



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Budget 2015-16: OFMDFM Briefing

25 March 2015

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Alex Maskey
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

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| Mr Stephen Boyd | Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister |
| Dr Mark Browne | Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister |
| Ms Sinéad McCartan | Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister |

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Following the statement by the Finance Minister on the outcome of the draft Budget for 2015-16 we requested a briefing on the implications for the Department and the arm's-length bodies. Mark has kindly stayed with us and is joined by Stephen Boyd and Sinéad McCartan. Mark, would you like to set the scene?

Dr Mark Browne (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): The draft Budget for 2015-16 was agreed by the Executive on 30 October 2014 and proposes a series of reductions to the 2014-15 opening baselines of all Departments, excluding Health and Education. For OFMDFM, the draft Budget proposed a resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) allocation of £65.4 million. This included £5 million of funding for the inquiry into historical institutional abuse, which is ring-fenced, and an allocation of £3 million, which the Finance and Personnel Minister indicated was for victims and survivors and thus was effectively earmarked.

The impact on the remaining areas of the Department's budget was a reduction of £8.4 million, or 12.8%. In December, Ministers approved a series of proposals necessary for OFMDFM to live within the proposed reduced Budget for 2015-16. These were put out to consultation on 28 November. During the consultation period, we received 21 responses from public, private and voluntary organisations, as well as from private individuals. Officials also met with a delegation from the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). A number of issues emerged from the consultation, but the key issue was that no money in the draft Budget had been allocated to promoting sustained, key programmes under Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC).

The final agreed Budget settlement for 2015-16 provides OFMDFM with a total resource budget of £67.9 million, which is an increase of 3.2% on the opening 2014-15 baseline. Again, within this, there is money for the historical institutional abuse inquiry of £5 million and of £1 million for EU funds. The

settlement also includes additional resources of £1.5 million earmarked for the victims and survivors service. This allocation was made at the final Budget stage and is additional to the £3 million allocation to victims indicated at the draft Budget stage.

Outside these earmarked and ring-fenced areas, the Budget represents the same reduction of 12.8% on the opening baseline for 2014-15 for the remaining areas of the Department's activity.

In common with the experience of other Departments, reductions of this quantum have represented a significant challenge, and we have had to take some difficult decisions to make sure that we can live within the reduced budget. We intend to absorb these Budget cuts through reductions to the three main spend areas. Those are the core Department, arm's-length bodies and our programme expenditure.

The approach that we took was this: to apply the necessary 12.8% cuts to the Departmental pay bill and then identify any other deliverable reductions and efficiencies within the Department on top of that; to start from a presumption, for all arm's-length bodies, of 12.8% and then assess the extent to which that level of reduction was achievable and the extent to which it would protect delivery of statutory functions and to adjust it accordingly should it not be achievable and deliverable; and to take the remaining amount required from programme, the idea behind this being to minimise the impact on programme delivery.

I will look at each of the actions that we took in turn. Around one third of the total core departmental spend is expended on staffing and administration costs. We are implementing the plans to deliver the 12.8% reduction in staffing budgets, and we are reducing expenditure on research and making savings in the maintenance costs associated with the former military sites. Together, these will provide budget reductions of £3.1 million in our core departmental expenditure against a target of £8.7 million.

In 2014-15, about 56.5% of our budget was allocated to arm's-length bodies (ALBs). We gave them scenarios of 10% and 15% reductions and asked them to assess the implications for them and their statutory functions and so forth. Based on that information, we considered what level of savings they could deliver in 2015-16. On the basis of that, we identified specific reductions for each arm's-length body which, in total, has reduced ALB budgets by £4.4 million or 11.9% in 2015-16. The ALBs will seek to absorb the impact of these reductions by focusing strongly on the delivery of their statutory requirements and taking steps to streamline work and improve efficiency. In addition, three ALBs have identified a requirement to offer a voluntary exit scheme to their employees in order to reduce their total workforce and deliver those savings.

The third area is programme spend, almost all of which is on good relations. I mentioned earlier that there was criticism that there was no formal allocation for the Together: Building a United Community strategy. The final Budget settlement included a £10 million allocation for T:BUC that is to be held centrally and allocated as part of the June monitoring round process. Ministers have approved a drawdown of £3.3 million from that £10 million to OFMDFM for the specific initiative that the Department is taking forward. This will maintain OFMDFM's funding of good relations programmes at just over £8 million in 2015-16, and it will support the roll-out of key initiatives in this area.

The Department has been allocated a capital budget of £4.2 million for 2015-16. Ilex has been allocated £2.8 million and Crumlin Road Gaol and Maze/Long Kesh have each been allocated £700,000. For central initiatives, the final Budget maintains an allocation for Delivering Social Change (DSC) initiatives of £14 million in resource and £15 million in capital in 2015-16, which is the same as the allocation for 2014-15. That will support the roll-out of the social investment fund, the DSC signature projects and the childcare strategy, which we discussed earlier.

Looking forward, the Department will enter the 2015-16 financial year with a balanced budget but with a pressure of £600,000 that we will have to meet over the course of the year for international relations and the Beijing office, which was not provided for in the Budget settlement. This is an Executive commitment, so we intend to bid for it in June monitoring; indeed, it was funded in-year last year. All things being equal, we hope that that bid will be met.

The 2015-16 Budget settlement for OFMDFM has been tough, as it has been for other Departments. We have sought to absorb the necessary 12.8% reduction in our budget by protecting programme delivery and front-line services as far as possible; by focusing reductions on the departmental pay bill and administrative costs; and by applying differential reductions to our arm's-length bodies. While our arm's-length bodies will find their reduced budgets difficult, we are satisfied, from the information that

they have given us, that they will be able to continue to deliver their statutory functions. While it has been necessary to also make reductions to some aspects of OFMDFM's good relations budgets, the very welcome additional £10 million provided for T:BUC and the OFMDFM drawdown from that will ensure the ongoing roll-out of important work in this area.

I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Thank you, Mark. There is an awful lot there, and it was almost a random start. You mentioned the Beijing office. What about the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels and, indeed, the Northern Ireland Bureau, which has four staff members in Washington and one in New York? Where do they fall? Are they in the Executive services directorate? Where is the budget line for those bodies?

Dr Browne: They are in our core departmental spend. When we were looking at our 12·8% reduction, we looked to those offices as well to make their contribution to the reduction. They are not arm's-length bodies; they are part of the Department.

Mr Stephen Boyd (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): They are in the resource, regeneration, international relations and institutional review directorate.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): OK. They are just not specified in the document —

Dr Browne: They are not separately identified, but they are in it.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): The very first one is the head of the Civil Service directorate. Given that you are talking about a kind of overarching 12·8% target, the head of the Civil Service's budget is reduced by 0·87%.

Dr Browne: Yes. The 12·8% was to be applied across the areas of the Department outside the ring-fenced areas. We did not break it down and apply it mechanically to every single area because our view was that we have to prioritise our activities. We asked all areas to come forward with suggested reductions. We looked at what the impact of those reductions would be, and we took the judgement that, in some cases, applying such a cut evenly to every area would have a differentially bad impact, particularly around the head of the Civil Service's office; it is very small. The Stormont House Agreement and all the other stuff that has been going on recently has hugely increased the pressure on that office. It has done very well to provide the support that it has provided even with the same budget, never mind a small reduction.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): So, to be clear, in cash terms, the budget has been cut by £4,400. That is less than 1%.

Dr Browne: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): I calculate the equality budget as being down by 14·52% on last year. However, within equality comes the historical institutional abuse (HIA) inquiry, which now has a ring-fenced budget. Therefore, if you take equality minus the HIA, the cut, year on year, to the equality budget is 24·87%. That is a quarter, Mark. How did that happen?

Dr Browne: As I said, the process was to find 12·8% reductions across all the areas of the Department outside the ring-fenced areas. The proposals were put forward by the various directors, and we looked at those and made the reductions necessary. The pay bill in the equality and strategy directorate (EqSD) would have been subject to the same reduction as other parts of the Department, so it would have been 12·8%.

In respect of other areas around equality, one of the key things that we did above the pay bill was to look at the other areas that we could potentially reduce. One of the areas that we looked at was research. We took a significant amount of money — £700,000 — out of research, which leaves a research budget of £400,000. We did that because there had been a significant research programme, a lot of ad hoc projects had been put in place and most contracts were coming to an end, so there was an opportunity to finish those projects off and not to start a substantial raft of new projects but to still have in the £400,000 left projects that we need to give us the measures and indicators that we need to know whether our programmes are having an impact.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Is the research being commissioned through the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)?

Dr Browne: It is commissioned through a range of —

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): For clarity, one of the issues that we had when reading down into this was that, this year, you have given us just a budget line on equality. Last year, you broke it down into well over a dozen units, including NISRA, age, race, victims, cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) and childcare. Those are missing this year. Why is that?

Dr Browne: The reason for that is that we would have got into a very confusing discussion along the lines of the sort of comparison that you have just been making. At the very start of the year, initial allocations are made to a number of those areas, and we then have to adjust them. My accountant friends can explain in detail why that is the case. We would have ended up chasing our tail round a lot of the detail, when, in fact, some funding in that area may be moved over at the first opportunity. This has to do with the business units and so forth and the way that funding has been set up and allocated. I will let my accountant colleague explain the detail of it.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): With respect, Mark, I do not think that scrutiny for this Committee is chasing your tail. If we are interested to know why childcare received a certain percentage that is different to that for victims and victims received a certain percentage that is different to that in economic research, that is part of the Committee's function.

Dr Browne: Sorry, Chair, I must apologise. That was loose language. What I meant to say was that it would have been very misleading and not informative. When we have all the funding in the appropriate areas, which takes a few months into the year, that will give a better picture of the impact and would be more useful.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): On the broad point again, I will come back to non-ring-fenced equality, which has been cut by 24·87%. That does not stack up when compared with the strategic investment and regeneration directorate, which is 22·18%; the Office of the Legislative Counsel, which is at 15·68%; the North/South council directorate, which is at 10·12%; and the Executive Information Service, which is at 4·68%. The cut in non-ring-fenced equality is massive compared with that everywhere else.

Dr Browne: I will ask Stephen to come in with some of the detail on that in a second. As I said, we did not apply 12·8% the whole way down into every single branch because there are some areas where we simply could not reduce support. In some of the critical areas of support that Ministers and the Executive Committee receive, it simply would not be acceptable to have reductions. In trying to apply these, we have to look at the areas where we can minimise the impact on business. That is why we have differential reductions.

I suspect that, if we had applied it commonly the whole way through, the other criticism would have been, "Do you not have any priorities in the Department?" We had to establish what those priorities were. In the detail of some of them, there can be some confusion, because other factors should be brought to bear. For example, there does not seem to be a significant reduction in the Office of the Legislative Counsel. However, we have agreed with other departments that, because of the rising costs associated with the OLC that are related to the number of Bills that are coming in and the difficulty in attracting people to that area, it will be making a contribution to costs. That has been an important aspect in helping us to balance our budget in that area. So, in fact, it has been generating some income from other departments.

Is there anything else that you want to say about the equality, Stephen?

Mr Boyd: On the staffing budget, equality lost just over 12·8%, which is equivalent to some of the other areas. It also experienced a £1·2 million cut in its programme spend. However, the T:BUC allocations go on top of this, and they are not included in that figure because Ministers had not allocated funds from T:BUC at that stage. So, its budget will increase as we get funding from the central funds for T:BUC, SIF and DSC. That will still have to be added in later in the year, probably through June monitoring and the later monitoring rounds.

Dr Browne: That goes back to the point I made in my opening statement; I appreciate that there were a lot of figures in it. I was making the point that the funding on the good relations programmes is being maintained at just over £8 million each year. That takes account of OFMDFM's own funding and some of the T:BUC drawdown that we have, so that is being maintained.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): I hope that you accept that my interest is to see whether the vulnerable are being impacted by the cuts, particularly in equality. For example, the Committee has for some time taken a particular interest in victims and survivors. While there is a very significant uplift of over 13% to the Victims and Survivors Service, which I am sure we all welcome, when we look at the Commission for Victims and Survivors, we see that there is a cut of over 15%. Why is that?

Dr Browne: The commission, along with all the other arm's-length bodies, was asked for the impact of 10% and 15% reductions. In the end, where we felt that any arm's-length body could accept a 12-8% reduction, which was our starting point, we applied that. Based on the information the commission gave us, it indicated that it could maintain its services with a 12-8% reduction. As to what we applied, there must be some other additional factor. I do not know whether it is associated with the fact that it does not have a commissioner at the moment and whether there are savings in that.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): That is my supplementary question, Mark.

Dr Browne: There might be some delay. We will obviously try to programme in the point at which the appointment will be made and consider its necessary costs.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Can you tell me what assumption is being used for when you think there will be an appointment of the next Commissioner for Victims and Survivors?

Dr Browne: I cannot, I am afraid, Chair. I am not sure what assumption we actually put in. Off the top of my head, I can say that I suspect that we probably allowed a month or two for that appointment to be made, but it would be made by our finance side in the broadest sense. It is not predicated on a very precise date from the policy side.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for the presentation. I probably have a number of questions that, realistically, would need to be presented to Ministers, to be honest, so I will not go into them too much. In 2007, I think it was, OFMDFM commissioned Deloitte to conduct research to estimate the cost of division in Northern Ireland. That was estimated at over £1 billion. What, if any, serious work has OFMDFM undertaken since to update that assessment and to reduce that cost?

Dr Browne: I am aware in broad terms that that research was carried out back then. I am not aware of any specific plans to revise it. The programmes that the Department is taking forward through T:BUC and Delivering Social Change are all designed to try to reduce the potential impact of the problems that we have in our society. The funding that I mentioned that has been maintained this year for good relations programmes is all there to support programmes to try to reduce division and to increase contact and appreciation of diversity and the role that different groups have to play. There is ongoing evaluation of those programmes.

Mr Lyttle: Is there any greater detail on how the £10 million that has been allocated for T:BUC will be distributed at this point?

Dr Browne: Ministers have determined how some £6.7 million of it will be approved, and the rest is under consideration. Some £3.3 million will come to OFMDFM. That includes the £1.2 million that was referred to for having the 100 shared summer schools by 2015; up to £2 million for the central good relations fund; and £100,000 for summer interventions. That makes the £3.3 million for OFMDFM. For the 10 new shared education campuses there is £0.2 million, and for the 10 new housing schemes there is £0.29 million. For the programme of cross-community sporting events, £0.545 million has been identified. There is £2.46 million for developing four urban village schemes. That collectively comes to £6.795 million. Those are the allocations that Ministers have approved. The remainder of that, which is £3.4 million, is under consideration.

Mr Lyttle: There is no real greater detail at this stage of exactly what will go into the like of the urban village scheme, for example. Are those really just headline allocations?

Dr Browne: That is the headline allocation. DSD is leading the work there, and it is being developed.

Mr Lyttle: OK. Thanks, Chair. Some of those are reasonably significant investments of public money. I wish I had received a bit more detail about that. In fairness to officials, I think that that requires ministerial input as well, but I appreciate the updates to date. Thank you.

Mr Spratt: Thanks, Mark, for the presentation. You mentioned that the bill was to reduce by a third. I took from it that the bill for staffing will reduce by a third.

Dr Browne: Staffing and the transferring functions that are going to the new Departments, will reduce our numbers by a third, but the actual pay bill reduction this year, which is separate, is 12.8%.

Mr Spratt: I am more interested in the fact that you mentioned that there are three arm's-length bodies. You are considering a voluntary exit scheme. Can you tell the Committee what those three bodies are? Can you assure the Committee that the voluntary exit scheme will be no different to the one that is being proposed so that some of the fat cats in some of these arm's-length bodies do not have a separate scheme to feather their own nest?

Dr Browne: The provision that has been made for voluntary exit includes funding for up to four years. That is under the Stormont House Agreement. It will include arm's-length bodies. The provision is that, first of all, you must have an approved scheme. Secondly, a business case must be approved for that scheme.

Mr Spratt: When we talk about having an approved scheme, are we talking about a scheme that will be no better than that which will be agreed for everybody else?

Dr Browne: Yes. It is a scheme that will be no more generous, but it could be different in detail.

Mr Spratt: So, is there no opportunity for any of those organisations to make their own rules?

Dr Browne: My understanding is that they have to be no more generous than the schemes being provided for the Civil Service. They also have to bring forward a business case that has to be approved through their own Department and DFP before anyone can be released.

There is no question of them being able to get a portion of money and going off and doing whatever they want with it. The reason for the number of staff going, the implications for business, the costs and payback time will all have to be set out clearly and subject to approval.

Mr Spratt: I asked the question to make sure that the people at the bottom of that pyramid are treated in a fair way and in the same way as some of the people who are higher up in the organisation, given that many of the folks in the arm's-length bodies originally came from the Civil Service. They must all be treated equally. You say that "you think" that that may be the case, but, really, safeguards need to be put in place so that those bodies cannot go off and do what they want.

Mr Boyd: There are safeguards in place, and we will evaluate them. We are waiting for business cases, and we asked for those by the end of this month. We have to put bids in to the June monitoring round. DFP informed us that funds will be allocated from the central pot and on a rationed basis, so the bodies generating the most savings will get the funds. Due to the size of the pot, there is no guarantee that everyone will get funds this year. If schemes are submitted for just higher-rated people, they may not get the funding for them.

Dr Browne: It is all about value for money. In practice, the bulk of staff, particularly in our arm's-length bodies, tend to be on Civil Service terms and conditions and will be subject to exactly the same scheme, or they are in the NILGOSC scheme, which has approved and agreed terms. I do not think the risk you are referring to is going to materialise in those areas, but that process of the business case and approval will ensure that if, for every pound invested, it is the best return, you will be put up the priority list for getting funding.

Mr Boyd: The numbers we are talking about, we think, are roughly —

Dr Browne: They are very tiny for us.

Mr Boyd: There are about 17 people for our three arm's-length bodies, so the numbers are small.

Mr Spratt: I asked what the three arm's-length bodies are, but I am not sure I heard an answer.

Dr Browne: They are the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI), the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) and the Planning Appeals Commission/Water Appeals Commission (PAC/WAC).

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Jimmy raised an interesting point. That is the first time I heard it mentioned that there might be more than one one-size-fits-all voluntary exit scheme. Is that because of technical reasons, like pension schemes?

Dr Browne: It is because any voluntary exit scheme has to relate to the employer and to the terms and conditions that workers are employed under. The overall control is to make sure that it is not any more generous, as the member said, but that it is done in a way that represents best value for money. Those who give the quickest payback for what you are paying will go first. That tends to be those with less service.

Mr Spratt: You said that there are three arm's-length bodies at the moment — you told us what they are — but I assume the scheme is still open to other arm's-length bodies. If somebody in one of the other arm's-length bodies or a group of people said, "We would like to choose this opportunity to leave", I assume that they could approach the body.

Mr Boyd: Yes, they can come to us and put a case in. However, we have already consulted with them, and those are the only three parties that have said —

Mr Spratt: You say that they can come to you, but they obviously cannot come to you as an individual. I know that there are arm's-length bodies in other Departments; they are not necessarily in OFMDFM. Do you have an understanding of whether each arm's-length body has widely consulted with its members or employees?

Dr Browne: There are a couple of things to say. The funding available for this, as set out in the Stormont House Agreement, is set out over four years. It is £200 million, £200 million, £200 million and £100 million. At this point, the scheme for the Civil Service is for the first year only. Clear dates have been set by which Departments have to come forward with the number they expect to go out, and it is likewise for the arm's-length bodies. It is likely that the arm's-length bodies will be able to access this over a longer period. So, there will be further opportunities.

A timetable has been set out for each tranche. I think there is one in September/October. It is critical that applications are in then for next year, and business cases will all have to be approved for then. Then, when the next Budget settlement is going forward, everyone will be looking at their budgets and requirements. This is a moveable feast. At the minute, we know only 2015-16, but when we get to the next three or four years, everyone will have to look at it again and consider whether they can afford the staff they have and what access they will need. That is why there will be schemes over a number of years.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Mark, I have one other question on that. If the objective of 20,000 public servants leaving over the time is met, it will be a seismic shock; it is not something we have ever experienced in Northern Ireland. In another place, I asked for an assurance that not a single person of that 20,000 would leave on a Friday, figuratively speaking, only to be brought back in on the Monday because nobody knew how to do that job. I was assured that that would not happen, because people will be trained up. Have you any sense of the impact on training budgets within the broad public sector that will be required to manage this transition?

Dr Browne: That is the sort of work that will be done by the various project boards that have been established for the restructuring of Departments, as well as the voluntary exit scheme.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Does OFMDFM have such a board?

Dr Browne: We are establishing one. We have just put terms of reference out internally, and we expect to establish one in the next week or so. There is going to be a number of areas. Even at this time of change, when staff are going, it is particularly important that the staff who remain in the service are supported to be able to do their work. So, the requirement for training is likely to increase, rather

than decrease. It has not yet been quantified. It is something that all those project boards and Departments will want to look at over the next couple of years.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): So, it would not be unreasonable to think that there will be a requirement for additional budget and resource.

Dr Browne: There will be a requirement for additional training. I think Departments will have to be innovative about how they manage to provide it. Some of it could be job shadowing or peer-to-peer training. That has a cost, but it is not an explicit cost; it is staff time cost. I think we have to be innovative about how that training is provided.

Mr Maskey: Thank you for your presentation. I have two questions. Two of the three arm's-length bodies where you are suggesting jobs might go are children related — NICCY and CINI. Will there be a disproportionate negative impact on the children's sector as a result of any of that?

Dr Browne: We asked all the bodies to assess what the impact would be. One of my colleagues may be able to give the detail on this, but a number of the bodies had existing vacancies that had not been filled, so the action to save budget would have been on not filling the vacancy and suppressing the post. In some other circumstances, staff wanted to leave, and they could have access to the exit scheme. In other cases, where some of the bodies performed non-statutory functions, such as giving advice, promoting their activities or increasing awareness of the office, the arm's-length body decided that it would cut back on that to preserve the staff. It has not all fallen on staff. We have said that, front and central, they must protect the delivery of their statutory function and alert us if there is any risk to it.

Mr Maskey: I thought you said that something like 17 posts were going out of those three organisations. Would it be posts?

Dr Browne: Yes.

Mr Maskey: Some of them may be suppressed.

Dr Browne: In fairness, some of those bodies — one in particular — have been downsizing over time. In fact, even before the current voluntary exit scheme, they have been funding from their own resources. They have been able to fund some voluntary redundancies to reduce their pay bill. These budget pressures have been going on for some time; it is just that they have become particularly significant over the last year.

Mr Maskey: My second question is about the good relations funding. I think you detailed that a figure of something like £8 million would have been available previously and will be available again. Am I reading that correctly?

Dr Browne: Yes.

Mr Maskey: It would come by way of a different configuration of money through T:BUC and so on. Taking that same amount of money into consideration, presumably less is available in cash terms. I am not sure whether £8 million will be available a year on from 2015-16. You are normally told that it is going to be less valuable than last time around. Are there any identified losers in that new funding arrangement? I am thinking particularly about ethnic minority funding arrangements, which are generally ad hoc and a bit —

Mr Boyd: Minority ethnic funding is being maintained at last year's levels. That was just over £1 million, plus the £100,000 set aside for the crisis fund, which has been allocated for this year as well.

Mr Maskey: In effect, there is no loser.

Mr Boyd: Not in the minority ethnic sector.

Dr Browne: Not in the minority ethnic sector.

One of the good relations funding programmes where a saving was made was the contested spaces programme, and that was coming to an end in any case. There was half a million pounds in that. That programme came to a natural end and has not been specifically replaced. That was one saving.

There has also been a reduction to some of the councils' good relations funding in the previous year, and we carried that through. Other programmes have been put in place. As you say, it is a different configuration.

Mr Maskey: I have one final point, Chair, if you do not mind. I am not sure whether you will be able to answer this particular supplementary. Turning to the contested spaces funding, are you aware of any evaluation that might say, "That programme was coming to an end, but it might be beneficial to continue it"? Was there an argument to continue it, or is there any evaluation to show that, in the absence of the programme, we could be worse off or we are not tackling the problem? I do not know.

Dr Browne: I could come back to you about the evaluation. Our policy colleagues look after that. It had a set time frame. It was planned to end, it ended, and that created savings that we have kept. Obviously, the other initiatives in that whole area are all designed to tackle the same problem, perhaps in a slightly different way. We can certainly come back to you about the evaluation.

Mr Maskey: I would appreciate finding out whether there was any evaluation. As you know, a lot of organisations' programmes start with funding for a year or a period of time, but they are actually hoping to continue.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Just to follow up on Alex's first question, you assured us, Mark, at the beginning, that all the ALBs will be able to perform their statutory duties despite the financial constraints. Would the same apply to the VES? Do the business cases and so forth take into account whether there will be any impact from losing a post?

Ms Sinéad McCartan (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): In developing the scheme, each ALB will need to develop a business case, and that will need to set out how business continuity will be maintained.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): You gave a magnificent defence of the head of the Civil Service directorate's 0.27% reduction, given the support he had to give in the months leading up to the Stormont House Agreement and now, subsequently, with implementation. However, the Office of the Legislative Counsel is also going to be very busy if we implement the Stormont House Agreement. That department is losing 15.68%. Is that going to impact on the OLC's ability? I think that we went from nine Executive Bills to 16 to 25 in the last year of the mandate. There is a natural progression toward the end of the mandate to more Executive Bills, and, on top of that, we have the pressures of implementing Stormont House.

Dr Browne: That has been a difficult area to recruit people to and to retain them in. Its expertise is very significant, and it is a very specialist area. We have had a constant battle, to be frank, over the last number of years, in attracting and retaining staff. I know that Brenda King has worked very hard to ensure that she can attract people. Some of them work remotely and so forth. The interesting thing is that she has always said that they are very keen to work in Northern Ireland or to work on Northern Ireland issues, because they find it all very interesting and enjoyable. However, they are expensive and difficult to attract and retain. We were able to attract some on a secondment basis, who then had to go back to the GB administration. In addition, there are a number of vacancies that it has tried to fill for some time, which it has now said that it is not going to be able to. Brenda is now looking at a mix of attracting some more people in and training up from within our own resources people to fill the vacancies in the team. That does not reflect any diminution in the importance of the legislative programme; we are just doing things differently. Another aspect, which I mentioned, is that departments have agreed to contribute towards the increasing costs, so there will be some income from departments to increase that budget. That is not the full quantum.

I do not know whether Stephen has anything to add.

Mr Boyd: We are expecting to spend about £1.7 million this year. The other departments have agreed to fund OLC to the tune of £50,000 each, so we will increase that budget by another £550,000.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): As you may know, this Committee is considering bringing forward legislation for a new Northern Ireland public services ombudsman, but we were not expecting to pay for it.

Dr Browne: It is an expensive business.

Mr Maskey: Have you any money on you?

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): More than loose change. Thank you very much indeed, Stephen, Sinéad and Mark.

Mark would it be possible to give us the breakdown under equality by gender, age and victims? We got that last year.

Dr Browne: Yes, Chair, if you could give us a little time to get the allocations in the right place. A wee bit of adjustment is needed, because some of those units of business have been set up in a way that does not accord any more with the way the money is used. It will take us a wee while to get in there, but certainly we will come back to you with that.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): I appreciate it.