



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Off-street Parking (Functions of District Councils) Bill:  
Mid and East Antrim District Council

19 November 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Regional Development

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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 Declan McAleer  
Mr Stephen Moutray  
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

**Witnesses:**

Ms Anne Donaghy	Mid and East Antrim District Council
Councillor Timothy Gaston	Mid and East Antrim District Council
Councillor Gordon Lyons	Mid and East Antrim District Council
Councillor Tommy Nicholl	Mid and East Antrim District Council

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Anne, you are very welcome. Maybe you want to introduce the councillors. Some of the members will know them.

**Ms Anne Donaghy (Mid and East Antrim District Council):** Chairman, if you do not mind, Timothy will do that.

**Councillor Timothy Gaston (Mid and East Antrim District Council):** Mr Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to give oral evidence to the Committee this morning on the Off-street Parking Bill. I am sure that you can see in front of you this morning the importance that we have placed on it by the fact that three elected members have come personally to the Committee to give first-hand evidence on why we feel a necessity to come here and address our concerns.

I will start off with a few introductions. I am the deputy presiding officer of Mid and East Antrim District Council, and I will begin by outlining our overall position on the Bill. I will then hand over to Councillor Gordon Lyons to my right here, who is the chairman of the planning committee. He will outline the council's vision to grow our local economy and our desire to ensure that car parks are transferred to councils with no constraints. You will then hear from my colleague on my left, Councillor Tommy Nicholl, who is chairman of the community planning committee. He will outline our concerns about the transfer and the need to uphold the principle of rates-neutral at the point of transfer. We are also joined by our chief executive, Anne Donaghy, who will help and support us in answering any questions that the Committee might have.

The council very much welcomes the transfer of off-street parking to local government. Growing our economy and, in particular, town centres is, for us, a very high priority. We see the transfer of the 27 car parks to Mid and East Antrim District Council as a great opportunity to take a proactive approach to regenerating our town centres. Our consultation response to the Bill indicated that we are broadly content with the proposal to transfer car parks to the councils. We followed the Second Reading of the Bill in the Assembly with interest, and we have a number of concerns. We wish to use this opportunity to present two particular points to the Committee.

First, we urge the Committee to ensure that car parks are transferred to councils with no restrictive covenants or constraints in order that councils can maximise the regeneration potential for town centres. Councillor Gordon Lyons, chairman of the planning committee, will shortly present our position on this.

Secondly, we urge the Committee and the Department to maintain the principle that car parks are rates-neutral at the point of transfer. In particular, we seek assurances on transparency of costs and wish to ensure that the Department provides adequate information to enable local due diligence to take place in the package to transfer. Councillor Tommy Nicholl, chairman of the community planning committee, will present our position on this.

Before I pass over to Councillor Gordon Lyons, Mr Chairman, I once again take this opportunity to thank you for allowing us this time this morning, and I assure you that we are happy to take any questions at the end.

**Councillor Gordon Lyons (Mid and East Antrim District Council):** Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. I am very happy to be here this morning, although it is not often that I am described as being to the right of Councillor Gaston. I am happy to be here and to tell you a little something about our view on the Off-street Parking Bill and how we believe it is central to creating stronger local government. As chairman of the planning committee in Mid and East Antrim, I can say that one of our key priorities is looking at the ways in which we can integrate planning powers into the council's suite of functions to ensure that we maximise economic growth and regenerate our local areas.

We believe that car parks have the potential to be an important element of this regeneration programme that we hope to enact. Therefore, we have been following the passage of this Bill through the Assembly and the Committee so far. We have to say that we are concerned that there has been discussion on potential amendments that, if introduced, could attach restrictive conditions to the transferring of car parks. We want to use this opportunity to urge the Committee to ensure that car parks are transferred to councils with no restrictive covenants, conditions or constraints in order that councils can maximise the regeneration potential for our town centres. We urge the Committee not to include any amendments to the Bill.

During the Second Reading, the Minister said that one of the principal aims of the reform of local government is to create stronger and more responsible local government. We believe that the inclusion of any restrictive clauses or creation of a departmental veto over the future arrangements for off-street car parking would be contrary to the spirit of the reform programme, which is to give local councils and local elected members the responsibility for the decisions that they make on these issues.

Mid and East Antrim District Council recently undertook a best practice study visit to Peterborough City Council, and, when we were there, we were very impressed by its innovative approach to planning, regeneration and growth. It very much took a holistic view of how it as a council should go about regenerating the city, and car parks was an important part of that. We believe that it will be the same for us in Mid and East Antrim, and we want to see the same opportunities for regeneration and growth.

We also believe that local councils are best placed to identify local need and to drive forward programmes to regenerate local areas, and we take seriously the role that we have and the enhanced role that we will now have in growing the economy locally and striving to contribute to the Programme for Government's vision to promote economic growth. To do this, we need to make sure that all of the spaces that we have are used to their greatest potential. Obviously, car parks are part of that.

I think that it is important that we say to you that we want to alleviate any concerns that the Committee may have that we want to be able to take car parking control from the Department just so that we can sell off the car parks and make a quick pound or two. That is simply not the case. If the council were to make an informed and strategic decision to develop an existing off-street car park, we believe that we would be obliged and that it would be in our best interests to make sure that we provide alternative

car parking elsewhere. We would not consider reducing any car parking spaces lightly; only on a needs basis or on an evidence-based approach. This would be factored in to our regeneration plan, and, again, it is local people and local elected representatives who would have the local knowledge that would be needed so that we could do what is necessary and what is specific to our own areas.

I want to take the opportunity to urge the Committee to ensure that car parks are transferred to councils under the proposals in the Bill as it stands. Of course, it is very important that we continue to work with citizens and with local government and central government to ensure that we have fit-for-purpose, accessible and maintained car parking provision that meets need, and it is critically important that we understand how we, councils and DRD take forward planning for future car parking provision. We are keen to ensure communication and strategic decision-making in that, and that it is open and transparent. I have some concerns about a disconnect between on-street and off-street parking in the future. For example, consideration of any reduction in the number of on-street parking places should not be done in isolation without an overall needs analysis of the number and nature of parking provision. In particular, if, as part of the consideration of ways to alleviate town centre congestion, there is the potential for DRD to reduce on-street car parking in the future, there could be an expectation that any reduction would be absorbed by additional off-street parking. We need to ensure that there is a coordinated approach to that, because the powers will no longer lie with one body.

In conclusion, we strongly urge the Committee to avoid introducing any amendments that would incorporate restrictive covenants or conditions to transfer. If we are to realise the vision for improved town centre economies, it is vital that the councils have the flexibility to maximise the regeneration impact for our local residents.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Tommy, do you want to add something?

**Councillor Tommy Nicholl (Mid and East Antrim District Council):** Yes. I find it difficult to say "Mr Chairman"; it is usually Trevor.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Anything will do me, do not worry. I have been called a lot worse.

**Councillor Nicholl:** Mr Chairman, I join my colleagues in thanking you and the Committee for the opportunity to be here and for listening to us. I have had the privilege of being a councillor for over 34 years. I believe that the new powers that transfer off-street car parking to local government are right. I believe that we have a real opportunity to make a difference for our citizens and our local business community through the new powers and duties in the Bill. One of the fundamental principles of the transfer of powers to local government is that they must be rates-neutral at the point of transfer. I completely agree with that principle, and will fight to make sure that it remains the position. After all, we are the people who are accountable to the local ratepayer. I use this opportunity to urge the Committee and the Department to ensure that the package of car parks transferred to local government are rates-neutral at the point of transfer. Nothing else will do.

The council has instructed its chief executive, Ms Donaghy, to undertake a detailed due diligence assessment of all the transferring functions. The elected members are particularly interested in off-street car parking and making sure that we are treated fairly. That is all we ask: fairness. As part of her comprehensive analysis, she informs me that the council continues to lack detailed information on many elements of the transfer of car parks. Ms Donaghy has sought urgent clarification from the Department on a number of points. It concerns me that that information remains outstanding. We are close to approaching the eleventh hour, and we need answers to those questions. As an example, among the information we are still waiting for is detailed information on the income history for the car parks, and specific information on Springwell Street car park, for those who know Ballymena, and the provision of up-to-date boundary maps of all car parks.

We are currently completing condition surveys of all the off-street car parks in mid and east Antrim. I understand that many other councils are doing the same. Early indications from condition surveys suggest that extensive refurbishment works will be required to bring the facilities up to an acceptable standard. With your permission, Mr Chairman, I would like to send the outcome of our condition surveys to you in due course. Why? Because we believe that that should be factored into the funding allocation associated with car parks as part of being cost-neutral on the point of transfer. It is very important, in the interests of fairness to our ratepayers, that there is complete transparency on the costs and financial information around the car parks. It is vital to ensure that car parks are rates-neutral at the point of transfer.

The chairman of the planning committee, Gordon Lyons, has already spoken, and he is going to sum up on our behalf and summarise Mid and East Antrim's position.

**Councillor Lyons:** As has already been stated, we hope that the Bill will progress as it was in its original form, without any further amendments. We also want to impress upon you the importance of needing to have information that we currently do not have. There is outstanding budget information that we need to know, and we have not got that information yet. To repeat again what Councillor Nicholl said, we believe that the transfer should take place and that it should be rates-neutral. To repeat what I said previously, we believe that we are best placed and that we, as councils, should be able to strategically plan where car parking provision should be for our area. We ask that no restrictive covenants be placed on that, and we urge that any Executive budget reductions should not directly impact on car parking.

I am happy to take your questions, Mr Chairman. Thank you once more for the opportunity to come here.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Thank you for your presentation. At the outset, after Tommy's comments, I feel that I should declare an interest as being a constituent of Mid and East Antrim. I would expect you, Tommy, to do some of the things that you said about getting best value for ratepayers, because I am a ratepayer in your constituency. You will probably not get just as hard a time today as some others may get.

The points have been well made. Some of the points, the Committee will generally agree with. Cost-neutrality is important, whether it is Mid and East Antrim or anywhere else in the Province. None of us would agree that a burden should be transferred. It is disappointing that a theme is emerging on the lack of detail, and we are concerned about that. As you will appreciate, we have a very tight timescale for the Bill. The Department asked us to do it in the shortest possible time. We have said that we will comply with that, but, of course, there was a caveat. If all the information is not there and things do not go in the correct manner, then we will have no other option but to ask for an extension of that period of time. The Minister said that he was minded to go for accelerated passage, but the Committee will resist that if the councils are not in receipt of the information required to make a decision. Most of the Committee members around the table have come from local government, so we have a genuine interest in our communities. We have to get this right; we cannot afford to get it wrong.

I do not know who wants to lead off on the questions. I do not mean to be disrespectful to Anne, but I am glad that councillors are here today. It is important that councillors lead as opposed to officers. Officers, to an extent, have a role to play in directing it, but it is good to get into the heads of councillors, because they represent the public. If it is wrong, they will bear the blame for whatever happens in the future.

Timothy, you talked about regeneration, and we all agree that you are best placed to deal with that. There is also the issue of transparency. You were against making any amendments to the Bill. What is your understanding of the Committee's mind on that clause?

**Councillor Gaston:** In the sense of the general feeling in the room?

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** I am picking up different vibes from different people about what that clause may look like. What have you been informed about what that clause has been suggested to look like?

**Councillor Gaston:** Chief, do you want to answer that?

**Ms Donaghy:** We have not had a lot in writing, but our understanding of it is that the clause may restrict us from developing car parks in any other way than as car parks. What we are saying is that that may be inaccurate and, if it is, that is good, because we want to regenerate our towns, and part of that regeneration will be to look at the car parks as a strategic asset in the borough. Is it an opportunity for development or regeneration?

Let me go back to what Councillor Lyons said. We will carry out a strategic needs assessment of car parks in our area. If there is a need for the car parks, and we want to develop the central asset of a car park into something more for business growth, we would replace them. It is all about the citizens. We are not going to replace that car park half a mile outside the town, but in a place where people can

use it. Access to the car parks is important. That is a key part. Again, Councillor Lyons mentioned that this is about the strategic analysis of car parks. We cannot do that in isolation. In the Bill, there should be something to encourage DRD, working with on-street car parking, to work with councils with off-street car parking. It is always about the whole package.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** We need to kill off the subject of on-street car parking very soon in this debate, because on-street parking is nothing to do with this Bill. It is something that councils may want to make representations about in the future.

My question was really more about your perception of the clause. This Committee has never been minded in terms of what you think that clause may be. The Committee generally, or many of us — I cannot say all of us, because we never actually came to a decision on this — have wanted to build in a degree of protection. I feel as though I am like a long-playing record because I have repeated this so many times. Many of us have come from local government. Anne, you know from your time in Antrim Council that the councils always wanted control of the car parks because that could help to regenerate our towns and help to bring people into them. That is a given.

All we are really suggesting here is this. Look at the Minister's comments, on the last day that he spoke in the House on this issue. He said that some car parks have already been identified for redevelopment, and that may even be from the Department's point of view. I am not saying that it will happen in Mid and East Antrim, but we need a degree of protection. There is no one in this room who is against redevelopment or regeneration, but we are all for protection of our towns and villages. Where we have a car park, regardless of its size, if the council is minded to regenerate or redevelop it, I think that it should be allowed to do so. All we are saying is that, where you have been transferred an asset that is cost-neutral, you should be made to replace it with a similar asset in a similar locality. We should not be standing in the way of you redeveloping your town centres.

Listening to what has been said, I think that Gordon referred to alleviating our concerns and, where possible, councils would do that. We are not saying "where possible"; we are saying that this is where we want the clause to be. Do not let us prevent redevelopment or regeneration of town centres, but make sure that we have adequate provision in our towns. That is all we are saying. There is danger in us just leaving this completely open-ended. I can say this to officers, though I will not look Anne in the face: when it comes to balancing the council's books, officers can be very imaginative as to how they can raise finances. I am a little bit concerned about that. I have come from local government, and I have seen how it works. Some of those proposals could be for selling off assets to bring in income to balance the books. All we are trying to do is to build in protection for the communities that we all come from and we all represent. Just because we sit in the Assembly, we have not turned our backs on the communities that we come from. We are trying to assist you in protecting our communities.

**Councillor Lyons:** I completely agree with the points that you are making. We want to make sure that there is adequate car parking, and you want the same. You want to make sure that the needs of the local communities are met. However, if you look at the whole spirit of the review of public administration, it was about giving power down to councils. I understand why some Committee members here say that they want to have control of that because they want to act in the best interests of the people that they represent. However, we have the same interests, so we want to act in their interests as well.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** You should not be fighting us on that one, then, Gordon. We all have the same interest. All that we are saying is that it should be a case of like for like. We are not trying to suggest what you should do other than that.

I have heard different interpretations of what this Committee is minded to do, and they are far from anything that the Committee has ever set out to do. The Committee has never come to a view on this. The officials are in the Public Gallery today, and we asked them to consider and bring forward a restrictive clause. The Minister was very quick to come out in the House and say that he is not minded to include any form of restrictive clause, and that has gathered legs.

I take the point that you are making about the spirit of the Bill when it comes to transferring powers. However, at the end of the day, the assets are worth about £7 million, and I think that it would be unfair of us not to build in some sort of protection when we are transferring valuable assets such as car parks.

**Councillor Lyons:** We are not too far apart on those things, Mr Chairman. However, instead of including a clause that applies across the whole of Northern Ireland and that perhaps does not serve the right purpose, we believe that, if you are giving the power to local councils instead, we need to act in the best interests of the people whom we represent, and we are going to try to do the same thing.

I completely agree with you. I think that, if we are to take a piece of land that was a car park and redeveloping it, we ought to provide similar car parking elsewhere. Take this as an example: the Department may include a clause that says that such a car park has to be replaced, like for like. That does not take into account local need or the fact that we may have a piece of land that is a car park but is underused. There might be a surplus of car parking spaces. Why therefore would we want to have that restriction placed on us? We would be unable to develop land fully in that restricted space, because we would have to have so many car parking spaces, even though there might be a surplus.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** The flip side is that, were you to redevelop a car park, you would hope that it will bring people back. However, you have no way of measuring that until after it happens. That is why you need the protection of this requirement to provide additional spaces.

**Mr Lynch:** I think that it was you, Tommy, who said that extensive upgrading works are needed to some of the car parks. How essential is that in the transfer, and have you identified car parks that are not fit for purpose?

**Ms Donaghy:** If I may answer that, we are currently carrying out a condition survey, as was advised, and gathering information on that. I will give you an example of one of the car parks that is being transferred to us. Many years ago, it was determined centrally — not by us — that it would take about £1.5 million to bring it up to standard. Therefore, it is always about understanding —

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Sorry, can I cut in there, Anne? Can you name that car park? It would be useful for the Committee to explore that.

**Ms Donaghy:** Yes. It is the multistorey car park in Ballymena.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** OK.

**Ms Donaghy:** I have been out at that car park, and its condition means that there are maintenance issues. I cannot determine that myself, but I have officers looking at it at the minute. Our concern is that we want to provide a standard of car park. The citizen has an expectation. We want to have car parks that are fit for purpose. This is about the definition of "fit for purpose". In many cases, people will say, "It is already a car park, so it is fit for purpose". That might be a definition, but at the other end of the spectrum, if you are a housing developer, you have to bring a road up to a standard or else it will not be adopted. The definition lies somewhere in between those examples. What we want are car parks of a standard transferred to us that we can maintain to that standard for the next 10, 20 or 30 years with the income that we have. I hope that that answers your question.

**Mr Lynch:** What do you think the solution is for the particular car park that you mentioned, Anne?

**Ms Donaghy:** I would like to have some conversations with the Department about how the gap will be met. We do not expect everything to happen on day one, obviously. Therefore, a solution might be a phased, strategic programme of maintenance over the next number of years supported by the Department, along with council. To refer back to what Councillor Lyons said, I think that there is a spirit of delivering for the citizen among us all. We are all using the same public pound to deliver. It is about being responsible and making sure that we use that to the maximum. One of the solutions that we are thinking about is to develop a maintenance plan together that we would share over the next x number of years. We would move it forward based on income and on what we can bring to the standard of the car park. Hopefully that answers you.

**Councillor Lyons:** That is why the income history is so important, and that is information that we have not received yet. If we are taking on an asset and do not know how much money is coming through or whether it generates x thousands of pounds every year, how can we plan? We do not even know the condition of some of the car parks. That is an important factor that we need to take into consideration as well.

**Mr Lynch:** It is disappointing that that information has not been forthcoming.

**Ms Donaghy:** If it is helpful, I will provide you with what was requested and the latest update on that on a periodic basis. There is no problem.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Perhaps I should put it on record now that, during the comfort break, I sought information from officials. It would be inappropriate to bring them to the table now, but they are of a mind that the information and figures on the income history has been provided to councils.

**Ms Donaghy:** No, I am clear, Chairman. I wrote back with specific questions that were raised by the elected members, and I have not been in receipt of the detail.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Will you send us a copy of the information that you are providing and when you have asked for it?

**Ms Donaghy:** I certainly will.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Again, we will ask the Department about that officially, but, when we had the comfort break, the officials indicated that the information has been provided. That theme emerged from another presentation this morning, and it is alarming.

**Ms Donaghy:** Perhaps I can shed a little bit more light on that. It would be untrue to say that no information is being provided. Generic information was provided to all. However, my members were very clear that we needed more specific detail in order to make determinations, and I wrote back looking for specific information.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Sorry to cut across you again, Anne, but that may be the problem. There may be confusion in the message about what the level of information is. Will you put on the record now what information on the income history you are after so that we are clear and that there is no ambiguity about what is needed?

**Ms Donaghy:** OK. I do not have the specific letter with me. I will forward it to you, but Councillor Nicholl already told you some of the areas that we wanted information on. For example, we wanted more information on the multistorey car park in Ballymena. We are not even certain on some of the boundary maps issues. We still have a query concerning one off-street car park that was used in the Carrickfergus area during the road upgrade. It was temporarily turned into a park-and-ride facility on a temporary basis. We are now not getting that transferred over because it has been defined as a park-and-ride. It never was a park-and-ride facility. My understanding is that that was a temporary solution, and, as such, I believe that it should go back to being an off-street car park. However, we are being told that it is not transferring because it is now a park-and-ride. I do not understand what the word "temporary" therefore meant. Those are the sorts of issues that we have asked for clarification on. There are more, which I cannot say off the top of my head.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** I am certainly not a cheerleader for the Department. However, temporary or otherwise, if the park-and-ride facility has been used and proven to be successful, it probably adds benefit to a particular area, so I can understand why that one would not transfer.

Another emerging theme today is that councils do not seem to be in receipt of a definitive list.

**Ms Donaghy:** Yes.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** There seems to be some fluid movement with the list. That is something that the Committee needs to tie down with the Department. We cannot be asked to do this piece of work within 30 days if the number of car parks on the list is going up and down. We need a definitive number of car parks for each of the councils so that they can make an informed judgement.

**Ms Donaghy:** Absolutely.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** You and I may disagree on the detail of that, of course, Anne, because I think that park-and-rides have a function. Whether the Department stumbled across it by accident or design, the park-and-ride has proven to be successful. Many of our towns suffer from the lack of a park-and-ride facility.

**Councillor Lyons:** For clarity, Mr Chairman, the car park was turned into a park-and-ride because of the developments with the A2. It was meant only to be temporary. It may become more successful, but that is a different issue.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** In Randalstown in the constituency that I represent, we have a park-and-ride facility at the Ballygrooby roundabout. First, we could not get a park-and-ride facility, but, now that we do, you cannot find a space in it. That proves that there is need for them, and, sometimes, they can be come across by accident rather than design.

**Ms Donaghy:** If that is the decision, it is the decision. However, we have not got an answer to the question of how the park-and-ride moved from being temporary to being permanent. If it has become permanent, it would be nice to understand that and for the council to know that the facility is being used extensively and that the Department has made a formal decision to make it permanent. We have asked why that has happened and whether the park-and-ride is now a permanent feature. I think that that is fair, and all that we ask for is an answer.

I will provide you with the full list of questions that we forwarded and where we are with them.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** We will include those as part of our evidence to the inquiry.

**Ms Donaghy:** Excellent. Thank you.

**Councillor Gaston:** To reinforce what the chief executive said, I hope that you see that it is imperative that we get the information as quickly as possible. In three months' time, we will be striking a rate, and we have outstanding issues.

We talked about the multistorey car park. The condition survey for it is coming up to being 10 years out of date, and there has been minimal maintenance carried out on it since then. The council has to be in a strong position to know what it has and what money we need to put in so that, when we go to the ratepayer, we have enough money and there will be no surprises coming down the line.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** We entirely agree with that. That is why we need a definitive list. We need to be clear about what is transferred and what is not.

**Mr McAleer:** Very briefly, Chair, the message has come out very strongly that you need the information about the boundary maps and the income history.

I note that you are carrying out a condition survey. If the findings of your survey are at odds with the Department's view, will you be content to accept liability come the handover date?

**Ms Donaghy:** I cannot answer that. Once we get the information, we will sit down as a Committee to discuss how to take that forward. We will look at all options. It is all about affordability, a phased approach and where the responsibility lies. I can speak only for Mid and East Antrim District Council councillors, and they are very responsible. They consider themselves to be the custodians of all assets, and those assets have to be of a certain standard for our citizens. If we get an at-odds figure, we will have to discuss that and write back to the Department or make representations to it.

I know that some of the other councils that are here will have completed their condition surveys. Those will probably be presented to you as evidence after we finish. Most, if not all, the councils are carrying our condition surveys, and a trend is coming through. In the absence of the figures, I cannot give a response from council.

**Mr Dallat:** Thank you for your presentation. Whatever money is spent on car parks in the future will come out of either the regional rate or the local rate. I represent neighbouring areas such as Coleraine and Limavady. Are you seriously suggesting that the ratepayers in those towns should contribute towards your fabulous multistorey car park in Ballymena, which must have generated billions of pounds over the years?

**Councillor Gaston:** It is important that, when we get them, the assets are fit for purpose. I am a health and safety officer by trade. It is important that the service that we provide to the public is safe and to a certain standard.

**Mr Dallat:** Are you saying that it is not safe?

**Councillor Gaston:** Minimal work has been done on the multistorey car park. The condition survey was not carried by the council, but the Department would not have said that there was a need to spend £1.5 million on that car park if there was not. As I said earlier, the condition survey is 10 years out of date. It would be interesting to see the up-to-date survey. Chief executive, do you want to add to that?

**Ms Donaghy:** As public representatives, the Mid and East Antrim District Council councillors recognise fully that major assets are being transferred to us. That is from where I would start. You draw attention to what is perhaps the second or third highest-earning car park in Northern Ireland. At the other end of the spectrum, we have car parks that cost money to keep open. You cannot look at one car park; rather, you need to take a holistic view. That view cannot be taken within one town but must be seen across the whole of the new borough. We need to look at how much it will cost for all the car parks. To pull out one car park for discussion would skew that.

We are glad that our multistorey car park has been such a success, and we hope that that will continue. It will absorb some of the costs of some of the car parks that are costing you to run at the moment and that will cost us to run in the future. Hopefully, that answers your question.

**Mr Dallat:** I hold my hands up: I am just envious. Ballymena has a multistorey car park, and most other towns do not. I cannot see in what circumstances you would want other towns to pay for the upgrade of your multistorey car park out of the regional rate. That is mind-boggling.

**Councillor Gaston:** It would not be upgraded; rather, it would be brought up to an acceptable standard, and that is something that should have been done over the years.

**Mr Dallat:** I would keep that quiet, because people might begin to believe that it is dangerous to go into your car park. I go into it quite regularly, and, to be honest, it is one of the better car parks for turning in.

**Ms Donaghy:** It is about maintenance. It is always about maintenance. It is probably one of the better car parks, and it was determined by the Department, in and around 10 years ago, that maintenance needed to be done. Minimal maintenance has been done since then. As I said, when we get the results of the survey, we will be in a better position to say what needs to be improved.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** I suppose that I am looking at the figures. I can see John's point. You will have 27 car parks with a net income of £600,000 a year, and that one car park makes £242,000. Therefore, almost half your annual income from the 27 car parks will come from that one car park.

I am sitting on the fence on this one. You will have to look at the spectrum of what you are getting.

**Ms Donaghy:** Absolutely.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** It is a large proportion of the total income for other car parks that are not making money, but I share the general view. You are getting an asset that is still functioning. You will get £7 million worth of assets, and there will be an expectation in the future that you will be responsible for the upkeep of those.

I come back to Timothy. The car park cannot be in such a state that it is not fit for purpose, or else it would have been closed. You have to strike a balance somewhere. It is still generating quite a large income, and I would not think that the Department is irresponsible enough to leave a car park open that is not fit for purpose or that is unsafe. If it were, I would be the first to criticise it for doing so, I can assure you of that.

In the round, you will have 27 car parks, and the multistorey car park will make up almost half your income. That makes it a wee bit more difficult. I take the point that Anne has made. It is a more difficult one to balance in your head.

Did you want to come in, Cathal?

**Mr Ó hOisín:** I am sorry that I missed part of the presentation. I was away doing an interview about a six-mile-long car park on the A6.

I want to go back to what the Minister declared about the 27 car parks that your new council area will have. Are you aware of any prioritisation for retention or disposal of those car parks by the Department?

**Ms Donaghy:** I am not clear exactly what you are asking.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** The Minister has indicated that he thinks that a number of car parks might be prioritised across different council areas for disposal or retention. Are you aware of any of that?

**Ms Donaghy:** I am not aware of that at the minute.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** OK. Thanks.

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Had you finished you, John? Sorry, I may have —

**Mr Dallat:** No, I did not want what I said to sound terribly negative. It will be very useful in making up our mind, and I could have developed it further. There are a lot of smaller shops — there are probably many in your new council area — that are struggling for survival. They have to fund their own car parks and are finding it difficult to pay their rates. Why would they, through the regional rate, be asked to contribute to renovations on a multistorey car park in Ballymena?

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Maybe they will all come to shop in Ballymena if they did that. That would be OK. I would be happy enough with that.

Have all members had an opportunity to ask questions?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Chairperson (Mr Clarke):** Thank you for your presentation. Your evidence will be considered. Anne, can you get us that other information as quickly as possible?

**Ms Donaghy:** Absolutely. That is not a problem, Chair.