



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Social Development

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Department for Social Development:
Corporate Plan and Service Delivery Plans**

3 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Social Development

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Paula Bradley
Ms Pam Brown
Mrs Judith Cochrane
Mr Michael Copeland
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Fra McCann
Mr David McClarty
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Nelson McCausland	Minister for Social Development
Ms Heather Cousins	Department for Social Development
Mr Will Haire	Department for Social Development
Ms Jenny Pyper	Department for Social Development
Mr Tommy O'Reilly	Social Security Agency

The Chairperson: I welcome the Minister; Will Haire, the permanent secretary; Tommy O'Reilly; Heather Cousins and Jenny Pyper. They are all from the Department for Social Development (DSD) and are here to deal with specific aspects of the Minister's guidance. I welcome everybody to this wonderful building, the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC). Hopefully, it will be a very successful project in the years ahead. Without any further ado, I ask you, Minister, to address the meeting.

Mr Nelson McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to set out the corporate plan for the next three years and our business plan for this year. We look forward to taking questions after that and hearing your views on how we move forward so that we can finalise the documents.

The plans that you have before you represent my direction of travel for the Department for Social Development. I want DSD to be a Department that helps people to change their lives for the better. That is a high aspiration, but through the priority themes of housing, welfare reform, strengthening communities and creating vibrant urban areas, we can make a real impact on transforming our society and helping individuals, particularly those in need. To do so, our job is not just to support those in need; we have to tackle the underlying causes of poverty and disadvantage. We also need to

transform how people think about the future. That will require a major shift in not only people's attitudes but our approach to tackling issues such as worklessness, housing need and the economic challenges that are posed by an unsteady economy.

I have a number of priorities. The first is that we need to urgently help those who can work to get into the labour market. Secondly, we need new and innovative ways of delivering social and affordable housing. Thirdly, we need to be smarter in how we work on the ground with others to regenerate our towns and cities and to build capacity in our communities. We have a good delivery record in all of those areas, with evidence, for example, of successes in handling changes in welfare and in helping neighbourhood renewal areas to regenerate, the fact that we have the best housing stock in the United Kingdom, and the transformation of many of our towns and cities. However, we need to go much further. We have, for example, to ensure not just that we get welfare reform such as universal credit and personal independence payments implemented; we need to do so in a way that is customised to our needs in Northern Ireland. We need to see where we can tackle some of the tough pressures that the new system will bring, as well as ensuring that we work across Departments to create coherence.

In housing, we do not just need to deal with the changes to housing benefit; we have to ensure that our whole approach to social housing meets tenants' needs more effectively. A much tighter customer focus and better strategic leadership of the sector, and, indeed, the whole housing sector, lies behind my approach to reform as I bring forward the new housing strategy and the review of the Housing Executive. In urban regeneration, I want to ensure that we get to the roots of deprivation in our poorest wards and that we provide a strong link to economic opportunities. We have to support economic growth and ensure that it supports regeneration in our poorest wards and city centres. At the same time, the impact of housing on regeneration seems to be a major opportunity that we have insufficiently exploited in the past.

We have a significant agenda. We have to be much more thorough in dealing with causes rather than symptoms. We have to work across the different parts of DSD more effectively, and we have to work much more in effective partnership with other Departments, bodies and the voluntary and community sector. Working closely with the Committee will also be essential as we take our plans forward.

That is the introduction. I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Minister. I have a couple of points before I open up the session to members. One specific issue that has come up again — the Committee raised it some time ago with the Department — is building control fees. They are emerging as a problem; Bryson Energy Group has drawn to our attention that local councils are charging building fees for warm home insulation. We are advised that that would have a considerable negative impact on the warm homes scheme, which is something that concerns all members. It is a Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) issue, and it may well be a Department of the Environment (DOE) problem as well, given its responsibility for local government. Perhaps you, at some point, could address that issue.

Although some of the appendices show high-level resources against specific plans, at what point will we get the budgets for more specific actions and so on throughout the plan? We see the high level, but we would like to see budget allocations against all the various specific targets. That is one area in which work needs to be done.

Mr McCausland: There have certainly been a lot of representations on the issue of the fees; most local authorities have sent in a lot of letters on the matter. As you said, it is an issue that goes across Departments. We are conscious of it, and we are looking at it at the moment in response to those representations.

The Chairperson: We have Bryson Energy Group in here later this morning, so it will deal specifically with that as well. Are you saying that that is in hand at the moment and that we will see where that takes us?

Mr McCausland: The case has been made very eloquently by a wide range of groups and councils.

Mr Brady: We came across the problem last year. We contacted Newry and Mourne District Council, which agreed to waive the fee. There may be variations in the different councils, but it was prepared to do that. I am not sure what other councils are doing.

Mr McCausland: It is certainly commendable that that has been done.

Mr F McCann: I have a number of questions, Chair, but you constantly shout at me, as does David, who is at the bottom of the table, for talking too much in these meetings.

The corporate plan is a very important document; it guides the Department over a period of time. During that period, we will see much of the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act 2012. Do you believe that your staff, particularly those in the section of the Department that Tommy runs, will be in a position to deliver not only what is, by and large, delivered now but the added weight of welfare reform? Will you have more or fewer staff at the end of the three-year period?

Mr McCausland: It is certainly a big challenge for the Department and the Social Security Agency (SSA); there is no doubt about that. The pressure on them is greater, or rather, would be increased, if we get out of sync and miss target dates for getting the appropriate legislation for Northern Ireland. We could end up in situations where we are running two systems, the old one and the new one, at the one time — it may well happen anyway. There is a danger of increasing the pressure on staff if we get out of sync.

I will ask Tommy to go into the details of the numbers of staff. I have been round all the different areas of the Department and have visited quite a number of social security offices, and I have talked to the staff at the top level in the SSA. We have really good staff there. The quality of staff is such that if anyone can do it, it will be them.

Mr Tommy O'Reilly (Social Security Agency): Our current assumption is that, between now and 2015, the number of staff in the agency will increase, on the basis that we have been given some additional funding and we need to implement and run the dual systems, as the Minister said. However, we expect that, when we get into the next comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, there will have to be efficiencies as we improve the service and introduce more digital services. Again, we have to transform the way in which the service is being delivered. That is the current planned assumption. We are working on the basis that we will have increased numbers in order to provide that service during the current CSR period with efficiencies to follow in the next CSR period.

Mr F McCann: What you are saying is that, by the end of this period, there will be an increase in staff and there will be no decrease. "Efficiencies" is a wonderful word when we are talking about staff: it usually means that there will be staff cuts. At the very height of the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 we can see possible reductions in staff. Surely that will make it more difficult to deliver some of the serious consequences of what welfare reform represents.

Mr O'Reilly: If we take the baseline of the SSA as it currently sits, the Executive recognise that there is, shall we say, a hump of work over the next number of years. Over the next three years, we will get additional resources to help us to implement welfare reform. Then we will need to come back down again towards our baseline. We are getting a temporary injection of funding in order to take forward the welfare reform implementation phase.

We are hoping, then, to move to a position whereby we can move back towards our current baseline. In that sense, we are trying to change the way in which the service will be provided. We are also changing the nature of the relationship that we have with our customers. It is not necessarily the case that we are working on the basis that there will be large-scale efficiencies. We are working on the basis that the service will change, and we will handle that as part of that process.

Mr F McCann: Have you any idea how many additional staff will be required?

Mr O'Reilly: At the moment we are working through the individual business cases. We have been ramping up the numbers of project staff over the past year in all the various areas.

Mr F McCann: You will know that there are ongoing discussions about the dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). There have been some discussions in the Committee about the possibility of elements of DEL being moved across to DSD. I do not know whether that has been discussed in DSD. It makes sense for that to happen with the jobs and benefits offices, because there is a crossover in some of the work that they are doing. How would that sit in the scheme of things?

Mr McCausland: The possible implications of any changes that may come down the road are still being worked through, to be honest. Bringing the jobs and benefits offices together is a good thing, first of all. We can look at the implications of bringing other services into the Department.

There are regular efficiency surveys of offices across the UK. Tommy can give you the precise details, but some of our offices are right up there at the very top. In fact, we were the best in the UK recently.

Mr O'Reilly: The Belfast benefit centre, for example, which provides services to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for London, is sitting as the number one benefit processing centre in the UK. It had moved to fourth, but in the most recent quarter it was number one. We aspire to that standard of efficiency and quality of service for all our offices.

Mr McCausland: It is worth putting on record that credit goes to the staff there for that improvement.

Mr F McCann: This Committee has always recognised the professionalism and dedication of the staff in the Social Security Agency, and any staff who work at the front line of a service need to be commended.

I will move on with a question for Jenny. The document talks about a number of aspects of community development, including the financing. Something that I have learned over a long period, and which you and I have spoken about, is that the Department and other Departments sit down together to plot out a course for how things can be done better. They then go out to a broader community base that will deliver the services that are being funded. They tell them the way that they want it done, and, in the middle, they change it and say, "We have rethought that; let us change that again", but the community and voluntary structures have already started implementing it.

When you sit down to talk about the three-year corporate plan, there could be a better approach. Neighbourhood renewal partnerships have a number of people who oversee and try to work things out, and you also have a broader voluntary sector. I am not asking that they have a say in how the Ministers all link, although I think that is inevitable and will come. However, at an early stage, they could sit down with Departments and give you a better gauge of how things will work on the ground. Would that not be better than a three-tier approach of making a strategy, giving it to the ones that will deliver it and then changing it midstream?

Mr McCausland: You mentioned neighbourhood renewal. We are looking at that because it is our major inroad into the most disadvantaged communities. Over the past year, since coming into the Department, and on the back of having a fair bit of experience of neighbourhood renewal in north and west Belfast over the years, I have been around a lot of the neighbourhood renewal partnerships and have talked to them in depth, sometimes with officials and sometimes just dropping in to chat to people. I have picked up that some of them are working really effectively and others are less effective, and I have been trying to find out why there is that difference. Why do some work really well and some do not? We are trying to learn the lessons from that so that, before there are any changes to neighborhood renewal, there has been a tremendous amount of engagement with the sector to see what works well. I have previously quoted examples of really successful neighbourhood renewal partnerships in west Belfast such as that in Colin, and I have contacted others where there is not the same level of dynamism, vision, aspiration and delivery to find out why that happens. What are the characteristics of one that works really well and of another that does not? What is the difference? We are trying, as much as possible, to learn from good practice in communities, to shape our way forward.

Ms Jenny Pyper (Department for Social Development): In addition to the work that the Minister has talked about, we will bring to the Committee — hopefully next month — our new overarching framework that will try to set out how we see the various elements of urban regeneration and community development working together. We are conscious that we have not had that joined-up framework in the past. That will go out for consultation, but it will propose the sort of better linkages that you are talking about so that there is a clearer, joined-up picture of how all the different initiatives will fit together to get a more joined-up delivery for the community. Coupled with what the Minister said about looking at the effectiveness of the partnerships, I hope that that will make for a more joined-up way forward, Fra.

Mr McCausland: That will go out to consultation in the summer.

Ms Pyper: Absolutely; that is the intention.

Mr F McCann: I do not disagree with what you are saying, Minister. I am a member of a neighbourhood renewal partnership board, as you have been, and I am also a member of quite a number of community structures throughout the west of the city: Colin is a good example. There are six good examples in west Belfast that work together. We recently met Jenny to sort out some difficulties. At an early stage, even of a consultation, you should take somebody from the rural end of neighbourhood renewal and somebody from a city end and bring them into the very centre of the process of drawing up consultation documents, so that they can say what affects them. I am not saying that the Department does not do good work or that there are not a lot of good people in it, but it is at a level where the nitty-gritty of what goes on and what makes communities tick is not known. You can learn by bringing the representatives in at an early stage, because it would certainly help any form of partnership. "Partnership" is a much abused word and has been for many years. Usually, when you say you are going to form a partnership, it means that the community is picking up the pieces and the officials are coming in to direct and dictate what goes on. It is essential that they are involved at a very early stage.

Mr McCausland: Your point about looking at things in a rural and an urban area is well made. I have met folk from neighbourhood renewal partnerships in Dungannon, Coalisland, Enniskillen, Londonderry and everywhere. There are practitioners on the ground from whom we can learn, and we should be doing so throughout the process.

Mr F McCann: Mickey would shout at me for being selfish in what I said, because west Belfast is 37% rural. He would say I am just shouting from the urban aspect.

Moving on to the housing issue, the Programme for Government said that there would be 8,000 social and affordable houses built. Obviously, things are financially strained, but 6,000 houses in the social sector will do nothing to deal with the huge waiting lists.

The other thing that I did not see in the corporate plan, although it was probably mentioned a wee bit, is the recent review of the waiting lists, how that will be handled and how people are appointed in the common selection scheme. There needs to be urgent work to bring some sense to how people are allocated houses, because the current system adds to the long waiting lists that exist already.

Mr McCausland: The figure for the total number of new houses was set out in the government plans. You drew a distinction between social and affordable homes, but quite often people move into an affordable house from a social house. When they move from one to the other, they are freeing up a social house that someone else can have.

It is much better if we look at the situation holistically as the total number of houses, because the housing need in Northern Ireland is not going to be met solely by social housing; it needs to be met by housing. Some of that will be done by the work that we are going to do in the private rented sector, which we need to make a better and more attractive option for people. You are aware of the work that is ongoing in that regard with the registration of landlords and so on.

At the moment, in many ways there is a preference in some people's minds for a social house over a private rented house. We need to make sure that the private rented sector is as good as we can make it. That means that there are issues about regulations and standards and so on. We are doing a

certain amount there. That is not going to meet the entire social housing need in Northern Ireland, but bear in mind that there are people in social housing who want to move into affordable housing, and if we can free up houses, that is a good thing.

We are looking at a complete review of housing, which I indicated in my preliminary remarks. So, there is the review of the Housing Executive and the housing strategy. When it comes to housing in Northern Ireland, the attitude has been very much to keep doing what we have done before. I gave an example of that in a speech yesterday to the Construction Employers Federation and some housing associations. We have a system for determining the social housing development programme. The current regime could end up producing a result that says, in one estate in Clough Mills, we should build six houses this year and two houses next year. Why would you break that up into six and two? You would have two procurements and all the complexities around that. Why would you not just build eight houses? However, the system dictates that you can only build six this year, because that is the way that the sums work out. You can only build two next year, because that is the way that the sums work out.

We had issues with how many houses you can build on the island of Rathlin, whether it is six, eight or 10. You go through a whole rigmarole and engagement process because the social housing development programme for Rathlin has worked out that you can only have six one year — not eight or 10 — but two more next year. Given what it takes to get all the equipment out to the island of Rathlin, it makes sense to do all the houses in one go, and that is what will happen eventually. However, we can be so bound up with these calculations that we end up with odd decisions such as that.

Therefore, we have asked that, first, the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) comes in and looks at the situation to see how it works out. I spent a morning with the Housing Executive and got a detailed explanation of how the calculations are done. I used to teach sums and mathematics in a school in the Shankill, but I came away confused as to how those calculations are done. I was not that much clearer at the end of it. I do not think that anyone outside that little world of the Housing Executive will ever understand how the sums are done, but there you are. We are doing that because how could anyone defend building six houses one year and two the next? Common sense says that you do not do that.

We need to look at a number of things. Major reviews will take place in a number of areas. There are odd decisions about the way that things are done. For example, if someone has been in an estate for many years and a new house is built in that estate, they are resentful when someone from outside the area is allocated the brand new house while they are left sitting in a house that is 40 years old or whatever. Why not let the person who has been in the estate get the new house and the person who is moving in get the house that they were in? We need to be more flexible about the whole system.

Mr F McCann: My understanding is that that already happens.

Mr McCausland: It could, but, in many cases, it does not.

Mr F McCann: The Housing Executive and housing associations will say that 40% or 50% of any new estates will be transfers rather than new people coming in. There has to be a mixture, because there is a mixture of house sizes.

There are areas of the North in which the housing waiting list actually discriminates against the people on that list. They can wait three or four years, and 180 to 200 points will not get them a house because the common selection scheme does not allow the conveyer belt to run. They sit in hostels with just 20 additional points that will never get them a house. It might bring them to 130 or 140 points, but it will never get them a house. That is the basic problem. People from some areas of Belfast are in hostels outside Belfast because the common selection scheme does not work. I know that you had an interest in it after the recent consultation, but something has to give to allow a flow in that system so that people will not be sitting in hostels for four years, single lets for six years or in overcrowded conditions for six to 10 years.

Mr McCausland: I will let Heather come in and then come back with a couple of points.

Ms Heather Cousins (Department for Social Development): This week, we launched the homelessness strategy. One of its objectives is to look at access to affordable housing, with an overarching view that we should not be putting people in hostels but looking for longer-term solutions at the outset. Once someone goes into a hostel, it becomes their home. They become settled, and it is difficult for them to want to move on. There is the issue of waiting lists and specifying particular areas in which demand is 10 times greater than supply. As a working group, we will be looking specifically at those issues to see what we can do to try to get people into their long-term permanent accommodation much more quickly than we do at the moment.

Mr F McCann: I do not want to hog the meeting. The Minister has given me an answer. I will not go on, but I would like to develop the debate and argument around the common selection scheme.

The Chairperson: We will be coming back to that because there are issues around the selection scheme.

Mr Ross: I have two points, which is about 34 fewer than Fra. The first is the double glazing programme. A number of people are looking forward to that being rolled out. Will you give us an idea of how that is progressing, how it will be rolled out and how you will ensure that there will be value for money for the public purse?

Mr McCausland: One of the things that has become clear is that the current method of installing double glazing is certainly not the most efficient and does not provide the best value for money; there is no doubt about that. The current system is different from the way in which you or I might have double glazing installed in our houses; we would tend to have it installed by firms that do minimum damage to the walls and so very little repair is needed afterwards. Some of the craftsmen who install windows in estates may not be the most experienced in window installation. I have seen some really bad examples of window installation. Our intention is to have a new contract for window installation. I think that there are 30,000 houses needing double glazing installed. There was uncertainty of the total number because the Executive did not have an accurate record of which houses had and did not have double glazing. We now have a more accurate figure of 30,000. We can get better value by having a new procurement process for that. The Housing Executive has been notified of that.

You can install double glazing with virtually no damage at all. The current system means that you have to pay for a redecoration grant for every room. The person is much more disrupted because of the damage to the surrounds when the installation is taking place. Some indications are that it is possible to save tens of millions of pounds in that installation process if it were done by people with more experience in that field. That is why we have gone out to the new procurement process. You are talking about a massive saving — perhaps £10 million — in redecoration grants if you could do it without causing the damage to the decor of the room.

That will all be completed within this Assembly mandate. The work that we have undertaken in the past while suggests that very substantial savings can be made. That is good; it means that money is available for other things. We can do more kitchen schemes, insulation and whatever, because we have saved money. As you rightly indicated, we need to make sure that we get value for money rather than simply sticking with the way it was done in the past.

Mr Ross: I am fairly new to the Committee, so the whole issue of welfare reform is not one that I have spoken about very much. We might not all agree, but we understand the importance of not breaking parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. Obviously, it will be a massive piece of work over the next number of years. Will you indicate what the current thinking is in the Department about the variances that we can have in Northern Ireland and what some of those might be?

Mr McCausland: That is being worked through at the moment by the Executive subcommittee. We have asked all the political parties, which are all represented on the Executive subcommittee, to bring forward their suggestions of what might be done somewhat differently in Northern Ireland. Engagements are still ongoing with DWP in London and the relevant Ministers over there. Officials are meeting Lord Freud in a couple of weeks' time. Operational issues have been identified by not only the

political parties but people in the stakeholder groups. There has been a lot of interaction with representative bodies, whether single parents groups, women's groups or disability groups. The main issues of concern seem to be around the single payment, multi-payments and the direct payments to landlords. Those are fairly straightforward operational issues that are largely dependent on the will of Westminster to accommodate us and largely dependent on the technology and computer systems being able to accommodate that. There is flexibility for Northern Ireland around the social fund. We need to look at how we do that, and conversations are starting around that.

Those are the main areas at the moment, but we are open to practical, sensible ideas about what might be done somewhat differently. The response from Westminster so far has been encouraging. I think that the Chair is meeting Lord Freud on the Thursday, so there will be opportunities for further engagement on that.

Changes are still being made at Westminster to some aspects of welfare reform. I was hearing just yesterday about changes with regard to the changeover from disability living allowance to the personal independence payment. They are not fully sure of all the implications of the changes that they have made and will, I think, be tweaking the process for some time. We are really at only the start of the process.

It is hard to be more definitive than that at the moment, but we are committed to getting the maximum done that can be done within the bounds of parity.

Mr Copeland: Minister, rather uncharacteristically I will begin by passing on, through you, my thanks to your officials for the preparation of the plan, because the availability of a plan gives us the milestones with which we can measure not only your progress but the progress of your Department, and it requires courage for anyone to provide such as we with this information.

I will try very hard to limit myself to the plan in its totality. However, I would like to raise one small matter on the back of what Alastair said about double glazing. Many members will be familiar with my background: there was a saying that all plans are wonderful until they meet the enemy, or reality. I am sure that this plan will be no different. I am sure that the authors of this plan will be aware of the variables, imponderables and unknowns that may surface and misdirect or prevent efficient delivery of the plan. I am curious to know your assessment of those variables and what steps have been built into the plan to cope with unknowns and variables to ensure that, as far as possible, the plan, which is aspirational, is delivered.

Secondly, with regard to Alastair's comments on double glazing, having had some experience with the construction industry, I know that double glazing can, in certain circumstances, create problems. There is a common problem in very many Housing Executive properties, not all of them old properties, of water where it should not be. Some people call it damp and others call it condensation. In certain retro-fitted properties, the double glazing is acquired but you then acquire problems of condensation because the house was not designed to be as draughtproof as the double glazing has made it. I would like to check that the Department is aware that that is a potential problem, and whether any secondary measures have to be put in to accommodate problems and unforeseen consequences that arise from the installation of double glazing in properties that were designed to be more ventilated than they would be after the installation has taken place.

Mr McCausland: That is an issue I am very conscious of because I encountered it in my own house.

Mr Copeland: Did you solve it?

Mr McCausland: With an extra extractor fan, yes.

Mr Copeland: Right, OK.

Mr McCausland: You raised the issue of double glazing and I forgot to make one point earlier. Going out to a new procurement process will mean that where there has already been a commitment to start now, that will start. However, there will be a rejigging of the programme so that the procurement that

goes out will be a good sizeable one. So, some schemes that might have been starting later this year, even though people will not have been informed that they were going to start, will be put back to January, and heating and kitchen schemes will be brought forward so that the money that is there is not wasted. So, we will spend the money but reshape the delivery; the amount of money that can be saved will make that worthwhile.

The targets that we have set here are realistic. Yes, they stretch us, but they are realistic, and the whole programme was developed on that basis.

Mr Will Haire (Department for Social Development): We are using a Bill Shankly vision of strategy, which says: "Get the ball in the back of the net and then let's talk about strategy." One can get fascinated by strategies and plans and get caught up in them.

Mr Copeland: I do not.

Mr Haire: On the other hand, we need to know what our goals and directions are, and we are very realistic. There are issues on which we will come to you during the three years and say, "We are going to have to pull back on this; we are not going to achieve that in this framework." Jenny's team has 30 urban projects, and we all know that issues can arise, such as money not being available because there are blocks in planning or something. However, her team is excellent at rejigging, making sure they get the money in the right place and flexing things. So, some years we will underachieve, but the next year we will make it up.

Our aim is to do it by the end of the three years, and that is the breadth of what we can achieve. It is useful to have milestones, because they tell you where you are in the process. We will have lots of dialogue with you in the coming years on these issues and, undoubtedly, other issues will arise. There will be broad issues around housing as we go through this and the welfare reform process. There are really big issues in housing, such as housing finance: we all know how the banks react through the rates they are offering.

We have to exploit the opportunities and be ready to take them. Having a plan at least gives you a base to work out how to get the best value for money. I stress that there will be an openness and dialogue here. When we come here in a year's time, I take it that if we have slightly underperformed in a milestone area you are not going to beat us around the head too much, as long as we can convince you that we will get there in the end. I am very grateful for that reassurance.

Mr Copeland: You would not be much use to us if you were grievously injured.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister and the panel for coming here today. Picking up on Will's quote, it is vital that you get the ball in the right net and that we avoid any own goals.

Mr McCausland: As long as Derry City score a few own goals in the Setanta Cup final.

Mr Durkan: Following on from what Alastair was asking about welfare reform, I would like to have heard more detail on the efforts that are going to be made to mitigate the impact of welfare reform here in Northern Ireland and deal with the problems that, although not unique to here, will certainly be more pronounced here. Somewhere in the plan, I would like to see a bigger commitment to advice services. Can you fill us in on how advice services are going to be funded? Is there going to be an increase or decrease in funding for them?

Mr McCausland: On mitigating the impact, one of the areas that we control to a greater degree is the social fund. So, we need to look carefully at how that operates and what the priorities are within it. We are having to design a new one, so there is an opportunity to design one that is completely suitable for our situation, our circumstances and our particular differences.

Ms Pyper: We have looked at the provision of advice services to try to make sure that we are getting consistent coverage and efficient delivery of services but also consistent high-quality standards of delivery. The Minister made an announcement earlier in the year about regional advice services. We

are aware of that and we work very closely with the councils on the delivery of services, because they have a closeness to people on the ground. Obviously, elected representatives have a keen interest as well.

Mr Haire: We spend over £5 million on advice and are a really big provider. We have a lot of offices out there and work with a lot of other groups, and we give a lot of advice right across the system. With welfare reform coming in, the senior management group has been discussing the issue and trying to see how to get the best return. We are working through that, and people are doing some work to look strategically at that issue. We will use a lot more IT-enabled activities. We will be asking: how does that work? How far does it work? The telephony services that we are developing are working quite well; how do they fit into the system? How is the advice that we provide directly in our offices? How does the advice system work? How does advice work in your offices? We need to look at how that works together.

I have been talking to Derek Alcorn and other people to see how that works. Undoubtedly, we will have a really complex phase here, and, up to 2017, we will be running, at minimum, two systems. It will be really confusing for your constituents and our people to determine where they are in the system and what change is coming around, and we will have to do an incredibly strong communication job. I am sure that we will come back to you on this issue, and we will have to think strategically about it and ramp it up a level, because it is such a big change and the potential for confusion is so great. Our focus will be on that.

Mr Durkan: You mentioned earlier that discretionary payments are one method of mitigating the impact. We appreciate that there is an Executive subgroup, at which you might raise with the other Departments the possibility of reprofiling money from the social investment fund towards the social protection fund over the next couple of years to increase our capacity to mitigate.

Mr McCausland: The social investment fund is outside my remit.

Mr Durkan: You can raise it.

Mr McCausland: We are coming to the point of concluding the shape that that will take.

The benefit uptake campaigns that have been run have been extremely successful. A total of £37 million in annual benefits and arrears has been generated for almost 12,000 people since those programmes were introduced, and £31 million of the £37 million went to older people. Those are substantial figures, and letters have come in from individuals to thank the provider of the service and to thank the Department for supporting it. Some of them have gained considerable benefit. So, we are very happy that that is working.

We need to find new and innovative ways of engaging with individuals and getting information out. It is not just about advice centres; there are lots of other networks across the Province that people get information through. I was talking yesterday to some folk from churches who run mother and toddler groups, groups for senior citizens, luncheon clubs and so on: that is a ready-made network for getting information out. When you get people together for one activity, quite often they look for speakers to come or for activities when they are there. So, that is an opportunity to get information out. We are wide open to anything that can be done, and those outlets are particularly cheap. There is not much cost, because you do not have to provide an office, for example. Looking at the regional infrastructure provision will help to direct money away from infrastructure to front line services.

Mr Durkan: I will just touch briefly on housing, Chairperson. I agree with the Minister when he says that we need to look at smarter use of existing stock and private stock. However, I disagree when he says that most people move from social housing to affordable housing. Increasingly, people are looking to move from an unaffordable house to social housing. Obviously, we would like to see a commitment to building more social housing and affordable housing, and the ability to do so. We await the outcome of the review of the Housing Executive; will it provide an opportunity for us to maximise the number of houses that can be built by government?

Mr McCausland: After 40 years, every organisation needs to have a review. You might think that it would be done even before 40 years have elapsed. This piece of work started when your party was in charge of the Department. It is coming to fruition now, and I think that it will produce a better system for delivering housing. I do not mean just delivering social housing; it is also about the strategic role, the regulatory role and all the other roles. There will be better outcomes for housing as a result of the review, including the delivery of housing.

Mr Brady: Thank you for the presentation, Minister. You will be pleased to hear that I am staying clear of welfare reform, just for today. In the plan, it says:

"The investment we make in housing also has knock-on effects across the construction, supply and delivery sectors."

Your predecessors had a preference for buying off-the-shelf housing, which did not really do anything for the construction industry, apart from the fact that money had to be spent to bring them up to the decent homes standard. Is the intention to reinvigorate the newbuild end of the construction industry?

I have another question about the Housing Executive. The majority of Housing Executive houses, if not all, have oil-fired central heating. Are there any plans to give tenants of those houses access to grants to change to gas? In my constituency, certainly in Newry, a lot of gas infrastructure has been put in by Firmus Energy and others, but people cannot access it, particularly those who live in social housing, because they cannot afford it. Gas is a cheaper alternative to oil, because the price of oil has gone through the roof. I know that Phoenix Gas has imposed increases, but some of the gas companies have confirmed that they will not increase prices over a specific period, so it does seem to be a cheaper option and probably a good investment in the long term.

Mr McCausland: One of the issues around gas is that the network does not spread across the entire Province. You are aware that Arlene Foster has raised the issue of the west of the Province and about making sure that the gas network gets out there.

Work is ongoing on the pilot pay-as-you-go scheme, which seems encouraging so far. We have yet to receive the final report on that, but when I went out to look at homes in which it had been installed, the people involved told me that they were very happy with it and thought that it was very successful.

We are limited in what we can do in certain other types of property, such as tower blocks. We are looking at more efficient electrical forms of heating. There are newer forms that are much more efficient than that which is currently available, such as Economy 7. There is a range of things to be looked at.

Ms Cousins: If gas is available when we are doing heating replacement systems, it is the first choice. However, under the investment model, it does not make sense to remove fairly new oil boilers and replace them with gas. However, over the longer term, the intention is to move to gas. We are also looking at other forms of heating, such as wood pellet boilers. That might work in areas where people cannot have gas. We are doing what we can. In the interim, if the pay-as-you-go system for oil works, it will help with people's budgeting issues.

Mr McCausland: People in one part of the Province were concerned about the availability of peat.

Mr F McCann: Was that in the north of the city?

Mrs Cochrane: Thank you for coming along today. A lot of my points have already been covered. I welcome the new procurement for double glazing. A couple of weeks ago, I was out with a constituent who had double glazing put in. The mess that was made meant that they had to replaster. Areas were not covered up. She is on a ventilator, and she has had to sleep on a sofa downstairs. That is being remedied at the moment, but we do not want that to happen to other people.

I will not get on my hobby horse about shared housing; I assume that there will be some good progress towards that in the housing strategy and the review of the Housing Executive. I want to ask you about

business improvement districts. You have a target to enact the primary legislation by March 2013. Is there any hope that it could be done earlier than that? I have been working with a number of traders in east Belfast who are very keen to see that coming forward.

Mr McCausland: You are aware of the timescale for legislation and the various stages, including the role of the Committee. I would welcome whatever can be done to speed things up. If the Committee is able to move forward quicker than might otherwise be the case, that would contribute to speeding it up. Traders should not wait for it to happen; they should get prepared now.

Mrs Cochrane: That is what we are doing.

Mr McCausland: That is absolutely right. I agree with you entirely: there is an anticipation and a thirst for it.

I welcome the point that you made about double glazing and the way in which it has been done in the past. I made those points earlier. What you said, as a practical example, reinforces the sense of what we are doing. It is something that could have been done before, but we are on top of it now. Getting the right people to do the right job is key.

Mr Durkan: I have a question about the strengthening of communities. I welcome the ongoing commitment to neighbourhood renewal. It is vital that we get improved and continued buy-in from other Departments. Neighbourhood renewal is not the only show in town. There is a mention of areas at risk, which is a great programme. Is there any danger of areas at risk being at risk? What is its current status?

Mr McCausland: No; we are keen to continue areas at risk.

Mr Durkan: At the same level?

Mr McCausland: I am not sure of the exact figure that we have in the budget for that.

Ms Pyper: The pilot had a budget of £1 million a year. That is our ongoing budget for 2012-13. We have been rolling that out and increasing the number of areas that are able to access areas at risk funding. We are working really closely with colleagues in OFMDFM on the social investment fund to make sure that we get a good balance and a good spread of funding across neighbourhood renewal areas, areas at risk and others that do not fall into those categories.

Mr Durkan: Increasing the number of areas will reduce the amount of funding that is available to each area.

The Chairperson: Time is running against us this morning. I will raise a couple of points with you, Nelson, and your colleagues, some of which we will return to. First, you referred to the legislative programme. We have been working with the Department to try to get clear legislative time frames so that we can start preparing better. I would like to activate that work between the Department and the Committee Clerk to get time frames, preferably on a prioritised legislative basis. That is obviously down to policy development and all of that, but it is an area of work that needs to be taken forward.

Secondly, the urban regeneration and community development policy framework was due last autumn. We are advised that, given staff transfers and so on, it will now not come until this autumn, which means that a year will have been lost. We are a year into the mandate, so it will be nearly two years into the mandate. We are moving into the region of it being not acceptable. You know that the Department has engaged with the Committee on the regional infrastructure support programme and a whole range of other things. There is a lot of stuff in the mix. We could be in danger of having all these single component elements, whereas we should have the policy framework first of all. I am just putting on record a bit of frustration about the long delay.

Thirdly, the corporate plan talks about new approaches in tackling disadvantage. We want to have a dedicated discussion around the whole programme of tackling disadvantage, because that is a key

component of the Department's work. We want very focused concentration on that, because it is a big part of the corporate plan. We deal with mitigation of welfare reform and all the rest, but if we do not tackle the problem at source, we will just be taking a pebble-dash approach over the next number of years.

Lastly, we referred to the fact that we are in the MAC in the Cathedral Quarter. Our bringing forward the visit to the Cathedral Quarter was sparked by the grant issued to the Laganside arts fund recently. As you know, Minister, that was reinstated by your own work. The commitment was that there would be discussions between the steering group, the Department and even the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. We are keen for an assurance that those discussions are under way or have come to some kind of fruition. I do not know where it sits, but it has been an issue of concern for both you and the Committee. You referred to it obliquely in your opening remarks. Is there an indication of where that is?

Mr McCausland: Our commitment to that area is most definite as regards not only general grants but even this building in particular. The viability of the project was dependent on a grant from us to the MAC for the next two years so that it gets itself properly established, as well as the initial contribution in providing the land. Therefore, there is a commitment to the MAC and a commitment to the area generally. We are encouraged by the uptake of the community grants. There is better awareness of the Laganside community grants; therefore, I have heard about more community groups applying for them, which is a good thing.

The other thing that is crucially important in respect of the Cathedral Quarter is the whole change that there will be in this part of the city over the next number of years. It is not just the Cathedral Quarter; there is the arrival of the University of Ulster. It has its difficulties, with communities concerned about how it will impact them. However, bringing all those students into the area will create business, maybe not for the more upmarket, expensive restaurants but for quite a number of other establishments and shops in the area. Fifteen thousand people is a lot of people to come into an area, so it will improve the economy in this part of the city very significantly. As a South Belfast representative, Chair, you will be pleased to hear that many of the students might well want to live near the university. Therefore, there will be a social life in this part of the city as well as at the golden mile and all of that.

The Chairperson: No other members have indicated that they want to ask questions. We have touched on quite a range of issues, and we will clearly need dedicated discussions on a number of them. We look forward to dealing with that in the very short term. Minister, I thank you and your colleagues for being here this morning and presenting your thoughts on the plans, and I thank members for their questions. We will be pursuing a range of these matters.

Mr McCausland: Chair, I thank you and the Committee members for your input on a wide range of issues, whether that is formal input through the Committee structure or individuals raising particular issues that are near and dear to their heart and affect their own area. We appreciate that, as it helps to shape our thinking.

The Chairperson: Thanks very much.