



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Off-street Parking (Functions of District
Councils) Bill: Belfast City Council

19 November 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Trevor Clarke (Chairperson)
Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr John Dallat
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr David McNarry
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mr Damian Connolly	Belfast City Council
Mr Mark McBride	Belfast City Council
Ms Cathy Reynolds	Belfast City Council
Ms Siobhan Toland	Belfast City Council

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I welcome you all to the meeting. Siobhan, you are leading off. Maybe you could introduce the rest of your team and describe their involvement with Belfast City Council, which may be useful for us to know.

Ms Siobhan Toland (Belfast City Council): Thank you. We thank the Committee for the opportunity presented to Belfast City Council to make a representation. I am the council's head of environmental health, and I am the strategic lead officer for the transfer of off-street car parking functions. That is why I am here today. Mark McBride is our head of finance and performance; Cathy Reynolds is the estates manager for the council; and Damian Connolly is one of my environmental health managers and is leading on this project for me.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): If you would make your presentation within 10 minutes, we will then open the floor to questions from members.

Ms Toland: Thank you for that. There are probably six key points that I want to make, and obviously, under each, I will want to make a few others. Committee members will have seen our response of 30 October to the consultation on the Bill.

Our first key point is that for us, and I am sure for the other councils, car parks are not looked at in isolation but as part of the overall transfer package within councils to use assets and powers that will help to support regeneration and growth in towns and cities. We see them as central to traffic flow, and they have positive benefits for consumers coming into the city. They help us to make best use of city assets. I will come back to that point later, in terms of the strategic importance of car parking in the overall investment proposals of Belfast City Council.

The second key point that we want to make is that it should be a transfer without restriction. The transfer of car parks without restriction is key to the realisation of our council's vision for the city in terms of place shaping. The contribution that those assets will make is linked to wider regeneration and economic proposals that will be developed as part of our overall local government reform package. The council strongly supports the position taken by the Regional Development Minister Danny Kennedy MLA at the Bill's Second Stage on 21 October, when he indicated that:

"there should be no restrictive conditions as the powers are transferred to the councils."

He went on to say that the inclusion of restrictive provisions:

"could remove a council's ability, potentially, to progress any town centre regeneration proposal for the benefit of local citizens."

The inclusion in the Bill of conditions or restrictions on the use or disposal of transferring assets would be at odds with one of the principal aims of the reform of public administration, which is to create stronger and more responsive local government. Currently, in exercising its own function of car parking, DRD is not fettered by any additional restrictions in the use of the car park assets beyond any contained in the title, so councils should therefore be permitted to discharge this function in a similar manner as DRD. It is worth noting that, at the time of the previous local government reform in 1972, the legal interests in each transferring asset passed unaltered to Roads Service without any additional restrictions as to their future use or disposal.

The third key point that we want to make is about Belfast City Council's commitment to regeneration. The council fully recognises that the amount of car parking, its costs and how it is managed have a significant impact on the local economy and the accessibility of our city, not just for cars but for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport. The council is committed to providing adequate parking provision and wishes to act in the best interests of the city, its residents, consumers, workforce, commuters and visitors. We are looking at developing a city centre regeneration investment strategy for Belfast. The council aims to support the economic viability of the city centre by providing accessible short-stay car parks for shoppers, visitors and business users, and the council wishes to have the same level of flexibility that was afforded to DRD to make unrestricted decisions on future regeneration plans for the city linked to the assets in its ownership. Obviously, that is done in the best interests of the city.

The fourth key point that we want to make is in relation to the transfer of assets and budget allocation. The council is still awaiting written confirmation of the final list of car parks that will transfer, although we have been working closely with our colleagues in DRD, and we are nearly at that point. The council's position remains that all car parks should transfer. The council strongly supports the intention of the legislation as laid out in the explanatory memorandum and, in particular, the statement that:

"all assets relating to the ownership, management and operation of off-street car parks would need to transfer to councils."

If DRD decides to retain Corporation Street car park for the development of the York Street interchange, the council will contend that it should be recompensed at open-market value for the loss of that car park. This would allow the council to re-provide the 124 lost spaces elsewhere if required, in order to ensure accessibility to the city centre in support of the local economy. This would also reflect the normal practice of compensating landowners for any loss incurred as a result of acquiring land for roads schemes.

The council would seek assurances that the income from any non-secured and leased car parks, of which we understand that there are a number, is excluded from the rates-neutral calculation. I know that that is not necessarily a matter for the Committee, but it is possibly a matter for DFP in the package of the transfer of function. For some of these car parks, there is no security of tenure, and hence there is no guarantee that the car parks will be available to us as a council in the longer term. The council is also aware that a number of the car parks leased by DRD are currently being considered for other uses. For example, part of the Corporation Square car park is owned by Belfast Harbour Commissioners, which has indicated that it would require possession of a section of it in order to carry out a programme in the future, possibly including the building of a multi-storey car park on adjacent lands. Station Street car park in the east of the city centre is earmarked for future development as part of the Queen's Quay master plan.

Based on the most recent financial figures from DRD and the estimates that the council has prepared at this point, it would appear that not all costs are included in the DRD figures. A difference between the figures provided has been identified, and we feel that that may present a detriment to the council. The council seeks to stress the importance of the consideration of accurate running costs for the determination of the rates-neutral calculation. It would also seek to ensure that all necessary remedial works are completed prior to the transfer of the assets so that they are fit for purpose.

The fifth key comment that I want to make is specifically on the Bill. The council does not have any major issues with the text and the single-clause Bill. We have made the point strongly that we want to be able to influence and be consulted on any new regulations or adjustments to the regulations. We welcome assurances that DRD has made in relation to that. We also seek to add the word "authorise" to paragraphs 1 and 2 of article 25 on parking attendants in the Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 to the word that exists now, "appoint", to allow for councils to authorise parking attendants to carry out the off-street car-parking function on their behalf through a service-level agreement with DRD. This is obviously a moot point, but it is on our legal advice on the difference between "authorise" and "appoint" that we submit to have both words included.

The final key point that I want to make is the council's support for parking and transport policies. This relates to the strategic context and emphasis that Belfast City Council gives to both car parking and the impact on the economy. To coincide with the new powers transferring to the council, we welcome the opportunity to continue to work with the Department and the Committee in the development of strategic parking and transport policies and proposals for the city. As the planning authority, the council, from April, will take forward new development plans and policies. This will be done in consultation with DRD as a statutory consultee. The council welcomes the opportunity to continue to work collaboratively with DRD on the new transportation plan for Belfast, both on the approach for parking policy and the associated land use. We will obviously work strongly and closely together to support Belfast's economy and businesses.

The council strongly believes that the strategic approach to parking, transport and land use policies and proposals would be much more effective than simply placing restrictions on individual sites that are currently used for car parks as these policies are adopted in the future and will shape the city in its regeneration and capacity to attract tourism, jobs and economic vibrancy. The council therefore needs to have flexibility to allow us to align future car-parking provisions with any future regeneration and development plans in the city as policies emerge.

In conclusion, to summarise the key points, I reiterate the council's overwhelming support for the transfer of the ownership, management and enforcement of the provisions to the council. We strongly support the position that all car parks should transfer without restriction. We request written confirmation of the final list of car parks as soon as possible. It is our view that only the secure income should be included in the overall rates-neutral calculation together with accurate and realistic delivery costs. I would also like to restate the council's commitment to providing adequate car parking provision whilst progressing any city centre regeneration proposals for the benefit of the city, its residents and visitors. We welcome the opportunity and support working with DRD on future transport policies.

Again, I thank the Committee for taking the time to listen to us this morning. We very much welcome the opportunity for questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Thank you. Siobhan, does any of your team want to add anything at this stage before we move to questions?

Ms Toland: No.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): OK. In your opening comments, you referred to the Minister's comments at Second Stage about his not being minded to put restrictions on it. You are aware that the Committee has a different view on that. The Committee has that view because it has concerns that, on some occasions, there could be a detrimental effect. Can you, from Belfast City Council's perspective, allay the Committee's fears that having no restrictions would have a detrimental impact on Belfast?

Ms Toland: The key thing to emphasise — I think that I have emphasised it in points that I have made — is that, rather than restricting issues to individual car parks, it is about the whole aspect of the benefit to the city, to visitors and everybody who comes into the city daily, such as commuters and

shoppers. We want to see an attractive city centre that is vibrant, attracts tourism and provides jobs in the local economy. Our issue is that we want to get people into Belfast. We want to be able to allow them to park. We want to be able to provide facilities for that. It is in that context, as well as currently with DRD, that you have an overall sustainable transport approach. So, we would encourage other users and other modes. At this point, we are not looking to change the asset value of car parks. A finite number of car park spaces will transfer over. Going forward, we hope to develop our development plan for Belfast, which will have a city centre regeneration focus and strategy. As we move forward over the next three to five years, it may emerge that there are opportunities to change or to make adaptations to some of those assets. Those decisions will be taken in light of the overall car parking provision accessibility to the city and will be taken by the elected members, who have the best interests of the city at heart. So elected members will make those decisions and, like this Committee, will have particular views on car parking. We have no intention of doing anything in the immediate future. It is about developing economic strategies for the city, so we would not want to use any of our assets that would impact negatively on that. That would be in the interests of the members.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Without sounding rude, Siobhan, I accept everything that you say about your vision, but you referred to elected members, and, from my experience in local government, officers quite often guide elected members. I dislike it when officials say that councillors make the decisions, because those decisions are often shaped by the direction in which council officers put them. I just want to put down that caveat. I do not think that you will find that the Committee's opinion differs much about your vision for Belfast. However, you spoke about the finite number of spaces in Belfast.

There seems to be a concern from the councils about the Committee suggesting an amendment in the form of a restrictive clause, but we have not been prescriptive about that clause. Will you explain the effects of the Committee amending the Bill to protect the number of spaces? It does not necessarily mean that we are saying that you cannot redevelop or regenerate a particular site, but if you have 400 spaces, one of the clauses may be that you replace like for like. Given what you said about the finite number of spaces in Belfast, what would be the effect of the Committee suggesting that you replace like for like?

Ms Toland: If the restrictive clause is adopted by the Committee and alters the Bill, and if it says "like for like", we would comply with that. That said, you have to look at it in the round in that, at this time, it will probably be only 13%. I do not have an accurate figure, but around 13% of car parking provision will be in the ownership of the council, so there will be a significant amount of private car parking provision. Therefore, like for like might be that a private car park provision has grown, so you might need to offset.

All those things are controlled to a significant degree by transport and planning, because planning will set the context of the land use and the vision for car parking provision for the city. If members are thinking of like for like, it is probably more to do with pricing and availability for consumers coming into the city or any town centre. Those aspects of tariffs and so on will be a complex issue for debate.

I know from attending the transition committee that the council and members have discussed a restrictive clause, and they are not in support of it. So, in the future, if you are looking to change an asset use, it would be up to us to present information to members showing the impact of that and the wider impacts on the opportunity for accessibility to the city. Decisions will be made based on evidence.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Thank you for that. I do not want to seem as if I am coming down hard on the officers, but councils as a whole seem to be resisting the proposed amendment. I am phrasing this in such a way that I seem to be blaming officers again. I am sure that some of my colleagues have been approached by councillors looking for an explanation. If we take the time to explain the rationale behind our suggested amendment, they will understand our perspective. Whilst councillors on transition committees are opposed to the amendment, I think that that sometimes happens under the direction of officials. I do not know whether you accept that as a fair comment.

Ms Toland: I accept that view, and I accept that that can sometimes be perceived in that way. Obviously, we do a lot of direct work with our councillors, groupings and parties, and we prepare councillors and give them all the information to make decisions. I will not make a comment either way. It is your view. I am not sure whether our councillors have a view, but I am sure that some councillors have a view that officers bring information to them, but we always try to bring a balanced perspective. Councillors probably have the same comments as you, and, in the collective room of a committee,

they will have concerns about the impact of our doing something with a future asset and how we will compensate for a lack of parking in some part of the city. That is when we have to look at it in the context of the overall strategic plan for the city. If you have a finite amount of car parking provision, you also have to decide whether that is the right number for Belfast in the future. Maybe it needs to increase or decrease, but you bring in other active travel policies and approaches. We have Belfast on the Move, and rapid transit is coming to Belfast, led by Transport NI in DRD. Those are all very positive impacts for the city. Therefore, car parking is not the only thing. You have to balance it with our strategic road network proposals.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I will make one more comment. The Committee is very supportive of Belfast on the Move and the rapid transit system. However, that is not at the expense of DRD transferring something to the council for it to sweat that asset, believing that those other two things will take up the slack.

Mr McNarry: Thank you for your presentation. The Minister has indicated that he has identified sites. Are you aware that he has identified sites in your council area?

Ms Toland: Identified sites for —

Mr McNarry: To sell off.

Ms Toland: No, I do not think that we are.

Mr McNarry: Are you worried that he has identified sites and has not told you and that they will be flogged behind your back?

Ms Toland: We have been working on the issue over the past year. We have a list of car parks that have changed, and there have been negotiations with DRD. Some responses that we put to the Committee in August identified a number of sites that DRD was considering selling off or doing something, but, through negotiation with the officials at our committee, those things have been negotiated out of the system. We are confident that a clearer picture about the car parks is emerging, except for the final list, which we have not got. The York Street interchange is the only one that is under —

Mr McNarry: You may have already done this, but I would be grateful if you could supply the Committee with a list of the car parks that you think you will inherit. What is the asset value that will transfer to your council?

Ms Toland: Do you have a total, Cathy?

Ms Cathy Reynolds (Belfast City Council): No, we do not.

Mr McNarry: Perhaps you could furnish the Committee with that.

I will pick up on your written and oral reports, which are very helpful, as one would expect. Will you tell us more about the discrepancies with the budget figures that you mentioned?

Ms Toland: Mark has prepared some information on that. I will ask him to come in.

Mr Mark McBride (Belfast City Council): I am a bit loath to go into the detail because the number of car parks has been changing, and two were changed last week. The issues —

Mr McNarry: May I interrupt you for a minute, Mark. What changes are going on? We are working on a Bill. Are you telling me that the Bill is, in a sense, incomplete because we had to start off with knowledge about the number of car parks? Will you elaborate on the changes that might affect the Bill?

Ms Toland: Before you come in, Mark, may I say that that is in relation to some of the proposals. We are here about the Bill, and we do not have very much to say about it per se, apart from the few points that I made. The actual number has ranged from 30 to 33; it has gone down and up again. The reason why it has gone down and up again is that we have been in negotiations with DRD on its road

proposals in the city centre for the inner ring road and Cromac Street. At one point, it looked as if they might not transfer as part of the overall package, but they are now back on the list. The only one that seems to have a question mark over it is the York Street interchange. There was negotiation with officials about developing the final list. That is where the differences are.

Your first question relates to the finance. Mark can say a few words on that.

Mr McBride: In that context, additional car parks have come in. We are still in discussion with DRD on maintenance issues, the maintenance of the pay-and-display machines, the resurfacing of car parks and some of the rating liability. Those have been positive, and we have been engaging. Sitting alongside that is the due diligence exercise that Deloitte is doing at the regional level. I am sure that the member is aware of that. A report is going to the regional transition oversight board on Friday. At the minute, we have a gap of around £126,000 a year, but we do not believe that that is a final figure because of the issues I mentioned: we are still in the middle of negotiations about individual amounts, the overall level of settlement will be guided by the decision taken on the amount that will go to local government, and we are awaiting the due diligence report from Deloitte.

Mr McNarry: I am very grateful for the answers. I apologise to the Committee and to our guests because, as you know, I have to leave.

It is being said that an intense element of negotiations is going on. As they seem to be ever-evolving, I think that it would be relevant for the Committee to be informed of the level of negotiations. I understand why Belfast and other city councils are involved in negotiations. Are all councils involved in negotiations over pay and display, maintenance and all sorts of things? I suspect that they are. That leads me to wonder whether a car park giveaway will come at a cost, which is what these people and other people are negotiating. They are saying things like, "We will not accept that car park because the surface is no good". It would be very helpful to the Committee if, through what we are doing, we followed it up in the Bill as to what negotiations will have taken place before the Bill is presented to the Assembly.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): As Mark was speaking, it struck me that the situation is fluid, so we need to find out from the Department which councils, apart from Belfast, are fluid.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Siobhan, you mentioned that upgrades need to be done before transfer. How essential is that?

Ms Toland: We have been around the car parks, but we have not yet done a detailed analysis because of the other assets that we are transferring from the Lisburn and Castlereagh area and DSD. We have not surveyed every car park in detail. The Deloitte papers have identified that some resurfacing is needed. There is the issue of whether and how electricity will be supplied to some of the machines, equipment and lighting. Those matters are still under negotiation in relation to the transfer of the whole asset. Is that correct, Cathy?

Ms Reynolds: That is correct. The condition surveys have been completed for the car parks. Initial inspections have taken place, but our facilities management people will undertake further conditional surveys. The initial view is that some upgrade work might be required.

Mr Lynch: Have you examples of car parks that may not be fit for purpose?

Ms Reynolds: Not specifically. Our facilities people are reluctant to provide that until proper condition surveys are completed for all the car parks.

Mr McAleer: The Committee had the opportunity to look at your original response to the Department and, indeed, to us. We took the opportunity to raise some of the issues with officials at the Committee, particularly about regulations. The officials assured us that any changes or anything to do with the regulations that were to be retained by the Department would be subject to consultation with councils. Do you still feel that that requires an amendment to the Bill?

Ms Toland: Not if we are going to be consulted. If it is going to cause a delay or any drafting issue, I do not think that it would. We have the spirit of working in partnership. If we are consulted and that is part of the process and guidance, that would be satisfactory.

Mr McAleer: Chair, the Hansard report will reflect the fact that officials gave assurances that they would consult with councils about regulations.

We also mentioned the concerns raised by some councils about the current state of some car parks. Officials gave us assurances that they were all in tip-top condition. Do you agree with that?

Ms Toland: Again, initial checks are being done. There may be small parts that need repairs or maintenance to get them to the standard that we would expect. The council wants to ensure that we have enough disabled parking and family-friendly parking in the city in our own facilities as well as in the transferring assets. Those are the kinds of things that we need to look at.

Cathy, do you have any other comments about the state of any car parks?

Ms Reynolds: Unfortunately, until the condition surveys are completed, we cannot go into specifics. However, that exercise is being undertaken over the next few weeks.

Mr Dallat: Thanks for your presentation. It is not for me as an outsider to teach the city council to suck eggs, but I am absolutely amazed by improvements in the city. I wonder whether there is a risk that a Bill will be introduced that might restrict the constant movement of economic development that is switching from one area to another, where urban renewal is very much part of the council remit. The Minister thought that there should be no restrictions on the sale of car parks and so on. What are your views on that? While everybody is bogged down in the safety and lighting of car parks and so on, does anybody up in the balcony look down on what the Bill might do in the future to strangle what I believe to be the excellent work that the city council is doing in urban renewal?

Ms Toland: Thank you. Your comment about strangling urban renewal is the comment that we are trying to emphasise most strongly today: the transfer of an asset without restriction. We definitely have a focus on attracting inward investment, the economy and improving the city's regeneration, and you referred to seeing some of the outworking of that.

We are no different from DRD in our strategic approach to transport, transport policies and development plans for the city. Traffic movement, transport and sustainable transport methods are all part of that package and should be looked at as a whole. We have real aspirations for the city, which I tried to emphasise in the presentation. It is not in our interests to restrict parking or not to attract people into the city to spend money and improve the economy. Any decision that we make, therefore, is in the context of strategic planning and transportation policies that we are developing in partnership with DRD.

We will have the opportunity to develop our development plan for the city, and we hope to have one for the city centre. Accessibility to the city is a key focus. We see the positive impacts of this asset in the overall package of ownership and influence that we have in the city to regenerate it, and I think that any restrictive clause would probably strangle — to use the member's word — that opportunity. That is why we made the point in our presentation that there should not be any restrictive clause, although I acknowledge the Committee's concerns about it.

Mr Dallat: Siobhan, let us say that your endeavours to regenerate the city become so successful that every square metre of land is sought after for development. Would there then be a danger that, if there are no restrictions, prosperity may engulf the provision of car parking, which is critical to the hundreds of thousands of people like me who go to the city occasionally to buy the things that we cannot buy in Coleraine or wherever?

Ms Toland: That is when controls come in such as planning controls and planning policies on the provision of accessible and sustainable parking. I do not think that our council would take decisions that would eliminate car parking from the city, because we need to attract it. It is in our interests, therefore, in developing our development plan, and it is in the interests of the Belfast metropolitan area plan and the transport plan, that car parking is a key feature. To go back to the point about offsetting and balancing the number of car parking spaces that are available in the future, decisions need to be made in a strategic context and be strongly influenced by DRD, as is currently the case. There are transport policies and approaches, and there are transport plans for Belfast, so we would not make those decisions in isolation without other policies. To answer your question directly: we see car parking as an important feature in the city and in the city centre. So we will look for a balanced, sustainable and partnership approach in the city, with members making those decisions.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Siobhan, there will be a difference, of course, between DRD and the council. If DRD were to propose a sell-off, there are planning restrictions because it is a different Department. How do you feel that the two will work with Belfast City Council being the planning service and the car park provider? The council will be the decision-maker in both instances, so it could make a decision based on sweating an asset — I used that term earlier — over whether you have a requirement for a car park. You will control both those policies.

Ms Toland: We will control both policies at a local level, but it would have to be set in the context of the regional level. There are transportation approaches for planning regionally and for influencing policy. That still sits significantly as a regional approach, so there is an overarching regional approach for sustainable transport in both planning and transport. Those decisions will be vital for us as officers and in supporting the elected members in making decisions in the future. We are interested in the best interests of the city for all of the reasons that we mentioned, including tourism, economic vibrancy and attracting people into the city. We want to create a city centre to which we can attract more people to live in. Parking is part of that. It is part of a problem and a solution, and we would not look to eliminate car parking, because we know that we need it. I said that you have to look at the availability of car parking in the round. Obviously, there are private providers and a number of assets that are maybe earmarked for future car parking provision. We have to look at balanced decisions, which will be made by elected members.

Mr Dallat: On that very point — this is my last one — I am glad that you referred to the private sector. I am an old miser, and I was in Belfast in the last few days. I paid £5.80 for a few minutes in a private car park. Do you agree that, if the council provides car parking, it controls to some degree what the private sector can expect from people? Is it essential that there is not a wholesale sell-off of council-owned car parks? In those circumstances, the private sector would really go mad.

Ms Toland: I accept that, and I do not think that our councillors would want to see that happen and would have the same concerns as the members around the table. Tariffs and tariff-setting on the car parks that would transfer to us are decisions for members. We will face challenges over the 2,000-plus spaces that we will get as part of the transfer of assets. I am certain that councillors will have a view that we want to reduce tariffs in the city. Currently, the way in which that operates has an impact on the rates burden, and we will have to try to match that in some way. Councillors do have strong influences on that. Less than half the car parks that are transferring are charge car parks; a significant number of free car parks are transferring in the asset as well. How many out of the 30 are —

Mr Damian Connolly (Belfast City Council): Seventeen of the 30 are charged, mostly in the city centre; the other 13 are free.

Mr Dallat: I must get a map of the free ones.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): You could save the Assembly a fortune, because there is probably a receipt in for that one already. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lyttle: As an East Belfast MLA, I am delighted to see Belfast City Council at the Committee today. You raised the issue of the Corporation Street car park. The Minister has proposed retention of that car park in relation to the development of the York Street interchange. How much of an issue is that to the council, bearing in mind that you had concerns about how the 120 spaces would be used in future?

Ms Toland: The York Street interchange is a positive benefit to the city. DRD officials have been in with members and have made presentations. The council is very supportive of the York Street interchange for the flow of traffic and the improvements that it will make to the road network. I suppose, ultimately, that it is the last one that we are negotiating with DRD officials. One car park was earmarked initially as on the list that is not on the list any more. Our mandate from the councillors has been that we want to see that transferred or to be compensated in some way. If it does not come to us, it will remain a car park for a time on a lease to the council, although that will depend on the time of the strategic road changes, which are imminent but which can take some time. We will lose 124 car-parking spaces instantly. At that point, we will be charged with responsibility for off-street parking, so that is an issue for us instantly at the point of transfer. We still want to negotiate that key point with DRD officials. We want either recompense around space for those car parks, income generation on the land that would have transferred over or recompense for that so that we can purchase somewhere else to provide additionality. We are negotiating with DRD on those things.

Mr Lyttle: Those negotiations are ongoing.

Ms Toland: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: You also mentioned your commitment to sustainable transport, and I know that the council is embarking on a public bike hire scheme soon. Car-parking spaces, as John said, are at a premium in the city centre. Has there been any exploration of using spaces for bike storage units, or will additional bike storage space be factored into a strategy?

Ms Toland: The council, in partnership with the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the trust, is launching an active transport action plan today that includes walking and cycling; it links into the council's bike-hire scheme. We want to make provision for more structure for bike parking and secure parking. We are looking at that as a council to see whether it links into all the assets transferring over in the Off-street Parking (Functions of District Councils) Bill, and that may well be a key feature. I suppose that most cyclists park their bike near the building or the area that they are going into; they are less likely to park in a car park where they would take up the asset of a car-parking space. We do those kinds of things in consultation with DRD officials and its active transport unit. We work very closely and positively with them.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): The Committee is keen to work with all councils. Many of us have come from local government, and we can see the benefit of transferring functions. I do not want you leaving this room thinking that we are on opposite sides, because there is a real benefit. There are DRD officials sitting in the public gallery, and I am not trying to cause offence to them either. I think that local people are best placed to drive what is happening in our town centres. At the same time, we have to be careful in what we do as a Committee. We have all had to leave that behind us and come to the Assembly; we have to be justified in the decisions that we make and in how we shape, assist and scrutinise what DRD does.

I will ask Mark a question. Belfast City Council, and other councils, is coming with a wish list of resurfacing, and those kinds of things. The public will hear that you are getting a free transferred asset, from which your net income will be approximately £1.3 million a year. How can we convince the public that it would be acceptable for more public money to be spent and for those to be given to local councils for free, only for the council to make a net income of £1.3 million a year?

Mr McBride: As you know, any net income will be taken off the other transferring functions; it will be netted off from what is coming from planning. There will be an overall settlement on the transfer.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Maybe I should deal with that separately. This is DRD. Every Department should be treated separately; DRD should not be subsidising DOE. That is maybe how Belfast City Council looks at it as a whole. We could get to a stage where there will be deal-breakers for councils, or otherwise. DRD is coming forward with a proposal to transfer car parks, which is a good idea for councils; councillors definitely want it. In the past, they criticised DRD for car-parking charges that prevented people from using their car parks. Now, we have an opportunity to drive change to bring people back. Taking car parks on their own, you are netting £1.3 million a year; at the same time, you are telling them that you want them to do this and to do that.

Mr McBride: We are looking at what it costs to operate car parks. All that we are trying to do is validate that the amount being taken off the surplus is the right amount. That is the due diligence exercise that we are doing with officers from DRD. It is about validating the amount that is transferring. If there is a gap, it will have to be picked up by the ratepayer. You are right: there is a £1.3 million surplus, but the DOE draft allocation model has the overall funding package and the transfer netted off against the others. Yes, it is £1.3 million.

Another important point is that we are making sure that it is rates-neutral; we are making sure that, when the function transfers, there will be no extra burden on the ratepayer. In the original submission, we highlighted that the income that we would get would be net of the expenditure and be based on the charges currently in place. Those charges in Belfast are higher than in other cities and towns in Northern Ireland because of DRD's charge-setting policy. Once it comes across, if we decided that we want to reduce the car-parking charges, the burden would have to be picked up by the ratepayer.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I accept that. We are all ratepayers and would expect you to do what is best for the ratepayer. At the same time, we are taxpayers, and we expect things to be done right

as well. You are getting millions of pounds in transferred assets, and you have an opportunity to make a net gain of about £1.3 million. If you adjust your prices to make car parks fuller, to encourage people into town centres, you are getting a bigger rate of return for the businesses in Belfast. We are sustaining business as well. It is a chicken-and-egg situation. Generally, the Committee is supportive of the idea, because we come from local government and communities, and we can see the point of the transfer.

However, councils are approaching this with a big wish list. There are even suggestions, although I do not think that I read them in your submission, that DRD should transfer to councils that part of its budget that it used to maintain car parks. I assume that DRD's money for that came from the money that it received from car parks; so, really, the councils are coming here with a very long list. I can understand that; but, hopefully, you understand my point of view that, sometimes, it does not all make sense.

Mr McBride: We will get the net amount, the income less the expenditure, and if there are maintenance costs that we will have to incur, then the settlement comes into play. The Budget bid that DRD has in at the minute is for the income less the expenditure. All we are doing is trying to make sure that the impact of the transfer on the ratepayer is neutral.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Cathal, I can give you a small supplementary question on that, and then we will wrap this one up.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thank you for that, Chair. Siobhán, you mentioned, as a minor nuance, the amendment of the powers of appointments to include the authorisation of parking attendants. Can you elaborate on that?

Ms Toland: Yes. I suppose that we should have had somebody legal in the room to answer that. However, our lawyers have looked at it and said that it would be better to have the word "authorise" as well as "appoint". I suppose that it is a matter of legal terminology, and they perceive that to be correct. So, we would like "appoint and authorise", which would allow the power of delegation. Authorising is different from appointing. From how it has been explained to me, I understand that appointing a body to act on your behalf is one thing, whereas authorising it is a different process. That comes through the council or the committee, and the council appoints a director, or whoever, to discharge a function. So, it is in relation to a delegated power. It is minor, but it is based on a legal point. Your own lawyers will decide whether that is appropriate. It is about the difference between "appoint" and "authorise".

Mr Ó hOisín: My other question is this. A number of years ago, most councils adopted the option of gritting footpaths, particularly in town centres. Do you see that as now being extended to car-parking areas?

Ms Toland: We do the road-surface gritting on behalf of DRD in extreme weather.

Mr Connolly: We have been working on our estimates for managing that function post April, and we have included money for the winter maintenance of the car parks that we are adopting.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Thank you for your time today, and, obviously, we will take on board your comments.

Ms Toland: We will get the information that Mr McNarry asked for to the Committee.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): OK. Thank you.