generally, the new amounts from April each year are based on the increase in the general level of prices over the 12 months ending the previous September measured using the consumer prices index (CPI), which is the measure of price inflation considered most appropriate for the purpose by the UK Government at Westminster.

1.00 pm

I am aware that there has been some debate in the past about whether CPI or the retail prices index (RPI) should be used as the measure, and some people argue that using CPI will cost less. Clearly, there is no perfect measure of inflation, but uprating by CPI ensures that, at the very least, benefit levels maintain their value against inflation. In addition, some commentators consider that it better reflects the inflation experience of pensioners and benefit recipients.

This year, however, because of the national economic situation, the Westminster Government decided to limit the uprating of certain working-age benefits to 1%. The Welfare Benefits Up-rating Act 2013 provides for an increase of 1% in the majority of working-age benefits and statutory payments in Great Britain for the 2014-15 and 2015-16 years. I stress that my Department has no power to increase benefits by a different or greater percentage to that provided for in orders made by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Basic state pension is increased by 2.7% to £113.10, which is an increase of £2.95 a week, and the minimum guarantee in state pension credit by the same amount, taking a single

person's weekly income to £148.35, and for couples the increase will be £4.45, taking their new total to £226.50 a week.

Those facing additional costs because of their disability and who have less opportunity to increase their income through paid employment have seen their benefits rise by the increase in CPI. Therefore, disability living allowance, attendance allowance, carer's allowance and the main rate of incapacity benefit have all risen by 2.7%, as did the employment and support allowance support group component and those disability-related premiums that are paid with pension credit and working-age benefits. Other benefits have been increased by 1%.

As a result of the uprating order, we will be spending an additional £108 million on social security in 2013-14, and that is money that will go into the local economy.

I fully appreciate that many of us wish that we could do more, but, as I have already stated, my Department is only empowered to set the same rates of benefits as those payable in Great Britain.

I am sure that all Members will wish to ensure that people in Northern Ireland, including some of the most vulnerable in our society, can continue to receive these new increased rates of benefit and will, therefore, join me in supporting the order.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for tabling the motion.

The Committee for Social Development first considered the Department's proposal to make this annual uprating order at its meeting on 13 February 2014. When this was originally proposed, the Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the regulations, but with the very clear caveat that it had a number of concerns, particularly about the scale or level of the increase.

Those concerns related to the fact, which the Minister has addressed, that uprating the benefits either in line with CPI or at the 1% rate effectively represented a real-terms cut. As many Members will be aware, when NICVA carried out its report on welfare reform and the costs associated with it, it factored in the 1% increase over a number of years, which brought another figure, an additional £300 million, out of the local economy. Members made that clear at the Committee meeting.

When the statutory rule was subsequently brought before the Committee on 20 March, the Committee was content to recommend that it be confirmed by the Assembly, although the same views were expressed that the uprating, as it was called, would in fact represent a real-terms cut in benefits.

The implementation of the uprating proposals is expected to increase the Department's annually managed expenditure by approximately £108 million. The uprating order also includes provision to increase the weekly rate of ordinary and additional statutory paternity pay and statutory adoption pay, and those are responsibilities that lie with the Department for Employment and Learning. DSD has informed the Committee that it has consulted the Department for Employment and Learning and that DEL is content with these proposals.

I place on the record the concerns expressed by the majority, if not all, of the Committee members when the matters were discussed in Committee. With those concerns noted, the Committee recommends that the rule be confirmed by the Assembly. It is also important to point out that, if the regulations are not agreed to and the motion is not passed, the Department will have no legal authority to make the increase, even though it is by a small amount.

Mr Copeland: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I will make a few brief comments on the uprating order. It is an annual exercise, with little changing from year to year, so, to a degree, the issues that faced us last year still apply.

We appreciate that it is the Welfare Benefits Up-rating Act 2013 that provides for the 1% increase in the majority of working-age benefits and that that is still to apply for another two years. However, as I have said in the past, the Minister will no doubt be aware that the majority of children living in poverty in Northern Ireland now live in low-paid working households. The order will not support them. In our view, it will do the opposite. I hope that the Minister is keeping a watching brief on the impacts of the cap. I wonder whether he can inform us of what discussions he has held with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on its intentions post-2015-16.

On some of the other benefits affected, I welcome the 2.7% increase in the basic state pension, disability living allowance, attendance allowance and the main rate of incapacity benefit. However, I stress that we must ensure that an inequality does not begin to build

between those people in receipt of differing means of support. I am fully supportive of the pension, for example, being increased in line with the rate of CPI —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr Copeland: — but we need to remember that tax credits, maternity allowance and maternity pay are still very important benefits to the people who are in receipt of them. Therefore, the sooner that they can revert, the better for us.

On a slightly separate note, I wish to make a comment on the timing of the order. It is my understanding that the Minister sought Executive approval for his paper in February, and, as we have heard, the increase came into operation in April. However, it is only now being brought to the Assembly for approval. I realise that the order is subject to the confirmatory procedure, which means that it is first made and then must only come to the Assembly within six months. That makes me wonder what the point of today's debate really is and whether we are merely ticking boxes.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Chair has summed up the Committee's views on the legislation. I agree with Mr Copeland that the uprating happens in April every year, yet it is a number of months after that the Minister is bringing it to the Assembly. The Committee certainly had reservations about the 1% freeze in benefits for the next three years, which, again, is part of the Tory policy of cutting benefits. As the Chair said, it has been recorded that Committee members had a lot of reservations about the legislation, but the difficulty is that, if it does not get through, benefits may well be affected.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Fra McCann.

Mr F McCann: It has already been said. I have nothing further to add.

Mr Wilson: I support the order that the Minister is bringing in. On some of the points that have been made, yes, the Committee did look at the issue. We all understand that the degree of increase is set centrally by government. We all understand the difficulties that many people on low incomes and benefits are having to face, but there are two considerations that we have to make.

The first, which has been reiterated by all the Sinn Féin Members who have spoken, is that

this comes from Westminster, and, if we do not implement it, there will be consequences. The odd thing is that, although it is taken on this issue, that stance has not been taken on other issues of welfare reform that will have consequences for the public purse. I am sure that the Finance Minister will raise that later on.

The second issue, which I just want to mention, because he would not take the intervention, is one that Mr Copeland raised. We accept the point that he made about the difficulties with small increases, especially as the cost of living has increased by more than the uprate in benefits, and we recognise the difficulty that that causes for people on benefits. Nevertheless, the same problem is being faced by people in employment, including those who are in low-paid employment. I doubt very much whether there is anyone in the Assembly who would make the argument that we should increase benefits at a greater rate than wages are increasing, making it even less attractive for people to go into work. We are not talking about the wages of people who are very well paid; we are also talking about wages of people who are on low pay.

There are two reasons to support it, which I and other Members outlined. First of all, it is something that comes from Westminster that, if we ignore, will create greater difficulties for people. That is an important lesson, if only Sinn Féin applied it right across the spectrum of the debate on welfare and welfare reform. The point that I think is important for all of us is that we make sure that any actions that are taken in this Assembly do not make work less attractive for people who are in employment and who may face a situation where they are caught in a trap if benefits outstrip the increase in wages. For those two reasons, I support the order.

Mr McCausland: I am glad that there is a consensus of support across the Assembly for the uprating order, while acknowledging that various Members raised concerns and talked about a desire to be able to do more. However, as I said in my introductory remarks, the fact of the matter is that legislation does not enable my Department to diverge from Great Britain at all on the matter.

I thank the Chairman and his colleagues on the Social Development Committee for the way in which they have dealt with the matter. The fact of the matter is that all that I can do is commend the order to the Assembly. I am certain that Members will at least welcome the increase in the rates of benefits provided for by the uprating order. I should also say in the light of the earlier discussion that I think that

Members should reflect on some of the important points that Mr Wilson made about the background to the order. I am certain that we will all welcome the proposed increase, and I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 be approved.

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2014-15

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours for the debate. The Minister will have up to 60 minutes to allocate, as he wishes, between proposing and making a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have 10 minutes. I remind Members that the vote on this motion requires cross-community support.

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

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £8,411,921,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 and that resources, not exceeding £9,168,609,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1-3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2014-15 that was laid before the Assembly on 28 May 2014.

As has been set out, this debate covers the Supply resolution. The resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of the 2014-15 spending

plans of Departments and other public bodies as set out in the Main Estimates.

The Main Estimates were laid in the Assembly on Wednesday 28 May 2014.

1.15 pm

The resolution relates to the supply of cash and resources for the remainder of 2014-15, as set out in the Main Estimates. A Vote on Account was passed by the Assembly in March, which provided initial allocations for 2014-15 to ensure the continuation of services until the Main Estimates could be presented to the Assembly for approval. The resolution and the Budget Bill that I will introduce later today request the balance to complete the total 2014-15 cash and resource requirements for Departments and other public bodies. The balance amounts to over £8.4 billion of cash and over £9.1 billion of resources.

The requirements have their origins in the final year of the Executive's 2011-15 Budget, which was approved by the previous Assembly on 9 March 2011. It also reflects the demand-led annually managed expenditure (AME). On behalf of the Executive, I request and recommend the levels of Supply that are set out in the resolution under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

As is the norm, accelerated passage is required for the legislation, and, indeed, there is a provision for its use in this specific instance in the Assembly's Standing Orders. I understand that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has agreed to grant accelerated passage. I place on record my appreciation of the Committee's vital role in agreeing that important step in the financial process.

I am sure that Members are aware that the debate on the resolution is time-limited. I encourage Members to use their limited time to focus on the issues that specifically relate to the 2014-15 Supply resolution.

Like previous years, the 2014-15 financial year will present significant challenges for the Assembly in the provision of public services. When the 2010 UK spending review outcome for 2014-15 was set, it provided real terms resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) and capital DEL respectively that were 8% and 40% lower than the 2010-11 baseline.

Since the 2011-15 Budget was agreed in March 2011, a number of issues have changed the 2014-15 financial landscape. Probably the

most important in determining the scale of the Northern Ireland block has been the allocations as a result of subsequent UK autumn statements and Budgets. Those additional allocations also reflected a change in emphasis from resource to capital spending by the UK Government. That means that we are now better off by some £185 million of resource and £247 million of capital compared with the original 2011-15 Budget position.

The increase in resource DEL mainly reflects the reclassification of some elements of our Budget and does not represent any significant increase in spending power. However, the majority of the extra capital represents additional spending power, although some £63 million is in the form of financial transactions capital, which must be used as a loan or equity share to the private sector.

Since 2011, a number of financial exercises have taken place that also impacted on the position. They include a re-profiling of our capital budget, adjustments that resulted from the delay in the A5 road scheme and the Executive's economy and jobs initiative. The outcome of those exercises is reflected in the Estimates and ensure that the necessary resources are in place as early as possible to allow good planning and delivery of essential public services.

The Estimates are seen by many as complex and difficult to understand, and I agree with that assessment. However, it is imperative that we as an Assembly recognise that the Budget Bill underpinned by the Estimates is the key legislation for delivering funding to vital public services such as schools and hospitals. The public services underpinned by the legislation in turn support the wider Northern Ireland economy, and it is vital that we debate the legislation and pass it expeditiously.

We as an Assembly have an obligation to support our economy and encourage growth in our private sector. We must utilise the resources in the Bill in the most effective way possible to ensure that we can provide a sound footing for our businesses, our society and our people.

There are signs that the hard work of the Executive is beginning to take effect. Over the last few years, we have seen stabilisation and, more recently, the beginnings of growth across the economy. According to the May economic update that was published by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Northern Ireland labour market continues to improve. The number of people claiming benefits has

also fallen for the fifteenth month in a row by 8,800 over the period.

The speed of improvement, however, has been slow compared with the UK average. The number of claimants in Northern Ireland fell 16% over the past 15 months compared with a UK average fall of 38%. The unemployment rate between January and March 2014 was 7.2%. That is down 0.9 percentage points over the year and is above the UK rate of 6.8% but well below the European Union average of 10.6% and the Republic of Ireland's rate of 11.9% in February. The local economic inactivity rate is now 26.8%, which is a fall of 0.6% over the past year, but this remains significantly above the UK rate of 21.9%.

Results from the latest Ulster Bank Purchasing Managers' Index survey suggest that local private sector business activity expanded for an eleventh consecutive month in May. April's figure was the sharpest monthly pace of expansion since the survey started in August 2002. The pace recorded was higher than the UK average and behind only London of the 12 UK regions. The local construction industry is also beginning to show signs of improvement, with a rise in workloads reported. There is clearly good progress being made, but there is much still to do.

Over the coming months, there will be a number of critical public expenditure issues to be dealt with, locally and with Her Majesty's Treasury, that will ultimately affect the public purse and the amount of funding that we can utilise in our public services. As we know, the public expenditure environment will continue to be constrained, and we will no doubt make decisions this year that will affect budgets going forward. That is why it is imperative that we work to get budgets right during 2014-15, which would allow us to make the key decisions that are necessary to keep our public finances on a sound footing. I believe that the Estimates before us today are the start of that process.

I look forward to the debate and to debating the expenditure plans contained in the Budget Bill and the Main Estimates. I request the support of Members for the resolution to approve further supply for the 2014-15 financial year to enable vital public services to continue beyond the current provision in the Vote on Account.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On 28 May, DFP officials briefed the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the Main Estimates and the associated Budget (No. 2) Bill, which

gives legislative approval to the Estimates and is to be introduced in the Assembly following this debate. DFP officials also provided a paper to the Committee that, amongst other things, reconciled the figures in the Main Estimates for 2014-15, with the original allocations for 2014-15 in the four-year Budget 2011-15.

The Committee's scrutiny of the Main Estimates focused on establishing the background to and reasons for the changes in the allocations for each Department. The amounts involved were significant, including a total of £157.2 million in resource allocations and almost £237.9 million in capital allocations; and a total of £48.8 million in resource reductions and £267.6 million in capital reductions. There was a total of £30.3 million in resource transfers and £45.6 million in capital transfers with Whitehall Departments plus a range of resource and capital technical adjustments.

In addition to explaining the make-up of these changes during oral evidence, DFP officials provided the summary figures for each Department in writing to the Committee in advance. The largest of the resource allocations applied to the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education. The former received £55.8 million, which includes £21 million for the top-up of student fees and £20 million for NEETs and youth unemployment allocation. For DE, there was an increase in its budget of £75 million, which was agreed by the Executive in 2011.

In considering DFP's position, the Committee noted a capital reduction of £10.1 million and questioned officials on the background to this. In responding, the departmental officials advised that the capital budget for the four-year period was originally quite heavily end-loaded with projects in the 2014-15 year. With additional capital funding available in 2013-14, the Department was asked to identify whether it could bring forward the planned projects for completion, which it was able to do, thereby resulting in the reallocation to the preceding financial year.

Given that there does not appear to be any provision in the DFP Estimate for equal pay, the Committee also queried how any settlement of the PSNI/NIO and Civil Service retiree issues would be funded in 2014-15, if agreed. In responding, officials advised:

"The PSNI/NIO element will be a matter for the Department of Justice."

They said that, in terms of the latter, because of the way that the accounting in the Estimates

works, provision was made in the 2013-14 financial year.

Reference was also made to provision not appearing in the Estimates because Assembly permission to spend it was sought when it was in AME. As that explanation seems quite technical in budgetary terms, perhaps, when concluding today's debate, the Minister can provide us with further clarification on how any settlement of both the PSNI/NIO and Civil Service retiree grievances will be accounted for, including any practical impact on the Executive's DEL resources.

As for the other Departments, the most notable of the amounts in capital allocations was the £92.2 million for DRD, which included £30 million for the A8 Belfast to Larne project. The Department of Health received a significant number of allocations, which totalled £32.9 million, including £15.5 million for the children's hospital, £5 million for the addressing serious risks programme, and £3.5 million for the endoscopy decontamination unit at Belfast City Hospital.

DFP officials also explained the significant reductions, reclassifications and transfers across Departments' budgets for the year. On the latter, for example, they explained that the £129.5 million transfer for DSD relates to movement of housing benefit and social fund from the annually managed expenditure to DEL budgets, which does not represent additional amounts.

On behalf of the Committee, I wish to thank DFP officials for taking members through the reconciliation of the Main Estimates with the original Budget for 2014-15. The Department previously recognised the benefit of having the complete prior-year out-turn information available in advance of the Assembly considering the Supply resolution. In terms of further improvement to the process, if each Department were in a position to brief its Committee early on prior-year outturn, it would enable scrutiny of the incoming budget to be informed by consideration of the prior-year financial performance of each Department.

Following the DFP briefing on 28 May, the Committee agreed, in accordance with Standing Order 42(2), to grant accelerated passage to the Budget (No. 2) Bill 2014, on the basis that it was satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the expenditure proposals in the Bill, and I have advised the Speaker accordingly.

Speaking from a personal and party point of view, for us in Sinn Féin, the Budget was framed to focus on delivering economic growth and, especially in my constituency, increasing tourist numbers, and also improving our international reputation. Unfortunately, the party opposite has undermined a lot of the good work done since devolution to position the North as a place to do business. We do not want to be portrayed, as we have been in recent weeks, as some sort of backwater economically and otherwise.

Of course, the First Minister's comments about ethnic minorities have an economic impact. They have had an international impact, they have been broadcast all across the world, and you would need to be very naive to think that that would not have an impact on investment. Coupled with that are the comments that we are, unfortunately, used to hearing now with regard to the lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) community, and we also find out now from a survey carried out amongst the Democratic Unionist Party that the majority of its members would oppose relatives marrying a Catholic.

All those things coupled together do not paint a good picture of this place and do not paint a good picture of the North; it is making investors think twice about coming to Belfast, coming to Derry and about coming up the road from Dublin. I remember listening to one radio interview in recent weeks and hearing that a potential investor who was coming from Dublin to the North told the person who was bringing him up the road to stop the car once he heard some of the comments that were being made about the Muslim community.

We need to learn from all of that, because, time and time again, some of the ignorant politics that are out there and which we hear within these four walls and outwith in the community are impacting not only on our community in the North but impacting on our economic potential and our potential for economic growth and investment.

1.30 pm

The main aims of the Programme for Government were to grow the economy and tackle disadvantage. Many members of the party opposite see themselves as Tories; about 50% of them, according to their own internal surveys. Many of the party's MPs like to share tea and crumpets with the British Prime Minister.

Mr Wilson: You are jealous. Sure you are trying to get an invitation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McKay: I will take an intervention, if you want.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McKay: Of course, I am sure that Mr Cameron had some interesting things to say about the welfare cuts agenda that his Government want to implement. I am sure that Mr Cameron was telling the DUP MPs, "Keep doing what you are doing, because this is what we want to see: our ideological agenda pushed in London and in Belfast". It is clear that the DUP is wedded to that agenda.

In the British Government's pushing of the welfare cuts agenda, I am interested to hear how the Department of Finance has assessed the costs, and not only in some of the scare-mongering it has been doing in recent weeks. We know that, once this agenda is implemented, a lot of people will be pushed below the poverty line and the breadline. That has other impacts as well, including on health. What impacts will this have in increasing pressure on our health service? How are we going to meet that cost? In terms of employment, with less money circulating in the economy —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McKay: That is going to have an impact on costs to business, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises. These are questions that have been left unanswered, and the Minister needs to discuss them today.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I do not know what planet the previous Member to speak was on. However, when you consider that Sinn Féin Members are talking about the Budget, they maybe know more about aerospace, anyway, than about the Budget or the economy.

I am speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I will cover today the work the Committee has done on scrutiny of the DARD budget for 2014-15, capital and resource. I will mention some of the budgetary and financial issues and constraints that have been debated in the Committee.

The Agriculture Committee takes briefings on budgetary and financial matters on a regular basis as part of its ongoing remit to scrutinise the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. We had our last formal briefing on the Main Estimates, the June monitoring round, 2013-14 out-turn and the savings delivery plans on Tuesday 3 June. That was in preparation for this debate and others that will come to the Assembly over the next few weeks.

During the briefing on the Estimates, the Committee paid particular attention to an amendment or late addition to the budget for £100,000 to allow for initial financial assistance in connection with the Reservoirs Bill. A further £100,000 will be required the following year. This is to enable reservoir managers to meet their initial obligations under the Bill. It is expected that reservoir managers will use this assistance to commission an inspection of their reservoir, if they have not already done so. This will allow DARD to identify those reservoirs that are in need of work, to establish the associated costs of those works and to determine the need and type of a future grant scheme.

Whilst, in the larger scheme of things, this may be small change, it is a major issue for the Committee, in that it addresses some of the key concerns that we have with the Reservoirs Bill at present and the heavy-handed approach in the Bill, which is not, in the Committee's opinion, based on firm evidence.

The Committee is aware that the Department is not normally one of the big spenders when it comes to capital projects. Nevertheless, it is aware that, this year, there are some major capital projects, namely the headquarters relocation, the Going for Growth strategy, flood alleviation measures and modernisation of the specialist estate. When we scrutinised the business plan for 2014-15, we noted that the capital resource was estimated at around £52 million. The capital projects that I have just mentioned are major issues for the Committee from a policy and an expenditure viewpoint, and, as a Committee, we will be following both aspects with great care and attention over the following year.

Another major issue for the Committee that is expected to be resource-heavy in the coming and following years is a new IT system called the Northern Ireland food animal information system (NIFAIS). This is to replace the current animal and public health information system (APHIS). The Committee has been concerned about this because APHIS and its replacement are essential to the agrifood industry, enabling

traceability, and thus trade, within Northern Ireland and internationally. The agrifood industry is vital to the economy of Northern Ireland, so we will be scrutinising this issue with great care and attention from a policy and an expenditure viewpoint. As there are issues of commercial sensitivity around this project, the Committee has arranged a closed session oral briefing on it for late June.

Another major concern of the Committee is CAP and the pillar 1 and pillar 2 aspects. Getting the CAP budget sorted and finalising how it will be spent is probably the most important issue for the Committee at the minute.

I will turn to the budget for pillar 2, or the new rural development programme (RDP) 2014–2020, first. I went back to see what I said about the programme when we debated the Vote on Account in February. Unfortunately, nothing has changed. I could repeat what I said about the Committee's concerns about the budget uncertainty for the RDP and CAP overall and it would still be valid nearly four months later. That is a major issue for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to address and she must bring her proposals to the Executive as soon as possible.

There is a major budget issue that needs to be resolved. The importance of our rural development programme for the rural and farming industries cannot be underestimated. It enables valuable and essential projects, ranging from agrienvironment schemes and farm modernisation to tackling rural isolation and social and economic poverty. The lack of certainty is unsettling but the Committee is to be updated on the rural development programme at its last meeting before summer recess. Let us all hope that we get some details on the programme and the budget at that meeting.

Probably more important is pillar 1 of CAP or the new basic payment scheme to replace the single farm payment. Worth over €300 million a year to Northern Ireland, this EU grant is undergoing changes in the way it is being paid and distributed. I am sure that most Members are aware of the complexities and decision-making difficulties around this issue. Many decisions have been made and have been met with general approval by the industry, but there are two big outstanding issues: the single region versus a two-subregional model for Northern Ireland and the speed of moving to a flat-rate payment system. Both are controversial and both have their supporters and those who oppose them. At this stage,

most, but not all, parties have indicated which side of the fence they are on.

The most important thing the industry needs is clarity and a decision to enable farmers to plan and make key business decisions on how to manage and develop their businesses. It is imperative that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development brings her proposals to the Executive as soon as possible. In fact, it is probably too late for those farmers who need to plan ahead. I do not and cannot understand the delay. This could have been sorted out months ago, and she has been dragging her feet.

Linked but not dependent on CAP funding is the Agri-Food Strategy Board document 'Going for Growth'. This was published in May 2013, with a stated request for £400 million from central government. As the Chamber will be aware, agrifood and this strategy are a key target in the Programme for Government, falling jointly to DARD and DETI.

The agrifood industry is important to Northern Ireland. It has substantial potential to create jobs and wealth that can be spread across Northern Ireland and, with the right financial incentives, that growth could happen soon. The industry tells us that the opportunities are ready to be acted on. Many of the proposals in 'Going for Growth' sit well with the proposals of the rural development programme. There is near-perfect alignment regarding the farm business investment scheme, which is estimated to be worth £250 million.

At our recent briefing on June monitoring, we heard that DARD has made a bid for £1.4 million for a pilot scheme for a farm business improvement scheme. The pilot scheme is to ensure that the £250 million capital investment will do what it is meant to do and that farmers have the tools and know-how to make best use of it. We await the outcomes of that pilot scheme and the worth of it. We also heard that the Department is giving serious consideration to how the farm improvement scheme is to be delivered, whether by using in-house resources or outsourcing, and how the funding will be found.

Another major financial issue concerning the Committee is the budget for the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) exercise to combat bovine TB. DARD has been preparing, for some time, to undertake pilots on the TVR scheme for badgers. In fact, there was considerable media coverage of the long-awaited launch of the TVR exercise last week. We are aware that the scheme could be costly

and have been asking, for some time, for indicative costs and timetables. We now know that it will cost approximately £7.5 million over the next five years, at roughly £1 million to £1.5 million a year. The cost for that is to be met out of the existing budget dedicated to animal health, which in turn is part of the Veterinary Service budget. So there is no new money here. As a Committee, we have asked for further information on that. If it is just reusing existing moneys, what are the consequences? There are projects that are not going to be funded. Have staff been relocated to do it and, if so, from what?

The Committee was previously briefed on the capital funding that DARD will need to deliver flood alleviation measures over the next four financial years, to 2017-18. We heard recently that, in 2014-15, that will require £2.8 million approximately. This is timely, in that we had considerable media coverage last week of the launch by DARD and the Rivers Agency of flood maps. Those maps will inform the work of producing flood-risk management plans for areas of significant risk.

I will just mention, Mr Deputy Speaker, that, last night, I was out until 11.00 pm and did not sleep until 3.00 am because I was assisting families and households that were flooded in my constituency of North Antrim, in particular in Ballymena south. Families were on tenterhooks as flood waters entered their homes. It is an absolute disgrace that, after the massive flood in 2008, there is still the same issue with the drainage scheme.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Frew: So the work being done on flood levels and planning for that is very, very important.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, as an deis cainte ar an rún tábhachtach seo atá faoi bhráid an Tionóil inniu. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to participate in the debate today. It feels like only yesterday that I last spoke in the Assembly on a Budget Bill debate, but it was, of course, four months ago. Since February, we have, I suppose, rehearsed many of the arguments. You might say that nothing has changed or you might say that everything has changed.

Last Wednesday, we heard in the Queen's speech about a whole raft of legislation proposed by the coalition Government for the

year ahead; I think that there were 11 pieces, in all. Of those, a number will, I am sure, have direct relevance to the people of Northern Ireland. Indeed, it will be interesting to hear from the Minister how he assesses the effects that some of that legislation may have. For example, what is his assessment of the coalition's plans to allow workers to contribute to Dutch-style collective pensions? How will the proposed Pensions Tax Bill and National Insurance Contributions Bill impact upon the economic spending power of the Northern Ireland public? How will the planned Childcare Payments Bill impact on Bright Start? The suggestion of a childcare subsidy worth up to £2,000 a year sounds promising, but I wonder whether we will, in fact, see the benefit here through the receipt of the appropriate Barnett consequentials. The coalition Government have realised that capital investment will underpin economic growth. They have proposed an Infrastructure Bill. Does the Minister think that we have prioritised capital infrastructure development here to a sufficient extent to underpin our economic growth?

I should note, however, that, in that raft of legislation, the SDLP fundamentally disagrees with the coalition Government's plan to give energy companies the right to run shale gas pipelines under private land. We will oppose that legislation in Westminster. I hope that the Minister and his party see sense and change their mind on progressing fracking plans for Northern Ireland.

1.45 pm

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. Maybe he will explain why the SDLP is opposed to exploiting a natural resource that we know is available in Northern Ireland and that could create thousands of new jobs, give us a secure source of energy in our own country and potentially bring down the cost of energy to householders.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to come back to the debate.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention, but he is well aware of the potential dangers of fracking. In that context, we have to consider not only the price but the cost. The cost may well vastly outweigh any profits that we may gain in the short term.

I was saying that the SDLP has been highlighting the need to address the issue of employers exploiting zero-hour contracts and the importance of developing a living-wage

society. A little progress has been made on that by the SDLP on Belfast City Council, but even the Tories have chosen to propose a Bill with tougher penalties for firms that flout minimum-wage rules and abuse zero-hour contracts. That is something that we might consider here as well.

I have said in the past that we should review the four-year budgetary period. A yearly Budget might add more interest to the budgetary process here, and that would enable us to respond in a more flexible way to the difficulties that we face, especially during these particularly harsh economic times. In conjunction with an annual Budget, we must emulate the Scottish Government, who highlighted the additional set of levers that they could obtain to provide more control and help shape a bespoke economic future, by establishing a Calman-type commission, such as that which was established in Scotland. Such devolved powers would enable us to move from merely tinkering around the edges of the Budget to shaping a Budget that suits the needs of our people.

Mr Cree: It is now four years since I spoke of the need to replace the cumbersome, convoluted ritual that we call the Budget process. It lacks clarity and transparency and does not allow for direct read-across and accountability. The then Minister — I am glad to see that he is here alive and well again today — agreed and was keen to improve the system. The Committee for Finance and Personnel did much work on it, we debated the issue in the House, and there was agreement on the way forward.

The matter was referred to the Executive, and there it has remained because the Minister of Education did not agree. He did not want the degree of accountability in his Department that would arise. I wonder why. Surely this ridiculous situation must come to an end. It is right and proper that all taxpayers' money should be clearly shown at all stages of the budgetary process. When will we have an improved financial process that is fit for purpose?

This is the final year of the Budget that was designed to cover the period from 2011 to 2015. There have been some interesting changes in that time, and, even working back, it is almost impossible to reconcile the figures at every stage. Of course, we are now faced with a new set of figures that, strangely enough, are similar to the 2011-15 resource and capital numbers. We know that many work areas and

projects were not carried out. Indeed, some budget areas have disappeared altogether.

What have we to consider for the final year?

The sum to be applied out of the Consolidated Fund for the year ending 31 March 2015 is £8,411,921,000. That is certainly a significant sum of money. I would like clarity from the Minister of several areas in the Estimates in due course. To start with, a sum of £6.8 million in the OFMDFM Estimates for equal pay has been removed in the current Estimates. The Minister has been considering some sort of package for staff who had not been granted that award. I would be grateful if he would advise me of the current situation.

I also notice that several resource bids were anticipated to be made in the June monitoring round. They were classified as inescapable or high-priority. Why were they not included in the Department's Estimates as a matter of certainty? One bid referred to the Hillsborough sites, which are at a cost of some £1.3 million. I understand that it is necessary for maintenance and site security. How was that covered in the past? How does that significant cost relate to the capital value of the gifted sites?

The scale of the financial pressures in the Health Department appears to be severe. The respective Minister's estimate is that £305 million — 6% of the Department's total budget — is under stress. Is that another instance when in-year monitoring will be expected to take up the slack?

The Minister will not be surprised at my raising the issue of money being held in the centre. It would appear that there was over £800 million there last week. Will the Minister advise on the various sums at the centre and how and when disbursements will actually take place?

Finally, when the capital budget was set for 2011-15, it anticipated much more being spent in the 2014-15 year. A re-profiling exercise was conducted recently; indeed, the Minister referred to it. Capital appears to have been moved into the 2013-14 year. Therefore, I ask the Minister this question again: what other capital moves are planned or are likely in the current year?

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I welcome the opportunity to outline the Environment Committee's views on the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates 2014-15.

In a recent briefing to the Committee, departmental officials outlined the main aspects of the Budget position for 2014-15. They also referred to the additional amount of £12.75 million that has been ring-fenced by the Executive to enable the Department to meet the costs of local government reform. The Committee believes that it is essential that such a major change in the way in which this country is governed should be fully and properly resourced so that not only are the staff who join the administration of the new super-councils provided with appropriate training but there is a high level of capacity building to enable the new councils to fulfil their duties to the highest standards. The Committee has been supportive of the Department's plans to put such support in place. Adequate funding is an essential element in the delivery of the plans. The Committee welcomes that ring-fenced funding.

Officials also advised the Committee that further additional funding would be sought for the coastal communities fund. Members welcome any measures that aim to support the economic development of coastal communities by promoting sustainable economic growth and jobs so that people are better able to respond to the changing economic needs and opportunities of their area.

The main area of concern for the Committee in considering departmental resources is the adequate funding of environmental protection and enforcement measures. Within the past year, we have seen the impact of illegal waste dumping at Mobuoy, where the cost of reinstating the surrounding landscape is still being assessed. Although we welcome the Department's review of its structures and procedures to ensure that such an incident never occurs again, the lack of resources available for environmental crime enforcement was a factor in allowing that situation to continue for such a protracted period.

Indeed, when we consider the extremely high cost of attempting to rectify incidents of pollution of all kinds, from the illegal dumping of tyres to the contamination of our rivers and waterways, we see that money spent on the prevention and detection of environmental crime is money well spent. For that reason, the Committee also supports the Department's June monitoring bid for increased funding to retain the 10 temporary investigators working with the NIEA to respond to organised environmental crime. In addition, the bid will address protection measures for the River Faughan and the disposal of hazardous waste that has been tipped on public land, both of

which are issues on which the Committee has previously expressed its concerns.

I will move on to the Committee's consideration of the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill. We are glad that the Estimates include increased funding for road safety services for 2014-15. The measures introduced by the Bill will require an intensive and widespread public education campaign, possibly during this Budget period, and the Department will need to devote adequate and appropriate funding to ensure its success.

The Committee supports the Department's bid for additional funding under the June monitoring round and welcomes the resources delivered by the Main Estimates for 2014-15.

I now wish to say a few words on behalf of the Alliance Party. I want to mention briefly the racial equality strategy, which is now named 'A Sense of Belonging'. Given the recent increase in racism and the recent outcry, I think that we all need to redouble our efforts to get that long-awaited strategy produced. There is also a big need for the strategy to be resourced. A seven-year wait for the revised document is obviously unacceptable, and it indicates that the racial equality strategy has not been a high priority for OFMDFM. I also have to mention the lack of resourcing for the racial equality unit in OFMDFM. I understand that, at one stage, there was only one member of staff in the unit, although it now has five.

On the implementation of the strategy, I believe that all Departments will be asked to produce two to three meaningful actions to make a difference on the ground. How does the Minister intend to resource the strategy? Will funding be mainstreamed, or will it be sought through bids in the monitoring rounds? There is a big need for the strategy to be adequately resourced so that we can see proper actions and outcomes on the ground.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments. Question Time is due to commence at 2.00 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we begin, I inform Members that questions 6 and 15 have been withdrawn.

Delivering Social Change

1. **Mr Moutray** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Delivering Social Change signature projects. (AQO 6272/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer this question.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): As Members will be aware, the Executive set up the Delivering Social Change framework to tackle poverty and social exclusion. It represents a new level of joined-up working across government to drive through initiatives that can achieve real and long-lasting social benefits for those who need them most. The benefits of this approach are illustrated by the multi-departmental, multi-agency and multi-sectoral implementation of six key cross-cutting signature programmes announced in October 2012 under a £26 million funding package. In addition, a further £1.6 million investment was announced in October 2013 to develop a future play and leisure signature programme. These programmes focus on early interventions and tackle the very root of issues before they have time to develop into problems.

We are already starting to see positive outcomes through the practical delivery. Over 900 family members have already received support through an intervention to support young people not in education, employment or training. Twenty new nurture units are in place and are playing a key role in improving the lives and educational attainment of our most vulnerable children. Over 225 teachers have been recruited to help children who are struggling with their English and maths, and a suite of parenting support programmes have

been developed and are providing additional high-quality parenting support. In addition, the family support hubs and the social enterprise hubs are due to be fully operational by the summer. We look forward to seeing further positive outcomes as the programmes continue to progress, and, through the implementation of the Delivering Social Change framework, we remain committed to tackling the integrated, complex and sometimes spiralling issues that can lead to social deprivation.

Mr Moutray: I thank the junior Minister for her response. Can she outline the number of families who have benefited to date from the nurture unit in Upper Bann?

Ms J McCann: I do not have the exact numbers for the Upper Bann constituency for the Member, but I can say that over 140 young people have already been assisted by the nurture groups. Junior Minister Bell and I visited some of the schools operating the nurture groups, and those facilities and services help not only the children but their wider families. They also help the teachers, and I think that they have been very productive. I will certainly get the constituency numbers that you asked for.

Mr Attwood: I thank the junior Minister for her answers so far. First, on the spread of Delivering Social Change projects, are there any funding gaps in relation to one or more of the proposals? Secondly, can you explain why the June monitoring report was submitted to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister two hours before it met last Wednesday, making it necessary for the Chair and the Deputy Chair to discharge themselves from their responsibilities and for the meeting to be chaired by another member of the Committee? Why were we given a paper of such import two hours before a Committee meeting began?

Ms J McCann: I will answer the Member's second question first. I know that there has been an ongoing problem with a number of Committees through the years, even when I sat on Committees, in getting that information. I will certainly look into it for the OFMDFM Committee.

To date, I have had no indication of any real problems in drawing down funding. The funding comes from a central Delivering Social Change fund and operates through the Bright Start childcare strategy. There is also the social investment fund and the central fund. To date, I have had no indication of any problems.

Muslim Community

2. **Mr McKay** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they are tackling prejudice and prejudicial views towards the Muslim community. (AQO 6273/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is committed to racial, ethnic and religious equality. We support the good relations work of the Belfast Islamic Centre through our minority ethnic development fund, and we will soon launch a revised racial equality strategy entitled, 'A Sense of Belonging'. As part of the consultation process, we will run public events to allow all people to contribute to the document. I encourage everyone to get involved in the process. The strategy must be fresh, informed and focused on the needs of the individuals and families that it represents. We can do that only if there is full participation not just from the minority ethnic sector but from everyone who wants to see all forms of prejudice and religious intolerance challenged and defeated.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. There is no doubt that recent comments about the Muslim community have been hurtful primarily to many in our community; however, they also undermine your work in trying to attract foreign direct investment to our shores. When will the racial equality strategy be published? It will be vital in helping to ensure that such episodes become a thing of our past.

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, I agree with the Member that the events of the last couple of weeks have been shameful, and the comments of Pastor McConnell were very unfortunate. He has apologised for those comments, but their dramatic effect on the Muslim community in Belfast was evidenced by the conversations that we have had with the Muslim community at the Islamic Centre in south Belfast. Clearly, people were placed in an atmosphere of fear to such a point where one young woman who is a teacher in some of the schools said that she was afraid to go to her work. That is absolutely unacceptable. The steps that have been taken in the last short while to correct the situation were much needed. This will impact, if not handled correctly by us, on our prospects of attracting foreign direct investment. The story travelled all round the world, and I think that it was very damaging.

The racial equality strategy should be published and put out for consultation. I have cleared the

draft, and I am optimistic that it will be signed off in a few days. A racial equality strategy will set the framework for tackling racial inequalities and promoting good race relations. Officials have been working with minority ethnic representatives through the racial equality panel to draft a strategy that will meet the needs and aspirations of minority ethnic people and wider society. We want to make sure that the document is fit for purpose, and we will continue to work in partnership with representatives of minority ethnic people with the consultation and the finalisation of the strategy to ensure that we achieve that aim.

Mr D McIlveen: I am sure that the deputy First Minister will agree that, whilst we should stand against racism in all its forms, in taking such a stand, it is equally important not to demonise or stereotype an entire community.

Mr M McGuinness: I absolutely agree that all of us in positions of political leadership have a duty and a responsibility to stand four-square beside one another but against racism and sectarianism in our society. I think that the big difficulty about the last short while is that it gives a distorted picture of the overwhelming majority of our people from every section of the community who want no hand, act or part in racism or sectarianism.

That represents a real challenge for all of us, and I think that it is a challenge that we have to rise to. I want to pay tribute to all those people who, over the last couple of weeks, have come on to the streets to protest against the comments that were made. In doing so, they send a clear message here on the island of Ireland, in Belfast and to the wider international community that we are a society moving forward and that we are not prepared to capitulate to those in our society who wish to portray us as being in any way sectarian, racist or, indeed, bigoted.

Mr McKinney: I thank the deputy First Minister. I concur with him about the shameful nature of the remarks, and I acknowledge the fact that some words of apology were used more recently. Can he acknowledge just how deep the damage has been and, therefore, how comprehensive the remedy must be, up to and including an apology to not just the Muslim community but the rest of society here?

Mr M McGuinness: I certainly hope that all sorts of lessons will have been learnt from the events of the last couple of weeks. I know that this is not just about people in the Muslim community being offended. We have met these

people on a number of occasions over recent years. These are very civilised, very cordial, very intelligent, highly educated people who make a massive contribution to our society. These are professional people, many of whom have the lives of our people in their hands on a daily basis, and they are people in whom I have absolute faith and trust. So I think that it was not just the Muslim community that was offended by this; I think that wider society as a whole was offended by this situation.

The focus now has to be on how we move forward and how we learn the lessons from the last couple of weeks. Remember that all of this is happening against the backdrop of what is clearly being reported by the PSNI as an increased number of attacks on ethnic minorities, particularly in the Belfast area, much of which has been instigated by elements within the UVF. That has been very, very clear for some considerable time, and I have been on the public record in the House stating that. That places a huge onus on all of us to stand together against the attacks, but to be very focused on what we need to do in the future. I think that the publication of the racial equality strategy, which is long overdue, needs to urgently address the issues that lie at the heart of this matter.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There is a later question on the anti-racism strategy.

Mr Swann: Taking the deputy First Minister's comments into consideration, what financial or material support will his Department offer to the Muslim community to ensure that it has a cultural centre that meets its needs?

Mr M McGuinness: That is an issue that came very much to the fore during the course of the First Minister's visit and my visit to the Islamic centre. We have absolutely accepted that the Muslim community is entitled to a mosque, if a proper site can be found which is suitable for them. The First Minister is on the public record as saying that he believes that it would be appropriate, and I agree with him that, if necessary, public funds could be used to provide assistance with regard to the construction of a mosque in Belfast.

So, yes, I think that there is a huge responsibility on all of us to ensure that we deal with the needs and concerns of the Muslim community. Hopefully, the racial equality strategy will be contributed to in a very meaningful way when it goes out for consultation. Once that is put into effect, it, coupled with very strenuous efforts to provide a

mosque, should send a powerful message to our people and to the international community that we are a very tolerant society that recognises that diversity enriches our society.

Ms Lo: What specific provisions relating to Islamophobia are going to be included in the new strategy?

Mr M McGuinness: Hopefully, within the next number of days, the Member will see the detail of what is being put out for consultation. Obviously, because of the events of the last couple of weeks, we are focused on the needs of the Muslim community and those people at the Islamic centre in south Belfast, but it is a wider issue. It is about our general attitude to people who come from far-distant shores to live among us. I am one of those people who absolutely believes that diversity is a good thing and a strength, and that our society is enriched by the presence of people from different cultures. We live in a world that is increasingly cosmopolitan, and there is a huge responsibility on all of us to ensure that the rights of people, and the associated equality, are implemented in a way that ensures that every section of our society, including the Muslim community, feel part of our society and wanted.

2.15 pm

The experiences of people from this island over many centuries, when they went off to far-flung regions of the world, whether it be North America, Australia or wherever, were that they were badly received at a time of great ignorance. The fact is that that is now happening in our day, and there is still a very tiny minority of people in our society who have racist or sectarian attitudes. They need to get the very clear message that there is no place in our society for any of that sort of activity. The Member has been the subject of criticisms and attacks. I absolutely deplore her treatment and the treatment of all those who have come to live among us and make a massive contribution to our society.

Disability Strategy

3. **Mr Lynch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what impact the disability strategy will have on the post-19-years-old special educational needs sector. (AQO 6274/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer this question.

Ms J McCann: The Executive's disability strategy aims to set out a high-level policy framework to give coherence and guidance to Departments' activities across general and disability-specific areas of policy. It provides a framework for the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities. The strategy emphasises the fact that young people with disabilities should be supported in addressing transition needs so that they have the same opportunities for growth and fulfilment as non-disabled young people. The strategy refers to article 24 of the United Nations convention relating to education, which includes access to an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning.

Employment and employability are issues that require Departments to work together to support people with disabilities. The Executive's disability strategy aims to set out actions to promote education, vocational training and employment opportunities, as well as safeguarding the employment opportunities of those already in work. It aims to increase the opportunities for people with disabilities to attain skills and qualifications through access to appropriate training and lifelong learning opportunities.

In taking forward the delivery of the strategy, all Departments have committed to considering what needs to be done and how they will measure progress. One key aspect of the Department for Employment and Learning's contribution to the disability strategy will be to chair a cross-departmental focus group on transitions for young people with severe learning difficulties and disabilities.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she believe that enough is being done at community level to help people with disabilities?

Ms J McCann: I think that the Member and others will agree that we have heard concerns of people with disabilities and their families about this issue. A transitions paper has been brought forward to that ministerial group. We will look at that very issue.

When young people leave school, or whatever they are at, aged 19 they can sometimes be very vulnerable without the support they enjoyed in the school setting. A team works with the parents and the young person to find work placements. It does not have to be just work placements; it can be volunteering, mentoring or whatever. There is a need to

ensure that when we have that transition for the young person at 19 we have those community-based projects. There are some with very complex needs, and they might need to have a day care setting as well. It is very important that they are there.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the junior Minister for her answers so far. Will she give the House some further information on the 12 cross-cutting themes and the 18 strategic priorities associated with the disability strategy?

Ms J McCann: As you know, the disability strategy has been out for consultation since last year. I cannot remember the month, but it was 2013. Theme 7, for instance, deals with the transition from childhood to adulthood, and theme 10 covers employment and employability. There are a number of themes that are directly connected with the transitional period, but there are also themes that look at, for instance, disability awareness and advocacy for people with disabilities in organisations. Monitoring and reporting are part of the strategy, as are employment and standard of living; tackling crime against people with disabilities; and access. That access is not just about access to transport or buildings, it is also about access to sports and leisure. There are clear themes that entail a cross-departmental approach and Departments working together to ensure that they are delivered in that way.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree with me, a former teacher, that the provision for those children when they reach the age of 19 is appalling by any standard and does not register the type of equality that was enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement? Does she further agree that it is time for this Assembly to stop sitting on its hands and to do something?

Ms J McCann: I said earlier that I, as a representative, have had constituents coming to my office to raise the issue of the lack of support and community-based activity facing people when they reach the age of 19. The ministerial group is now in place and that paper is coming before it. It will not solve everything, but the issue is being examined. It is a big issue, and it has been raised at that level.

NICVA Economic Data Report

4. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for his assessment of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action commentary on economic data published in March in relation to measuring the impact of the economic pact. (AQO 6275/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The economic pact contains measures that will promote and accelerate economic growth as we build a shared and prosperous future. We are making good progress with the package in areas such as job promotion; assisted area status; identifying further shared future projects; progressing our red tape review; promoting research and development; and broadband. There is further developmental work on corporation tax, the consideration of further fiscal devolution and the setting up of a joint ministerial task force that will address banking. Measuring how well we are doing with economic pact actions is straightforward, and we are due to meet the British Prime Minister later this month to discuss that.

The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) commentary on economic data makes no reference to any difficulties concerning the measurement of the impact of the economic pact. The NICVA report puts forward some recommendations giving its views on ways to improve how we measure our total output, investment in exports, public expenditure and regional data. The recommendations that are of most relevance to the economic pact are those that relate to enhancing the accuracy of public expenditure data and strengthening measures of economic growth.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. Does the Minister believe that there is potential for improvement in local economic data?

Mr M McGuinness: There are some challenges associated with securing the level of information to facilitate a deeper understanding of all the dynamics of the local economy. We would benefit from the publication of input/output tables, which are currently in development. There are significant gaps in local public finance data, which exist because the Treasury in London does not publish disaggregated receipts. The accuracy of the estimates of locally generated revenue could be improved. Ultimately, it would be in our best interests to have a full set of accurate public sector accounts, and the British Government should support us in achieving this. Addressing the gaps would enhance local economic strategies as we would have greater information on local economic performance.

Mr G Robinson: As we are now approaching the anniversary of the economic pact, could the deputy First Minister indicate what progress has

been made on it in the last year and whether any formal announcement is likely?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that considerable progress has been made on the commitments in the economic pact. Progress made against the actions is establishing the foundations for future economic growth, and, while we welcome that progress, it is important that we continue to work with the Government to ensure that all commitments are delivered in a timely manner.

Securing powers to lower corporation tax remains a key priority for the Executive to promote the growth of the private sector. We will continue to advance the case for the devolution of corporation tax within the time frame set out in the pact. Considerable progress has also been made against the key pact commitments on the review of business red tape. Considerable progress has been made on all four work strands of the review. I am encouraged by the positive engagement with business representative bodies, regulators and Departments. It is essential that businesses provide evidence to support emerging recommendations.

The pilot enterprise zone in Coleraine, announced in the Budget statement of 19 March, will offer enhanced capital allowances only as an incentive, potential to promote economic development and further investment in the area. Access to Finance welcomed the extension of start-up loan schemes here. Some 99 loans have been drawn down to date, with a total value of £459,000. I welcome confirmation that we will continue to benefit from 100% assisted area status, at least in the medium term.

Racial Equality Strategy

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the development of a racial equality strategy. (AQO 6276/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer the question.

Ms J McCann: The deputy First Minister has already outlined in an earlier answer that we hope that it will be in only a matter of days. A number of events will be held in areas where there is a high proportion of minority ethnic people, and events will be facilitated in different languages, where relevant. We hope that that will be very soon.

Mr McCarthy: Given the hugely detrimental publicity around the world for Northern Ireland as a result of the disgraceful diatribe and venom coming from a Belfast pulpit recently, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister must be hugely embarrassed and, indeed, ashamed that, in seven years, a strategy to tackle racial inequality has not been produced. Will the junior Minister tell the Assembly what specific issues have held up the strategy for seven years, and, if and when the strategy comes, will there be sufficient resources available to see it implemented without further delay?

Ms J McCann: Yes, I agree with the Member that it is unacceptable that it has taken so long. There have been issues on which we have needed political agreement, but those have hopefully been resolved, and we want to see the strategy published as soon as possible.

We believe that the strategy will be adequately resourced, and we will also set out in the strategy a number of points that we are specifically looking at to take it forward. The points include the elimination of racial inequality; combating racism and hate crime; the equality of service provision; participation; social cohesion; and capacity building for groups. Alongside the strategy, there will be a separate fund of £1.1 million from the minority ethnic development fund, which will also go some way.

However, I totally agree with you. The length of time that this has taken is totally unacceptable.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Minister, we understand the importance of the publication of the racial equality strategy, but what is OFMDFM doing to address the increase in racial attacks?

Ms J McCann: As I said last week when I spoke in the Assembly's debate on racist attacks, the strategy will in some part help, but much more needs to be done. One of the best things that we can do, as the deputy First Minister outlined in answer to a previous question, is stand together and show our support for those people who feel vulnerable and under threat. That goes right across society, for political, Church and community leaders.

2.30 pm

We are also going to be taking a number of initiatives in the short term. For instance, we will look at having a leaflet campaign to try to

send a visual message to our ethnic minority people. We will look to try to develop a multi-agency approach like there is, for instance, in south Belfast through the Round Table. We are going to try to put that in place in east, north and west Belfast and we are going to take the Unite Against Hate initiative forward again. So, there are a number of proposals and interventions that we are making, as well as putting out the strategy. Some are short term and immediate, some are medium term, and others will be more long term. However, I think that, at the minute, the important thing is to show support and solidarity to people out there.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for questions for oral answer. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies

1. **Mrs Hale** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to assure the House that they will support the abolition of the discriminatory practice of the restriction on non-Catholic teachers being able to teach in maintained schools without a Catholic certificate in religious studies and take steps in OFMDFM to have the restriction removed. (AQT 1221/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: This matter lies within the remit of both the Department of Education and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It has been the subject of considerable debate over many years. I think that there is a huge responsibility on all the stakeholders to see whether a satisfactory outcome that all sides can live with can be achieved. I certainly encourage everybody to be involved in a very constructive debate on how to resolve the matter.

Mrs Hale: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. In his drive to deliver equality, and given his public statements both outside and inside this House regarding respect for other communities, will he outline how a non-Catholic accesses a certificate of religious education?

Mr M McGuinness: That is the challenge. What we are dealing with is the historical nature of education in the North of Ireland going back many decades since the partition of Ireland in the early 1920s. The Catholic education sector took up the mantle for the education of Catholic children, and as a result, practices were put in place that now, in the context of a society moving forward and evolving, necessitate everybody approaching the issue in a way that

does not allow anybody to be open to the accusation of discrimination of any kind.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Alastair Ross is not in his place, so we will move on. I call Mrs Sandra Overend.

Internet Safety Strategy

3. **Mrs Overend** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the cross-departmental Internet safety strategy, for which they are responsible, especially as we come to the close of another school year, when our children, depending on the weather, might spend a higher than average amount of time on the Internet. (AQT 1223/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, junior Minister McCann will take this question.

Ms J McCann: The Member will be aware that we have had a number of meetings on this matter, and it is being taken forward. We have met the Safeguarding Board and the National Children's Bureau in recent weeks on the progress that has been made on taking the strategy forward. The forum that was being set up has already met.

When junior Minister Bell and I were in Brussels last week, we joined the Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union (COFACE), which is an international organisation over there, for a conference that was video streamed to a number of countries. We have made some progress on connecting internationally on the whole area of the Internet and the digital safety of our children and young people. I certainly look forward to meeting the Member again to update her on the work that has been taken forward on that.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for that information. She mentioned that the e-safety forum has had its first meeting. Could the Minister nail down a time frame for the completion of the work of that e-safety forum and for such a strategy to be brought to the Assembly? Could she tell us what resources will be provided to it?

Ms J McCann: Again, I can only say that I take a keen interest in driving this forward because I have three teenagers. As a parent, I know that parents are looking to see what they can do and how they can help. We are trying to push the issue forward as quickly as possible. Work has been carried out, and we made

connections when we were in Brussels, so we hope that the e-safety forum is now in a position to drive the strategy. The Member will know that the main responsibility is with the Department of Health, but, as junior Ministers, we are certainly keen to ensure that it is brought forward as quickly as possible.

Secret Deals: Victims' Commissioner's Comments

4. **Mr Givan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that they will know that the Victims' Commissioner has said that revelations about secret deals are eroding the trust and confidence of people who were bereaved and injured during the Troubles, whether the deputy First Minister, in considering that comment and in his role as the deputy First Minister, with the Victims' Commission under his remit, will ensure that he and his colleagues take part in the inquiry by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and give evidence in a public, open and transparent fashion, rather than continuing to go on-the-run on the issue. (AQT 1224/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The Member needs to be conscious that, when I stand here as deputy First Minister, I represent a joint Department. I do not stand here as someone who has a duty and responsibility to speak for Sinn Féin. I speak for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. However, the question is valid in so far as it deserves an answer from my perspective. I make the point that I am not speaking on behalf of the First Minister on this issue.

Gerry Adams, Gerry Kelly and I met Lady Justice Hallett a few days ago. She has been given the responsibility to take forward an inquiry into the matter. The first thing to be said — I know that there is a dispute between us on the matter — is that it is absolutely nothing to do with a secret agreement. All that was in the public domain, going as far back as Weston Park, and every single Member knows that. The Committee then took the decision to establish its own investigation, and I will flag up the difficulties that that presents. In the recent past, some unionist politicians have said to me that that body will probably not report until early in the new year, and it has been flagged up that the Ulster Unionist Party in particular is not prepared to engage in a way forward on dealing with the past until such times as that Committee comes in with its report. So it is not satisfied with any outcome from Lady Justice Hallett. That has huge implications for whether we as a body will deal with —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule.

Mr M McGuinness: — how we learn from the past and how we deal with other issues associated with it.

Mr Givan: Given the role that the deputy First Minister has over the Victims' Commission, and given that victims are looking to that office for truth, honesty and, at times, justice, does the deputy First Minister want to apologise for his crass comment of, "How sorry do you want me to be?" for the specific acts that his Provisional IRA was involved in when he was a commander of the IRA? Will he apologise for that comment and step up and tell the truth about what he and his hate-filled Provisional IRA were involved in during the 30 years of conflict?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member needs to be conscious that, in the course of a conflict that lasted for a quarter of a century, many people were involved in violence, including many people supported by the Member and by all the unionist parties in the Assembly. I would like to think that the work that I have been involved in over the last 20 years, which I do not think even compares with the contribution that the Member and, indeed, many Members on the opposite Benches have made towards peace — *[Interruption.]* That work — *[Interruption.]* As the old Native American chief said, fine words, as some people expect here, mean little unless they amount to something. I think that the work that I have been involved in over 20 years has amounted to something. I have done that in the face of much opposition, including from some Members from the opposite Benches.

Flooding: North Antrim

5. **Mr Frew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what they can do to ensure that their office aids and abets a coordinated approach to save householders in his constituency of North Antrim, particularly in Ballymena last night, where many families and households were subjected to flash flooding, with some flooded five times in the last six years. (AQT 1225/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: I am in total sympathy with those affected by the issue that the Member raises. There is a huge responsibility on us all to seek remedies to these situations in a very coordinated way. If you look at the events of the last couple of years, you see that it is quite obvious that all the Departments are working in a very coordinated way. Obviously, the Department in the lead on this situation is the

Department for Regional Development, but we all have a responsibility to work together to ensure that the terrible circumstances that people faced in the Ballymena area are addressed as quickly as possible.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his answer. Although we commend people on the ground for their efforts, it took Roads Service an hour and a half to bring sandbags and the Fire Service two hours to bring an appliance to pump water. What more can the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister do to make sure that any coordinated approach is hastily put in place so that the damage done is not as bad and that houses are saved before they are flooded?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member can be reassured that we in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister take these situations very seriously indeed. They cause terrible trauma to those who have their household, in particular, and their business flooded. The way that we have established working processes in a very coordinated way among Departments has put us in a position of being able to deal effectively with quite a number of the unexpected situations that occur.

Over the last couple of days, the weather went from bright sunshine one minute to incredible deluges the next. I suppose that it is very difficult for the infrastructure to deal with that sort of situation. Also, in reality, no two situations are the same, so lessons are being learned all the time. It is incumbent on the Department for Regional Development and the Department of the Environment, supported by OFMDFM and other Departments, including the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, to ensure that we are well prepared to deal with fairly extraordinary weather outbreaks such as those we have seen in recent times.

Victims: Apologies

6. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in turning to a question that the deputy First Minister does not want to answer, given that, although, last week, he was very keen that his partner, the First Minister, should do a lot of apologising, he, as a victim-maker, went out of his way to insult and demean the innocent victims of the IRA by arrogantly asking "How sorry do you want me to be?", would he today like to take a second opportunity to apologise for his condescending outburst. (AQT 1226/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: It is obvious that the Member has selectively extracted one aspect of an interview that I gave to Stephen Nolan. He would be much better representing the totality of what I said on that matter. In my remarks, I clearly outlined my view that an awful lot of people, including republicans, had a lot to be sorry for in the events of the last 25 years. I include the people whom he supported in the state forces, who were up to their neck in violence for much of a quarter of a century.

2.45 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up.

Finance and Personnel

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 4 and 11 have been withdrawn.

Equal Pay: NIO/PSNI

1. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the equal pay claim from Northern Ireland Office and PSNI administrative staff. (AQO 6287/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): It was clearly established in court that the equal pay settlement applied only to periods of service in the Northern Ireland Civil Service and did not apply to bodies such as the NIO and PSNI. So there is no valid equal pay claim. However, I am aware how strongly affected staff feel about this issue, and I have worked to find a way in which the moral argument that has been raised could be recognised in some way. As a consequence of that work, I recently circulated a paper to my Executive colleagues outlining a recommendation that will result, I hope, in a satisfactory resolution of the issue for this group of staff. The recommendation and any expenditure will require the agreement of the Executive.

Mr Hussey: Unfortunately, I did not quite hear the full response from the Minister. Is he aware that the rumour is that the proposal from the Minister has been put forward to the Executive and that he has said that it will take weeks to get through the Executive? Do we have a rough indication of when he expects this matter to be resolved?

Mr Hamilton: The Member, I am sure, would not expect me to operate on the basis of rumours. All I can say to the Member, the

House and, more importantly, to those affected members of staff is that I have done the work that I need to do on putting forward a suggested solution, as it is at this stage, to Executive colleagues. The paper has been with the Executive for a number of weeks now. I understand the frustrations that some members of staff will be experiencing because of what they perceive as yet further delay in resolving this issue. I have done my bit. As I said, I have drafted a solution, and it has circulated around Executive colleagues. I await the agreement of Executive colleagues for that to come forward for debate and discussion at the Executive, and, hopefully, agreement to the solution that I have put forward.

On estimating how long that will take, I hope that it will be resolved and, indeed, it should be resolved as a matter of urgency, given the widespread support that there supposedly has been for a resolution over the last number of months. Because of that, I expect that it should be dealt with fairly quickly, but, as the Member will appreciate, not everything moves through the Executive as quickly as we would like. In that respect, even if I wanted to or were able to, I cannot put a clear guess or a clear estimate on when it might come forward for agreement, although I hope that it does so very soon.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister clarify to the House that all groups, including home civil servants at AA and AO grade, have been consulted and have agreed to any proposed settlement?

Mr Hamilton: I am not going to get into the detail of what is being put forward in the paper. What is in the paper and the detail that is included is still a matter of confidence between Executive colleagues and me. There has been no consultation, to use his word, about the specific paper that has gone forward other than, I have to say, I have listened very carefully to representations by, for example, Members of this House on behalf of affected staff. I have received much correspondence from affected staff since taking up post in late July of last year. So, in that sense, I have been listening constantly to representations about the need to deal with this issue conclusively. Although there may not be, as I mentioned previously in the House, a legal argument for dealing with this, there is a need to recognise the very strong moral argument that has been put forward. I hope that what is there in respect of a suggested solution not only meets with Executive colleagues' favour but will be welcomed by those staff affected and will draw a line under this issue.

Mr Newton: Minister, you have indicated that you have submitted a paper for the consideration of your Executive colleagues. Can you indicate to the House the extent of the support that there has been, or has not been, from your Executive colleagues thus far?

Mr Hamilton: I have received responses to my paper from roughly half of the Executive. I have received responses from Ministers representing our own party, the Alliance Party, the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. Many of the responses have highlighted issues around the detail of the paper, which I welcome, because it is important that Executive colleagues feed back any concerns that perhaps have been represented to them by affected staff and seek clarification of how any scheme might work. That is to be welcomed and is a positive response. The responses have ranged from enquiries of that nature up to outright enthusiasm for the suggested solution that I have put forward.

To date, I have received no responses from Ministers representing Departments where Sinn Féin Ministers are in charge, so I am unsure of their position. However, I seek some solace from the fact that members of that party — particularly those on the Finance and Personnel Committee, where the issue has been voiced most strongly over the last year, 18 months and beyond — have been supportive of a solution. I hope that their support rubs off on their ministerial colleagues, and that they come forward with support for the solution that I have put to the Executive.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, and, as a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee, I certainly will not speak on your behalf. I am sure that the Minister is aware that a large number of retired civil servants are very disgruntled that the settlement is a belated response for people who were discriminated against throughout their careers and who are still waiting for justice. Will the Minister clarify whether the paper that he has submitted deals solely with those in the PSNI and the NIO or whether it includes the small number of workers in NI Water who are in a very similar situation?

Mr Hamilton: The paper that is before the Executive deals exclusively with PSNI and former NIO staff. It does not deal with the NI Water situation, as that is a matter for the Minister for Regional Development. I am very keen to see this resolved as quickly as possible. Early on in my tenure in office, I made the commitment to affected staff that I

would reopen the issue and take a look at it again. I think I owe them that at the very least. I have been able to find a way to resolve the issue satisfactorily, and I hope that the Member, having been brave enough to rise and ask the question, can now impress upon his party colleagues in the Executive the importance of recognising the very points that the Member has made in respect of the moral argument that something has to be done for the staff who have been affected, and that they, too, can come forward with their support and that that support is not only forthcoming but forthcoming in a rapid fashion so that the issue can be dealt with conclusively.

Mr Allister: The Minister knows how perplexing this matter, and the inordinate delay, has been for the affected staff. Do I discern from what the Minister said that, whereas he has proffered a paper to the Executive, it has so far been blocked from being tabled for discussion by Sinn Féin, the party that likes to talk the most about equality in the House — and this is an equality issue? Is the Minister gently saying to us that expectations, for example, that this might have been dealt with in the June monitoring round are now to be dashed because of that obstruction?

Mr Hamilton: The Member is always less gentle than I would be in the use of terminology, which is something that I pride myself on.

It is not right to conclude that this could not be dealt with in the June monitoring round; it could still be dealt with. Submissions of bids by Departments for inclusion in the June monitoring round only concluded at the tail end of last week, and they have yet to be deliberated on by the Executive. I hope to do that at our next meeting, which is in about 10 days' time. I suppose that there is the possibility — I will put it no more strongly than that — that this could be dealt with at that point. Of course, as the Member has rightly identified and as he will understand and appreciate, because there is an expenditure element, the proposal that I have put forward would require a considerable amount of expenditure, which would have to happen within a tight monetary and budgetary context as well. It will require the agreement of all sides and all parts of the Executive to do that. The fact that every party in the House has come forward with support for a resolution to the problem bodes well for agreement at Executive level now that a viable solution has been put before them. So I remain optimistic that this can be agreed, and I share the hope of the Member and, I am sure, the rest of the House that this could be resolved in the

short timetable that the Member has spoken about.

Invest-to-save Measures

2. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of whether the public sector reform agenda could be stimulated through invest-to-save measures. (AQO 6288/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Whilst public services must operate as efficiently as possible, public sector reform is not all about cost containment. Up-front investment may be necessary to stimulate innovation in service delivery, improve outcomes for citizens and generate savings. The public sector reform division in my Department is exploring potential financial incentives that may be useful in progressing reform initiatives, and those could indeed include invest-to-save measures. For example, I believe that a greater focus on preventative spending is key to encouraging innovation in our public services. Invest-to-save measures could provide the financial stimulus required to encourage preventative spending.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. Further to that, which invest-to-save measures are being considered?

Mr Hamilton: The public sector reform division in the Department is exploring possible sources of funding to support a range of reform initiatives, including the potential to establish a specific change fund. It is envisaged that a change fund would be based on invest-to-save principles that have been well established in Northern Ireland over the last number of years. The fund would be available to finance up-front investment in cross-cutting initiatives that are expected to generate savings in the longer term.

It is also envisaged that a change fund would be available to finance some of the innovative methodology, such as the innovation laboratories that we have commenced, to develop solutions to complex policy issues. I anticipate that the fund will be in place for 2015-16; the next financial year. However, given that discussions are at a very early stage in respect of next year's Budget, it is not yet clear what quantum of expenditure would be required.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that nowhere in Northern Ireland are public sector workers more demoralised at this point than in Coleraine? Can the Minister assure us that this is not just another device,

homespun, to rob areas of Northern Ireland of public service jobs when the private sector is nowhere ready to absorb them?

Mr Hamilton: I presume that, in framing that question, the Member is not suggesting that reform of the public sector is some of code for reductions in headcount. I hope that I have picked him up correctly in that respect. He is wrong if he is suggesting that that is the underlying ethos behind reform of the public sector. I have been pushing this issue, really since the start of my term in office, recognising, as I do, the need.

This will become crystal clear and more than apparent to Members of the House — if it is not already apparent — over the next weeks and months, as we start to conclude not only the Budget for 2014-15, as we are taking through the Budget (No. 2) Bill today and tomorrow, but as we start to develop the Budget for 2015-16. It will become crystal clear to Members and people outside the House that the money that we have to spend on public services is decreasing, in real terms, as we move forward. That will put severe pressure on the services that the people of Northern Ireland rely on.

From the outset, I never suggested that reforming the public sector is code for reducing the headcount; that is not something that I see as part of the agenda. Instead, it is about getting better outcomes with the resources we have or less. So, it is about improving how we do business, changing how we do business and learning from others' innovative methodologies and how they deliver public services. It is about not being afraid to say that we in Northern Ireland are not perfect at everything and acknowledging that there are others who do things perfectly well if not better, and learning from them and applying those methods to Northern Ireland.

This is about using the staff that we have in the public service in Northern Ireland. There are some very gifted, talented and able staff located across Northern Ireland. As a matter of urgency, because of the underlying problems in public spending moving forward, I want to see us get better outcomes from them for their work.

Infrastructure Projects

3. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how he plans to reduce the time taken to develop infrastructure projects. (AQO 6289/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Public infrastructure projects are critical in helping to underpin the economic growth of Northern Ireland. It is important that they are delivered expeditiously. The potential for improvement in the commissioning and delivery of public infrastructure projects was recently examined by a number of reports, including one from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI).

3.00 pm

As chair of the procurement board, I established a subgroup to bring forward recommendations to improve government's performance and to draw up an action plan for implementation. That work is now complete and will be considered by the procurement board this week.

Having considered feedback from the subgroup, I intend to endorse the following key recommendations, among others. The first is that a centralised construction procurement and delivery service is established in the Central Procurement Directorate in my Department to be responsible for the provision of technical advice, procurement, project management and contract management relating to all government building projects. The second is that the Executive agree to a portfolio of strategically significant projects based on recommendations from my Department and the Strategic Investment Board. This will follow a zero-based review of the priorities for infrastructure investments. The third is that projects are reviewed quarterly to enable Ministers to report on the progress of those that are of strategic importance. Other recommendations are that Departments fully populate the ISNI delivery tracking system to enable the information it contains to form a regional infrastructure plan, improving the visibility of forthcoming projects to the local construction industry; and that the head of the Civil Service and permanent secretaries implement a change programme to support a delivery-focused culture in government.

Mr Moutray: The Minister mentioned his hope for a more centralised procurement and delivery service in CPD. Has he been able to make any progress on that?

Mr Hamilton: I have. For example, the Health Minister and I recently agreed that the functions of the Health Estates investment group would be transferred from the Department of Health to the Central Procurement Directorate in the Department of Finance and Personnel. A material result of that is that around 50 staff will

transfer to CPD in October 2014. As for how having a more centralised approach to procurement and delivery will work in practice, the benefits of having centralisation and the shared experience that will come from CPD joining Health Estates will quickly become apparent. Those individuals will be responsible for specific technical advice, the actual procurement, and project and contract management. Responsibility for the prioritisation and ordering of health infrastructure projects will remain with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It will also be responsible for the financing of those projects.

As far as I am concerned, the approach that the Health Minister and I have agreed to in respect of Health Estates is the way ahead in meeting the objective of having a more centralised procurement and delivery service in CPD, where the parent Department still decides the priorities for infrastructure. In Health's case, it decides where a hospital service or primary care centre will be provided. It is then the responsibility of CPD in my Department to ensure that that is delivered on time, to specification and within budget. That responsibility is taken from the Health Department, and it does what it does best, which is to deliver the service that flows from that. It is my Department's responsibility to make sure that the infrastructure is put in place in a timely manner. That is the way ahead. I hope that it is a template that other Ministers will follow and that they, too, will see the benefits of that approach.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra cuimsitheach chomh maith. I thank the Minister for his wide-ranging, comprehensive reply there, particularly on procurement issues. How many major capital schemes or further investment infrastructure schemes currently rest at his Department for sign-off?

Mr Hamilton: I do not have the precise number of projects that are sitting before my Department awaiting sign-off. The Member is talking about business cases that other Departments have put forward to DFP for sign-off. We will certainly do our best to provide that information to the Member as quickly as possible.

With the issue of business cases, I am mindful of the criticism of the Department of Finance and Personnel, criticism that I do not always think is warranted. It is sometimes convenient to criticise DFP for slowing down projects

because it is sitting on business cases. I have found through experience that the business cases had often not even arrived with DFP, yet we were already being blamed for slowing them up. I do not mind being blamed if we have slowed a case up, but, if we have not even got the paper, it is hard for us to slow it up.

We did analysis in the Department and found that we were turning business cases around in short order. I cannot remember the precise number of days, but it is not weeks and weeks and weeks, as some might think it is. As part of the work of the procurement subgroup, we have also looked at raising the delegated levels so that Departments will have to take some responsibility themselves. One of the other things that happen from time to time is that Departments pass on business cases to DFP, almost expecting us to mark their homework for them. They need to take on some of the responsibility themselves. They look to us to sit in judgement on the merits of a project or scheme, but it is important that Departments start to do that more themselves. Therefore, one thing that we will look at is whether we can increase the current delegated limit, which is, I think, £1 million, to perhaps £2 million for all business cases.

I am mindful of the criticism that is there. We have not turned a blind eye to it and instead have sought to address it. I do not think that all the blame is ours; in fact, I do not think that even the majority of the blame is ours. Hopefully, the work of the procurement subgroup and the recommendations that come forward will get endorsement from the whole procurement board and will be taken forward so that we see an even swifter turnaround of business cases, whether for infrastructure projects or not.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule.

Mr Cree: It is certainly good news that the Minister brings today. Minister, what progress has been made on fast-tracking other projects that could be substituted at short notice should a particular project not go ahead?

Mr Hamilton: That is incredibly important. You can put the procurement delivery vehicles in place as best you can — the merger of the Health Estates into CPD is a major step forward in doing that — but the Member is right: you need a pipeline, to use the vernacular of the construction industry, of projects that are ready to go in the best of times and the worst of times. In the worst of times, when we identify major

projects that do not go ahead — the A5, for example — there is an urgency for the Executive to find projects. We will have something akin to that situation, I imagine, in June monitoring, as, early on in the financial year, as is always the case, Departments will identify capital projects that cannot go forward. They relinquish that cash pretty early, and it is then up to the Executive to find other projects that are worthwhile spending that money on. As the Member will appreciate and the House will understand, it is not always easy to bring forward major projects. You simply do not have the time to do that. One of the key recommendations that I am endorsing is that the Executive as a whole agree a portfolio of strategically significant infrastructure projects for Northern Ireland so that, when we get to Budgets and in-year monitoring and when situations such as the A5 arise — unfortunately, such situations arise from time to time, as that is just the reality of the type of projects that they are — we can pluck strategically important projects off the list and move them forward much more quickly than previously would have been the case.

Monitoring Rounds: Reallocation

5. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how allocations redistributed through monitoring rounds are assessed. (AQO 6291/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Executive's decisions on allocations during the monitoring rounds are based on a number of factors, not least the amount of resources available. When Departments submit monitoring bids, they provide a range of information, including how the proposal will impact on departmental objectives and the Programme for Government. Departments are also asked to rank their individual bids. All those factors are taken into account in the Executive's monitoring round decision-making.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. What protections are in place to ensure that allocations are made on the basis of evidence-based need?

Mr Hamilton: Considerable work goes into analysing exactly the need of each bid that comes forward from Departments. In response to an earlier question, I said that Departments were given a period in which to come forward with their own priorities. They are, in some respects, responsible for ranking those priorities themselves against the actual need for the project. However, as the Member will

appreciate, there is always more bid for than there are available resources. Therefore, other factors have to come into play sometimes, depending on the quantum of resources available to meet a bid, even a bid for which there may be pretty acute need. I imagine that June monitoring will be no different, although I do not anticipate there being much cash available. You will see bids partially but not completely met, because the Executive will want to try to meet something of quite a few things rather than all of one bid. Of course, there is an important factor, too, in each Department's ability to deliver on what it is requesting in-year. There may well be a need, but the quantum of resources that they are looking for may not be able to be spent within the year. Usually, that is not a problem in June, but it becomes increasingly a problem in October and certainly in January, as the financial year runs down and the ability to spend large amounts of money diminishes.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that response. Will he outline what pressures the Budget faces in the current June monitoring round?

Mr Hamilton: As I said in response to Mr Brady and previous questioners, the Budget, as the Member will appreciate, is under increasing pressure. The June monitoring round process, whereby Departments make bids to the Department of Finance and Personnel and list and rank their bids, has just concluded. That is being analysed, and we hope to be in a position to agree it or certainly to put something to the Executive by their next meeting in a week or so. I cannot give specifics on the bids, much as the Member and the House might like me to. As I said, the process has just concluded, and we are looking at those bids. We will come forward to the Executive with our recommendations on how those bids can or cannot be met.

The one thing that I can say without getting into the specifics is that I know that June monitoring, as is the case, indeed, with the whole Budget moving forward, will be immensely challenging. It is not helped by the fact that there is still no agreement to proceed with welfare reform. This year alone, in June, we will have to deal with the £13 million that has already been lost through penalties for non-compliance last year, and we will have to deal with the £87 million penalty for non-movement on welfare reform this year. Already, before we go in and try to meet bids — I know that many are urgent and that Departments are in great need of that cash — we are in a situation where around £100 million is being taken from our Budget because of non-compliance with welfare reform. I think

that many Departments will be disappointed in the June monitoring round, but many of those will be Departments that are headed up by a Minister from a party that is ensuring that there is no progress on welfare reform. Therefore, any failure to meet the bids from those Departments will, in effect, be self-inflicted wounds.

Mr McKinney: Could I just drill down into the process a little bit more to see what has primacy in the distribution in the June monitoring round or any other monitoring round? Is it a government target, or is it the Department's? Given the process that he just outlined, is he not in danger of spreading the butter so thinly that it satisfies neither the Department's ambition nor the Executive's target?

Mr Hamilton: Unfortunately, that is the reality; that is what government is all about. It is about making choices. We are being forced to make choices in increasingly difficult fiscal circumstances that are not helped by the fact that, as I mentioned in response to Mr Anderson, we are shooting ourselves in the foot, so to speak, by not proceeding with welfare reform. We are being forced to pay penalties that we should not be paying. What is being spread will have to be spread even thinner as we move forward, and we already face the reductions coming through from Tory cuts from Westminster as well.

When it comes to which priorities are met, there is a range of issues that we will have to look at, not least the overall picture of what resources are available. You could have, as we have had in the past, tens of millions of pounds' worth of bids but considerably less than that with which to meet them. So, we are having to look at things such as Programme for Government targets and priorities and things that are inescapable legal requirements. There are frequently bids — the Member will see this in the June monitoring round paper as well — that have been committed to in the past or where we legally have to comply with certain things and they have to be met over and above something that is, perhaps, even a Programme for Government target. That is just the nature of the beast, and we have less money than we need to pay for everything that we want to pay for, so choices have to be made. That is what governing is all about.

Mr Swann: The Minister has already outlined that bids are often for more than the supply of money that is available. What steps does he

take to ensure that, where any bids have been previously supplied, the moneys are spent?

3.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: That is monitored on an ongoing basis throughout the financial year and is ultimately dealt with in the provisional out-turn, which I will come forward with for the last financial year in late June or early July of this year. There is ongoing discussion and correspondence backwards and forwards between my Department and others to ensure that money is being spent and that pressures that have arisen within the year are being addressed through the allocations that have been made to them.

Departments do not always spend exactly what they anticipated they would spend. That is why, at the end of the year, there will sometimes be underspends in Departments. Thankfully, we have the Budget exchange scheme in place, which allows us to roll forward expenditure into the subsequent year, but I do not want Departments to get into that habit and think that they can just not spend the money on what they were given it to spend on. To be fair, I do not think that most Departments make erroneous bids. They will make bids for genuine pressures, when there is genuine need, and will spend the money accordingly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That brings us to the end of the period for oral questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Budget 2015-16

1. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he expects the Budget for 2015-16 to be prepared. (AQT 1231/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: When the 2015-16 national expenditure situation was clear, I wrote to Executive colleagues outlining the process as we move forward. During November and December 2013, my officials also undertook a pre-consultation exercise with a range of key external stakeholders. That included major business organisations, trade unions and voluntary and community sector representatives as well as the Committee for Finance and Personnel, of which Mr Cree is a member. I aim to have a final Budget in place by Christmas 2014. That would necessitate a draft Budget being agreed by the Executive for consultation early in the autumn.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for that response. Does he anticipate any changes to the Programme for Government as a result of that Budget exercise?

Mr Hamilton: Changes to the Programme for Government that flow from the Budget are ostensibly the responsibility primarily of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as they are the owners of the Programme for Government. They will have to come forward with their recommendations about what we do with it.

We are in the situation of having agreed a Programme for Government and, indeed, a Budget, thinking that they would take us up to the end of this Assembly's mandate, which has been extended by a year. That poses a range of questions for the Executive as a whole on the Budget and whether we need to do radical surgery on it. Many Executive colleagues might think that that is a good idea, given the pressures that their Departments are under. Others might think that an extension of spending patterns from the previous year might be the most sensible thing. That and whatever spending review flows after it might be the easiest thing to agree given that it is only a year until the next Assembly elections.

Similarly with the Programme for Government, many targets would probably follow through and be extended into another year, whereas others, given emerging needs, demands and issues, would have to be added into that alongside the updating of other targets.

June Monitoring Round: HSSPS Bid

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he expects a bid from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the June monitoring round. (AQT 1232/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I always expect bids from the Health Minister coming up to monitoring rounds. I am aware — the Member is maybe better aware and better placed than I am on this — of media coverage on the pressures that the Health Minister believes his budget to be under. I absolutely expect that, as in previous monitoring rounds, he will come forward with a range of bids to deal with those very real pressures that he faces.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he expect to be able to meet the bids that are submitted by the Health Department?

Mr Hamilton: I would like to be able to meet the bids that the Health Minister is coming forward with. I know that his Department is almost insatiable in its demand for resources. It is under constant pressure. The fact that the Minister has endeavoured to drive out waste from his budget and has done so to the tune of several hundred millions of pounds over the last number of years shows that he is trying to do the right thing to reduce costs in his Department. Nevertheless, the pressure in that Department is constant and continual.

I think that my ability as Finance Minister to recommend to the Executive that all or even a substantial chunk of the bids that are coming forward be met in June monitoring is hampered by the fact that other Departments are coming forward with pressures.

The envelope of available finances is less than we would like. As I mentioned, we are, of course, facing the reality of penalties for welfare reform. I think that it is a shame and, indeed, a disgrace that, in a scenario in which Health, Justice, Education and other Departments, which deliver front line services that vulnerable people in Northern Ireland badly need, are facing such pressure that we cannot address, even in part, some of those pressures because we are having to squander money by sending it back to Westminster because we cannot move forward with welfare reform.

Desertcreat: Bill of Reductions

3. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to update the Assembly on the bill of reductions process and addendum to the business case for the Community Safety College at Desertcreat. (AQT 1233/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I do not have the full detail of the reduction in costs. It is not primarily a responsibility for my Department. The Department of Justice heads up the procurement and is taking it forward. My Department is involved in many respects, not least the financing and the continuing flexibility that we have received from Westminster to finance this with some end-year flexibility. However, the procurement, the cost and reducing that cost to try to ensure that the project remains a reality are not, first and foremost, the responsibility of my Department.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat. The project offers major, significant opportunities for employment, not least for the construction sector. Is the Minister concerned that it is taking too long to be finalised?

Mr Hamilton: As I say, I am not responsible for it, nor will I stand in judgement or be critical of other Ministers or Departments because projects have not moved forward. The Member will be well aware — Mr Cree raised this issue with me in respect of the likes of the A5 — that big capital projects, particularly those of the quantum of Desertcreat and the A5, will habitually, unfortunately, meet problems with delivery because of their nature and complexity. I regret that that happens. It happened in those two cases at times very close together and, therefore, created the impression that it happens all too frequently.

I think that it is worth pointing out that, annually, we spend well over £1 billion on infrastructure, and most of that goes ahead without any headache or problem whatsoever. In recognising the very real economic benefits that the college brings forward, never mind the community safety benefits, it is important that any outstanding issues are resolved very quickly so that we can proceed with the project or, as Mr Cree said, if there is an issue with funding or an issue that means that the scheme cannot move forward in the timescale first envisaged and is delayed, we can have other equally valuable projects that we can spend the money on as quickly as possible.

Health Service: Payroll Problems

4. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he agrees that the payroll problems experienced in the health service raise serious questions that should be addressed by the Executive, as such IT and technical problems could affect any upgrading programme in any Department. (AQT 1234/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Once again, it seems to be the day for me to be asked about everybody else's responsibility but not my own. I am happy to come here any time to answer questions about my responsibility.

That is not to denigrate the very real payroll issues affecting staff in the health service. I understand that there are issues with HMRC, the emergency tax code that people were put on and the inaccuracies contained in that. I understand that there are also issues with the timeliness of the submission by staff of information on, for example, overtime.

My Department is not responsible for payroll services in the Department of Health. We are, however, responsible, through HR Connect, for payroll services for the Civil Service and a few

other agencies. My Department is responsible for just shy of 30,000 members of our public service. At present, the monthly payroll accuracy in HR Connect is 99.9%. So, it is almost as good as it can get in ensuring payroll accuracy for the some 30,000 public servants whose pay is my responsibility.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer, even though the issue goes, as he said, beyond his remit. Are all Departments deploying the same software?

Mr Hamilton: No, they are not, and this is a very good example of where it is not the case and where the Department of Health is using a different system for its 70,000 to 80,000 employees. Given that it is successful, paying at 99.9% accuracy rate and that there is, I understand, spare capacity in the system or could at least be built on to the existing system, I encourage all Departments whose bodies, agencies or arm's-length bodies are not using HR Connect to look very seriously at it as a shared services option to roll their payroll into. Given current performance, that would not only ensure accuracy in the delivery of pay to individual members of staff but will help to reduce costs, because the more individuals who are getting paid using HR Connect, the bigger the reduction will be in the unit cost for each person.

I have tried to encourage all Departments to look at that, and I have been in discussion with the Minister of the Environment about the possibility of using it in time for our new councils, as they look to realise savings as a result of RPA. So there is huge scope for HR Connect to be expanded as, indeed, there is for quite a few of our shared services that are quite successful in Stormont.

DVA: Job Relocation

5. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he is prepared to follow the example of his ministerial colleague the Minister of the Environment and relocate jobs to Coleraine to mitigate the impact of the disastrous Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) decision, given that, last week, his ministerial colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment gave a very disappointing response to the same question, saying that she would look at that in the context of local government reorganisation, which would be far too late for the DVA workers. (AQT 1235/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Member will be well aware that the Minister of the Environment and I have been working very closely on that issue. He and I took on responsibility to bring a paper to the Executive, and, indeed, we brought it to the Executive in the last number of weeks. I welcome what the Member's party colleague and my Executive colleague Mr Durkan has done in relocating jobs from DOE to Coleraine. As the Minister primarily responsible for those staff, it is, first and foremost, his responsibility to do that.

I know that other Departments have been actively looking at opportunities that may exist in their Department to redeploy staff to Coleraine and to the other affected areas in Northern Ireland. That was the whole emphasis of the paper that was circulated around Executive colleagues. The Member will appreciate from his time in government that it is not always easy to do that in the sort of time that we have for that issue, because time is marching on with the end of the existing work coming up in the summer. I have confidence and faith that Executive colleagues are doing their best in looking at relocating his staff, but it is not always as easy as the Member might wish it was, and he will know from his time in government, having not moved a substantial amount of jobs out of Belfast to anywhere else, that it is not that simple and straightforward.

Mr Attwood: I think that the record shows that, when I was Minister, I did relocate jobs out of Belfast in moving jobs to Derry for social security purposes, for the carrier bag levy and for other reasons. The issue is that, last week, your ministerial colleague the Enterprise Minister chided other Ministers who are responsible for large volumes of staff in their Departments. Your Department has over 3,000 staff. Given the paper that you have been working on with Mr Durkan, why are you not able to say today that you will relocate 50, 100 or 150 of the 3,000 jobs that fall under your responsibility?

Mr Hamilton: Very simply, a substantial number of the staff under my responsibility in the Department of Finance and Personnel are not at the grades that are affected in Coleraine. The Member will know full well that the majority of the grades affected are at AA and AO level. A substantial number — in fact, the larger percentage — of my staff are not at that grade. You cannot move someone in a job at a different grade to Coleraine to take up the slack if there are AAs and AOs there. So it is not as simple and as straightforward as the Member thinks it is.

3.30 pm

I commend the Minister of the Environment for what he has done to date. As I said, it is primarily his responsibility, as the Minister responsible, to address it first and foremost. I will continue to encourage other Ministers who have larger complements of staff to similarly do so, but we all have to appreciate and understand that it is not an easy matter to do in the short timescale that is available to us in respect of the DVA jobs in Coleraine.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time. The House will take its ease while we change the top Table.

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

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2014-15

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £8,411,921,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 and that resources, not exceeding £9,168,609,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2014-15 that was laid before the Assembly on 28 May 2014. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to today's debate on the Main Estimates. In the context of continued economic instability and the requirement on the Assembly to address local needs and prioritise, this is a critical debate. It covers our final spending plan for 2014-15. I thank departmental officials for briefing the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the Main Estimates. The officials took the Committee through the changes that occurred during each of the monitoring rounds. I want to focus on a couple of the issues.

First, as the party spokesperson on disability, I see a necessity for budgeting to change to ensure that those with a disability are prioritised within local spend. The welfare cuts agenda

will hit sickness and disability claimants the hardest. Indeed, the 66,000 individuals adversely affected by the incapacity benefit reforms can expect to lose an average of almost £3,500 a year. The 67,000 people losing out as a result of the changeover from disability living allowance to personal independence payments by an average of more than £2,100 will have a devastating impact on the most vulnerable in our society.

I believe that we need an independent assessment of the impact of the proposed cuts to welfare reform on sick and disabled people and their carers and families, drawing on the expertise of the Work and Pensions Select Committee in Westminster. We also need to ensure that the proposed budget reductions being brought forward by the British Government do not negatively impact on services to disabled children. It is important that children with disabilities are given the best opportunity to reach their full potential and are fully integrated into society. There must be no barriers to participation for disabled children. As poverty is one of the key indicators in preventing children with disabilities from leading an improved lifestyle, some of the proposed cuts in budgets will only add to the number of children who fall under the child poverty level. Health and Education combined need to ring-fence and prioritise funding in that area.

We also have a higher percentage of households with children than those who live in Britain. As well as having more families, we have a higher proportion of larger families with four or more children.

Our rates of persistent child poverty are more than twice those in Scotland, England and Wales. The income of families with children has already been badly affected by the welfare reforms introduced since 2010, with a consequent lowering of living standards for those in the bottom half of society. Those families face a further drop in living standards over the coming three years, and we need to protect families in any way we can.

I also welcome the Health Minister's recent announcement of a new pioneering device to help those with diabetes. Although it is being piloted in the South Eastern Trust, I urge the Health Minister and, indeed, the Minister of Finance and Personnel to prioritise it to allow the 80,000 people here who suffer from diabetes to benefit from it and to ensure that, once it is piloted, it is not a case of a postcode lottery as to who can avail themselves of it. Everyone entitled should receive it. I hope that the Minister is prioritising and is able to ring-

fence much-needed funds for it, as diabetes is the fastest-growing health threat here today. Statistics for the Strabane and Omagh districts in my constituency show that the number of people with type 2 diabetes has increased by 1,000 over the past five years.

Again, I want to major on the A5 and the £108 million that was handed back and reallocated to capital projects in DHSSPS and DRD. The A5 is vital for the economic infrastructure west of the Bann, as recent economic investment, inward and indigenous, has been lost in favour of other areas because of our road infrastructure or, indeed, lack of it. The A5 is a strategic must for the region and a massive influencer on the decision of an investor to our region west of the Bann, but I am reassured that the A5 remains an Executive priority. Hopefully, the money coming forward will be reallocated to it.

We also need to deal with the challenge of youth unemployment. There needs to be a robust partnership between government and employers. Some 22% of young people aged 18 to 24 are unemployed, and 30% of the total unemployed are aged 18 to 24. Twenty-five thousand people exit the North every year. That represents a huge pool of talent and youthful ambition that is being lost to our economy. Forced emigration and unemployment has been a scourge on our society for generations. Emigration has been utilised as a political safety valve since the economic crash. We still raise too many of our children for export. It is one of the great failures of our society, and there is a massive human cost to it. The curse of emigration is causing untold misery to families the length and breadth of this state. I have met many parents who have been in tears as they recounted the fact that the children they have reared and educated have been forced to leave for Canada, Australia and elsewhere. Increasing numbers of families are fragmented, with their children scattered around the world, and, as a consequence, we have a Skype generation. We must offer our young people a real choice — not just the dole or the plane out. We must offer our young people a credible youth guarantee scheme, and we need a cross-departmental working group to address emigration.

The number one priority of the Executive — rebalancing the economy — has yet to be fully achieved and is a work in progress. There has been considerable improvement, but, despite all the efforts made and good work done, challenges continue.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé thar a bheith buíoch díot as seans a thabhairt dom labhairt ar chúrsaí airgeadais anseo inniu. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on the Main Estimates. Initially, I will speak as Chair of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee on DETI's capital allocations, which are £3.4 million in relation to tourism development and £10 million in relation to Invest NI's agrifood loan scheme.

At last week's meeting on the June monitoring round, DETI reported that the £3.4 million for tourism development resulted from a bid from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board against the events fund. Of that, £2.3 million is for contractual commitments, where letters of offer have issued to event organisers. Those cover international events, the sponsorship of national events and pre-commitments for the Tall Ships 2015. Given that such events are usually planned and organised well in advance, it is entirely unclear — to me, certainly — why those requirements were not identified during the original Budget process.

In evidence to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, it was further stated that there was a Budget realignment of £12.2 million, where the Executive took money from DETI in acknowledgement that there was not as much economic stimulus at that point, and a further £7 million on the capital side for the same reason.

This year's monitoring round identified that Invest NI is now seeking the reinstatement of £7.7 million to its resource budget, along with a further £2.8 million resource allocation. DETI is also making a bid for £6.6 million for its capital budget through internal reallocations.

In summary, the DETI/Invest NI resource budget was reduced by £12.2 million due to the economic downturn. Invest NI is now seeking to have £7.7 million from its allocation reinstated, along with a further £2.8 million, making a total resource bid of £10.5 million due to the economic recovery. The DETI/Invest NI capital budget was reduced by £7 million due to the economic downturn, and Invest NI is now making a bid for £6.6 million for its capital budget due to the economic recovery. Given the short period between the original budget Estimates and the current Estimates, the figures support the view that there is considerable uncertainty around budgetary requirements for Invest NI in what remains a volatile economic climate.

I stood here roughly a year ago to inform the Assembly that, in June monitoring 2013, Invest NI had made a bid for £9 million due to increased economic activity. That further supports previous calls for end-year flexibility in Invest NI's budget. I brought that to the attention of the Assembly last year, and I reiterate it today. As the economy is the Executive's number one priority, we must recognise the importance of Invest NI to the development of the economy. We should provide it with the flexibility it needs to conduct its affairs in a confident and professional manner with a prudent level of financial flexibility, rather than having it continually coming back to the Executive with its begging bowl every time a substantial investor makes a commitment.

I will now speak with my party hat on. We have heard references to uncertainty, tourism and tourism development. It is appropriate that a number of domestic local factors over which we have some control are inherently part of the problem of the fluidity between semi-certainty and uncertainty. For example, issues such as flag protests are certainly not going to attract tourists to the North by any means, manner or fashion. Those things add uncertainty to the image we give abroad. I have done some research into this. The image sent abroad in recent weeks from the most senior member of the Executive, Peter Robinson, as he endorsed extremist comments from Pastor McConnell, made this place sound very unwelcoming and not tourist-friendly. That is the absolute opposite of what we know the rest of our neighbours and friends to be: a welcoming, good, charitable and hospitable people. That was a very wrong message to send across the world.

Just so that people are not in any doubt about what that may cost us economically, I will put something on record. We send a message to people across the world, whose only difference from us is that they are of a different religious persuasion. We are supposed to cherish, respect and nurture that difference. That should be the message coming from the Assembly. I hope that that message goes firmly on record as the true voice of the people of the North.

3.45 pm

For the record, the total number of Muslims in Asia in 2010 was around 1.1 billion, which was 25% of the population. Asia is home to the world's largest Muslim population. Sixty-two per cent of the world's Muslims live there, with

Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh having the four largest Muslim populations.

Islam is the largest religion in Africa. I will come to my point here. Members may not want to listen to the facts or realities of this, but, in Asia in 2012-13, the export market was worth £386.2 million, which was worth 14.7% of rest-of-the-world sales. The total for the Middle East was £221.3 million, which represented 8.4%. The total in Africa was £169.8 million, which was 6.4%, while, in Turkey, the total was £24.1 million, or 0.9%. Those figures relate to and impact directly on the businesses offering a future to our young people and stability for our local community. The clear message from here should be that we are welcoming to difference, that we accommodate difference, that we respect difference and that we want to do business with people from differing backgrounds rather than insult their culture and where they come from.

In future, when people are doing business across the world, they should be very careful about what they say when they want to attract economic activity, when they want to have investment in our country and when they want exports from the North to be readily accepted by people of differing backgrounds. They should be respectful.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Storey: The Member talks of respect in this new era that we are living in, in which everybody has to be respectful of everybody else. Does that include the Black brethren in Dunloy at the weekend who were allowed to walk only about 20 yds outside their own Orange hall because of intransigence and the inability of republicans and nationalists in that village to show tolerance and respect for diversity and those who have a different culture?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the Member responds, I am sure that the vast majority of Members in the Chamber will agree that we have now gone well off the Supply motion. If I had not been here a minute ago, I would not have a clue what we are debating.

Mr McGlone: I think the Member, in his unique way, probably makes the point. Respect is given when respect is cherished, and when those whose activities, be they verbal or physical, show respect for people and respect difference, they will get that back.

You are quite right, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not quite sure how a band parade in Dunloy contributes to the economic activity of an area, other than maybe to slow the place down for a day so that people cannot get in to do their shopping, but — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Now you see the problem that I have: several Members are shouting from a sedentary position. That is not the conduct of an Assembly that is worried about the economy and hoping to do business.

Mr McGlone: The Member probably does not know this, but some of us come from areas where respect is cherished and given. That applies equally to some of our villages: whether they be Orange or Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) parades, those people are respected and accommodated. That is the type of society and the type of message that we want to put across the world when we are going for economic activity and when we want to sell this place as a positive, rather than as a negative, by word or deed.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will maybe return to the remarks of my colleague from Mid Ulster later, if I have time.

As Chair of the Education Committee, I want to comment on the Supply resolution Main Estimates of 2014-15. As the House knows, the Department of Education is one of the larger-spending Departments. In 2013-14, it spent over £2 billion, according to the Estimates document. The Committee understands that the total spend amounted to around 99% of the Department's 2013-14 budget. Education generally has a good record in overall budget forecasting for capital and resource. If you look at the way in which that is set out in the document, you will see that it certainly indicates that there was a considerable large spend. However, serious concerns remain about the Department's non-engagement in the context of the savings delivery process and repeated comments that the existing and previous Finance Ministers made about abiding by and applying the rules equitably and fairly across all Departments in that way.

I cannot leave the subject of forecasting without mentioning the Department's capital programme. Around £109 million was spent on capital projects in 2013-14, most of it on schools. The Main Estimates set out a substantial increase to £182 million in 2014-15. That increase is very welcome and is good news for school estates, particularly for those

schools that will benefit as a result of new capital build. However, less welcome is the level of delay that is associated with the individual capital projects that were previously announced in the House. Of the 42 major capital works that were announced in June 2012 and January 2013, only five, including Arvalee special school in Omagh, are in construction. Another three are due to begin in June. Additionally, 51 smaller-scale school enhancement projects, costing over £100 million in total, were also announced as being advanced in planning during October 2013. The Committee for Education understands that the capital budget for those in 2014-15 will be only some £5 million, not the £20 million as originally indicated.

Given the delays and the low level of investment, it appears that those schools that have been waiting for new buildings or enhancements will have to wait a lot longer before the work is completed or even before the spades are in the ground. I understand that the Department's capital budget in 2014-15 is safe; that is to say, it will probably all be spent and thus will not be reallocated to the centre. However, the Department of Education appears to be managing that by using its capital money for a large programme of much-needed minor works.

Programming a large number of major capital works is not easy; there will always be delays and slippage. However, given the large number of planned works, the significant delays and the expectations that have been raised, the Department of Education, and, indeed, other Departments, may wish to think again about the selection of capital projects and the way in which they are announced. The real issue is the procurement process for school buildings, and the current single tender process militates against the effective and efficient delivery of school buildings. It can take anything up to five years-plus between the announcement of a capital programme and its delivery.

Turning to the resource budget, the Department of Education has just gone through an elaborate and surprisingly expensive process, costing over £100,000, of revising the common funding formula scheme. The Committee scrutinised that process carefully and welcomed some of the changes that the Minister made. However, despite the Education Minister's much-acclaimed comments that this was a good example of how you conduct a public debate, I cannot fail to say that it should be used as an example of how you make a monumental disaster when giving assurance to schools about the future of their particular

funding stream. That said, a majority of Committee members were far from satisfied with what has become the end product. Many members continue to be dissatisfied with the absence of clarity on a distribution mechanism for some of the additional funding to schools in 2014-15. That clarity is vital, given the current uncertainty about the 2015-16 Budget process. I trust that the Department will be able to give clarity to schools, given the concerns that have been expressed to many Members over the last number of weeks and months.

The Department also recently advised that, as a consequence of issues relating to welfare reform, it plans to set aside some £29 million in 2014-15. Officials assured us that this is not a contingency fund. I remind Members that the Minister of Finance had to write to the Department and the Minister expressing concern about the use of a contingency fund. There is another term for it: a slush fund. Officials were very quick to point out that that is not what it is. However, it has all the hallmarks of money being put under the bed so that, when a crisis comes, the Department will find that it is able to take the £29 million that it has top-sliced from education and library boards, which affects every Member and every school that is represented in the House. Clearly, there is inventive financial accounting going on to which the Finance Minister requires to pay particular attention. There is a concern despite the officials' assurance that this is not a contingency fund and that the Department will, in fact, be redirecting its contingency moneys to what it calls a welfare reform "set-aside" fund.

Officials also indicated that the balance of the set-aside money will come from resource that had previously been earmarked for teacher severance payments and the establishment of the controlled schools sectoral support body. So here we go again. The one sector that ends up getting its coffers raided is not the integrated sector, not the maintained sector, not the Irish-medium sector and not the voluntary grammar schools but the controlled sector. It is good enough to raid its coffers because it does not complain or moan. It does not have a sectoral body. It does not have a voice speaking up for it, and, therefore, it is an easy target. Shame on the Department for treating a sector in that way.

The Committee notes with concern the Department's proposals for the set-aside fund. The majority of Members are concerned that the Department's proposals may have an unwelcome impact on front line services. Therefore, not surprisingly, Members will view with renewed interest the outcome of the June

monitoring round and the general outworking of the Budget process in 2014-15.

I now turn to a number of issues as a Member of the House. One issue of great concern is how the Department, in setting out its policy projects and plans, is able to set aside money for carrying out those plans and policies without there having been a proper, effective consultation with schools and stakeholders. I will give you one example of an absolutely unmitigated disaster in the Department of Education that cost the Department and the Northern Ireland Exchequer over £5 million: computer-based assessment. We now have a raft of reports that have been made available to the Committee in which the Education and Training Inspectorate, the gateway review and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment all tell us clearly that computer-based assessment was fundamentally flawed in its preparation, procurement and in the way that it was processed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Storey: As a result of all that, Members, £6 million has gone down the Swanee. The House, the Finance Minister and everybody concerned with education needs to be aware of that and to make sure that it does not happen again.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. We are all too aware of the many challenges facing our health service. 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. This is not the first year that the Department has faced financial problems. Last year, it received an additional £55 million in the monitoring rounds, but there was still a cash overspend of some £13 million at the end of 2013-14.

4.00 pm

The Department told the Committee that it faces a funding shortfall of £160 million this year and has therefore decided to submit bids totalling that amount under the June monitoring round. There are 12 key areas in which the Department faces a challenging financial situation this year and for which bids have therefore been made. I want to mention just a

few of them. There are bids of £30 million for elective care; £22 million for unscheduled care; £21 million for Transforming Your Care (TYC) transitional funding; £10 million for public health; £10 million for clinical negligence; and £9 million for mental health and learning disability. The first thing that struck the Committee was that the financial pressures are spread right across the Department's remit. There is no area without financial pressures. That highlights the stresses that the Department is experiencing and is a cause of concern for all of us.

The Department advised the Committee that, under DFP rules, it has to prioritise the bids as A, B or C, with category A referring to inescapable expenditure, category B to expenditure having a direct impact on the Department's ability to meet wider pressures and category C to expenditure not contractually committed to that could be scaled back if needed. The Committee scrutinised the bids at its meeting on 28 May. We wanted to understand exactly what the money would be spent on, why the pressure had arisen in the first place, why it had not been foreseen and the rationale for classifying the bid as A, B or C.

I turn first to the bid for £21 million for transitional funding for Transforming Your Care. It was originally estimated by the Department that £70 million would be required to implement TYC in the period 2012-15. However, the Committee was told by officials that this £70 million is now required over a five-year period rather than the initial three-year period, and, to date, only £28 million of the required £70 million has been allocated to TYC transitional funding. That means that we have a gap of £42 million. Under June monitoring, the Department is bidding for £21 million. However, it has classified that as a category C bid — the category designated for expenditure considered expendable and easily scaled back. The Committee was very surprised by that, given that we have been told countless times that TYC is the only way forward, that we cannot continue delivering healthcare as we are doing and that change is absolutely necessary. Yet the Department has rated the need for funding to implement TYC as category C.

The Committee was concerned about the approach taken, so we wrote to the Minister to ask for an explanation of the logic of classifying the bid. We received a response at our meeting on 4 June, when we were told that the category system is required by DFP and that all the bids are important for the Department. As a result, the Committee has, rightly, written back to the Department to ask it to prioritise the 12

bids that it submitted. We need to know how the Department, if its request for £160 million is not met — I must say that it is an unprecedented amount to bid for in a June monitoring round — will spend the money that it does receive and what its key priorities are.

The Department is also bidding for £30 million for elective care to bring down the waiting list times for a range of specialities, including orthopaedics, general surgery and plastic surgery. While the Committee wishes to see the Department getting a handle on waiting lists and waiting times, we query whether using the private sector to tackle the backlog is the best approach, particularly in the long term. The Committee has been carrying out a review of waiting times since January 2014 and will present its findings to the Assembly in due course.

The next bid that I want to refer to is the £22 million for unscheduled care, which has been classified as category A. We are all too aware of the current problems across emergency departments: waiting times, patient safety, staff morale and so on.

When the Committee heard from the Department on 28 May, we were told that the bid was needed to pay for more staff, to have seven-day lab services, to improve patient flow and to plan for winter pressures. Members of the Committee and, indeed, all MLAs will have constituents who have had poor experiences in our emergency departments. We all agree that that situation must improve and that, if more resources are required to get to the bottom of the problem, they must be pursued.

I now wish to turn to the bid of £10 million for clinical negligence.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. We have the Supply Estimates in front of us. If, as she suggested, the case is so compelling, maybe she would give us an indication of how the £15 billion-plus might be reallocated to facilitate what she has asked for in her speech.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is very apparent that there is an unprecedented pressure across the Department. I do not think that anybody would take issue with the Member's comments on that. However, if you like, the great hope for the delivery of health was to be the implementation of Transforming Your Care. That bid should be prioritised. It should be a category A bid and should not be a category C bid.

I want to turn specifically to the bid of £10 million for clinical negligence. The Committee understands that the Department must, of course, provide for cases where medical negligence is found and compensation is due. However, we are concerned at the scale of the problem and the pressures it is placing on the Department's budget. The Committee is firmly of the belief that, while you can never completely eradicate problems with care, the Department should make strenuous efforts to reduce the possibilities of them occurring. That means that processes and procedures must be regularly tested and those found to be ineffective must be replaced — surely that is why the serious adverse incident system has been put in place. To do otherwise would be to waste public money that could be spent far better on improving patient care.

To sum up, the Committee is seriously concerned about the financial pressures that our health service faces in this financial year. However, we need more clarity from the Department on what it believes its priorities are, should further funding be made available through the June monitoring round. We are also concerned that, within the current financial context, the shift left envisaged under TYC simply will not happen and real and positive changes to our health services will not be made or delivered.

Mr Givan: Before I go on to make justice-related comments, I am pleased that, in respect of the comments of the previous Member who spoke, Sinn Féin is now saying that it supports TYC, that it needs to be pressed forward and that funding for it needs to be provided. For the past number of months, Members from Sinn Féin have been beating the drum and saying that it needs to stop and there needs to be a review. We now have it on the record — TYC: get it funded and keep the process moving. It is useful for that to have been put formally on the record. The Member did not comment on welfare reform and what the implications could be from not pressing forward with it. We have heard a lot of concerns about the £150 million needed for the Department of Health, and the party opposite has a lot to play in reducing the burden on that Department by acting more responsibly in respect of the finances of this place.

I now turn to my role as the Chairman of the Committee for Justice. I am pleased to be able to make some comments on the resources available to the Department of Justice. The Committee regularly scrutinises the Department's budget and savings delivery plans and receives detailed information on each of

the monitoring rounds. At its meeting on 4 June, it considered the detailed information provided on the budgetary position for the 2013–14 out-turn and the June monitoring round. Given the position outlined and the scale of the emerging pressures facing the Department in particular, the Committee has scheduled further briefings with officials to discuss the issues in more detail.

On the 2013–14 out-turn, the Department's unring-fenced resource DEL underspend represents 0.86%, which is commendable as far as managing the budget is concerned. The capital underspend, excluding the Desertcreat training college, represents 10.5% of the budget, and we will want to look more at that issue. In relation to Desertcreat, the Committee is extremely disappointed that further progress has not been made and that construction work on the college has not started by now. It is clear that the Programme for Government commitment to deliver the college will not be met within the envisaged timescale. While the underspend relating to the college will be carried forward under the Treasury security funding agreement, it is imperative that the procurement process is resolved and that construction begins as soon as possible. The Committee will want to look closely at this capital project.

I turn to some of the key pressures the Department is already facing in the 2014-15 year before the likely impact on the budget as a result of welfare reform, which I will touch on shortly. A range of potential pressures in relation to litigation, including the working time directive costs faced by the Police Service and costs relating to the O'Brien litigation and judicial pensions, have been identified as likely to have to be covered this financial year. There is also a pressure of £4.7 million arising from miscarriages of justice and criminal appeals that will have to be funded.

In respect of the Prison Service exit scheme, I welcome the Department's commitment to provide funding of £1.7 million to enable the remaining 12 officers who applied to leave as soon as possible this financial year. While it creates a pressure in the short term, it is right to complete the exit scheme, which has been ongoing for some time, and it will remove a payroll pressure in the longer term. Members will be familiar with the scheme. Over 500 officers — I declare an interest, as a family member was one of them — have now left the Prison Service under the scheme. Primarily, it is an invest-to-save scheme because it will save money in the long term, and that is what the business case was predicated on.

However, it also gave recognition to the service and sacrifice that many of the prison officers gave to this country during the worst times of our Troubles. It is right that recognition was given to them. I know that a number of them feel aggrieved at how lengthy the process has been to get to this point, but nevertheless, as we come to the conclusion of the scheme and these remaining 12 officers leave, it is right that we put on record our thanks and appreciation to those who served in this particularly challenging role.

On legal aid, yet again, the main pressure faced by the Department centres on the cost of legal aid, with the forecasted pressure already indicated as being £35.5 million for this financial year. If reforms had not taken place, the pressure would be even higher. While some of the pressure has been created by an initiative by the judiciary during the last financial year to clear a backlog of Crown Court cases — action that is to be welcomed, given the avoidable delays often faced in criminal cases — the worrying increase in the cost of civil legal aid continues. The Department intends to allocate £23.5 million towards the legal aid pressure and will bid to the Department of Finance for the other £12 million as part of the June monitoring round.

The continuing financial pressure caused by the cost of legal aid is not sustainable, either now or in the future, and other parts of the Department and other criminal justice organisations cannot continually have their budgets reduced to fund it, particularly given the other pressures that they face, including the possible impact of welfare reform. The Committee will carefully consider the further reforms of legal aid being brought forward by the Minister to ensure that, while value for money is achieved, access to justice is not undermined, particularly in respect of civil legal aid for family law cases. This is an issue that the Committee has looked at on numerous occasions, and, speaking personally, I believe that the Department needs to do more to press this issue.

We hear the constant complaints from the legal professions about what this will mean to them. However, when £20 million was taken out of criminal legal aid, at that time, the barristers warned that this would be a catastrophe. They threatened to go on strike, and dire predictions were made about the implications. I am not aware of any adverse impact from taking £20 million from barristers who could well afford to do with less. We only need to look at the list when it gets published every year — some barristers in this place will know better than

others how best to get money out of the system — to see that change needs to happen more quickly and more deeply than it has done to this point. Obviously, we will balance it, particularly around family law. That is a particular interest for the Committee, but more needs to be done, and the Minister needs to move this forward much more quickly.

4.15 pm

On welfare reform, the Committee has been advised by the Department that the Finance Minister has indicated that, without clear progress on moving the Welfare Reform Bill through the Assembly before June this year, 1.5% reductions across all Departments will be sought as part of the June monitoring round. That equates to a reduction of £11 million for the Police Service and £5.3 million for other areas of the Justice Department. I know that the Justice Minister believes that the 1.5% cuts should not apply to the Department of Justice, given its ring-fenced status. However, plans are being made to deliver the savings, if necessary. If the reductions are made, they will no doubt impact on the ability of all areas to deliver the required levels of service and will place further pressure on the Police Service budget.

When I spoke during the debate on the 2014-15 Vote on Account in February, I highlighted the major budget and resilience challenges that the PSNI faces, particularly in relation to sustaining the number of warranted officers that it believes is necessary, which will, as it currently stands, create a significant budget gap, while delivering its required savings. Clearly, any further reductions will most likely impact on the delivery of front line services, given that 80% of overall police costs are salary-related. The Committee will want to keep a close eye on the situation and the likely implications of failing to deal with welfare reform.

With regard to savings delivery plans, although the Department is on track to deliver total savings of £109 million by 2014-15, the impact of achieving that requires close scrutiny, particularly in relation to the delivery of front line services, and a number of organisations have already highlighted the likely impact that achieving the savings will have on them. It is clear that the Department faces substantial budgetary pressures during this financial year that will have to be carefully managed to ensure that key priorities and targets continue to be delivered to the required standard. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: The Supply resolution and tomorrow's Budget (No. 2) Bill are taking place against a backdrop of considerable fiscal uncertainty for the Finance Minister, the Executive and the Assembly. That uncertainty is born of an inability to make collective decisions and an inability to provide a clear strategy for Northern Ireland's economy and society.

Welfare reform is one of the numerous elements sitting on the Northern Ireland Executive's table. The Finance Minister has informed his colleagues on a number of occasions that his inability to get agreement means that the Treasury is bringing in a process of restructuring the block grant for additional payments from Northern Ireland for retaining the old welfare system. The Finance Minister has proposed the model of top-slicing 1.5% off all departmental budgets, and we heard last week that that would mean almost £70 million for the Department of Health. Suddenly, we hear the Chairperson of the Health Committee pleading for more money and putting forward a case for it. There are not many of us who would not want to make the case for more money for our health service, our hospitals and our A&Es that are struggling and for the social care part of health that is in desperate need. However, we cannot do all these things and expect the money to come from nowhere — from thin air — or for the Finance Minister to somehow pluck it off a tree. It has to come from somewhere. That is why we need to have an Executive who actually function with some semblance of collective responsibility.

It is bizarre that the entire Executive are in agreement to devolve the powers to vary corporation tax and reduce it, possibly over a number of years, to the same level as that in the Republic, which is 12.5%. That decision could cost the Executive upwards of £400 million a year. I ask the Finance Minister and the Executive parties this: if their strategy is to top-slice a sum from each Department on an annual basis, how will that be achieved and what effect will it have?

I note that HMRC is reported to have almost completed its technical work on devolving corporation tax to the Northern Ireland Executive. I note that one of the key conclusions from the Scottish Conservatives 'Commission on the Future Governance of Scotland' was:

"Corporation Tax is the least suitable of all taxes for devolution".

It concluded:

"it is not economical to collect on a small scale; it relates to activity that can easily be transferred across borders; it is highly volatile; and it does not generate a reliable yield".

The Finance Minister will have heard me speaking about this before. There are problems with our economic data and its reliability. Should we devolve corporation tax, there are problems with its volatility, and that message seems to be reinforced by Lord Strathclyde's commission.

I also note that the former Finance Minister Mr Wilson, who is in the Chamber, said last week that unless we progressed on welfare reform, we would not be able to devolve corporation tax. When you add into this the inadequate nature of the data that I have talked about, our budgetary process, which, I know, Mr Cree has talked about for a long number of years, and the inability of this Executive to make a decision or to come to some form of collective responsibility, it does not fill me with great confidence that the Executive may be heading in the right direction.

It is also important to reflect on the damaging headlines that we had last week, given the First Minister's comments about the Muslim community, and the effect that that could have on our international reputation. All these things have a potential impact on foreign direct investment. I acknowledge that the First Minister, after a number of days, apologised.

A look at the UK economy shows that it is performing better than many had expected. I note that the Ulster Bank index recently showed the best results for Northern Ireland since 2007. However, I think that, at UK and Northern Ireland level, we have to be careful not to get too complacent. We are a long way from sustainable and balanced growth, and our main priority must be to develop that balanced and sustainable growth. The fact that the UK trade deficit has widened since March suggests that, if we are not trading our way into economic growth, we might be either unlocking investment or, indeed, borrowing more to grow. The IMF's warnings over productivity and the developing housing bubble cannot be ignored, and all of those can cause major problems in our economy too. Those were some of the things that led to the very difficult period that we had. Recent reports by the Office for National Statistics showed that people in Northern Ireland had the lowest disposable income in the UK, meaning that the potential rise in interest

rates will hit our households or indeed our economy much harder than anywhere else. That is why I am extremely confused at the current stance of our Executive.

As I have said many times, the very nature of devolution in the UK is changing. The potential for a constitutional convention, after the Scottish vote, is growing. The conclusion of Lord Strathclyde that:

"the Scottish Parliament should be responsible for setting the rates and bands of personal income tax in Scotland"

is extremely significant. It means that there is more on the table with regard to devolution than ever before. Yet, we, somehow, do not seem to even be engaged in that debate in a particularly meaningful way.

In light of the nature of our economy, which is primarily made up of SMEs, I am also at a loss as to why the Executive are so scared of examining our options in full. For example, if Sinn Féin cares so much about the impacts of welfare reform, why is it not arguing for a special case for Northern Ireland that could see us have control over personal tax allowances? That would have the potential to really make work pay. Why does the DUP not look in more detail at making the whole of Northern Ireland a real enterprise zone by looking at further R&D credits and capital allowances? I have been calling for a full commission on devolution and fiscal powers for Northern Ireland, and I have yet to hear a real argument over and above "Don't rock the corporation tax boat" as to why we should not create that commission to look at these issues. Set that in the context of the wider UK debate and settlement, from the Welsh example to the Scots, and we are not at the table in that debate.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr McCallister: Yes.

Mr Wilson: I have listened to the Member intently. I know that his party is no longer a unionist party, so he is probably not too worried about greater independence for Northern Ireland. However, on the issue of capital allowances and all of Northern Ireland being an enterprise zone, is he not aware that, as a result of UK Budget decisions, capital allowances of up to £250,000 are now available? Most firms have recognised that they do not need capital allowances greater

than that, so why would we go chasing after something that we already have?

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to Mr Wilson for the intervention. The point is that we are not even having that debate here. We are not even progressing by saying that we should set up a commission to look at that — even something similar to what the Scottish Conservatives did with Lord Strathclyde. We are being left behind in the debate that the Scots and the Welsh have been having. We have focused solely on the corporation tax debate. Mr Wilson shakes his head, but he acknowledged even when he was Finance Minister that there were problems with corporation tax. He acknowledged even last week as a former Finance Minister that to do corporation tax we must do welfare reform, yet his most senior partners in government will not agree to do welfare reform. There is no sense of collective responsibility around the Executive table. Look at the plethora of issues that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr McCallister: — we have unresolved and costing money, from reform in education to welfare reform, which is the biggest. I am sure that the Minister in his response will be busily telling us the cost of welfare reform.

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

Mr McCallister: I see that I have run out of time. Thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You certainly have.

Mr Wilson: This is an uncomfortable debate, of course, for Sinn Féin and the parties on the other side of the Chamber collectively. If we look at the contribution of the Sinn Féin Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, once he got off the Committee script, he spent no time at all talking about what is in the Estimates and was all about attacking the DUP.

The false display of hand-wringing that we had that the poor, oppressed people would find themselves even worse off as a result of comments by the First Minister, when for years, even when in government, his lot were sponsoring arms importation into Northern Ireland and not supporting the rule of law and the police. They did not think that that would have an impact on the economy, so we do not need to take lectures from him on the issue —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Member will resume his seat. I am somewhat disappointed that the Member was not listening to me earlier when I encouraged Members to talk about the Budget.

Mr Wilson: We are not actually talking about the Budget; we are talking about the Estimates. However, the important thing is this: the point was made earlier, and I am simply making the point that this is an uncomfortable debate.

I will tell you why it is uncomfortable for Sinn Féin. The first reason is that this is an annual reminder of the financial benefit of the Union. Apart from the £15.5 billion in the Estimates, the totalled managed expenditure is over £23 billion. If you count the revenue that comes to Northern Ireland, there is a deficit of over £9 billion a year. The expenditure in the Estimates is a reminder that services of the quality that we have in Northern Ireland are deliverable only as a result of our union with the rest of the United Kingdom. That is uncomfortable for Sinn Féin.

I noticed that the Chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee talked about the cosy relationship between the DUP and the Tories and said that we wanted to have tea and crumpets with them. Sinn Féin has been banging on the door for four years to get in, so if anybody is searching for tea and crumpets with David Cameron, it is the party opposite. Of course, the Estimates are a reminder of their opposition to Tory cuts and their purist attitude of "We will not accept these Tory cuts".

4.30 pm

I can remember when I was in the position that the Minister is in now. Sinn Féin Ministers were outside with the trade unions protesting against Tory cuts. But do you know what this book is? This book is the outcome of agreement between Sinn Féin, the so-called Tory DUP and all the other parties in the Executive, because this is the final year of a four-year Budget — a four-year Budget that had to facilitate Tory cuts of £4 billion. So we will have nothing to do with this false hand wringing. Sinn Féin knows that, when the chips are down, either it brings this place down, which does not suit its image in the Irish Republic, or else it has to work with the material that is available. That is why I take issue with Mr McCallister asking why we cannot have some collective responsibility. We established a four-year Budget in the most difficult of circumstances. This is the outcome and the delivery of the final year of that four-year Budget. I think that that is something that,

sometimes, the Assembly is not given credit for having done.

The next point that I want to make is this: whilst we have figures in the Estimates for each Department, of course, like any budget, there will be changes. There are pressures on the departmental budgets, and some of the money will not be spent on the purposes that we will vote for today. That money will come back again and will have to be reallocated. Pressures will emerge that will have to be dealt with in year. That is made more difficult in the incoming year by some of the decisions, or indecisions, that we have had. I do not want to go on about welfare reform, but a lot of Members mentioned the impact that no decision on welfare reform is likely to have on the flexibility and opportunities that the Finance Minister will have in monitoring rounds. The first call will, of course, have to be on the demands that Westminster makes upon us because we have not initiated the process of welfare reform. That means that there is less money to deal with the kinds of pressures that are being dealt with.

Yes, there are pressures, and nearly everyone who has spoken talked about those pressures. However, the fact of the matter remains that this is the money that we have available and this is how we have decided to divide it up. Even those who say that it is divided up wrongly voted for the Budget four years ago. They have had opportunities to make changes. When we had the Vote on Account, I did not hear any amendments. No amendments are proposed to the Estimates. Plenty of people are talking about what we should be spending money on, but where would you change the figures around in the provisions that we have before us?

I want to make a final point. We do not have time to go into all the figures, but one constant theme is running through the document. That is that we are still not getting to grips with the cost of government. If we really want to find ways of delivering on all the front line things that people talked about today — education; justice; health; enterprise, trade and investment; and all the others that have been mentioned — we have to ask ourselves whether there is anything in the figures that we have that we can look at. Take, for example, the cost of social security in DSD. It is up 20% from 2012, and it will go up even further if we have to purchase a separate computer system because we do not implement welfare reform. Time and time again in the Assembly we have called for advocates for different sections of society. Look under OFMDFM and see the cost of the Children's Commissioner, the Equality Commission, the

Commissioner for Older People and the Victims' Commissioner. That all adds up to over £15 million. Since 2012, the costs for some of those have gone up by 50%.

We had a discussion in the Committee for Social Development the other day — we have the figures here in the book — about the transfer of urban regeneration to councils. It would seem, however, that, whilst it is being devolved to councils, and councils will take on that role, a sizeable element will be retained in DSD, with all the attendant costs that that brings.

I believe that those are the kinds of issues, across Departments, that we ought to be tackling. Either we have a costly Administration or we slim down the administration function, look for different ways to deliver it and put the money into front line services. There is no point in regularly having debates like this, with Members simply saying that they want more money spent on particular things without saying where they believe that that money should come from.

I believe that, even with the tightness of the Budget, as the Finance Minister has described on a number of occasions in recent weeks, there is still room to find ways to deliver additional money that he can allocate for the things that are required. In the Assembly, we have to engage in that ongoing work.

I wanted to make those few short remarks on the Estimates at this time. I will finish on one last point that Mr Bradley raised. The SDLP believes that this should be an annual exercise. I assure him that, if this were an annual exercise, long-term planning by Departments and non-departmental bodies would become almost impossible, with the wrangling, consultation and everything else associated with allocating a Budget. A four-year Budget, with the current flexibility, at least gives some certainty. That is why I believe that it was a significant contribution by the Assembly and, despite what Mr McCallister and the press say, it shows that, when we put our minds to it, we can do a job and reach compromises —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Wilson: — even though Sinn Féin does not want to accept that it made compromises on what was basically a Tory-based Budget.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Supply resolution motion on the Main Estimates for 2014-15. Whilst I am aware

that the Department of the Environment does not have the biggest budget in this devolved Assembly, it is, nevertheless, an important budget that has the potential to bring real improvements and benefits to our communities, towns and cities, our heritage and our landscapes. I want to highlight briefly some of the main issues affected by the Budget.

In the last few weeks, we have seen some of the most sweeping reforms of local government in Northern Ireland with the elections to the new super-councils. The new streamlined structures mean that we now have councillors elected to serve on only 11 new councils. The councils will bring real prospects of local communities having a greater say in how their areas are governed. It is essential that these new bodies are given every chance to succeed.

I welcome the work being undertaken by the Department of the Environment and the Department of Finance and Personnel to create a transitional relief scheme to protect those ratepayers who would otherwise face excessive increases in their rates bills as a result of RPA and the boundary changes, which will be complete by 2015. I look forward to hearing more detail from the Finance Minister on the transitional relief scheme.

During the relatively short time that I have been a member of the Environment Committee, one of the most troubling episodes I encountered was the discovery of the scale by which Northern Ireland is affected by environmental crime and pollution. No single episode encompassed this travesty more than the Mobuoy site in County Londonderry. I am absolutely committed to ensuring that there is sufficient funding in place for the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to enable it to tackle environmental crime and pollution, particularly with Mobuoy, where we have seen an obscene amount of environmental pollution for monetary gain. This crime should, of course, not have to be paid for by the taxpaying public but by the perpetrators. I sincerely hope that, in time, the justice system will see those responsible paying for the damage done to our beautiful countryside.

The Committee also expressed concern about the prioritisation of resources to ensure that dereliction is addressed, which needs to be prioritised as we seek to attract tourism and investment in Northern Ireland. The amount spent on tidying up eyesores in our town and villages to ensure that the opportunity for publicity generated by the Giro d'Italia coverage was maximised just goes to show how much work really needs to be done to our

surroundings. Improvements for the Giro were mostly cosmetic. As temporary measures, they cannot hide the long-term neglect that has left blights on nearly every street you care to mention.

Recently, my home town of Antrim benefited from some fantastic work to improve its public realm. Now that the work is complete, it is a real improvement for all to see. However, one thing that I feel very strongly about is that the improved public realm draws more attention to the number of derelict buildings and facades along the length of the main streets.

I am happy to support the prioritisation of resources to address dereliction. However, it must be done in a joined-up way to ensure that all Departments charged with the responsibility for development and renewal work together to make real change, not just change of a cosmetic or short-term nature.

I would like to bring my remarks to a close by saying that, in some senses, much of what Members contributed to the debate was on the issue that our aspiration to support policies and programmes that will make real change is in danger of being lost to us because of the cuts proposed as a result of our failure to agree a way forward on welfare reform. Anyone who has bothered to listen to any of my speeches in the Chamber will know that I am not someone who is interested in gratuitous political point scoring just for the sake of it. That is why I raise my concerns about welfare reform. It has the potential to decimate any future Budget settlement, such is the scale of the financial penalties. I do so out of genuine regret that, yet again, the Assembly is leaving itself open to the charge of failing to deliver for the greater good of our people. I hope that we will be able to find the will to resolve this and demonstrate that the ability to take difficult decisions is not beyond us.

Mr Lyttle: I will make comments on behalf of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in my capacity as Deputy Chairperson. I may also make some brief comments as an Alliance Party MLA.

Officials briefed the Committee on the 2014-15 opening budget and June monitoring proposals at our meeting on Wednesday 4 June. Regrettably, papers for the briefing were provided to the Committee less than two hours prior to the meeting. Members expressed concern that, as a result, there was insufficient time to give adequate consideration to the information provided. It was for that reason that

the Chairperson and I excused ourselves from the briefing. The failure of OFMDFM to provide papers to the Committee in a timely manner has been a serious problem for a considerable period. We have undertaken much work to try to improve access to information from the Department. It is my understanding that a similar situation also occurred last year with the 2013-14 budget briefing. The Committee is eager to hear from Ministers what processes can be put in place to prevent Departments taking that approach and to allow for proper Committee scrutiny on departmental budget allocations and bids.

At the meeting, the Department advised that its opening resource budget for 2014-15 was £70.4 million — a reduction of £3.5 million compared with last year's figures. Officials highlighted that that was a particularly challenging allocation for this year because of additional pressures on the Department. They advised that it has over-allocated its resource budget by £2.2 million.

The Department's capital funding allocation is £13.6 million. However, members were advised that almost £5.5 million is to be surrendered in the June monitoring round because of the failure to reach agreement on how to proceed with the Maze/Long Kesh site. From a personal point of view, that shows just how important it is that the Assembly reaches agreement on a comprehensive and ethical process for dealing with the past, given the scale of the surrender that will occur.

One additional pressure relates to the inquiry into historical institutional child abuse. The Committee was advised during its consideration of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill that the funds of between £15 million and £19 million required over the lifetime of the inquiry would be made available despite there being no baseline. Indeed, it is imperative that the bid of £4.282 million in the June monitoring round be met.

4.45 pm

There is also an issue with the regeneration of former military sites, in particular, the Shackleton site. There is no baseline for ongoing security and maintenance costs, which are significant for such a large site. The Committee was advised that that could cost as much as £500,000 to £600,000 a year. Again, there is a capital bid in the June monitoring round for £1.3 million to cover the costs of Shackleton and other sites gifted from MoD through the Hillsborough agreement.

The Committee welcomes the continued funding available to victims and survivors. Throughout this session, the Committee has carefully scrutinised the work of the Department and the Victims and Survivors Service to ensure that the needs of victims and survivors in our community are addressed. The Committee welcomed the independent assessment of the service and, indeed, looks forward to seeing all the recommendations implemented. With that in mind, the Committee is supportive of the bids for funding for the Victims and Survivors Service, which will hopefully ensure adequate resourcing for the service to meet the needs of victims and survivors.

From a personal point of view, it is clear that the Department is still striving for an accurate costing for the Victims and Survivors Service. Indeed, the administration of the financial assistance scheme for 2013-14 experienced significant difficulties, and concerns remain about how exactly that administration will be delivered in this financial year. It is my understanding that victims and survivors' groups have serious concerns about a potential gap in their funding further to June this year. Hopefully, all those situations can be addressed. The Committee will therefore continue to keep a watchful eye on the progress of the Victims and Survivors Service over the coming financial year.

I wish to highlight members' concerns about the scrutiny of the Executive's ring-fenced Delivering Social Change fund, which includes the social investment fund, the childcare fund and the Delivering Social Change signature programmes fund. The Committee encourages greater transparency on how those Executive funds are being allocated and spent. That would make it easier to track spending across the Executive's Delivering Social Change funding streams, which also now seem to include the Northern Ireland Hospice and the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum (NIERF) European capacity-building fund, as they were mentioned in the June monitoring round bid for an additional £6 million.

The Committee is awaiting a breakdown of how the £20 million in total that the Department hopes to spend in those areas will be allocated across each of the programmes. Indeed, from a personal point of view, I support the pilot that the Department is conducting on children's budgeting. I think that that could be a very effective way for the House and the public to assess exactly how much and how effectively money is being invested in children's services across Northern Ireland.

I would like to make a few other brief comments in my capacity as an Alliance Party member of the House. The budgeting and administration of OFMDFM's central good relations fund have caused me, and, indeed, organisations across Northern Ireland, significant concern. It is my understanding that there was an extreme delay in calls for a good relations fund in the last financial year and that ongoing delays are being experienced by groups across Northern Ireland working in that vital area of policy. Funding for community relations and for Building a United Community in Northern Ireland in general has seen significant challenges. OFMDFM appears to be relying heavily on funding from the European Union and, indeed, American philanthropy.

With goals set by the Together: Building a United Community strategy, which include interface removal within 10 years and perhaps more modest commitments on shared education, shared housing and cultural expression, and the racial equality strategy, it remains to be seen what types of long-term commitments and adequate funding are being allocated to those important areas for people in Northern Ireland. Indeed, we need to see much more serious funding committed if we are to believe that the Department is taking seriously those key issues for our society.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I am happy to give way.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Member's contribution on community relations. With all the adverse publicity about the racial attacks on ethnic minorities, there is a risk that we might take our eye off the ball in relation to sectarianism. This day last week, there was a horrendous front-page story in one of local newspapers about a young man who had sustained 19 stitches in his face because of a sectarian attack. Will the Member join me in urging OFMDFM to get on with the job and provide leadership in tackling sectarianism in our community?

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for her intervention and agree wholeheartedly. I believe that sectarianism and racism are, unfortunately, extremely close friends. Indeed, as I said, the commitment of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to robustly funding and adequately addressing those key issues remains to be seen. Investing in and delivering improved community relations and good race relations will build political stability in Northern Ireland, and it is absolutely

central to delivering the improved social and economic well-being that we all want for citizens across Northern Ireland.

In closing, as chairperson of the all-party group on cycling, I extend my support for the work being done by the Department for Regional Development and the bids that are being made by the Minister for Regional Development to vastly improve our cycling network across Northern Ireland. It has huge scope for social, economic and health benefits in Northern Ireland, and I hope that it is an area of policy that the Executive seek to give long-term sustainable funding to.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I rise to support the motion and follow on from my colleagues who spoke earlier, particularly Daithí McKay, who covered quite a bit of ground.

I want to speak first of all, if I can, for a moment or two, on behalf of the Social Development Committee. I will just speak very briefly. The last discussion that the Committee had on this matter was on 29 May, when we had a briefing on the June monitoring round from officials and asked them to refer to the Main Estimates discussion today. The officials gave some examples and some explanations around the Budget and so on. The Committee accepts, therefore, that there will be little change in the overall budget position of DSD. That is fair enough; we understand that.

There have been ongoing discussions at the Committee in the past, particularly in the past year, about the monitoring rounds, and virtually all the members have expressed strong concerns at the way in which the Department has not been able to manage the funding that has been available to it, particularly on issues such as housing, for example. Whilst no members of the Committee would have taken exception to putting additional moneys into co-ownership, for example, at the same time, the members are acutely aware that that money was going to co-ownership, which is fine; fair play and good luck to all those people who will benefit from that. However, at the same time, we are still not addressing the social housing need, which is one of our particular priorities, notwithstanding the fact that, on 24 March, the House agreed that 4,000 social houses should be built that were additional to the Programme for Government commitments in this CSR. We are disappointed that no additional bids have been made by the Department to address what many believe to be a clear shortfall in the social housing provision for all those people who are in need. The Department and the Housing

Executive's own figures tell us clearly that there are 20,000 people in housing stress on a waiting list, never mind the up to 40,000 in total on the waiting list who are waiting for a roof over their head.

I just make the point that the Committee has expressed concerns about the way in which issues such as housing and social housing have not been resolved to the satisfaction of all those people, particularly those who need a home. We have heard a lot from the housing association movement, for example, and, indeed, the Department has raised a range of issues that are barriers to the provision of social housing. Those barriers include land procurement, and the Department has moved to some extent to try to have advance purchase of land. That is good and very welcome, but there are other issues around planning, procurement, DFP funding streams and so on that we believe are barriers that still exist, and if we do not, as others said earlier, do government on a joined-up basis, we will not meet the needs that the people that we serve are entitled to have addressed.

I believe, and Sammy Wilson touched on it earlier, that the current British Government virtually pulled the rug from below the Executive in 2011 when they pulled £4 billion, which is no mean amount, from the money available. Sometimes, media commentators tend to forget that. To take £4 billion from the money available to the Executive was a devastating blow to the prospects of consolidating devolution and the power-sharing arrangements that we have, even though there are those who do not particularly want to be involved in them. Nevertheless, that £4 billion taken from the money available left one heck of a hole.

I believe that the Executive have done a fairly decent job, notwithstanding the money taken out, to try to meet the needs of the people we represent. There have been failings — there is no question about that — and there have been shortfalls. We can always do things a lot better, and we need to do things better, but I do not think that we can lose sight of the fact that we had money taken out of the Budget that nobody expected to be taken out.

This is why we make no apologies for continuing to bang down the door of 10 Downing Street. However, we are not interested in running to Downing Street to get peerages, which is what Sammy and his colleagues appear to be more interested in doing; we are interested in knocking down their door to make sure that the British Government live up to their responsibilities to the people

here, not only in the money they took from the Executive but in their other wider responsibilities in the Good Friday Agreement.

I want to try to accentuate the more positive aspects of the discussion today, because we are not dealing with all the individual policies. For example, even welfare reform, which has been mentioned before, is a separate debate, albeit linked to the overall money that is at our collective disposal. There are clearly fundamental differences in views on welfare reform. I do not see anybody in Sinn Féin being uncomfortable about blocking the Welfare Reform Bill, I can assure you of that. We are consistent on the matter.

We want to be, and we are, a responsible party in government. We want to try to make sure that we do these things responsibly. If all parties here were to band together in a common cause, we fail to see how we would not get a better deal from the British Government than that which is being imposed on us. Therefore, we will continue to pursue the course of action that we are involved in on the welfare cuts agenda, and we make no apology for that. We just hope that other parties will eventually come on board with the same agenda rather than, day to day, trying to ram the welfare cuts agenda down people's throats and tell us that it is actually not so bad and that we should be thankful for it because there are constituencies in England that are worse off. Well, I do not represent any constituency in England, but I represent a constituency here, and I am more interested in the people that I have to represent and am answerable to. I am very proud to have that privilege, and I am not going to let them down with respect to the commitments that we have made in the past.

We came into this mandate saying that we would be opposed to a welfare cuts agenda, and we remain true to that position. Will we work with the other parties to try to resolve the matter? Yes, we will try to do that. If we can get a better deal, we will be up for that. If we do not get a better deal, we are not up for it, and we will continue to block it.

I want to make it very clear, and Sammy Wilson, as a former Finance Minister, is well aware, that Sinn Féin blocked agreement on a Programme for Government at the beginning of the last mandate because the money was taken from the Executive. We were not prepared to simply impose those cuts directly on to the people we represent, which is why we had protracted discussions and debates, privately and publicly, around how we could generate

bigger amounts of income. That was why we had the whole debates around getting money from the Harbour Commission and whether, for example, we could find additional revenue, which we have not yet managed to do, around social housing. We insisted that we were not simply going to accept the cut from London but were going to see whether we could generate additional funding and how, in a fair way, we could distribute the money that we have available to us.

As John McCallister referred to earlier, we have been consistently arguing that we want to see a transfer of the fiscal powers that would allow us to tailor the system, whether it is a welfare system or a taxation system, to meet the needs of the people we represent. I am not interested in what happens in London, Sunderland or somewhere else. I am interested in what happens in my constituency and in the constituencies of all the other 107 MLAs who are elected to this House. I live by the mandate through which we, as parties, came in here, and we have a Programme for Government that is about building the economy. It stands to sense that, if we have a fair society, we have a stable society. If we have a stable society, we can provide a welcoming environment.

The Executive have done good things to support local businesses. They need to do more, but they have certainly done some very good and valuable work. We should not underestimate, undermine or denigrate some of the very good work that has been done by the Executive collectively, but, again, I stress that we need to make a fair society.

5.00 pm

It is regrettable that, in the environment that we have at the moment, there has been failure to have political agreement, whether that is on Haass, parades, flags or dealing with sectarianism and racism. The longer we put those big decisions off and the longer we put off a resolution of those serious issues, the longer we will continue to have a fairly toxic and negative environment into which we expect and hope to bring external investors and, indeed, hope to encourage local communities and businesses to invest more. We are about trying to have a fair Budget — we will deal with some of the figures tomorrow — and dealing with a fair society.

I will go back to the issues around DSD, for example. It is about tackling disadvantage. We all agree with that. It is about building sustainable communities. As I made clear last

week in the debate on racism, when the House, thankfully, was united in its condemnation of racism and was committed to tackling racism, no Member needs to have a racial equality strategy to deal with racism. Of course, we need and want to have it for wider society, but we also need to resource such a strategy. We need to make sure that we put the money where our mouths are, because we need a strategy, and, more importantly, we need resources attached to that. There are very simple things. If the Muslim community cannot have a decent quality of a mosque, it is an indictment of all of the community. In my view, that same test applies to all the various communities that, collectively, we are supposed to represent. In our view, we have a strategy, and we have the necessary resources applied to those strategies. If we need legislation, we need legislation and enforcement, because, we have to recognise that, sometimes —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Maskey: — we will not be able to change people's opinion, but we can certainly change their behaviour. I support the motion and welcome the good things that have been done, but we need to make sure that we will continue to monitor to make sure that we deliver a fair society, be that in housing, tackling disadvantage —

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

Mr Maskey: — or creating employment.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I will base my contributions on health, primarily, as health spokesperson for the SDLP, but I will turn back to some of the comments from earlier. Regardless of whether it is going to David Cameron for peerages, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, letters, it amounts to side deals by the individual or the parties. We need a collective approach from all parties in the Assembly in agreeing the way forward on negotiation. We need to sit down collectively with the Prime Minister to discuss those issues, not as individuals or individual parties.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair)

Last week, the SDLP brought a motion to the House calling for increased measurement of the Transforming Your Care plan and, more importantly, its implementation. You will not need to be reminded that that is the foundation

plan for health service change. The motion received all-party support. In short, the House was not satisfied by the response from the Department that the original 99 targets in TYC were being properly measured or, in some instances, whether they were being implemented at all. We are still not satisfied by the further answers that we have received.

Last week, a sizeable bid for moneys was made by the Health Department. It is important to underscore the fact that every pound becomes vital, because we are talking about something in the order of £5 billion of health spend here. That is 50p in every pound. In that sense, we must be sure that every pound is spent directly and measured against productivity, but we are not seeing that, and the public are not seeing that. Two and a half years into the process, respected unions, such as the RCN, have come to the Health Committee and told us that they do not know what Transforming Your Care is. Remember that it is supposed to be the foundation block for health service change. They cannot see a model for implementation, and, in the context of today's debate, we cannot see where the money is going to and whether it is going to the correct place. We cannot see if it is being properly measured. I will remind you of what some of the other unions said. NIPSA said that, "despite its visionary rhetoric" — so it recognises positives — Transforming Your Care is:

"creating the space within which universal provision is undermined".

UNISON said:

"TYC fails to control critical risks, and is cost rather than clinically driven. Therefore the TYC model as presented requires fundamental reconsideration."

Under Transforming Your Care, significant funding is being placed into housing and older people. That has been a focus of the Health Committee for some time. We discovered through evidence sessions with the Department that there is no definition of "assisted living" — not no agreed definition but no definition. There is no concrete plan, and the TYC direction is being implemented inconsistently and often unilaterally by health trusts. We hardly need much reminding, because of the uproar around it, but, following target 10 in TYC, the Northern Trust closed its residential care homes. The Minister had to reverse that decision after significant public outcry. That is one of his 99 proposals that absolutely went south.

How can we be sure, given the many crises in health service strategy, some of which I have outlined, that the money in the Department is being used effectively, when crisis spending is the order of the day and we do not know how much the impact of a failing TYC is provoking the crisis in the first place? The simple answer is that we cannot. Elected representatives are left accepting a health service bid for money while not fully knowing where it will go, whom it will go to and whether it is being used efficiently. We know nothing other than the argument, which is, effectively a demand-led assessment. The Department has consistently bid for more TYC transitional money, and consistently it has received less. As well as the overall plan not working, the Department is not even given enough money for it to work. What is the plan underpinning the bid? Do we simply back a Budget with a failed plan behind it? Is that what we are being asked to do? I feel deeply uncomfortable being asked to back the monitoring round and the overall Budget.

The Department received £9.4 million in the June monitoring round last year against a total bid of £28 million. It received little in January. It has put in a bid in this monitoring round for substantial millions. It is clear from what the Minister has said this morning about the thinness of the Budget that it is not going to get that either. During the debate in January, I asked the Finance Minister, who I do not think is listening, to continue to cast a clinical eye over Transforming Your Care and the amount of money being used for its implementation. The SDLP has not seen any evidence that he has done that to date. Instead, we are being fed warnings by ministerial counterparts from that party — the Finance Minister and the Health Minister — about the future financial situation here and the effect that cuts will have on the provision of services. The Health Minister has consistently used the issues of welfare reform and the health budgetary deficit to spell out a reduction in services, the possibility of redundancies and consequential risk to patient safety. The Finance Minister, on hearing that, did not take a comprehensive look at health service strategy or the Transforming Your Care agenda, where the money is being spent; instead, he backed his party colleague and issued threats of his own. So close together are those two Ministers that, on 16 May this year, they released simultaneous press releases containing threats of reduced services if more money was not attained. Where did that come from? Did it come from the finance office? Did it come from the health service office?

Mr Allister: The DUP office.

Mr McKinney: Did it come from the DUP office? That is an interesting question. Who is running whom? Who is running that agenda?

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): You should be a journalist.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McKinney: Who is running that agenda? Where is the accountability? The Finance Minister should not be cheerleading for his party counterpart when he outlines the extent of money problems in the health service; rather, he should scrutinise why that is the case in the first place. Is he a cheerleader or a challenger? Depending on that, what support are we being asked to give to the Budget and the monitoring round?

We know what the former Finance Minister would have done when it came to this issue. Mr Wilson was extremely critical of the then Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey. How different the situation is now, when the Health Minister puts his hands out for many millions of pounds. If we follow the press releases, we know that there will not be any interrogation whatsoever.

Last week, the Health Minister, in his reply to the debate, quoted what he believed were the successes of the Transforming Your Care implementation. Let us look at those again. The Minister picked five successes, but I will look at just two. He said that, under target 55, the Department now had a clear provision of information for those affected by mental health issues, and he spoke of using new technological resources for that. What he did not say was that this was a website that is a year late and is still not up and running as we speak. That was one of his top-tier achievements — the development of a website in a programme that is costing £70 million over five years — or is it three years? That programme has not even received that money through bids and will not receive it through further requests. He said that the Department had successfully established 17 integrated care partnerships. What he did not say is that the integrated care partnership model is currently under review, which is holding up a rake of other targets in the system.

My clear point is that there is a huge allocation to the Health Department. In this instance, it is nearly £5 billion. It is, therefore, extremely concerning that we cannot see how this money is being used, and there are serious questions about the strategy that it is being used for. We

will not accept the Health Minister's approach, which seems to be "You agreed the plan in the first place, so don't worry your sweet little heads about it. I will do the work, you pay the bills, and we will consult you later when it has been done or not done". This needs to be scrutinised, and, as I said, I am deeply concerned about being asked to support it when there is a clear lack of measurability. The House accepts that there is a lack of measurability, and the Finance Minister should share our concerns.

Mr Swann: I welcome the opportunity to outline the Committee for Employment and Learning's views on the Supply resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates 2014-15.

The continued pressures on all Departments are well known to the House, so I will not rehearse those issues. However, from the Committee's standpoint, I argue that the Department for Employment and Learning currently has an important long-term goal in developing Northern Ireland as an attractive destination for inward investment. Just last week, the Committee heard from the Department that, although the economic situation is slowly improving, the pressures on employability services such as Steps to Work and other schemes remain high. This means that the calls on the Department's budget, which must react to these pressures, also remain high.

The Department has informed the Committee that it has been living within its budgetary constraints. This is regularly maintained and inspected by the Committee. In reviewing the Main Estimates, the Committee considered the details behind the additional resource allocations. Of the £55.8 million, £21 million is for the top-up student fees, and £19.6 million is for NEETs, the youth employment scheme and Pathways to Work. There is also a range of further allocations for employment initiatives, including £2.7 million for First Start; £2.1 million for Step Ahead 50+; £2.6 million for additional undergraduate science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) places; £2.4 million for 150 additional PhD places; and £2.5 million additional funding to support European social fund (ESF) projects.

The Department's capital allocation includes £4.7 million for the University of Ulster at Coleraine's rationalisation phase 3; £3.3 million for Queen's University; £2.8 million for Stranmillis University College for asbestos removal and infrastructure; and £1 million for the Southern Regional College in Banbridge. The Department also advises that the Main

Estimates show the fallout of the reclassification of the further education colleges and university colleges to non-departmental public bodies. The Department has highlighted that there has been a £27.8 million non-cash addition due to the depreciation of assets of the further education colleges and the university colleges, which, as non-departmental public bodies, will not show in the Department's budget.

Another consequence of the reclassification to NDPBs is that an NDPB that wants to spend its accumulated cash reserves needs to have the equivalent budget cover from the Department to enable it to do so. The Department has advised that it submitted a £28 million bid for capital to Treasury, which has been successful. The Committee also asked about the detail of the reduction in the Department's capital budget, and the Department advised it that, after a successful bid for £28 million capital, it realised that it would not need all the money in the current Budget period. The Department has therefore worked with DFP to give back £18 million, with the proviso that DFP would make the money available when needed.

I will speak now as an Ulster Unionist Party member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Departmental officials spoke about the £1 million that was not raised by the wind farm development project. On questioning them, I was disappointed to find out that they did not have an awful lot of knowledge of the project, even though they thought that it was going to raise £1 million for the Department. More alarming is the fact that they wanted to offset that money by the sale of additional timber from forestry. I am no expert on the price of unfelled trees, but I would say that it takes an awful lot of trees to make up a revenue shortfall of £1 million. It is ironic that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development would make up a renewable energy project shortfall by felling trees.

5.15 pm

Mr Rogers: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate.

The SDLP has consistently argued against the way in which current financial arrangements have been managed. We did so during the debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates, and the 2014-15 Main Estimates give us another opportunity to assess the areas of greatest need in our education system.

Funding must make proper provision for our young people to help them to reach their highest possible standards of educational achievement. That has the potential to give them a secure foundation for lifelong learning and employment. As I listened to all the Members who spoke, it struck me that we have to look in the mirror at times to move forward. Schools are managing diminishing budgets, but they are expected to review their school development plan and plan ahead.

Important things have to be considered in a review. With the school estate, planning is extremely important, but it must be based on accurate projections of the future school population. In a recent debate, I spoke about the weaknesses in the area-planning process. That process, or should I say the parallel processes conducted by the boards and the CCMS, did not take on board the idea of shared education and did not think to involve further education at all. Surely that is not based on a sound analysis. An analysis that is based on the pretence that you need more than 105 children in a primary school and more than 500 in a post-primary school to be an effective school illustrates just one thing: the Department is driven by accountants not educationalists.

It is disappointing that, in 2012, only about one third of capital projects have cut the first sod. Of the projects announced in January 2013, only two of the 22 projects are expected to be on site by 2015. That is disappointing not only for school communities but for the construction industry. The announcement of 50 school enhancement projects was good news, but I am led to believe that there is only £20 million in the pot, and the expected expense is £100 million. Will it then take five years to deliver those?

The level of school maintenance and the whole procurement process are incredible. I will give you one simple example from my area. A local primary school had a meeting of the board of governors, and, luckily, one board member was a plumber. As they left that night, they noticed a bit of a leak, so the plumber got a ladder and isolated the leak. The principal rang the board the next morning to be harangued by the board. Why did he not get a plumber to come from Magherafelt? In one case, he said that there was a plumber there with a van from Castlebar. That will have to be looked at. Would the board rather replace the ceiling and close the school for a few days? Are we about value for money at all?

On the subject of value for money, we failed to deliver ESA, and £17 million has gone there. What we now have is a lame CASS, which is able only to firefight. I have always talked about another important resource in our schools, which is our teachers. Given that the CASS resource is lame, the level of good professional development is just non-existent. Our young teachers are being snapped up by schools in England. Why? There are no jobs here. How can we raise standards in schools when we have up to 35 children in a primary school class? Smaller classes would make a big difference. In addition, the recent debate on pensions has made life more difficult for young teachers because more mature teachers will have to stay in employment until the age of 68.

Another thing that we have talked about very frequently is embedding self-evaluation in our schools. How can we embed self-evaluation in our schools if we do not have good staff development?

Investment in a long-term early years strategy is essential if we are to create building blocks for our children's educational future. Current funding arrangements favour education at secondary or third level rather than at the early stages of learning. We believe that a child's development hinges on high-quality early childhood experience. The SDLP wants a redirecting of funds towards early years. Increased investment at an early stage is essential to addressing poor rates of literacy and numeracy. While there have been some modest improvements in the levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy, Northern Ireland's global educational position in literacy and numeracy has been falling since 2006. In 2010-11, some 9,000 pupils left full-time education having failed to meet required standards in literacy and numeracy. We just have to do better.

Not only is an effective early years plan right for the development of our young people but it will help to improve the local economy in the long term. A well-educated population can bring innovation, creativity and ingenuity to the local economy. We believe that a more robust focus on attainment in STEM subjects is important in order to provide our young people, and as a consequence our businesses, with the necessary skills to excel in this area of global competition.

If our economic outlook is to improve, we need to address the skills imbalances that characterise our island economy. Critically, these imbalances lead to lacklustre productivity and stifle levels of foreign direct investment and

business start-ups. Skills gaps act as an impediment to productivity and can, therefore, generate lags in growth. Skills shortages mean that there is an imbalance between demand and supply in labour markets. Labour demand may not be fully met if the labour supply does not possess the types of skills that we need to meet those needs. There seems to be recognition that, across our island, there needs to be much greater engagement with higher education and enterprise to ensure that there is no mismatch between Ireland's skills requirement and the output of its higher education systems.

The proposed changes to the common funding formula will not address social need or improve the delivery of the Department of Education's key policy objectives. Rather, the proposals will result in greater disadvantages, particularly among our small rural schools. The SDLP is only too aware of the finite nature of the resources available for education services. However, increasingly, budgetary restrictions in schools will result only in more expensive problems in school maintenance and future provision. Sound financial planning is as intrinsic to improving our educational system as it is to running a school. The Minister must allocate funding to strengthen the educational prospects of all our young people.

Mr Allister: One struggles to find any example of humour in documents as dry as this. However, I discovered something quite humorous when I got to page 268, which describes the functions of OFMDFM. One of those functions, and the basis on which it asks the Finance Minister for money, is to provide the:

"effective operation of the institutions of government".

Given how this Administration operates, they really must be having a laugh that the Department with oversight for the effective operation of government, OFMDFM — it being the Department that carries off the gold medal for dysfunctionality every year on every issue — should be the body charged with the very thing on which it fails so lamentably. In criminal law, there is such an offence as obtaining property or money by deception. I have to say that, if OFMDFM is obtaining money to the tune of tens of millions of pounds from the very generous Finance Minister, it seems to me that, prima facie, it is in the business of obtaining money by deception.

If ever I had any doubt on that matter, I was confirmed in that view when I listened to the

speech of my colleague from North Antrim Mr Storey who told us that, in one of the Departments, there is inventive accounting — in the Department of Education — that there is a slush fund being operated and that there are all sorts of failures and misdemeanours. If the annual Estimates are part of a bona fide process of financial management and oversight and we have an allegation as serious as that from a Chairman of the Education Committee — that the Department of Education is operating what he calls a "slush fund" and that there is inventive accounting — not only does the Minister of Education owe the House an explanation but the Finance Minister owes the House an explanation if that is how the Department of Education, which he funds, is being allowed to function.

Of course, we know that the Department of Education eschews transparency. It resists at every opportunity the attempt to shine any spotlight or searchlight of control on how it organises and expends its funding. Of course, it is no secret that the Education Minister was to the fore in resisting and thwarting the attempt by the Department of Finance to introduce more properly coordinated accounting processes in respect of how Departments get their money. They simply take on to themselves the billions of pounds handed to the Department of Education and, with no transparency, shift the money where it suits them, from sector to sector with no accountability.

Indeed, it is notable that, during the various monitoring rounds, the Department of Education rarely, if ever, gives back any money. Indeed, the same could be said of most Sinn Féin Departments. Oh yes, they always have their hand out looking for more, but, when it comes to the collective responsibility of helping to hand back money to share with other Departments through the centre, they have nothing to give. It is a Department that cloaks in maximum secrecy what it does with the money that it gets. It is surely a failure of the system that it continues to get away with that.

There are other challenges in relation to expenditure. In the House last week we heard a boast from the Culture Minister that, at the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting on waterways and the language body, she had blocked the approval of the 2013 business plan and the 2013 budget. Here we are, almost at the halfway point of 2014, and the Culture Minister is boasting that she has blocked the budget for money already spent by those two cross-border bodies. Where is the financial accountability in the fact that that Minister can make that boast? What does it tell

us about the financial anarchy that seems to prevail as a consequence in those North/South bodies if they merrily continue, year on year, and then, some time, one day, maybe, they will retrospectively put a budget in place for money that they have already spent, squandered or whatever the case may be? That is a glaring flaw in relation to how matters proceed.

5.30 pm

In opening the debate, the Minister told us that there will be significant challenges, and I think that we all know that, with the impasse on welfare reform, there will be significant challenges. Can the Minister shed any light on whether we see in these Estimates any reflection of those challenges, or will we see any reflection of them when he publishes the Budget (No. 2) Bill? How are the budgetary arrangements for this year going to reflect those challenges? Does he have an arrangement to get the Budget (No. 2) Bill through the Executive, either to reflect the existence of those challenges or, by some sleight of hand, to pretend that they are not there? How is the Budget mirror going to reflect the fact, the existence and the reality of those challenges? Perhaps the Minister can give us some indication of that.

Finally, from time to time, one notes little lines in these budgetary documents that, to laymen like me, are occasionally of some interest and leave one wondering what they really mean. In the Main Estimates document, what are called "Notional Charges" are listed against every Department. In some of the budgetary documents, there are also listed reflections that, perhaps, might be capitalisation or some down-writing of capitalisation etc, but when you total the notional charges in the Estimates book, they amount to something in excess of £110 million, with some £26 million of notional charges in DSD alone. Can the Minister shed some light on what those notional charges are? Are they simply a down-writing of capital assets or are they something more? What do notional charges reflect, and what are they about? Perhaps you can inform this ill-informed MLA about that.

Mr Dickson: In many ways, the debate is rather false. The reality is that a crisis is looming as public services face cuts of millions of pounds due to the failure to implement our Welfare Reform Bill. Therefore, that is where I would like to focus my remarks.

I share many of the concerns about the changes to welfare that have been

implemented by the United Kingdom Government, and we opposed those changes at every stage of the Bill's passage at Westminster. However, the concern of Members across the House does not negate the fact that the UK Government are not prepared to give us special status or privilege in those matters beyond the concessions that have been negotiated, and they are unlikely to do so in the future.

One of the questions that those who are blocking the progress of welfare reform need to answer is why they think that MPs will allow Members of this House to shirk their responsibilities and not take difficult decisions on the same changes that they have to implement in their own constituencies and for constituents in the rest of the United Kingdom. Blocking the Welfare Reform Bill demonstrates not just political immaturity but a reckless attitude to our public finances, as we will demonstrate as we approach the June monitoring round, unless dramatic and immediate action is taken by Members. We have already seen £5 million a month taken from us since January, and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is telling us that this will rise to £10 million in the next financial year, just around the corner. The Finance Minister outlined that we are now looking at cuts across the board of 1.5% in the next monitoring round, which will have a profound effect on the delivery of services. Those who oppose the progress of the Welfare Reform Bill, far from helping the most vulnerable in our society, are cutting their ability to escape from poverty because the financial penalties imposed affect, and will affect, our front line services, our health services, our education system and our skills and training, which are all key vehicles for overcoming and avoiding hardship. These are not abstract implications. We are talking about real cuts to teaching resources and to our services that help to get people back to work after periods of sickness or long-term unemployment.

Members can make a big show of standing up to the Government and opposing welfare reform, but passing the cuts on to other Departments will not help people either. It hinders. We desperately need to move beyond the current impasse. If we were able to get the Bill to the Floor of the House, at the very least, we could debate it properly. We could then discuss in detail the financial implications and how we and our Departments can respond within our powers. Until this issue and the issue of financial penalties is resolved, this debate is and remains somewhat farcical. We can debate budget allocations, but until this

Assembly faces up to its responsibilities, we do not know what further sanctions could arise and what the implications will be for those in other Departments.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Clearly, the business on the Order Paper will not be disposed of by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the business is completed. I call the Minister for Finance and Personnel, Mr Hamilton, and you have 52 minutes to respond.

Mr Hamilton: The debate today has covered many aspects relating to public expenditure, some that did not relate to public expenditure and some that were not closely related to the matter in hand at all. Nevertheless, I will endeavour to address as many of the points raised during the debate as I possibly can in the 52 minutes allotted to me.

First, I again thank the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its agreement to take this important legislation through by accelerated passage. This agreement secures a timely transition of the legislation through the Assembly, thereby avoiding any legal uncertainty over the funding of public services for 2014-15.

I listened to the debate today with interest, and I now turn to the issues that were raised by Members. I will address as many as I can. I begin with the Chair of the Committee, Mr McKay. He raised several issues, including some that related to concerns or issues that the Committee had raised. First, let me address his comments on prior year out-turn information. He raised the issue, as he has done in the past. My Department provides the Committee with forecast out-turn information. It does so regularly, and that covers all Departments. The information provided to the Committee in April and May provides the most robust assessment of year-end out-turn available at this stage, and I trust that that information is helpful to the Committee. Furthermore, I echo the Member's call for all Departments to engage early with their Committees on year-end information.

Mr McKay and McGlone raised the issues of tourism and economic growth. Whilst I think that they were positive in their assessment, they both raised those issues for somewhat negative reasons, although I highlight the fact that there are lots of positives in respect of tourism and the economy. I am very pleased to report that the Programme for Government targets for visitor numbers and tourism revenue have been achieved for 2013. The latest

figures show that visitors increased by 2% to 4.1 million in 2013, with associated expenditure increasing by 5% to £723 million. This demonstrates that the momentum built up with the ni2012 celebrations continued in 2013 and, hopefully, into 2014 and beyond as well.

I turn to the wider economy. While the global downturn had a significant negative impact on local economic conditions, there are now signs that the local economy is beginning to recover. This includes significant improvement in the local labour market, with the claimant count falling for each month since January 2013 and job numbers having grown for eight consecutive quarters, adding over 15,000 jobs to the economy. We are also seeing stronger growth in the private sector. I am sure that we all welcome the fact that the driver of economic growth in Northern Ireland is now quite significantly the private sector. Economic activity has expanded in three of the four quarters in 2013, with manufacturing exports also up by 6.5% in 2013 compared with 2012 levels. Our economic prospects are more positive than in recent years, with independent forecasters predicting economic growth to range between 1.9% and 2.8% in 2014.

Mr McKay and Mr McGlone attempted to talk about tourism and the economy in somewhat negative terms to try to make pretty puerile political points. Mr McKay, notwithstanding all of the great positive news that there has been in the economy, saw fit to describe Northern Ireland as an economic backwater. Those sentiments were echoed in part by Mr McGlone when he talked about flag protests being negative for our economy and our tourism sector. He was partial in what he picked out, and there was no mention, of course, of the likes of the republican coat-trailing exercise in Castledearg last summer. One wonders how many tourists the glorification of terror or the retraumatisation of victims attracts to Northern Ireland. As Mr Wilson pointed out, we listened to Mr McKay talk about the negative effect of particular comments or certain activities over the past number of years while conveniently forgetting the devastating impact that IRA violence had on our economy for 25 or 30 years, which was very selective. You have to ask what the IRA murders, the IRA bombs, the IRA kidnapping and murder of members of the business community and the blowing up of businesses across Northern Ireland do for Northern Ireland's reputation or to our attractiveness as a place to visit or to invest in. Indeed, the reason why we face an uphill struggle in transforming and rebalancing our economy is in no small part down to the fact that we faced three decades and more of

republican violence in Northern Ireland. Once again, we saw Sinn Féin attempting to rewrite the history of Northern Ireland. I want to put on record the fact that we on this side of the House will never let it do that.

Mr Paul Frew raised matters on behalf of the Agriculture Committee. He mentioned the Reservoirs Bill and referred to the provision in the Main Estimates for expenditure to assist owners to comply with proposed reservoir legislation. I welcome the Committee's scrutiny of all departmental spending plans and encourage the Agriculture Committee to continue to engage with DARD to ensure that its views are fully reflected in the development of that important legislation.

Mr Frew also mentioned the flooding in Ballymena and said that he was out to all hours of the evening and into the early hours of the morning, I think he said, wading through flood water, which looked pretty terrible, particularly in the Galgorm Road area of Ballymena. My officials have approved the emergency financial assistance scheme for those affected by flooding over the weekend. Householders will be eligible for a £1,000 payment as an offer of practical assistance to those who have suffered severe inconvenience to ensure that homes are made habitable as quickly as possible. The scheme is funded through the Department of the Environment, and any householders who have been affected should contact their council as soon as possible.

Mr Frew also mentioned the rural development programme, and I fully agree with the points that he made on the 2014-2020 rural development programme. It is imperative that the Agriculture Minister confirms her plans for that important scheme in a timely manner to ensure that the Executive can consider the funding requirements as part of the 2015-16 Budget exercise.

5.45 pm

I turn to Mr Bradley's comments. Mr Bradley is still in the House and has remained here for most of the debate. It shows on his face that he has been here for most of the debate. Conveniently for those of us who missed the Queen's speech in real time, he gave us a gallop through some of the highlights, particularly in respect of Bills. I assure him that Northern Ireland Departments, including my own, will examine the detail of the Queen's speech and consider the implications for budgets here at the earliest possible opportunity. I reassure him and the House that, should additional funds be made available in

Whitehall for the implementation of those Bills, Northern Ireland will receive proportionate allocations under the Barnett formula, where there is read-across to equivalent functions here.

Mr Bradley was not the only Member — I think that Mr McCallister did as well — who raised the issue of tax-varying powers and having additional fiscal levers. The June 2013 'Building a Prosperous and United Community' document, sometimes referred to as the economic pact, includes a commitment by the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to:

"examine the potential for devolving specific additional fiscal powers."

That is over and above the Programme for Government commitment to seek responsibility for setting the rate of corporation tax following the completion of an initial scoping exercise, which is currently being taken forward by my officials. A key deciding factor will be whether the benefits to the people of Northern Ireland of devolving the tax and moving from the national system of rates and allowances will benefit the people of Northern Ireland will be sufficient to outweigh clearly any cost. The recommendations from the analysis should be put to the Northern Ireland Executive and Government Ministers by autumn this year. There has been no lack of willingness to pursue attaining and taking on additional tax-raising powers, as air passenger duty for long-haul flights has shown, where there is a distinct, definable economic or social benefit for Northern Ireland, but, as Mr Wilson, for example, has pointed out, we have always to bear in mind affordability issues as we have the discussion about the pursuit of corporation tax. When you have the scenario that Mr Wilson outlined, in which we have a £9 billion-plus subvention and spend £9 billion-plus a year more than we raise in taxes, we have to be exceptionally careful about what additional fiscal levers we take on and employ, and we must consider what the impact might be on our finite Budget.

Mr Bradley also talked about infrastructure investment and the delivery of same. I think that he was here for Question Time earlier, at which I outlined some of the recommendations from the procurement board subgroup that I will be endorsing and seeking to take forward, such as more centralised procurement and delivery of infrastructure projects, prioritisation and the building of a pipeline of infrastructure projects. I see a scenario clearly in which, on the one hand, our current expenditure budget is going

down and is under increasing pressure, but, on the other hand, our capital budget is increasing. It is important that we as an Executive ramp up our infrastructure spend, knowing and understanding, as we all do, the significant economic and social benefits that improved infrastructure brings to our towns and cities and the region as a whole.

We entered this year with over £1 billion in capital expenditure for the first time in three years. When you add in asset sales and our reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing, for example, that takes our likely capital expenditure this year to £1.6 billion, which is getting back up to where it was before the current Budget cut 40% from our capital budget. Therefore, it is important that we ramp up that expenditure and get it on the ground as quickly as possible. Hence, my focus is on prioritisation and on ensuring that it is done and done effectively. That is why I want to see a much more centralised approach to procurement and delivery.

Mr Bradley also spoke about his desire to see a yearly Budget process. In some ways, we have a yearly process, and this is part of it, frustrating as it is for all of us. He is now a veteran of this type of Budget process. I would like to see a more streamlined Budget process, and I am on record as supporting that. Hopefully, we will be able to take that forward in the short to medium term. I echo the comments made by my colleague the former Finance Minister that, if the Member and the House think that we have difficulties now agreeing four-year Budgets, heaven forbid the difficulties that we would have were we having to go through this process annually.

Mr Wilson made the point about giving certainty to Departments, particularly over capital expenditure, which is a point that the Member raised and I have just addressed. It would be exceptionally hard to do that for Departments if we were going through the uncertainty that is inherent in an annual Budget process, in which you have political ramifications each and every year. You would almost never stop. This would be the backcloth. From one year to another, almost all that my Department would do would be seeking to agree budgets and trying to balance things. There are other benefits and merits in having multi-annual Budgets. I presume that whatever Government come in at Westminster after the general election in 2015 will go for a three- or four-year Budget, taking them to the end of the Parliament in 2020. One of the other benefits is that we can balance out expenditure across those three or four years. Some Departments might think that they are

doing badly in year 1 but are doing better in years 2 and 3, and they can plan appropriately. I think that I understand why the Member wants a yearly process. There would be a sense of greater transparency and greater involvement of the House, but, in the political environment and system that we have, coming back each year to try to agree a Budget process would be fraught with difficulty.

I want to see improvements to our financial process, however. Mr Cree raised that issue, which he frequently does on such occasions. On 9 March 2012, following consultation with key stakeholders, including the Assembly, my predecessor circulated a paper to the Executive reporting the outcome of the review of the financial process. To date, the report has not been tabled for discussion by the Executive. The Minister of Education and, indeed, the Minister for Regional Development raised concerns about sections of the report. Discussions with the Minister for Regional Development reached a successful conclusion in January of last year. Although not entirely content, from the perspective of accountability, with the Minister of Education's proposals on his expenditure lines, his proposals were accepted. An amended report, taking on board the Minister of Education and the Minister for Regional Development's proposals, was circulated to ministerial colleagues on 10 April 2013. It is worth pointing out that the concerns that were raised by both Ministers were addressed, even to the extent that the Department of Finance and Personnel was not 100% happy with accommodating them all. However, to get an improved process, compromise was achieved.

The Minister of Education still had concerns, however. He and my predecessor met and corresponded prior to the summer recess of 2013. The concern relates to ministerial versus Executive control over budgets, which is an issue that Mr Allister discussed, and reduced requirements in particular. I believe that the Education Minister's concerns would be alleviated if the Executive granted DE some flexibility. However, I would like to have further discussions with the Minister of Education, as I see this as an opportunity for the Executive and the Assembly to deliver a significant, positive reform of what are direct rule-inherited publications and financial processes. There is something fundamentally wrong with an Assembly that is seven years up and running still operating direct rule processes. There is an irony, of course, that one of the Ministers who are protecting and defending those direct rule processes is a Sinn Féin Education Minister.

Mr Cree also mentioned Hillsborough. He referred to them as "Hillsborough sites", and I started to panic and worry about what sites in Hillsborough we had. Was it the castle or the fort? Of course, he was referring to sites that had been transferred and gifted as a result of the Hillsborough Castle Agreement. They were gifted by the MoD under that agreement a number of years ago. Due to the timing of the sites being sold, there was no provision in OFMDFM's baseline as part of Budget 2010 to cover the maintenance costs associated with them. I think that Mr Lyttle also raised that issue. OFMDFM bid for and received in 2013-14 an allocation to cover maintenance costs for the sites. It would be up to OFMDFM to bid again this year if it cannot cover this pressure from within its existing baseline.

Mr Cree again, as he always does, raised his concerns about items that sit at the centre. I understand that he has received a briefing from my officials on centrally held items. Of those, the majority are financing items. Rates income, for example, sits as a centre item. However, some significant amounts will be allocated in the in-year monitoring rounds. They include £11.2 million of EU match funding; £26 million relating to the social investment fund and Delivering Social Change; up to £44 million of additional borrowing relating to Together: Building a United Community; £3 million relating to the childcare strategy; and some £35 million of financial transactions capital.

Mr Cree mentioned, as did many Members, the Department of Health budget pressures, and I will come to some of the specifics of that. I am fully aware of the pressures that the Department of Health faces in this financial year. Whilst I do not doubt that it faces difficult choices in the months ahead, it is not unique, as many other Departments face financial pressures. The Department of Health knows — it is something that I have communicated face to face with the Minister — that it needs to live within its budget as best it can and not rely on additional financing that may become available from monitoring rounds.

Mr Cree also raised an issue about £6.8 million. I think that he asked if it related to equal pay. If the Member consults the page in the Main Estimates, he will see that, whilst it is in the adjoining line, it actually relates to strategic sites, which was the issue that we were just talking about. It does not relate to equal pay. The figure that is attached to equal pay is only £4,000, which I understand is a correction of previous equal pay issues and not the issue about the PSNI and NIO.

Anna Lo mentioned several issues relating to the environment, but she also mentioned the racial equality strategy — 'A Sense of Belonging' — and the funding implications associated with that. Once agreed, it will be for individual Departments to implement the strands of the strategy that fall under their remit. I expect that Departments would prioritise their funding sufficiently to ensure that any agreed strategy would be funded from existing resources. However, should pressures arise, Ministers will be able to utilise monitoring and Budget processes to bid for additional funding.

Michaela Boyle spoke about the A5. She will be aware, as a representative of that area, that a number of steps are to be taken by DRD on the A5, including work to address the area of concern that Mr Justice Stephens identified in his court ruling and the public consultation exercise. I understand that the outcome of the public consultation exercise may lead to the need for a further public inquiry in the spring or summer of next year. Subject to the successful conclusion of those exercises, the Executive will decide, taking account of other Executive priorities and the funding commitments of the Irish Government, when funding can be made available to commence construction of the A5 scheme.

I move on to Mr Paul Givan, who raised many issues in his capacity as Chair of the Justice Committee. He particularly focused on pressure on the legal aid budget. Legal aid is a demand-led service with a range of factors that impact on forecast expenditure levels. Since the establishment of the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission in 2003, it has needed additional funding each year to meet its legal aid liabilities. During 2013-14, the Legal Services Commission faced significant budgetary pressures for legal aid expenditure. An additional £31 million was made available by the Department of Justice, enabling the Legal Services Commission to continue to make legal aid payments until year end. I understand that there will continue to be pressures on the legal aid fund during 2014-15, which the Justice Minister is seeking to manage as far as possible. I understand that the legal aid reform programme has put changes in place, which, when fully implemented, will deliver £20 million of annual savings in criminal legal aid. The Department of Justice is consulting on further changes, which, when implemented, will deliver further savings. The Department of Justice recognises the importance of accurate forecasting, and, as part of the legal aid reform programme, a project is under way that is aimed at improving the accuracy of the Legal Services Commission's forecast.

Mr Givan also asked about the Northern Ireland Community Safety College at Desertcreat and referred to the delays experienced in developing the project. The FGP consortium, comprising Spanish company FCC Construction and local company Gilbert Ash, was appointed as the preferred bidder in December 2013. Despite extensive engagement, the preferred bidder, unfortunately, was unable to demonstrate that it could offer an affordable and compliant bid. In light of that, the programme board discontinued the preferred bidder process. Although that 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 three services. The programme board commissioned a review of the project, the main elements of which have now been completed and are being considered. Future progress of the project will be determined following a full analysis of the review findings.

Maeve McLaughlin, as Chair of the Health Committee, spoke at length about the £160 million shortfall in health in this financial year. She made a great plea for more funds. It seems that every area of health funding is to be categorised as a top priority, with nothing to be considered a secondary or tertiary priority; everything should get top billing. It is hard to disagree with many of her arguments. Whether it was about elective surgery or Transforming Your Care, those are significant and important issues for the health budget. However, Maeve McLaughlin's comments would be much more believable, and not considered by some as crocodile tears, if Sinn Féin was not proposing to blow nearly £100 million because of non-movement on welfare reform, with that failure to move obviously putting significant pressure on that budget. She offered no response at all to Mr Wilson's perfectly reasonable question about how or where money should be found. Everything was a priority and everything should be funded in full, but there was no offer about where the money should come from. That is the sort of economic illiteracy that we have now come to expect from the party opposite.

Speaking of economic illiteracy, John McCallister — no, no, I am being unfair; I will come to that later.

He started off very well. He spoke of fiscal pressures and pointed out, as he was the next Member to speak after Ms McLaughlin, the ridiculousness of the Sinn Féin position of arguing for more cash but at the same time throwing money away because of non-compliance with welfare reform. I do not think

that anybody would disagree with his call for a better system of government to help to address some of these big issues — I do not disagree. He is a well-known advocate for opposition and does so as leader of the opposition in his own party. He has more experience of speaking about opposition, having now fallen out with at least two parties in the Assembly.

6.00 pm

Mr McCallister: At least our executive knew to resign. [*Laughter.*] Maybe this one will do the same.

Mr Allister: They have no shame.

Mr Hamilton: I will not get into talking about that.

Mr McCallister wanted to dwell on corporation tax. He raised the issue in January and February as well in the discussions on the spring Supplementary Estimates. I assure him that, as was the case last year, there is no impact of corporation tax in this financial year. He is right to point out that there is a significant cost involved, and my predecessor and I have spoken about that. There are very clear and obvious benefits in devolving corporation tax and lowering the rate in Northern Ireland to one that can compete much better with the Irish Republic: the estimate of around 60,000 additional jobs by 2030 is one of the lower estimates and comes courtesy of the Enterprise Minister's economic advisory group. When a positive decision, I hope, is taken by the Prime Minister in the autumn, we will have time to consider how we deal with the issue of where the money will come from.

I am not concerned about the robustness of our economic data. In fact, Members need to be careful, and I advise the Member in particular to be careful. Questions about the robustness of our economic data are raised more frequently by republicans in the House in an attempt to undermine our place in the Union. I think that the Member is still a unionist — [*Interruption.*] Yes, he is, he is nodding in affirmation. He needs to be careful when trying to make one argument that he wants to make. I know that he is a bit of a sceptic about corporation tax but he needs to be careful not to start using the language of republicans, which is designed to undermine our place in the United Kingdom.

He mentioned Lord Strathclyde's report on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. That has to be viewed in the context of a very political document that was feeding into the debate on a

referendum that is now 100 days away. It reflects, I think, the lack of desire among English Conservatives to devolve corporation tax to Scotland. There is sympathy with the position that we find ourselves in. There is less concern on their part about industry upping and moving to Northern Ireland to avail itself of a lower corporation tax rate. There is more very real concern about the same thing happening across the Scottish border. Their opposition in the report, although there is support for the devolution of other taxes to Scotland, has to be debated in the round when the referendum in September, I hope, goes the right way, and the people of Scotland vote to remain in the Union. Inevitably, there will be a debate about what additional powers, including tax powers, are devolved to Scotland. One that was never on the table was the devolution of corporation tax, and I do not think that we should lift the arguments against it in Scotland and transplant them in Northern Ireland, expecting them to fit entirely.

Mr McCallister argued for the non-devolution of corporation tax but then argued for further tax devolution or, at least, the consideration of further tax devolution. He also talked about the Welsh and said that — I am, perhaps, paraphrasing him — we are not where the Welsh are. If we look at where the Welsh are with many of their fiscal powers, we see that they do not have the borrowing powers that we do and they covet the ones that we have. They are seeking to get borrowing powers akin to the ones that we have.

The Welsh asked for and are getting, subject, I imagine, to a referendum in Wales, the power to vary income tax. However, if you look at the detail of what they got, you see that it is not a deal that I would ever recommend that this House take. They have agreed to something called the lockstep, which means that, if they want to cut or raise tax in a particular band — for example, if they want to lower tax for those at the lower end of the earning scale — they have to make a commensurate reduction at the higher end as well. Therefore, if you reduce at the bottom end, you have to reduce at the top end. If you increase at the top end, you have to increase at the bottom end. Their flexibility to actually do anything economically with income tax is severely restricted. The particular deal that they have gone for hampers their ability to perhaps, on one hand, help people by making others pay for it in a progressive way. When you ask Treasury for some of those things, you have to be careful because it will give them to you if it thinks that it will benefit from doing so. I am sure that Mr Wilson can back that up. Treasury has a deal with the Welsh

Government that they see as more beneficial than one that I would sign up to, I have to say.

However, as I mentioned in response to Mr Bradley, we are looking at the possibility of devolving further taxation powers. There is no blanket ban in my head on the devolution of those powers. If there is a clearly defined social or economic benefit, and it is affordable, we can and should look at devolving them to Northern Ireland. We are obligated to do that.

I want to pick up on Mr Wilson's comments. I have made several references to him already. He is right to point out that the Estimates are a reminder of the fiscal benefit to Northern Ireland of our membership of the United Kingdom. As I have said before in the House, it affords us Scandinavian levels of expenditure without Scandinavian levels of taxation. As tough as things are, we have to work within the constraints of the Budget that we have, which is, as the Member pointed out, £9 billion more than we raise ourselves. We are considerably constrained by that fundamental fact.

He dwelled quite a lot on different ways of delivering services. I am sure that it was a frustration of his when he was in my seat — as it is increasingly becoming a frustration of mine — that many Ministers will talk the talk on delivering services in a different way but will continually come forward with bids for more funding for the same old ways of delivering services. I always pose the fundamental question back to them: if you think of all the various social ills that we have, such as educational underachievement, alcoholism, drug dependency and recidivism, and that many of those indicators have been getting worse over time, particularly during the years when we had, comparatively speaking, an abundance of public resources, what would make us think that, in tighter fiscal times, more money would solve those problems? We have to look at delivering better outcomes with less money, which is, I know, a challenge. We are very good at starting new things. However, we are appallingly bad at stopping old things even when they do not deliver the outcomes and results that we want. Poor outcomes will persist if we fail to change.

If there is one small silver lining from the cloud of tighter fiscal times, it is that, even if Departments do not really want to look at different ways of delivering services, such as partnering with the third sector or the private sector or looking at doing it differently in-house, and are not attuned to wanting to do that instinctively, the fiscal circumstances that we face towards the end of the decade will force

them to think in those ways. That is why I have pushed the reform agenda from the outset; not for political reasons, but because we are facing at least another five years of tight times. The Chancellor has made that very clear. The Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor have made it clear that, no matter who is in power after the next election, tough times remain ahead.

Although the platform in Northern Ireland is not burning in the way in which it was in the Irish Republic or the mainland, it is starting to warm up, and, if Departments do not get to grips with it very quickly, we will have considerable problems in years ahead.

Alex Maskey dwelled a lot on housing. I have to say that I am very proud of what we have been able to do in respect of co-ownership over the past number of years. We have doubled the funding to co-ownership; it has received about £30 million a year. Last year alone, that allowed the Co-ownership Housing Association to house and find homes for over 1,000 people, families or couples in Northern Ireland. That is something that we should welcome and celebrate. It is not fair to say that co-ownership does not address social housing need. Many of those who can purchase their own homes through co-ownership either would have been on the social housing waiting list or might have been susceptible to going onto the list.

In respect of the 4,000 additional social homes in the 2014-15 financial year, the social housing development programme has been allocated £91.5 million to fund 2,000 new social and supported housing unit starts this year. Mr Maskey wants to see that increased to deliver 6,000 social homes in this financial year. While that might be a fine aspiration, it is clearly unrealistic. Even if the sector had the capacity to deliver 6,000 homes in a single year, which it knows it does not, we would need to find another £183 million with which to do so.

Pam Cameron mentioned local government reform funding, which is very topical given the recent elections to the new councils. In 2013, the Executive agreed to provide a reform funding package of £17.8 million over the 2013-15 period, with a further commitment of up to £30 million for rates convergence beyond 2015. That is a substantial contribution on the Executive's part.

I have made it clear that it is councils that will benefit from the savings that reforms deliver, and it is right that councils should contribute to the upfront costs. That can be achieved by using reserves, delivering efficiencies and

borrowing. My Department has secured the UK Government's agreement to allow councils to capitalise up to £33 million of what would otherwise have been resource cost to facilitate funding those costs through borrowing, which will prevent a spike in district rates.

The Executive have also allocated £30 million to manage rates convergence as a consequence of councils merging and other boundary changes. On 28 May, my Department launched a consultation on the proposed transitional rate relief scheme, which will protect ratepayers who would otherwise face sudden and excessive increases as a direct consequence of councils merging or other boundary changes.

I now turn to Mr Fearghal McKinney. I am glad to see that he is back in the Chamber so that he can listen to what I am saying. He came to the game of politics fairly recently, having previously been in the press. He mentioned joint press statements. I regret that my colleague the Health Minister, who was briefly on the Back Bench, has now departed because he might have been able to understand what the Member was talking about. He mentioned joint press releases being released by my Department on 16 May. I have looked at my Department's website, the Health Department's website and, indeed, at the suggestion of Mr Allister, the DUP website, but on none of those three websites is there a statement released jointly, severally or in any way by me or the Minister of Health.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr McKinney: If the Member checks the BBC news website, he will be able to see, on 16 May, separated by 15 minutes, two separate but consistent messages from the Health Minister and the Finance Minister referring to the overall welfare reform issue vis-à-vis the Health Minister and Finance Minister's Departments.

Mr Hamilton: I stand to be corrected. I will check Hansard, but I am pretty sure that the Member made an accusation, in all sorts of theatrical ways, that there was some sort of conspiracy with the releasing of press statements. Was that done by my press office? Was it done by the Minister of Health's press office? Mr Allister helpfully intervened and asked whether it was done by the DUP press office.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Mr McKinney seemed to be enthused by that contribution from Mr Allister. I am making a very clear point to the Member — I am happy to let him stand and retract what he said — that there are no statements from 16 May on the DHSSPS website, the DFP website or the DUP website. I am happy to check Hansard but I am pretty sure and pretty confident that the Member said that they were released as press statements by the press offices of the Departments jointly or separately or by the DUP. That is not the case.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Member for giving way. He may want to dive into the minutiae of the issue. However, the overall point is that the Finance Minister is in charge of the Budget. We have been able to demonstrate — we have support on this from across all parties in the House — that the fundamental platform for change in the health service, TYC, is not being measured and funded properly, and, as a result, the Health Minister is coming to the House and to the Finance Minister asking for more money. What we are saying is that, rather than echoing or parroting the Health Minister's concerns, the Minister should challenge him.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I think that the Member should be careful, because the Minister conceded and allowed you to address the point that he made. You seem to be reiterating an earlier point that you made in your contribution, but you are not addressing the point thrown up by the Minister.

Mr McKinney: I beg to differ, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I did so at the very outset.

6.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: It is convenient for the Member to rise and say, that the Minister should not get into the minutiae of this detail when it is very clear that the minutiae does not suit the case that the Member proffered earlier. The case remains that there was no issuing of press statements by my Department, the Minister of Health's Department or the Democratic Unionist Party's press office as implied by the Member. I know that he is new to this game and I do not know how he checked his facts when he was working in the world of journalism, but standing up and making such bold statements is not how you do business in this House.

If I stand accused of working closely with my colleague the Health Minister, I am guilty as

charged. I make no apology for working as closely as I can with my colleague Mr Edwin Poots. Given the level of cooperation and working together that goes on between the Health Minister and me, and indeed between other Ministers, not all of whom are members of my party, and me, it begs the question: would Members rather that Edwin and I did not discuss those issues, that they came as a surprise and that I was blindsided and did not have a clue what was going on? I think that it is right and proper that he discusses these issues with me and that I, in return, try to assist where possible.

I welcome what we have achieved together. The Minister has taken hundreds of millions of pounds of waste and inefficiency out of the health service system. We allocated an additional £100 million to health in the last financial year and, of course, found money for a new regional children's hospital at the Royal Victoria Hospital site. Those are things that I am proud of and that should be celebrated. I am sorry that I may not be able to offer the same degree of support to my colleague the Minister of Health, and I am more sorry that, because of the failure of the SDLP and others to move forward on welfare reform, we may not be able to offer the same degree of support to vulnerable people in Northern Ireland who need the support of our health and social care system.

I will turn to Mr Jim Allister's comments. He started by trying to find some humour in the document and proved that he has a unique brand of humour that is not shared by many people in this land. He raised concerns that were raised initially by my colleague Mervyn Storey and referred to — I think that he was echoing Mr Storey — a slush fund in the Department of Education. I think that that had been officially referred to as a "set-aside" by officials from the Department of Education — I thought that only fields were set aside — of nearly £30 million to deal with welfare reform. It was an interesting comment from Mr Storey because it suggests that there is no likelihood of agreement on welfare reform if the Minister of Education is setting aside £30 million to pay his contribution towards possible penalties, and I will certainly consider that in the context of what he might bid for in future monitoring rounds, including the current one in June.

I am concerned about the general lack of participation in budgetary processes by the Minister of Education, and I know that it concerned my predecessor as well, whether it is on departmental savings delivery plans or the monitoring round. I concede the point that the

Department of Education rarely gives up money and rarely bids at provisional out-turn. Usually, all the Department's money is spent. So, there is not a problem in that respect. The issue is more about transparency around where the money is being spent. It does concern me, and I have spoken about my concerns before, but one thing that I have learnt in the past 11 months or so in this job is that Ministers will need me long before I will need them. When they come looking for help, as they all do, these are points that I remember closely.

Mr Allister mentioned £126 million of notional charges that, I think, were down for DSD and maybe some other Departments. I point out to him that that reflects the cost of central services provided to Departments, principally by my Department, usually in respect of accommodation charges. So, they are charges that are incurred by DFP and are then pushed out to the likes of DSD and other Departments.

The issue of welfare reform came up repeatedly during the debate, and I do not want to dwell on it too much more other than to point out that the negative impact on Northern Ireland, if we do not move forward with welfare reform in the coming weeks, will be significant.

The negative impact of not introducing welfare reform far outweighs any adverse impacts of introducing it. It is not every part of it that I am supportive of and not every part of it that my party is supportive of. That is why my colleague the Minister for Social Development has negotiated a package of measures with the UK Government that will address the most significant adverse impacts like payments and the bedroom tax.

There is no doubt that the Treasury will reduce our Budget if we fail to make progress. For 2014-15, that is estimated to be £87 million on top of the £13 million that we have already lost to the baseline of this year's Budget because of penalties incurred for non-compliance last year. Furthermore, 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. There are also serious concerns over our continued ability to process welfare payments when existing DWP systems become unavailable to us from 2016 onwards. Separate local IT systems have been estimated to cost £1.6 billion and will not and cannot be delivered on time. That will directly affect hundreds of thousands of people across Northern Ireland.

I picked up a couple of points. One that Mr Allister has just left on is that he asked whether

the £13 million penalty or any part of the penalties of welfare reform were included in the Estimates: they are not. The £13 million penalty will, I hope, be dealt with in June monitoring, and the £87 million penalty for this year is not due to come out of our system until next year in the spring Supplementary Estimates, but it is something that, I believe, needs to be addressed in June as well.

I think that I have touched on most of the points that have been raised. I apologise to any Members if I did not address their points. To be fair, I think that I have addressed the points of most Members who are here. Perhaps, I failed to address Mr Swann's point. I will come back on the £1 million for wind farms. We will get a detailed response to the Member in respect of that. *[Interruption.]* Mr Wilson will give you a — I am loath to even raise it. Why did I even raise it with Mr Wilson in the Chamber? That was a silly mistake.

With that, Mr Deputy Speaker, I draw my remarks to a close. Thank you for your patience and your indulgence. Assembly approval of the Supply motion today and the associated departmental expenditure plans laid out in the 2014-15 Main Estimates is a crucial stage of the existing public expenditure cycle. Failure to pass the 2014-15 Supply resolution at this juncture would put at risk the smooth continuation of public services into the remainder of this financial year. I commend the motion to the House.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £8,411,921,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 and that resources, not exceeding £9,168,609,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for

Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1-3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2014-15 that was laid before the Assembly on 28 May 2014.

Budget (No. 2) Bill: First Stage

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 2) Bill (Northern Ireland), which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the year ending 31 March 2015; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources, including accruing resources, for the year ending 31 March 2015; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

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

Adjourned at 6.24 pm.



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