



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Environment

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Local Government (Numbers and Addresses
of Buildings in Townlands) Bill:
Mr Phil Flanagan MLA

5 November 2015

previously engaged with some individual Members of the Assembly who did not know what a townland was, never mind what their own townland was, so I will provide a brief history of what a townland is for any members who may not be fully aware of it.

Historically, Ireland was divided into four provinces — Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connacht — which were then separated into counties. Those counties were then further broken up into baronies, which, in turn, were split into parishes, with each parish being made up of a number of different townlands. Some 5,000 places in Ireland support the prefix "Bally", of which 45 have the name "Ballybeag", which means "little town". I was always under the impression that the townland system was unique to Ireland, but a former DUP MLA, Oliver Gibson, actually told the House in a debate that a similar system exists in Sudan. I have never been, but I will take his word for it. I do not know whether it originated in Sudan or here, but it is a good system and is something that we should continue to support and promote.

With regard to townlands, the issue has been somewhat controversial in some places over recent decades. The Local Government Act 1972 constituted local councils and got them to administer 26 local government districts, which were created by the Local Government (Boundaries) Act 1971. That abolished the existing local authorities at the time. It saw the introduction of road names for the first time on a statutory basis, at the expense of the more widely recognised townland system. Whilst the introduction of a formal system of road names was adopted in 25 of the 26 councils, Fermanagh District Council stood alone in retaining townlands, with universal support from councillors from all political parties. As a result, Fermanagh retained the historical townland system. However, Fermanagh District Council did move to adopt a system of road names after a lengthy period of internal debate amongst councillors of all parties, and that policy was enacted on 1 February 2013. The decision to introduce the road-name-based system was not taken lightly by the council. It was actually only taken because the current legislation did not allow the numbering of properties within a townland-based system. The council agreed at the time to continue campaigning for the minor legislative change that I am now proposing.

As someone who used to run a business that was reliant on the ability of individuals to pass credit checks, I can understand why some within the county and the council wanted a system that met the needs of the citizens. Due to the previous unauthorised system of issuing numbers within a townland system, which was not done on a statutory basis, some people found that they had multiple addresses and had difficulty passing credit checks. That was the reason why the council moved to the road-based system. There was never actually a demand for the abandonment of the townlands-based system; people were simply sick, sore and tired of not being able to order products for home delivery or to pass a credit check, as the previous system was not compatible with that of the credit-checking agencies. The introduction of a road-name-based system has addressed some of those problems with regards to accessing credit and sorting out home delivery. More people can now avail themselves of credit from mobile phone companies, banks and other such institutions. Such problems were a result of their historical absence of a unique property number that they could not be allocated using the townland system. However, despite the policy change in the council, there remains a strong desire in Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, and within the population of Fermanagh itself, to restore townlands to their former glory as the predominant part of the address of our properties.

Many people across the North have lamented the fact that the usage of townlands has largely ceased since the policy change of the early 1970s. The change that I am proposing today would allow councils, if they so wished, to put townlands back to use as the principal part of the address. When I engaged in the public consultation, it was clear right across the North that there is a strong demand for the greater promotion and protection of townlands. I carried out a public consultation exercise on the policy behind this draft Bill. The consultation was issued in 11 September 2012 with a deadline for responses of 31 October 2012. Over 80 responses to the consultation were received, including responses from individuals, groups, political parties and local councils. The majority of the responses were supportive of the proposed change, given the existing concern about the declining use of townlands and the acceptance that something needs to be done to protect and promote townlands.

Fermanagh was always the exception to the rule of the declining use of townlands, as a result of the council policy of using townlands as the basis for allocating addresses. That means that townlands were a common part of the language and culture of the county. However, due to advances in technology and the change in the way in which businesses operate, the previous system was not sustainable and some form of change was required. The old Fermanagh District Council, from the mid 1970s right through to 2013, had sought this exact change in policy where properties could be numbered within a townland instead of along roads. The council wrote to successive Environment Ministers asking for the change to be made, but that request was rejected, so I am seeking to process

this legislative change through a private Member's Bill. I have consulted officials from DOE with regards to previous concerns about the draft Bill, and, in my opinion, these objections have now been overcome as a result of the requirement for councils adopting this scheme to take account of guidance issued by DFP on how best to implement a policy of allocating property numbers in a townland, based on a non-linear system.

I have also engaged with the director of mapping services in Land and Property Services (LPS) to ensure that the Bill did not have any problematic points for either LPS or DFP, which manages and administer the Pointer address system. I am content that it does not. I also requested a meeting with the Environment Minister, after the first deal was completed, to brief him on the content of the draft Bill. I also wrote to his predecessor on 11 July 2012 to inform him of my intention to bring a Bill forward.

I will run through the four clauses of the Bill very quickly. Only two of the clauses are substantive in any meaningful way. Clause 1 deals with the numbering of buildings by councils. It amends article 11 of the 1995 Order, which relates to the powers of councils in relation to street names and the numbering of buildings. Clause 1(2) confers powers on councils to erect nameplates in townlands as well as on streets, and allows that such a nameplate may refer to the townland name. Clause 1(3) grants councils a new power, which would be contained in paragraph 1A, to number buildings as they see fit, and provides that such numbering may refer to a street or townland providing that, in doing so, a council has regard to any departmental guidance as included in paragraph 1B. Clauses 1(4) to 1(9) make consequential amendments to article 11 to reflect the powers of councils relating to the numbering on a townland as well as on a street basis.

Clause 2 deals with the role of the Department of Finance and Personnel. It introduces new articles 11A and 11B to the 1995 Order, which set out the role of the Department of Finance and Personnel in the numbering of buildings under article 11 as amended. It also makes a consequential amendment to the definition of "Department" in the 1995 Order. Proposed article 11A, which relates to the guidance on the numbering of buildings in townlands, confers on the Department an explicit power to issue guidance relating to the allocation by councils of numbers to buildings and townlands, and states that a council has elected to number buildings on a townland basis. Article 11B places a duty on the Department relating to the use of townlands in addresses, requiring the Department, so far as is reasonably practicable, to use an address format that places the building number and townland name ahead of the street name when exercising its land and property functions in relation to any such building, and when providing information about the address of such a building to third parties.

Clause 3 provides the short title of the Bill and clause 4 deals with the commencement. It provides that the provisions of the Bill that make the relevant amendment to the definition of "Department" and confer on the Department the powers to issue guidance come into operation on the day after it receives Royal Assent. The remaining provisions of the Bill come into operation six months after it receives Royal Assent, to give the Department of Finance and Personnel time to draft and issue guidance to councils. In conclusion, the Bill provides councils with the option of numbering individual properties within townlands instead of along roads or streets. It does not require councils to do anything unless they wish to do so. The amendment would allow the townland name to be placed first in the address and become the principal part of the address-based system once again.

If a council chooses to prioritise a townland name, it shall have regard to any guidance that is issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel, which will hopefully deal with any issue of inconsistency that might arise. The Bill will also place a duty on the Department, as far as is reasonably practical, to use the address format that numbers individual properties within the townland as the principal part of the address if a council chooses that option. That means that, if somebody goes on to the Internet to order a product or apply for a credit check, once they type in their house number and postcode, the format that will be presented to the user is that their townland will be above their road name is that if the system that the council has adopted. There will be a requirement for LPS, DFP and Pointer to help administer that scheme, but, from speaking to LPS, I know that that will be a fairly straightforward process.

In my view it is a fairly straightforward policy change, and I encourage members to approach it with an open mind. Thank you for your time. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mrs Cameron): Thank you very much. A fair wee bit of information there, and it was interesting. You talked about the positive views that have come back from the consultation: did you say that the majority of councils were in favour? What was the breakdown of the councils? Were any councils against the proposal?

Mr Flanagan: Some. Belfast City Council expressed concerns that, due to continuous development in the city, the use of townlands had more or less stopped, and it would not work in Belfast. Some councils — from memory, the Fermanagh, Omagh and Magherafelt district councils — indicated an interest in exploring the potential use of the new system. Some councils indicated that they were fully supportive of increasing the use of townlands but would not implement the system if it was brought in by the legislation. That is the beauty of the proposed change: it will not force a council that does not want to make the change to do so. There were differing views across councils, largely on the basis of whether they were urban or rural councils.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mrs Cameron): The townlands are obviously there, and you have talked about the councils that are supportive or that wish to investigate it further. There is nothing to stop any of us using townlands in our addresses now or at any stage in the future. There is no hindrance to that, is there?

Mr Flanagan: No. There is no legal impediment to any individual placing a townland in their address, but it is no longer the principal part of the address. Historically, in Fermanagh, the vast majority of the population knew what their townland was, largely because it was what their address was made up of. If you travel around the other five counties, it is clear that a similar situation does not arise. As the townland system of issuing addresses was abolished in the 1970s, very many people do not know what townland they live in, and they certainly do not give townlands the prominence that they once had.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mrs Cameron): I am a bit concerned that Belfast City Council has said that it will not work for them. Belfast has the bulk of the population of Northern Ireland. Is there really a need to legislate? If it can be done voluntarily by councils or individuals anyway, why do we want to legislate on it?

Mr Flanagan: I hear what you say, Pam, but it cannot be done voluntarily. For years, Fermanagh District Council wanted to retain a system whereby residents and businesses could have the townland as the principal part of their address, but, due to the fact that so many things are reliant on credit checks or background checks, people need a unique property indicator, which could not be afforded to them using the previous unauthorised system. Some change was needed in Fermanagh, and the change that the council was forced to accept was the introduction of a road name-based system to give people a unique property for those credit checks.

This proposal will put in statute the ability of a council to issue property numbers within a townlands-based system. That will put townlands back as the principal part of the address and protect and further promote townlands. If you speak to people across the North, the awareness and understanding of the townlands-based system is not as strong as it used to be. Very many young people do not know what townland they live in, and previous work that was carried out through the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee's inquiry in the area highlighted the fact that very many people do not know what townland they live in. For those of us who support this proposal, the best way to change that is to allow councils the opportunity to make this minor change. It does not force anything on them. Belfast City Council has indicated that it has no interest in pursuing this, but that is fine. I am not forcing Belfast City Council to do anything that it does not want to.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mrs Cameron): You talked about it being a minor change: have you any idea of the financial implications?

Mr Flanagan: The financial implications will be twofold. There will be financial implications for a council that wants to change its existing system; that is on an individual basis for each of those individual councils. I can tell you now that, of the 11 councils, the majority will not adopt this system. There will be zero cost to those councils. The Pointer system already exists, but minor changes will be required by LPS and DFP in administering the system. Any of the costs will be from the use of existing personnel to rework the system. There will be no considerable cost, in my opinion, for the Executive or any Department. If a council wants to introduce this change and reissue numbers to each of the properties in a council area, that will be a cost for the council. It will be up to the council to decide how much that will be and whether this is something that it wants to pursue.

Mrs Overend: Sorry for missing the very beginning of your briefing, although I do not think that I missed too much. It is an interesting concept. I use the townland in my address; I like townlands. I am confused about why you need houses to be numbered within a townland. Would you not be satisfied if everyone used their townland as part of their address?

Mr Flanagan: There are two different problems there. First, people who have an interest in townlands and want to promote and protect them do include them in their address voluntarily. Unfortunately, that is not universal, and whilst Departments have encouraged each other to do it, I have seen examples of driving licences being issued without the townland, even though it was included on the application form, because there is not enough space. Even though people want the townland in their address, that is not always complied with. When you order something from a website for home delivery, generally, you do not even type in your address anymore: you type in your home number and your postcode, and your address is generated automatically. If you analyse that, you will find that the townland is invariably left off. While some people want to use their townland, it is not being given the promotion and the prominence that it needs in somebody's address.

The policy objective here is to encourage and facilitate the greater use of townlands, and I think that this is the best solution, but if you have any thoughts about how this Bill could be changed to better promote and support townlands, I would be more than happy to engage with you. Personally, I think that this is the best way to do it, but I hear what you are saying, particularly given that there is already an acceptance that not all the 11 councils are going to do it. The impact is not going to be widespread across the North. It may be that there are other changes that we could make in the other council areas which may not adopt or introduce this system, to help promote townlands further in those areas.

Mrs Overend: How would buildings in a townland be numbered? Do you just pick a random spot, start at 1 and go clockwise? How does it work?

Mr Flanagan: To be honest, those concerns were raised by DOE officials at the start, and it is for that reason that previous Environment Ministers wrote to Fermanagh District Council saying that they would not support the proposal. I discussed it with the Department and suggested that the Department of Finance and Personnel issue guidance to the councils that they would have to take account of. There was much more sympathy for, and understanding of, this proposal, and they do not think that it will cause any of the problems they envisaged previously. It would therefore be a matter for LPS and the Department of Finance and Personnel to advise on that. It is not included in the Bill, any more than the 1995 Order says that odd numbers have to be on the left hand side of the road and even numbers on the right. That is up to building control in each council to decide upon. What I have included in this Bill is provision for DFP to issue guidance, which the council has to have regard to. It will be a decision for the experts within each local council about how best to number properties within a townland-based system.

Mrs Overend: I also have a concern for the blue-light services and how they find addresses. If you go down a road, there could be six different townlands along that road. That is one of my major concerns — that the blue-light services will not be able to find addresses.

Mr Flanagan: I understand what you are saying, Sandra. That is an area of concern, not only for a council that introduces a townlands-based system but for councils that have roads that are 13, 15 or 20 miles long. Lattone Road, from Garrison to Belcoo, is 13 miles long and property numbers stretch from 1 to 500, so if you are looking for a property on that road, how do the blue-light services find it? Do they drive the whole way from Garrison to Belcoo to find that one property? No; they use local knowledge and, increasingly, GPS software and satnavs to identify where properties are.

The problem that we have historically had in Fermanagh, because of the unofficial use of the townlands system, is that properties did not have a unique address and were not compatible with GPS technology. This legislative change will mean that all those GPS system problems can be resolved, because each address will have a unique property reference number. You type the number and the postcode into the satnav system, and it will take you straight to it. That is increasingly what the blue-light services are using to bring them to properties as quickly as possible.

Mrs Overend: OK. You talked about LPS having the flexibility to change its system, but if there is not uniformity across all the councils, how difficult is it going to be for LPS to produce a system for differing addresses? If only one council takes on the townland system and all the rest have the roads system, it is not going to be easy for LPS to provide that computer system.

Mr Flanagan: It is not the computer system, because the system already exists where Pointer has a list of data fields. The first one is house number or name, the second one is street name and the third one is townland. This means merely that townland is brought up above road name where a council decides to do so. It is no major change for LPS. What might be a bigger challenge for LPS is deciding what parameters to include in the guidance that it issues to councils. That is what LPS does

for a living; it deals with maps and how best to deal with these issues. Having spoken to the director of mapping services, I know that LPS will be fully capable of introducing guidance for councils that will help to resolve any of those difficulties.

Mrs Overend: I can imagine putting in my number and my postcode and the system will not know if it is 160 Ballymacpeake or 160 Mayogall. There is going to be confusion there. Anyway, I have taken up enough time.

Mr Flanagan: I will just respond to that, Sandra. One of the concerns that LPS brought forward was that there are several townlands that are repeated in different towns across the North. However, I put it to LPS that there are several Main Streets, Lisburn Roads and Enniskillen Roads, and they have the same problem. Its big concern was that townlands are not unique, but neither is the name of a road. So you use the postcode to offer the uniformity. In your instance, if your council were to adopt this change, once you put in your house number and your postcode, your postcode is unique to your townland, so your house number will be the only house number in that townland. That will be the unique way of finding your address.

Mrs Overend: So postcodes will probably change too, then.

Mr Flanagan: Yes. Well, the postcodes have recently changed in Fermanagh anyway to reflect this change. The reintroduction or changing to postcodes is not a huge issue, as we have recently seen.

Mrs Overend: OK. I will leave some questions for others.

Lord Morrow: There are a few things around this that I would like to hear, Mr Flanagan. Is this designed to create a more efficient system? Delivery services have been talked about: are you trying to assist because the present system is not working, or is it because you have a passion for townlands?

Mr Flanagan: If you are intimating that the previous system was inefficient prior to the implementation of the new system in Fermanagh in 2013, I agree with you. Whilst I am concerned that the long-term implications of it will be the eradication of or reduction in the use of townlands, the system that the council introduced in 2013 has led to a more efficient system in getting items delivered to people's houses and allowing people to pass credit checks to get finance, mortgages and things like that. The efficiency of the current system in delivering products and credit checks is fine across each council area. The proposal that I am making would not have any impact on the efficiency of the service but would merely afford additional promotion and protection to the townlands-based system. The policy objective is to increase the use of townlands, not to increase the efficiency of any existing system.

Lord Morrow: You mentioned the Belcoo-Garrison Road: did you say 30 miles?

Mr Flanagan: Thirteen.

Lord Morrow: How many townlands are on that 13-mile stretch?

Mr Flanagan: I am not fit to list them off the top of my head, Maurice.

Lord Morrow: Is there more than one?

Mr Flanagan: There is surely, yes.

Lord Morrow: Would it not then be easier to have it numbered? For instance, Dungannon council, in its time, named every road in the council area and included the townland in it. For instance, 36 Cavan Road was the address, yet you had the townland in that also. Is that what you are thinking of?

Mr Flanagan: Are you talking about the address that is issued or the signs at the bottom of the street?

Lord Morrow: I am talking about the sign at the bottom of the street or the bottom of the road. Do you not accept that, for instance, if I went onto the Belcoo-Garrison Road today and was looking for a particular address and all that I had was the name of the townland, that could be quite confusing? Would it not be easier if I had, for instance, "30 Belcoo Road"? Would that be easier to find than, for

instance, whatever the townland might be on that stretch of road? Which do you think would be quicker or easier to find?

Mr Flanagan: It all depends who the individual is.

Lord Morrow: He is coming from Belfast. He has never been there before.

Mr Flanagan: Well, he is very welcome. Finding 30 Belcoo Road out of Garrison — or 30 Lattone Road — would not be that simple, because the road stretches for 13 miles and there is no indication of where house number 279 is. There is no indication as to where house number 30 is. So the current system is not perfect either.

With regard to signage, I am aware that some councils have erected signs at junctions that highlight, "This is x road, and this area is within y townland", but those signs are not at the entrance to every townland; they are only at the junction of two roads. Whilst that has helped increase awareness of some townlands, not all townlands are included in it. I believe that this proposal can work. The system worked very well in Fermanagh for a lifetime. The system of using townlands worked up until 2013 and could have continued to work, only for the changes in the way people and businesses have operated through increased online activity and the requirement for credit checks. Up until 1973, every other area used townlands. I am led to believe that the townland system is going strong in Sudan. I do not think that there are any barriers to finding addresses through the implementation of this system. The Bill also amends provision on the ability of a council to erect signage in the same way that it can at the bottom of a street or road at the minute. The Bill also gives councils the power to erect signage at the entrance to a townland if it wants to provide that additional clarity for road users.

Lord Morrow: Do you envisage the councils paying for this?

Mr Flanagan: For what exactly?

Lord Morrow: If we are to have the changes that you would like to be made, there will be some costs attached to it, will there not?

Mr Flanagan: If a council decides to adopt this change, it will be a matter for a council to resource it. It will be for the council to decide holistically whether it wants to adopt this change.

Lord Morrow: How much do you think the ratepayers will have to pay for that?

Mr Flanagan: It all depends on how a council enacts it. One of the biggest costs that Fermanagh District Council incurred in 2012-13 was engaging in a comprehensive public consultation exercise to find out the views of the public on the proposed names of roads that did not previously have names. There were examples of the council being issued with road names, and LPS issued one road name, BT gave a different road name, and the council had another road name. Some areas had four or five road names, so the council had to engage in a considerable public consultation exercise. One of its biggest costs was engaging with people to find out what they wanted. With this system, that would not be a requirement, because townland names are already widely accepted and in use. That level of public engagement would not necessarily be as extensively required.

Lord Morrow: Have you received much representation about the existing system not being very good? I do not have a problem with your saying that you like townland names. As a matter of fact, believe it or not, I like them too. I do not have a problem with your saying that there is something about townland names that you like, and you want to retain them. However, we do not need this change to make that happen. Very often, things that happen voluntarily are much more respected and are just as efficient. I remember very well the discussions at the time of the townlands debate. Fermanagh stepped out of the system of road names, and I think that it used only townland names and refused to use road names — you can correct me if I am wrong.

Mr Flanagan: The council refused to allocate property numbers officially under the roads-based system that was outlined under the 1972 legislation and then updated in the 1995 Order. You are right: the council did not introduce that system. As a result, the townlands system is very strong in Fermanagh. Nearly everybody is aware of their townland name. I remember, in P6, doing a map of the parish, and everybody was able to identify each townland around them. Knowing the identity of your townland and the townlands around you is very strong. That is only as a result of our addresses

being based on that system. I contend that such knowledge in primary schools across the North would not be anywhere near that level. Most adults, let alone young people, do not know their townland name. The best way to protect townlands is to afford councils the right to number properties in a townlands-based system.

Your first question was about whether the existing system is any good. From a practical point of view, and looking at it coldly, it is efficient. I do not have a logic for changing the existing system and the way that it works, apart from my strong desire for townlands to be afforded greater protection and promotion and to give councils the ability, if they so wish, to number properties in townlands to protect them.

Lord Morrow: Did you start your research before or since the reorganisation of local government? Was it 26 or 11 councils?

Mr Flanagan: The research was in 2012, so it was 26 councils.

Lord Morrow: You said that Belfast was — maybe "hostile" is the wrong word — not very supportive or enthusiastic about it. Other than Fermanagh, what councils were enthusiastic?

Mr Flanagan: Omagh, Magherafelt and Fermanagh were, as far as I can remember, the three councils that indicated that they would consider adopting such a proposal if it were enacted. While nearly all councils indicated that they were fully supportive of the use of townlands, none of them went as far as saying that they would want the system adopted. They said that, at present, they had no desire to make use of such a change.

Lord Morrow: So are we down to three councils out of 26? I do not want to misquote you.

Mr Flanagan: Yes.

Lord Morrow: So the other 23 councils would come along in some form but not in line with your Bill. Surely that is the route to go.

Mr Flanagan: Which route?

Lord Morrow: The other councils said that the present system is working quite effectively and that maybe the best way to do it is as I said: go for road numbers while encouraging councils to use their townlands.

Mr Flanagan: All the councils already use their townlands, but you will appreciate that the vast majority of correspondence to and from citizens in this state does not come from government but from financial institutions, private organisations, dentists and doctors. No legal recourse is available to the Assembly to force those institutions to include townlands in addresses. If you want to explore that, I am more than happy to do it with you. That, in my view, would help in other council areas where this system would not be enacted.

As for how best to promote the use of townlands, I restate my view that offering this mechanism to the councils that want to use it is the best possible system. The system in 25 of the 26 former councils was not working. If you go out and engage with people and ask them what their townland name is, I contend that a significant proportion of the population does not know. However, I would be delighted to explore potential solutions with you and the Committee about ways in which we can further promote the use of townlands on a statutory basis. Asking councils to include townlands in addresses happened years ago, and it has not solved the problem.

Lord Morrow: I want to get this clear in my mind: do you envisage road numbering disappearing?

Mr Flanagan: No.

Lord Morrow: Do you envisage that road signs — say, Belcoo Road — be retained and that signage should include Belcoo Road, numbers 1 to 50, and the townland name? I am not trying to be smart here, and I suspect that you do not know — it is no slight on you or anybody else that you do not know

— but how many townlands are on the 13-mile stretch of road between Belcoo and Garrison? I do not think that you could be expected to know that unless you brought the information with you today.

Mr Flanagan: I frequently travel that road, which is why I picked it. Roads that are significantly longer have a single name, which, based on the number system, makes it very hard to identify where an individual property is. However, with signage on roads and in townlands, the Bill gives councils a choice. Let us be clear: officials in building control in councils are the experts when deciding what number to give a property, what name to give a housing development and how best to arrange the system in local government. It would be up to them to decide whether they want to enact this system at all and then what they do with it. All the Bill does is to give individual councils the flexibility to make a choice as to whether to stick with the existing system or to adopt one that gives much greater protection and promotion of townlands.

Lord Morrow: Belcoo Road is only an example, but do you envisage townland names being on the signage of the road that runs from Belcoo to Garrison?

Mr Flanagan: If I were a councillor on Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, I would certainly like that to happen. It may be the case that —

Lord Morrow: You could have a fairly big sign.

Mr Flanagan: A road could run in and out of a townland, and it might not necessarily be practicable to put signage at the entrance of every single townland. However, if a council wanted to put up signs, it would be a matter for that council, and this legislation would allow it to do that. However, I think that it would be helpful from a number of angles, not only to help people to identify that they are coming into a certain townland and to increase awareness and usage of that townland name but to reinforce the fact that townlands are a fundamental part of our shared heritage and culture on this island.

Lord Morrow: Would there be multilingual signage, with English, Irish and Ulster Scots — I do not know whether you have any other language in mind — or are you saying that townland names are already in Irish?

Mr Flanagan: No, townland names are not in Irish.

Lord Morrow: Are they not Irish names?

Mr Flanagan: Some of them are derived from the historical language of this island, which is Ireland; that is where the vast majority derive from. They have subsequently been anglicised; they are not Irish any more. Like most place names and people's names and so on on this island, they derive from the native language of the country, which is Irish. Over time, those names have been anglicised. We can get into a debate on the origins of words and their derivation, but townland names are currently in English. The Bill does not propose to make any change to the existing legislation on the use of English or other languages on signage.

Lord Morrow: I suspect that, if we were to do this, the satnav will be important apparatus in the future. It would be hard to find your way around if you were a stranger or not familiar with an area. You are familiar with Fermanagh, but would people from Belfast or elsewhere not have great difficulty in getting to some addresses if they did not have road names?

Mr Flanagan: If I am in Belfast, Dublin or a town that I am not familiar with, I put on the GPS on my phone, so that is not a unique trait that would be introduced if we brought in a townland system. It is much better to use a system like that, which brings you directly to the door of the place to which you are going rather than running around blindly and not asking for directions. It might be a trait for some, and it is usually men who are accused of driving around and not asking for directions. I use technology when it helps, and whether it is a stranger from a country area coming into a major city like Belfast or Dublin and using satnav or a delivery driver from Belfast or Omagh coming into rural Fermanagh and using a roads- or townlands-based system, I contend that most strangers who do not know where they are going and are there for a specific purpose and looking for a single address are already using satnavs or will make the switch in the next few years, regardless of whether this change is introduced.

Mr Irwin: As a country person, I am sympathetic to townland names. Like Sandra, I use them, so my mail comes through with my townland name on it. I am not sure about legislating for townland names. You propose to legislate for something that would be optional for councils. It could end up creating more confusion. It would be good to encourage the use of townland names — I have no problem with that. I still feel that it would be expensive for councils to administer and that there would have to be a whole change. I am not sure that that is the right way to go. I think that there are difficulties with this, and I have sympathy for what you are trying to do. I do not think that what you are trying to do will work, because, if it is optional, you might have one or two councils doing it, but you might not. There has to be some way to encourage the use of townland names. In my address, the name of the road comes first, and the townland name comes second, and, in my eyes, it would be a logistical nightmare to change that. You will have difficulty selling this, but that is not because I do not support the use of townland names.

Mr Flanagan: You have raised a number of points, William. You highlighted the key issue for me: road names appear first in people's addresses, and townland names appear second. I presume that the townland does not appear on all the correspondence that you receive, which is the big danger for me. Some organisations or individuals, out of laziness or trying to save money when printing letters, do not include townlands on their address.

You also highlighted the problem that the system is optional for councils. I think that, had I brought forward a Bill that said that it was mandatory for councils to do it, that would have been an even bigger problem for everybody. I do not think that it is logical to force councils to make the change if they do not want to. That is why I have kept it optional, because I think that only councils that want to do it should be allowed to do so. However, I think that it is wrong that a council that wants to introduce a townlands-based system is prohibited from doing so because of legislation that does not give any due regard to the historical significance of townlands on this island, particularly in rural communities where citizens very strongly identify themselves as being from a particular townland as opposed to living on a particular road. I am approaching the issue from that position.

You also highlighted costs: this will cost nothing. If a council wants to implement the change, it will cost some money, but a council will have to make that decision as part of the consideration about whether it makes the change. I still believe that having it as an optional process is best for all councils. If a given council wants nothing to do with it, there will be zero cost for it. The only councils that will be out money will be the ones that want to implement the change. It may be that some that are sympathetic might look at the cost and decide that it is not a road that they want to go down. We should give local people, councillors and councils the chance to make those decisions instead of dictating how they issue numbers for properties based on a roads-based system that does not meet the historical and cultural significance of this place.

I would be grateful for any ideas you might have for how we can increase the use of townland names. There is a generally held view across society that they are in decline. Regardless of where you come from, people from all backgrounds have a very fond affinity with their townland. It is not supported particularly by one tradition or another; it is supported right across our community. I am sure that you are aware that several Orange Order lodges are named after the townland in which they are based. People from all cultures relate very closely to their townland. If members have any alternatives for how we can increase the use of townlands across society as a whole, I encourage them to bring those forward. This is the best thing that we can do at this stage to afford councils, when they so wish, to number properties based in a townland and to restore townland names to the first line of addresses when that is possible.

Mr Irwin: Have you been lobbied by any councils that want to go down this route?

Mr Flanagan: Not since the introduction of the RPA and the 11 new councils in April. Historically, it was a major issue in the former Fermanagh District Council. As I stated, that council refused to introduce the official roads-based system and did so only in 2013. In late 2012/early 2013 — I do not have the date — the council passed a motion by 20 votes to zero that, if this legislative change were made, it would readopt the townlands-based system. All the councillors in attendance from all parties supported going back to the townlands-based system but only on the basis that it could be done in an official way, whereby all previous problems about accessing deliveries and passing credit checks could be resolved. For that to happen, this legislative change needs to be made.

Mr McElduff: Obviously, I support and commend the initiative. Townland names are hugely important to people. Recently in my community, there was an inter-townlands quiz. A lot of women's groups in

Tyrone have made quilts reflecting the townland theme. In Gortin, Drumquin and Termonmaguirc, they made these quilts, and they are great art pieces. The previous Speaker of the Assembly, William Hay, was supportive. I happened to be Chair of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee when the inquiry was carried out, and he was very supportive of the promotion of townland names.

I have a presupposition that postcodes will remain on addresses: Phil, do you anticipate the retention of postcodes on addresses?

Mr Flanagan: I cannot envisage a situation in which we would move to abolish postcodes, which have been in use for such a considerable period. In my view, postcodes greatly help people who deliver products to identify where they are going. People do not have any great desire for postcodes; they do not affect property prices and things like that as they do in Dublin, where the price of a property would be much higher in areas such as D4. I do not see any circumstances in which postcodes would be removed, because that is the easiest system to retain the uniqueness of an individual property, to allow people to pass credit checks and to have products and services delivered from couriers.

With regards to your preamble about townlands and how they are promoted, there has been considerable support from all parties in the Assembly. I read the debate that took place in the Chamber in, I think, 2002, when members of all parties called for the greater promotion of townlands. That was 13 years ago. Apart from Stormont including the townland name Ballymiscaw on all its official correspondence, I do not think that the Departments have done much to promote townlands to the necessary extent, so much so that I still think that townlands are declining in usage since that period.

Thirteen years ago, all parties expressed concern about the declining use of townland names. Before you today is a system that, in some areas at least, might help to prevent that and to restore townlands to their former glory, as it were. This is a sensible proposal that should be explored further.

Mr McElduff: Chair, Phil mentioned 2002, but, in 1998, I left Aghagogan to come to Ballymiscaw, and I was stopped by a gateman who asked me whether I had business here. I told him that the people of Dregish and Tattyreagh had mandated me to come here.

Lord Morrow: No doubt he was thrilled to hear all that.

Mr McElduff: He said, "Go on ahead".

Lord Morrow: You must have got the message over all right.

Mr Flanagan: It might be helpful if you told people what your townland name means.

Mr McElduff: No, I could not do that — not at this juncture.

Mr Middleton: I support the use of townland names. Barry mentioned the former Speaker, the Lord Hay of Ballyore: Ballyore is also my townland. My difficulty in trying to understand the proposal is that, when we change something, we usually change it to make it better, more efficient, simpler, more streamlined or more consistent. To me, this legislation would not do that. While it might not be an obligation on councils or mandatory, I do not see how, to be honest, it would be a positive change.

From my council perspective in Londonderry, about five or six years ago, we undertook the task of erecting 900 new signs throughout the council area, which included the use of townland names. At that time, it cost quite a bit of money: it cost over £100,000, but we undertook that as a council and encouraged people to use townland names. A townland name is on the tip of everybody's tongue, particularly in the rural area where I live: if you are asked where you are from, you use the townland. That is to be encouraged, but the difficulty beyond that is whether anything else is necessary other than encouraging people to do so. I think that it is the responsibility of individual councils to take this forward without it being in legislation.

Sandra touched on concerns about blue-light services. I do not know how this system would improve that.

Mr Flanagan: Thanks for your comments. It is good to hear from the Committee that all parties are unanimously in support of townlands, whether or not you agree that this is the best mechanism to deal

with the issue. You highlighted the fact that it is not a positive change in the sense that it does not increase efficiency or effectiveness, but that is not the purpose of the Bill. Its purpose is to allow councils to promote townlands further. It is about saving townlands as opposed to delivering more efficient or effective services or government.

I do not think that it will have a negative impact on any aspect of a citizen's life. It will not make it more difficult for people to access goods online or to pass credit checks, and I do not agree that it will make it more difficult for blue-light services to find people who are in distress, because the same problem exists at the minute. If you phone an ambulance or the police, you generally need to give them some direction about where they are going if you live on a long road. There are problems in housing estates where four or five roads go off to the left and right, and they are not always individually signed. Those issues for blue-light services exist in all areas, but I do not think that the introduction of this system will make it any more difficult for ambulance drivers or paramedics to find people who are looking for emergency services.

I commend any council that is proactive in increasing the use and awareness of townlands in its district. From listening to what you said, that seems to have been £100,000 well spent in highlighting townlands. That is only one small thing that councils can do. I propose to set something in statute, but it is not mandatory for councils to implement it if they do not want to. It will transfer the power to a council to decide whether it wants to allocate property numbers based on the townlands system as opposed to the roads-based system. We are not forcing councils to do anything. Some members believe that councils should do more voluntarily. If we introduce the Bill and it becomes an Act, all we will be doing is giving councils the ability to take another action voluntarily that would protect and promote townlands. I do not necessarily agree with what you are saying, but I hear you.

Mr Middleton: If the legislation were passed and Enniskillen and Fermanagh adopted the system, what obligation would there be on credit agencies to use it? Some councils will not adopt the system — for example, Causeway Coast and Glens might not adopt it. How do you differentiate between those councils?

Mr Flanagan: Some time ago, LPS and DFP introduced a system called Pointer, which manages all the unique property reference numbers in the North, so every dwelling or non-domestic property has a unique property reference number that is held by LPS. If you type your address into Google or any other search engine plus LPS, you will be able to access records on the LPS website, which gives you not only the valuation of your property but a unique property reference number. There is your number, your road name, your townland, your town, your county, your postcode and your local government district.

All credit agencies and private institutions that want access to customer data, as well as the Electoral Office, use the Pointer system, so they are provided with that information by government using this consistent system. The only change would be that the second and third lines of the address would swap. A credit agency or private institution would not have to make any major change. Once they download what may be an Excel spreadsheet, two of the address lines would have swapped, so there would be no difference from that point of view.

Mr Boylan: This is my first day back.

Mr Flanagan: Welcome back, Cathal.

Mr Boylan: Thank you very much, Phil. I wish you well with the Bill. To be honest, when I left the townland of Caramoyle to come up here this morning, I felt very supportive of the Bill. There have been positive comments, and I think that the only obstacle is probably costs for councils. Have you done any research into assistance for all that and whether there are European directives and programmes that offer opportunities? We are genuinely under threat of losing the townland names. I do not know what Joe Mahon would do on 'Lesser Spotted Ulster'; he might be out of a job because most of his programmes are based on visiting townlands and the great stories that he gets from them. There is a bigger significance to it.

People may argue about whether we need legislation for it, but I think that you are going down the right route in that regard. I think that we are under threat of losing the use of townland names. I know that there are 22 townlands in my area in Derrynoose. Another member mentioned the nice-sounding names earlier, such as Drumnahavil, Crossnenagh, Carrickabolie and all those. A lot of people round

our way would know them, but they are seriously under threat. The next generation may not know them, and I would like to protect all that. I just wanted to ask you about the funding element.

Mr Flanagan: I do not think that you can understate the perilous situation of the townlands. Going around the North, there is not a consistency of approach to the promotion and usage of townlands and very many people do not know what townland they live in. For me, that is a serious problem and it is something that the Assembly needs to address. I am not suggesting for one minute that the Bill will completely solve that problem; it will help only in those council areas that decide to implement it. If your council decides not to adopt the new system when the Bill is enacted, it is not really going to help in your council area. I accept that much more needs to be done from a broader point of view.

I would have some sympathy for Joe Mahon except for the fact that he has now branched out and is doing 'Lesser Spotted Ireland' with UTV Ireland and he has a whole range of new townlands to explore. He has covered the nine counties of Ulster very well, and he now has to try to do the rest of Ireland, so he has enough to keep him busy. I noticed recently that Barra Best seems to have run out of towns to cover on the BBC weather. He is now introducing townlands; he put up Bunnisnagapple, which is a townland between Brookeborough and Cooneen. Everybody had a good laugh about that, because it took up nearly the whole of County Tyrone on the map, it was that long. Everybody was wondering where this fascinating place was; one of the councillors in Fermanagh lives in that townland.

Mr McElduff: In Tyrone, we always knew that Fermanagh had an expansionist agenda.

Mr Flanagan: I would deny that allegation. Did Peter Canavan not come to Fermanagh?

I have not looked into the cost issue at all. When it comes to potential sources of funding, just off the top of my head, surely it would be a perfect project for the Heritage Lottery Fund to promote the use of townlands, which is a shared heritage. If a council wanted to enact this change and did so under the guise of the promotion of townlands, that would be something that the Heritage Lottery Fund could take a considerable interest in. That might be about a system of reintroducing townlands or erecting additional signage. I would direct people to the Heritage Lottery Fund in the first instance for potential sources of funding for any of this type of work, whether it is a council, a residents' association, a community or voluntary group or any other cultural organisation.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mrs Cameron): Thank you very much, Phil. We have had a good talk about the issue of townlands. Thank you for your time this morning.