

Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 21 April 2015
Volume 104, No 2

Contents

Executive Committee Business

Pensions Bill: Further Consideration Stage.....	1
---	---

Committee Business

Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Public Sector	1
--	---

Private Members' Business

Water Rates.....	14
------------------	----

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice.....	22
--------------	----

Regional Development	31
----------------------------	----

Private Members' Business

Water Rates (<i>Continued</i>).....	39
---------------------------------------	----

Adjournment

Causeway Hospital.....	44
------------------------	----

Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

They should be sent to:

The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.

Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

to arrive not later than two weeks after publication of this report.

Assembly Members

Agnew, Steven (North Down)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)
Bradley, Dominic (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Brady, Mickey (Newry and Armagh)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Byrne, Joe (West Tyrone)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)
Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Cochrane, Mrs Judith (East Belfast)
Copeland, Michael (East Belfast)
Craig, Jonathan (Lagan Valley)
Cree, Leslie (North Down)
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dobson, Mrs Jo-Anne (Upper Bann)
Douglas, Sammy (East Belfast)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Eastwood, Colum (Foyle)
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Farry, Stephen (North Down)
Fearon, Ms Megan (Newry and Armagh)
Flanagan, Phil (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Ford, David (South Antrim)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gardiner, Samuel (Upper Bann)
Girvan, Paul (South Antrim)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Hale, Mrs Brenda (Lagan Valley)
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)
Hazzard, Chris (South Down)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hussey, Ross (West Tyrone)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)
Kinahan, Danny (South Antrim)
Lo, Ms Anna (South Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCallister, John (South Down)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)
McCarthy, Kieran (Strangford)
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)
McCorley, Ms Rosaleen (West Belfast)
McCrea, Basil (Lagan Valley)
McCrea, Ian (Mid Ulster)
McDonnell, Alasdair (South Belfast)
McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
McGahan, Ms Bronwyn (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
McGimpsey, Michael (South Belfast)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)
McIlveen, David (North Antrim)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)
McKevitt, Mrs Karen (South Down)
McKinney, Fearghal (South Belfast)
McLaughlin, Ms Maeve (Foyle)
McLaughlin, Mitchel (Speaker)
McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)
McNarry, David (Strangford)
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (West Belfast)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Milne, Ian (Mid Ulster)
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Ó hOisín, Cathal (East Londonderry)
Ó Muilleoir, Máirtín (South Belfast)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Overend, Mrs Sandra (Mid Ulster)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Ramsey, Pat (Foyle)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Robinson, Peter (East Belfast)
Rogers, Seán (South Down)
Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Ruane, Ms Caitríona (South Down)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Spratt, Jimmy (South Belfast)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (North Down)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 21 April 2015

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Pensions Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Simon Hamilton, to move the Bill on behalf of the Minister for Social Development.

Moved. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Pensions Bill today. Members will be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Pensions Bill is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Public Sector

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on its review of sickness absence in the Northern Ireland public sector; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to implement, as

applicable, the recommendations contained therein.

I find myself once again speaking about a report by the Committee for Finance and Personnel that identifies huge potential savings for the public purse at a time when we as a government face significant budgetary pressures and the restructuring of our public sector. The Committee's cross-cutting review of sickness absence in the local public sector has identified potential savings of approximately £37 million a year for the public purse if average sickness absence rates in our Civil Service, health trusts and the education sector are brought into line with those of their equivalents in England, Scotland and Wales.

Before I outline the Committee's key findings and recommendations, let me explain the background to the work. The review arose from a referral by the Public Accounts Committee of the Comptroller and Auditor General's report in 2013 on sickness absence in the local public sector.

The 2013 report provided an initial evidence base on performance against targets for reducing sickness absence in the Civil Service, health trusts and the education sector here, compared with equivalent bodies in Britain. The Finance Committee built upon this through coordinated scrutiny of existing policy implementation to identify good practice and procedures as well as potential areas for improvement. Evidence was received from the Audit Office, DFP and the Institute of Public Health in Ireland, as well as from the other Assembly Statutory Committees in relation to their respective Departments. The Committee also received evidence directly from the health sector, commissioned research on various issues and took account of up-to-date statistical data.

In contextualising the findings, we first have to recognise and accept that people do and will get sick. I also wish to highlight that the Committee's work identified a lot of positives, including the fact that there has been progress

in developing and introducing good practice policies and monitoring systems. Some individual business areas have been very successful in reducing absence rates. The statistics show that a majority of civil servants have no recorded sickness absence throughout the year and also that senior managers now appear to be giving greater priority to compliance monitoring. However, whilst the total cost of sickness absence in these areas of the local public sector amounts to around £150 million per year, it has to be stressed that the potential savings of £37 million per year are on the basis of simply matching the performance of comparable bodies across the water. The figures that were provided by the Audit Office are stark, and the conclusion cannot be ignored. More needs to be done, and the Committee's recommendations will assist in this regard.

On the key statistics, while there seemed to be a downward trend in absence figures in the Civil Service up until 2012, when they levelled out, there has been a consistent failure to meet the overall targets. For example, in 2013-14, the actual average number of days per staff lost due to sickness absence in the Civil Service was 10·1 set against a target of nine.

The sense that emerges from the Committee's investigations is that the key reason for the failure to achieve overall targets is because good practice policies have not been applied robustly and consistently enough within and across all Departments, health trusts and the education sector. However, some hopeful signs appear to be emerging in this regard.

I take the Department of Finance and Personnel as a case in point. While the Department as a whole has been unable to meet targets set for absence levels, we have noted some potential success stories from the Committee's scrutiny of performance at a business area level. For example, the corporate services division indicated that the departmental target may soon be met, thanks to a new partnership approach to absence management between HR partner teams and line managers, and an e-learning training programme. The Committee looks forward to seeing the fruits of this very soon and for lessons learned to be applied across the entire Civil Service should it prove successful.

Similarly, in the health sector, in noting the previous limitations of the monitoring systems, members were encouraged to learn that the new HR payroll, travel and subsistence reporting system was being rolled out in an effort to address the poor monitoring and

reporting of sick absence, as well as a mixed performance by health trusts in meeting targets. The new system, once fully established, will also assist with target setting.

The Committee would also like to see further benchmarking with comparator health bodies in other jurisdictions where possible, taking into account the different job profiles and health-care structures across different organisations. In catching up with other parts of the public sector, the Committee would also like to see health trusts publishing details of their performance against sickness absence targets going forward.

In respect of the education sector and the other Civil Service Departments, I am sure that the various Committee representatives will wish to outline their respective findings during this debate. Suffice it to say at this point that a number of similar issues and themes emerged across the Departments, although it is important to note that different staffing profiles and job roles can impact on general comparisons being made across those different sectors.

I now turn briefly to what is, undoubtedly, the nub issue — the impact of long-term absence, especially due to mental ill health. That has been identified as an area for particular attention, with nearly 30% of working days lost due to sickness absence being attributed to anxiety, stress, depression and other such conditions. While we might expect that some public-sector roles, such as paramedics, firefighters and social security advisers, are more stressful than others, the reasons why mental ill health is such a significant cause of absence needs to be thoroughly researched to identify and tailor solutions at a local level. For its part, the Committee has highlighted preventative measures, early intervention and health and well-being programmes that have rolled out across the public sector and which could assist in driving down absence in that regard.

The Committee has noted how certain health and well-being initiatives, including the WELL programme, Carecall and welfare support, are having an effect. Members also look forward to seeing the results of the sickness absence recording tool, which could accelerate support to those experiencing work-related stress, which surely will be a focus, given the forthcoming voluntary exit scheme and public-sector restructuring. Indeed, the Committee has identified a risk that sickness absence could rise without sufficient support for staff who remain in post after significant numbers

leave through the forthcoming voluntary exit schemes.

In terms of further areas for progress, there is a need for increased focus on preventative and early intervention measures. That includes a roll-out in the consistent application of innovative and proven initiatives such as the mental health first aid programme and cognitive behavioural therapy. Clearly, mental ill health is the area that efforts should be focused on, as previous programmes in that regard do not seem to have had the desired impact on the figures. I, therefore, look forward to hearing the Minister respond on that point, including his comments on any additional or new approaches.

Another preventative area that I am keen to see advanced relates to health and well-being initiatives, such as the Cycle to Work and Calorewise schemes. I firmly believe that those will yield benefits in the longer term, but only if a strategic and joined-up approach is taken.

Similarly, the Committee highlighted evidence on how flexible working can improve work/life balance, generally, and, in particular, on how flexible location working, utilising technology, can assist in enabling the earlier return to work for some people who are on long-term sick leave.

I conclude by pointing out that the Committee has recommended a number of practical actions that need to be taken to restore the downward trend in sickness absence rates in the local public sector. They include the roll-out of pilot health and well-being programmes, which have demonstrated the potential to contribute to reducing absence rates; proactive employee engagement on further measures in that regard; the systematic adoption of early intervention measures; more use of flexible location working; continued focus on compliance with procedures and monitoring performance; the application of lessons from the public and private sectors across all Departments; and the regular evaluation of sickness absence policies and programmes against developing good practice.

I look forward to hearing the contributions of Members and commend the report to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Paul Givan.

Mr Girvan: The sickness absence report very much came on the back of an Audit Office report, which highlighted the matter. Suffice it

to say that there has been a general reduction in the number of days lost since 2006. It has gradually been going down. Unfortunately, it has not quite reached its target. I appreciate that the target set for last year was just 9.7, and it failed to hit that. It reached an average of 10.1 across the Civil Service as a body. I appreciate that there would be £37 million of identified savings if we were to achieve the same figure of 7.6 average days in GB, but I do not see it as just £37 million savings. I see it as a productivity saving as opposed to actual money saving, because I appreciate that the pay will still go on. So, I see it as a productivity saving. We need to work on that to ensure that we get it delivered.

10.45 am

It is good to recognise the good work that has been done and the programmes that have been put in place such as Carecall and the WELL programme. Those ensure that, when people come back to work after having been off, there is an opportunity to address some of the reasons for their being off. One of the worrying things is that 30% of days lost were associated with stress. It did not necessarily come out in the report whether that was work-related stress or whether other issues caused the stress, but suffice to say that 30% of absences were associated with stress or anxiety. We need to address that.

Some areas and Departments performed better than others. Some areas need to be focused on, and certain Departments should take this on board, the Department of Health being one. We hear all sorts of stories as to why there is such a high sickness level in that Department. The Department of Education also has high levels of sickness. We need to ensure that we try to address some of the reasons why individuals are telling us that they are off. Long-term sickness is another area. I have to recognise those members of the Civil Service who do not take any sick days. That is a large and growing percentage, which is good to see. In 2012-13, 55% took no sick days whatsoever. That has to be recognised, and those people need to be congratulated. Measures need to be looked at.

As a whole, the report is helpful. I had concerns about areas of the report, flexible working being one. I had a slightly different view on flexible working than some individuals. I believe that hanging your coat over the back of a chair while you are somewhere else could indicate that work is still going on even though the individual is missing in action: "inaction" might be the word. That needs to be looked at

to ensure that we have measures in place so that people can work flexibly, but supervision is also needed to ensure that the work is being done. It is about getting the balance correct. As a whole, it is a good report. I welcome the downward trend in sickness days. If all the measures and recommendations that should be implemented by DFP are put in place, that would help to reduce the number of days lost to the Civil Service. I support the motion.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I will speak primarily as Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. At the outset, I apologise as I will not be able to stay for the whole debate and also because I will bombard Members with statistics.

I will begin with a review of the years 2010-11 to 2013-14. On the upside, sickness absence rates in OFMDFM have been consistently below the average for the wider Northern Ireland Civil Service. Against the individual target for the Department, the performance has, however, been somewhat more mixed. In 2010-11, the Department greatly exceeded its target, which was 8.2 days lost per staff member; the actual absence rate was 5.4 days. The following year, however, the rate was 8.7 days against a target of 8.0 days. In 2012-13, the target of 7.8 days was met, and, indeed, OFMDFM was one of only two Departments to meet their target that year. That was followed by an increase in 2013-14: the target was 7.7 days, and the actual figure was 8.9 days lost.

In noting the increase in sickness absence for 2013-14, the Committee wrote to the Department for comment. The response was that both long-term absence — 20 days or more — and short-term absence had increased in 2013-14. It pointed out, however, that over 60% of staff in OFMDFM had no sickness absence for that year. That compares to 55% across the rest of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

The largest proportion of working days lost in the Department was due to anxiety, stress, depression and other psychiatric disorders. That accounted for 16.8% of absences. The Department noted that this is significantly lower than the rest of the Northern Ireland Civil Service where the category accounts for 31.3% of working days lost.

As well as managing cases proactively in consultation with the Occupational Health Service, the Department is focused on mental health in its workplace health programme over

the last year. With respect to long-term absence, pregnancy-related disorders account for 21% of working days lost. That compares to 7.3% for the Civil Service as a whole.

The sickness absence rates in OFMDFM over the last number of years have been such that it has not been necessary for my Committee to undertake a detailed examination. That said, the Committee for Finance and Personnel's report notes that sickness absences cost the Civil Service £30 million a year, with costs to the wider public sector of £150 million a year. The Committee estimates potential savings to the public sector of £37 million a year. Given the financial pressures facing the Executive, it will be important that Departments do as much as they can to reduce the cost of sickness absence. Therefore, I will be asking the OFMDFM Committee to closely monitor the Department's performance in sickness absence levels.

If I may, I will say a few words in a more personal capacity. I was struck by the Chair of the Committee mentioning mental health and well-being. Of all those statistics, the 16.8% and 31.3% relating to stress, anxiety and depression are key. I am glad that we got a paragraph about mental health in the Stormont House Agreement, but that is specific to a medical solution. I think that capacity building and resilience is key not just for the Civil Service but for our people so that they have a feeling of empowerment when things are starting to go wrong, and they know that there are routes to be followed to put that right. I also notice what Mr Girvan said about productivity — by the way, your impression of Mr Givan is really not good enough.

Deloitte, in its 'State of the State 2014-15' report, recently highlighted that a 1% increase in productivity in the public sector would be worth £64 million to the public purse just here in Northern Ireland. The amount of savings that we can bring forward to the public purse from simply a 1% increase in productivity across the public sector is an absolutely key point for us to focus on.

I will finish by saying that you can read more about that in Deloitte's 'State of the State 2014-15' report or, indeed, in the Ulster Unionist Party Westminster 2015 manifesto. I commend it and the report to the House.

Mr Speaker: We will take your response to the debate as being the priority contribution.

Mr Weir: I will try and be a little less partisan than the previous Member was in his closing

comments. As highlighted by all Members so far, there is a wealth of statistics in this, which shows the significance of the problem. It has been highlighted and already mentioned by others that, in the Civil Service as a whole, you are talking about £30 million of a direct cost. There are very significant indications, particularly in health and education, of £73 million in health and £46 million in education. As regards those two specific areas, it is not surprising that the figures are high, given the size of those sections of the public sector, but the depth of them should concern us.

Very specifically as regards health and education, there are a number of recommendations in the report. I think that it is important to draw the attention of the Health Department and the Education Department — and the respective Committees — to those aspects of the report because this is not something for DFP or even the Executive as a whole; it burrows into a number of Departments. Beyond the sheer statistics, mention has been made of the direct potential savings if we simply move to a situation in which we are brought into line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

As I think has been mentioned by a number of Members, there are intangible benefits to reducing the level of sickness and, indeed, intangible problems are created. It is not simply the cost and the lack of productivity. The danger with high levels of sickness absence is that it becomes a vicious circle. Indeed, it places an additional strain on those workers who are left to cover the work of absent colleagues in whatever Department or section, and that, in turn, can lead to sickness absences from them.

Mr Nesbitt and others were correct to focus on mental health, as, for many years, it has been the Cinderella service. We have all seen that, and not just through sickness absences. Any of us who are involved in tribunals can see the doctor's report of someone who has massive difficulty with movement in their back or can see someone sitting with a broken leg covered in plaster, and that is all very visible. However, mental health is a lot more intangible and the symptoms are a lot less obvious, but they are altogether very real.

It is important to acknowledge that, while there is a problem, the report highlights the good work that has been done on this, particularly by the Minister and his predecessor. We have seen the intervention in the creation of the WELL programme, which, while still in its infancy, has led to 170 trained champions

throughout the Civil Service. We have seen other interventions, particularly through face-to-face contacts, interviews and wider events such as No Smoking Day, which can all have an impact on health. As a result, we have seen a decline in sickness absence. That has helped to focus on short-term illness. However, that may have a long-term impact because there is a danger that, if you create a culture where there are short-term absences, it can lead to that.

There is no doubt that the thrust of the report looks at long-term illnesses, and that has a major impact on the Civil Service and on the public service as a whole. A wise person learns from their mistakes; an even wiser person learns from someone else's mistakes. The report highlighted the studies done by the City of London Corporation and HMRC, which has been able to reduce its sickness absence considerably. At times, some of us may not necessarily see a reduction in sickness absences in HMRC as the best thing. Nevertheless, it has been very successful in reducing absences, and there are clear lessons to be learned.

Good work has been done in DFP, and the report highlights the need to ensure that what is happening in DFP, and some of the pilot programmes that have begun there, is rolled out across the Civil Service. It is important to have a joined-up approach. The Chair of the OFMDFM Committee indicated that they had been successful in OFMDFM. Success has been somewhat patchy across Departments, and it is important to get joined-up thinking and success.

The report contains recommendations that need to be adopted and carefully studied. For all our sakes, particularly as we move into an era in which the size of the public sector is likely to be smaller — the number of staff is likely to be smaller — that will become a necessity rather than an advantage.

Ms Boyle (The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Speaking today as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, I welcome this coordinated report by the Committee for Finance and Personnel on sickness absence in the public sector here. The review arose from a referral by the PAC of the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on sickness absence in the public sector. PAC reported on sickness absence in the previous mandates, and it welcomes the Committee for Finance and Personnel's report, which provides a renewed

and timely focus on such an important issue in the public sector.

The health and well-being of the NI Civil Service workforce is crucial to the effective delivery of our public services, and staff sickness absence considerably reduces Departments' productivity, affects services right across and carries a significant financial cost. Therefore, it is important that Departments and the wider public sector protect the health of our workforce and manage sickness absence effectively.

11.00 am

Some degree of absence is inevitable, and that is accepted when employees are sick and should not come to work. Effective management can, however, help to minimise absence by ensuring that any causes of work-related ill health are addressed and staff helped back to work as soon as possible.

I welcome the fact that, overall, the report shows a declining trend. However, I am concerned that we are still not meeting our targets. The Audit Office estimates that sickness absence costs the public purse £150 million a year across the Civil Service, health trusts and the education sector at a time of ever-increasing pressure on essential public services. It is unacceptable that the cost of sick absence was £73 million to our health trusts, £46 million to the education sector and £30 million to the Civil Service.

While targets have been set in all three sectors, it is disappointing that achievement of them has not been consistent. The Civil Service, for example, had a five-year target to reduce overall absence to 9.5 days a year but did not manage to achieve that. Three of the six trusts did not manage to achieve their targets during the period, and the education authorities did not manage to achieve their targets for teacher absence in 2010-11 and 2011-12.

In 2010, the Public Accounts Committee published a follow-up report on the management of substitution cover for teachers, in which it recommended measures relating to sick absence among teachers. Clearly, more work needs to be done to address sick absence, which cost £12 million in teacher substitute cover in 2011-12.

I welcome the Committee's finding that good practice policies exist in the Civil Service. However, they need to be applied more rigorously and consistently within and across Departments. Long-term sickness absence

remains a significant issue and accounts for 70% of days lost in the Civil Service, 66% in health and social care trusts and 60% among teachers. In view of the impact of long-term sickness, I support the Committee's call for the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the wider Executive to place a higher priority on reducing long-term sickness absence rates in the NI Civil Service, especially through measures to address mental health issues, which are a significant cause of long-term sick absence in the public sector.

The Committee for Education undertook separate scrutiny of sickness absence in the Department of Education and wider education sector. Today's report echoes support for measures recommended in the Education Committee's report. I strongly urge that the measures recommended in all those reports are taken forward so that realistic targets can be set that will drive forward improvement in reducing sickness absence across the education sector.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Ms Boyle: Savings of £37 million a year could be realised if average sick absence rates in the NI Civil Service, health trusts and education sector were brought into line with those in Britain.

Mr Cree: The Committee for Finance and Personnel agreed in February last year to undertake a review of sickness absence in the Northern Ireland public sector. This followed a report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office that showed a clear downward trend in sickness absence until 2012-13.

From the beginning, it was apparent that the Committee was looking at long-term sickness absence as a major concern. The Northern Ireland Civil Service failed to meet its long-term sickness absence target for 2011-12. The Audit Office report cautioned that the lack of progress in reducing the long-term absence rate posed a great risk to achieving the Programme for Government target of 8.5 days for 2014-15.

The Committee also noted that the most recent NISRA report stated that, while the 2013-14 figure of 10.1 average days lost per staff year was down from 10.6 in the previous year, it was short of the annual target of nine days. In 2012-13, the average for all Departments was 10.6 days against the target of 9.5 days. In 2013-14, the Department's average was 10.1 days against the target of nine days. It was, however, good to note that there is a growing percentage of staff in the Northern Ireland Civil

Service who took no sick leave during the entire year: 55.3% in 2013-14, up from 52.3% in 2012-13. The Department of Finance and Personnel's own performance against targets for sickness absence was not met in 2013-14. The actual figure was 9.4 days against a target of 8.1 days. A concern for the Committee is that DFP and other Departments will have lower targets for future years, despite the fact that targets for previous years were not met.

On a happier note, which the Chair referred to, DFP officials from its corporate services division briefed the Finance and Personnel Committee on the Department's performance against business plan targets. This will help to support DFP business areas to achieve the Department's overall sickness absence target of an average of 7.6 days lost per staff year. A partnership approach to absence management will be used. HR business partner teams will monitor alongside managers, supporting them in taking on a larger role. This is important in the early stages of sickness absence, and the concerted effort should help to get people back to work more quickly. Compliance levels for sickness absence procedures have increased as a result of this action, and it is hoped that DFP will share its success with other Departments in an effort to replicate this success.

The Committee found that there were good practice policies in place for addressing sickness absence, and welcomed the introduction of health and well-being initiatives, such as the WELL programme, across Departments, and the trialling of new approaches as part of the sickness absence recovery strategy. The Finance Committee remains concerned that the sickness levels in the Northern Ireland Civil Service continue to be higher than in the Great Britain Civil Service. This fact gives great concern, especially when one considers that the voluntary exit scheme will have an effect on the overall figures. There is a record of failure to achieve targets here, and it is my opinion that more effort is required to improve the situation.

With respect to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the health trusts, the Committee recommends that sickness absence targets be set to cover all trusts, including the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, which sets its own targets. The Finance and Personnel Committee also noted the Committee for Education's separate scrutiny of sickness absence in the Department of Education and supported the various measures recommended. There are potential savings of approximately £37 million a year to

be made to the public purse if the local public-sector sickness absences are brought into line with those of their equivalents in Great Britain. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I am pleased to support the Committee's recommendations and the motion before us today.

Mrs Cochrane: As a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee, I rise to comment on our report into sickness absence in the Northern Ireland public sector. I apologise for being late to the debate. It is perhaps somewhat ironic that my reason for being late was due to me trying to juggle the responsibilities as an employer dealing with somebody who is on long-term sick absence, which is impacting massively on a number of other things.

From what I have heard, the main points have been covered by other Members, and I concur with most of what has been said. At the outset, it is worth noting that absence due to ill health has huge adverse effects on individuals, businesses, the public sector and, consequently, the economy as a whole. It is an area of policy where the UK is falling behind other countries, and, indeed, the Northern Ireland public sector is performing particularly poorly. Although this report was specifically looking at the absence levels in the public sector, it is widely acknowledged that the percentage of hours lost to sickness in the public sector has continuously been higher than that of the private sector. Therefore, the Committee considered what the absence patterns were like in the private sector and whether any lessons could be learned or best practice shared across both sectors.

There are, however, a number of factors to consider when interpreting the differences between the public and private sectors such as the fact that there are differences in the types of jobs between the two sectors and that some job profiles or work patterns have higher likelihoods of sickness than others.

Another issue to consider is that, on average, women have more sickness absence than men. The public sector employs a higher proportion of female workers and, therefore, figures could be slightly skewed. Individuals in the private sector are more likely not to be paid for a spell of sickness than those in the public sector. That may mean that private sector workers are more likely to go to work when they are sick. Absence levels also tend to increase with an organisation's size, regardless of sector. Most of our public-sector organisations dwarf our business sector in Northern Ireland, so that

could be one of the reasons why there are such big differences.

We should not be disheartened. Our report recognises that the Civil Service has good policies in place to address absence and that new health and well-being initiatives are being rolled out. That may be the reason why over 55% of employees have no sick absence at all, and that good news should be celebrated. It is the other 45% that needs to be addressed to reduce the burden of the £30 million cost associated with sick absence.

The report recognised an increase in stress and mental health problems among employees. We need to ask why that is the case. Is it the result of more work pressure, which could be exacerbated with continued public-sector reform? Is it simply that nowadays staff are struggling to cope with their caring responsibilities outside work? Most families now need two incomes, which results in much more pressure on juggling priorities at home. We therefore need to look more at what workplace flexibility is offered to see whether it can help to reduce absence.

The report highlights the importance of the effective use of the return-to-work interview process. Making adjustments early on really helps to iron out some issues and can prevent the long-term absences that we often see. The report also referred to early interventions, such as referral to physiotherapists or cognitive behavioural therapy. These are recommended as a way to reduce the likelihood of small absences becoming larger.

We have an ageing population, which means that people are working longer, but it also means that there is likely to be a greater prevalence of chronic illness, which is likely to affect those in work and those with caring responsibilities. We need to continue to come up with innovative ways to address the changing needs of the workforce. It is normal for the work environment to change as people's careers progress, and that may entail physical changes to the work environment as well as changes to the terms and conditions of employment. Introducing more flexible working, where we can, can be key to supporting employees' health and well-being as they get older. Other important measures include skills analyses, job design and coaching and mentoring to make sure that people are in the right job, which is also essential for good mental health.

In conclusion, workplace absenteeism is costly and, if not addressed, it will restrain our public

sector from delivering services to their full potential. Reducing sickness absence is a must, and the report highlights a number of effective strategies that are worth pursuing. I commend the report to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for Finance — Sorry, there is one more. John McCallister has joined the queue.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thought that you were introducing me as the Minister. I will not detain the Minister for too long; I just have a couple of points to make.

The Minister is usually keen to stress how difficult a financial period we face, and there is a huge financial gain for the public service in putting in place a better process and making sure that we are doing all we can. As colleagues have mentioned, it will take a partnership approach to drill down, look at best practice and see what needs to change. Also, as Mrs Cochrane mentioned, we have to look at early interventions where possible, whether it is physiotherapy or access to the types of services that return people to full health more quickly and get them back to work, or partially back to work. All those factors need to be taken into account.

11.15 am

One huge issue is the number of females in the public sector, who often must balance work with family life and caring responsibilities, whether for children or an older family member or parent. That can all have a huge impact on how we manage, and we need more flexibility at times in the workplace, as I know from my family experience. We have just finished six weeks of chickenpox with three children and having to find a place for them, since they could not go to their childminder during that period. You either rely on grandparents to help out or else one of the parents has to take a day off. That flexibility needs to be built in because it can be very difficult for any of us to manage, and those in the public sector are no different.

All these factors are very relevant, but we must continue to drive the figure down, reminding ourselves that, if we were at the same level as the rest of the country, £30 million to £37 million — a huge sum of money — could be reinvested and redirected into other services, so there is a huge gain to be got. We also have to remember and look at the issues of stress and mental health. Quite rightly, mental health is the biggest disability we have, and we have to look at the workplace practices that lead to

stress and mental health issues, because, as a general rule, work is good for people's mental and physical health. It is a positive thing, and those are some of the factors that we need to look at, Mr Speaker. On that, thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much. I am glad that I remembered to call you.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and respond to the Committee's report. I do so because sickness absence is a serious issue; during my entire time in the Assembly and my extensive membership of the Committee for Finance and Personnel down through those years, the issue has always been at the forefront of the Committee's agenda. Michaela Boyle asked that the Executive take this seriously. Looking around the Assembly Chamber, it is probably something that our Whips should take seriously as well, as it would appear that there is high degree of sickness absence in this place — perhaps some sort of lurgy or other affliction has hit Members of this House.

It is a serious issue; it is taken seriously by the Executive, and that is reflected in the Programme for Government, which sets a target for reducing sickness absence. The target is a challenging one, and we have not been successful in reaching it every year, but I welcome the fact that there has been a general downward trend in sickness absence in the Civil Service. It is important at the outset to note, as many contributors did, that, although sickness absence is a problem, over 55% of civil servants in the most recent year, as Mr Girvan reminded us, took no sickness absence. That is not just one year: it is habitually the case that over half, or a majority, take no sickness absence at all.

There were a lot of contributions throughout the debate, and, as you would expect, I am always very interested to hear suggestions about saving money. The figure of £37 million, which relates to the savings in the entire public sector if we were to take sickness absence down to the UK level, has been put out there by the Committee in its report. Whilst that would not realise £37 million in additional cash, it would be in additional productivity. Irrespective of whether it is cash or better productivity, it is still a saving that we should pursue, and, indeed, are pursuing. Additional productivity was a point laboured by Mr Nesbitt, who is no longer here. He encouraged us to look at the Deloitte 'The State of the State 2014-15' report, which, as he indicated, I think, informed part of his manifesto. I put it on the record that I

contributed to the Deloitte 'The State of the State' report. That is perhaps why it was worthy of being included in his party's manifesto for the upcoming election. That is no doubt a very accurate explanation of why that is the case.

DFP is responsible for the Northern Ireland Civil Service sickness absence policy and procedures. In the time that is available to me, I will deal with the recommendations that relate to Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments only. I will leave comments on the health and education sectors to their respective Ministers, and I encourage members of the relevant Committees to pursue recommendations directly with those Ministers. Although the Civil Service is substantial in size, with roughly 28,000 staff, the health and education sectors account for considerably more staff, with some 65,000 in health and 50,000 in education. Action to tackle sickness absence levels has to be taken right across the public sector if we are to maximise savings from managing sickness absence.

I welcome the recommendations contained in the report. I acknowledge that sickness absence is a topic that requires constant attention and that there is always more work to be done. However, I am pleased to inform Members that much of what has been recommended in the report for the Northern Ireland Civil Service is either in place, under development or being considered for introduction.

Mental health and well-being features heavily in the report. That is not a surprise. That type of illness, and its long-term nature, has had a significant impact on overall sickness absence levels in the Northern Ireland Civil Service for a number of years, accounting for around a third of all sickness absence. That is not particular to the Northern Ireland Civil Service; rather, it has been a general trend across the public and private sectors in recent years. Many observers suggest that that trend will continue as issues such as job insecurity, financial pressures and general life difficulties become increasingly apparent. A point that many Members who spoke made was that it is not clear whether that means work-related stress or, indeed, stress that is related to other aspects of people's lives.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service is going through a major period of change, which many Members mentioned, with the introduction of the voluntary exit scheme and the reduction in the number of Departments. It is therefore vital that we have the appropriate support available to staff and managers to mitigate any potential

impact that health and well-being issues will have, not only on individuals involved, managers and colleagues but on the business and the service that we provide. Preventing sickness absence rather than reacting to it is key. I am therefore pleased to inform colleagues that that approach is being adopted by Civil Service Departments.

The 2014 well-being survey includes stress as a major part of its analysis. To maximise its benefits, the survey is being managed by a cross-departmental working group, which includes the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland. The working group is coordinating and managing the survey and the response on behalf of Departments. Departments have been asked to consider the impact of the voluntary exit scheme and the reduction in the number of Departments when considering their individual action plans.

The sickness absence recording tool, which is mentioned in the report, is a standardised list of reasons used by the Northern Ireland Civil Service to record sickness absence. It provides for more detailed reporting on types of sickness absence as a result of stress-related illness, including work-related stress. In many stress-related cases, an immediate referral to the Occupational Health Service is a routine intervention, while welfare and other support mechanisms are also organised. The availability of that information has helped Departments to formulate an organisational response that is specific to their particular needs. It allows for more targeted interventions for specific business or hotspot areas that are experiencing particular issues. Again, targeted responses were a recommendation in the Committee's report.

I am happy to advise Members that mental health first-aid training, which provides participants with the knowledge and confidence to recognise mental health problems, to respond helpfully and to support the person's recovery is now being offered to all Northern Ireland Civil Service staff. I am also happy to report that the WELL programme, which received a positive commentary in the Committee's report, has been extended for a further three years. The WELL programme was mentioned and praised not just in the report but by several Members in their contributions to the debate. It is worth acknowledging the success of that innovative scheme, which, as I said, has been rolled out across the Civil Service and has been extended for a further three years. Since its introduction, we have seen a 2% increase in employee engagement; a 2% improvement in health and well-being; a 2.3% decrease in staff

absence due to mental health problems; and better attendance at work in 2013 compared with the 2010-11 figure, which saved us roughly £1.6 million. It is an innovative programme that I am very proud of, and I welcome the Committee's praise for the WELL programme.

The "Beating the Blues" online cognitive behaviour therapy programme for those suffering from depression and anxiety, also supported in the report, was introduced into Occupational Health Service practice in April 2011. It has been widely acknowledged that people on long-term sickness are at a high risk of developing depression. In addition, depression is in itself a significant primary cause of long-term sickness absence. Depression is regarded, therefore, as a major predictor of non-return to work and, the longer the spell of absence, the less likely a return to work. Suitable clients are offered access to the programme as part of their OHS assessment, with the option of activating the programme through OHS or their GP practice. Since its introduction, 99 sessions have been accessed by staff. The programme is also actively promoted through WELL and the rehabilitation programme provided by the Northern Ireland Civil Service welfare service.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service is committed to improving staff engagement. One of the reasons for this is that there is strong evidence to suggest that there is a correlation between increased staff engagement and reduced absenteeism. I am happy to advise Members that a staff engagement charter was launched on 4 March 2015. The launch of this charter clearly demonstrates a commitment from senior staff in the Civil Service to the principle of having an engaged workforce. The charter sets out the importance of clear and visible leadership, engaging with managers, listening to staff, measuring levels of engagement, and what is expected of our staff. Departments will use the charter as a springboard to consider how best to improve staff engagement at all levels.

The effective management of sickness absence remains a priority for all Departments. I am confident that all Departments are working hard to reduce sickness absence and to ensure that the policies and procedures that are in place to manage sickness absence are being applied consistently. To ensure that this is the case, a series of compliance measures have been introduced in relation to the prompt recording of absence, return-to-work interviews and the provision of appropriate certification. These additional measures will be reviewed by each departmental board, alongside their existing

absence analysis, to provide the necessary reassurance, governance and authority to ensure that any actions required are being taken forward in Departments. HR Connect is supporting this strategy by providing specially commissioned reports to monitor the achievement of these targets. Another initiative being explored is how the most advanced HR Connect reporting tool, Oracle Business Intelligence, could be exploited to deliver comparable management information directly to line managers across the service.

Supporting managers to manage sickness absence is, of course, of the utmost importance. I am aware that the Northern Ireland Civil Service managing attendance training provisions have been reviewed and that a revised package of training measures has been agreed. All staff will have health and well-being and compliance with Northern Ireland Civil Service policy and procedures incorporated into their annual personal objectives. In addition, all departmental business plans will include, as a priority, the provision of the appropriate staff support measures.

My officials are currently considering two NISRA reports on female absence rates and sickness absence rates in the 55-plus category. High levels of female absence rates have been an area of particular concern. Civil Service female absence levels are over 30% more than Northern Ireland Civil Service male absence levels and almost twice that of females in the GB Civil Service. Reducing the levels of female absence to those of male staff would have a significant impact on overall Civil Service sickness absence levels.

The rationale behind commissioning the report on staff who are over 55 was that, with a recruitment embargo, low levels of staff turnover because of the wider labour market position, the removal of any policy on age retirement in order to comply with age discrimination legislation and the probability that changes to public sector pension schemes will require staff to work much longer before they can draw an occupational pension, the Northern Ireland Civil Service workforce is likely to become an ageing one. It is not envisaged that the voluntary exit scheme will make a significant impact on this overall trend. As this ageing profile is likely to have an adverse impact on sickness absence levels in the future, it is important now to consider what interventions might be possible.

In the past, the Committee produced a report on flexible work practices; that is also

mentioned in the report. I am glad that the recent report acknowledged the work of DFP as an exemplar organisation in relation to flexible working. There are many benefits, which include improved staff morale and commitment, reduced staff turnover and absenteeism and an improved work/life balance. In recognition of those benefits, the Northern Ireland Civil Service has already implemented a number of alternative working patterns under the umbrella of flexible working, including flexible hours or flexitime; compressed hours and personalised hours; part-time working, including job sharing; partial retirement; and term-time working.

11.30 am

The majority of Civil Service employees can avail themselves of at least one of those schemes, and there is no doubt that they have a positive impact on the work/life balance of staff. For example, the results of last year's Civil Service staff survey showed that over 60% of staff agreed that they achieve a good balance between their work life and their private life. That is something that can only have a positive impact on staff absence levels.

I assure Members that we will continue to benchmark with other organisations to ensure that the best possible practice is being applied in the Civil Service and that, where appropriate, we will engage with external providers to ensure that we tap into all available support.

Overall, therefore, I can assure colleagues that sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service is receiving constant attention. Positive initiatives, such as the extension of the WELL programme, welfare support services and the launch of a staff engagement charter, will be important in reducing Northern Ireland Civil Service sickness absence levels. Managers and staff are supported through dedicated training courses, online e-learning and the provision of sophisticated sickness absence data analysis. Departments are vigilant in monitoring sickness absence trends and compliance targets and in adapting their approach in response to that data. Targeted interventions are being deployed with the analysis of female and over-55 sickness absence in addition to the development of well-being and stress action plans. A wide range of flexible working policies are in place to support work/life balance.

It is clear that there is no one silver bullet to resolve sickness absence issues in any organisation, not least one of the size and complexity of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. However, I am confident that we have a wide

range of initiatives in progress that, with continued perseverance, training, support and enforcement when required, will result in a reduction in the Northern Ireland Civil Service sickness absence and the associated cost to the public purse.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This has been a very useful debate on the Committee's report. I thank Members and the Minister for their contributions. As I indicated at the outset of the debate, the reality of life is that people do get sick and can need to take time off work at some stage in their working career.

John McCallister made a couple of important points. One thing that he said was that work is good for people's health. I think the vast majority of people do enjoy their work and get a lot from it. At some stage in employees' careers they come across situations that put them off work. Sometimes a lot of the problems are down to management, how those issues are handled and whether the issue becomes protracted and considerably worse over time. We have to learn how to nip those issues in the bud for the sake of the employees and also to get value for money, as the Minister said, from employees, because employees want to be productive. They want to get their work/life balance correct, and all that they want is assistance in doing that.

Of course, I welcome the introduction of mental health first aid and the availability of that for staff, because I think it is an issue. Perhaps staff do want to help their employees and help those that they have line-management responsibility for, but it is about ensuring that they know what to do and how to spot certain signs, especially in regard to employees' mental health.

The Committee's report has outlined how that reality can be dealt with to minimise, manage and reduce absence levels. There is undoubtedly scope for improvement through the public sector that could result, as we said, in savings of approximately £37 million a year to the public purse. Of course, Mr Nesbitt pointed out that a 1% increase in productivity could lead to savings of £64 million.

The figures, as referred to during the debate, show that the average level of sickness absence in the public sector here compares quite unfavourably to that in England, Scotland and Wales. While the figures may vary according to the different parts of the public sector, a rough indicator is that the level of sickness absence in the Civil Service in Britain

is about 7.5 average working days lost per staff year, compared with slightly over 10 days in the Civil Service here.

We have heard that the health and wider education sectors need to improve the monitoring and reporting of sickness absence and to set and adhere to challenging and realistic targets. In the health sector, the focus continues to be on long-term absence, particularly related to mental health and musculoskeletal problems. Members are pleased, therefore, to see specific programmes targeting these issues, such as rapid referral to physiotherapy services in the case of the latter.

It has been emphasised that such early intervention schemes need to be replicated across not only the health sector but the entire public sector. In the education sector, stress-related absence in the teaching profession needs to be addressed. This includes, amongst other things, evaluating the health and well-being programmes and training in this area in an effort to increase early intervention and decrease the human and financial cost of teacher absence and, of course, the cost to children.

In relation to the performance of the Civil Service, it is clear that there are a number of well-established procedures and programmes in place to assist staff and that absence is taken seriously. However, as noted earlier, the forthcoming public sector reforms — in particular, the loss of a large number of staff under the voluntary exit scheme — could have an impact on the staff who remain in post. As changes take effect and workloads increase, so, too, may the need for support services such as Carecall and the welfare support service.

Reference has been made to the difference between sick absence rates in the public sector and the private sector. The Committee commissioned research into this issue. From the research findings, members noted that comparisons between the public and private sectors can prove difficult. Levels of absence may appear lower in the private sector, but we need to be very careful about making straight comparisons due to a lack of data on absence levels in that sector. The private sector also covers different types of jobs, and there are differences in the gender breakdown of its workforce, a point that was also raised by Members today.

While the Committee was encouraged to note that the research suggests that more robust reporting mechanisms for sick absence exist in the public sector, I urge caution in making

straight comparisons due to the differences outlined. Similarly, direct comparisons between sick absence levels in different Departments and areas of the public sector can be problematic due to the different job profiles and working patterns of their staff. The Committee has, therefore, based its analysis on comparing performance of public sector bodies here with their equivalents in Britain.

The Committee is convinced of the value of benchmarking and learning from the successes of other comparable organisations in other places. This is highlighted by the example of HMRC, which is referenced in the Committee's report. It successfully reduced its absence rate from 10.5 days in 2010 to 7.51 days in 2013 by introducing a robust assurance programme. This raises the prospect of what the Civil Service here could achieve from a more concerted effort to apply consistently the procedures and policies that are already in place: in other words, better compliance with performance management and absence management policies.

Given the persistent themes around long-term absence and mental health issues, it is clear that resources must be focused on addressing the underlying causes and implications, taking the health and well-being of staff to the very heart of organisations whilst being clear that each Department will have different circumstances with regard to the reasons for absence and related needs. Members have rightly highlighted the fact that long-term absence needs a particular focus. As the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, Michaela Boyle, highlighted, 70% of days lost are due to long-term absence. As has been said, that needs to be a priority for Departments and the Executive.

Publication of the sickness absence recovery strategy, the roll-out of the mental health first-aid training programme, cognitive behavioural therapy, tailored and targeted training, and adequate policies that are supported by management to deal with bullying and harassment have all been identified as important measures in going forward. It has also been pointed out that there could be value in researching the reasons why mental health-related issues continue to be such a significant causation factor behind absence rates in the local public sector.

Also, as indicated by a number of Members, there must be effective monitoring and reporting systems in place consistently across all Departments. Awareness needs to be raised of how a simple measure, such as a return-to-

work interview, can be used to encourage individuals returning to work to be open and candid about any problems which may affect their attendance or ability in work. The evidence shows that, at the heart of these measures and at all stages, the importance of staff engagement should not be underestimated.

We heard from Peter Weir, Leslie Cree and others how the WELL programme, cycle to work schemes, the Caloriewise scheme and adoption of early intervention policies are all ways in which the Civil Service can be more proactive. The value of giving employees the option to work flexibly, particularly in terms of work location, has been proven to reduce sick absence and encourage people to return to work more quickly. It has been emphasised that this option should be progressed in a strategic and coordinated manner. It is fair to say that, in the Committee, Mr Girvan was a wee bit sceptical about flexible location working, but I have to agree with the Member that mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that work is done and that Members and employers in the public sector can have confidence that flexible location working can work.

In conclusion, I emphasise that we are talking about a significant amount of money. There is a potential saving of £37 million per year to the public purse through simply matching the comparable public sector sickness absence levels in Britain. That is a staggering figure, particularly given the financial squeeze on the public sector and public purse. The Committee's recommendations could have a significant impact on achieving those savings and we expect the Department to study the report very carefully. The Committee looks forward to receiving a formal response to the report after the Department has reflected further on the evidence and the recommendations therein. I therefore commend the report to the House and ask for support for the Committee's motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on its review of sickness absence in the Northern Ireland public sector; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to implement, as applicable, the recommendations contained therein.

Private Members' Business

Water Rates

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose it and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Clarke: I beg to move

That this Assembly reaffirms its rejection of the imposition of water rates on the people of Northern Ireland; recognises that, were they to be introduced, households would face an additional cost of at least £400 per year; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to prioritise within his budget to ensure sufficient investment is in place to maintain properly the local water infrastructure.

From the outset, I make it clear that I speak as a member of the DUP and not as the Committee Chairman. I thank Members for their attendance.

Obviously, the motion is primarily about the introduction or, as I hope, the non-introduction of water charges. It is to be welcomed that, until now, the Executive have supported the non-introduction of water charges. I also want to make it clear that I welcome the amendment proposed by the Ulster Unionist Party and will be supporting it, albeit I may make some remarks about it.

We are in election season. There are ones out there at the moment who, for their own purposes, are making suggestions as to what they believe should happen in relation to this. It is no secret that the Alliance Party has always strongly advocated the introduction of water charges. That is something which, I am thankful, all the other parties in the Executive have avoided for some time and hopefully will do so for the foreseeable future.

If there were a situation where money was plentiful and the pockets of people in Northern Ireland were full, you could ask people to pay more. Unfortunately, we are not in that situation in Northern Ireland and I do not see us

being in such a situation for the foreseeable future. It is now on record what such a charge would be. We are all familiar with the fact that the charge would be, on average, just over £400 per household. The average rates bill per household is approximately £800. As a public representative, I am glad — and I keep saying that I am glad — that other Executive Ministers have supported the non-introduction of water charges. I am certainly glad that that has been the commitment because, for many, it is a struggle to find what they have to pay without an additional burden being put on them. The other thing that bothers me is that many depend on rate rebates and suchlike, which someone else picks up. Ultimately, someone has to pay that cost, whether the individual has the money or not.

11.45 am

I think that the Alliance Party has been on record these last few days as trying to distance itself from some of its comments. The reality is that a portion of the £800 goes towards NI Water (NIW) through the DRD, but it is a very small portion; it falls short of £400. I think that the officials were on record last week or the week before, when they came to the Committee, as saying how much that charge would be. To put a burden of an additional £400 would, I think, be irresponsible of the Alliance Party. I look forward to hearing what its Members say in their contributions.

I agree that there has maybe been a lack of investment in infrastructure. I have been critical of the Minister since becoming the Chair of the Committee, but the Minister has to be commended for the work that NI Water has done in recent months to drive efficiencies in the organisation. We cannot be complacent; just because it has found some efficiencies does not mean that there are not more to be found. Given the work that has been done over the last number of months and the commitment that the chief executive has given, I trust that more efficiencies will be found in the organisation. The direct correlation should be that, wherever efficiencies are found, more investment should go into infrastructure. I definitely do not want to see us, as ratepayers, having to pay more. That is how it has to be done.

I indicated that I will support the amendment. The Minister has been supported, and he continues to be supported, by his Executive colleagues. I remind him that he got the fourth best settlement in the Budget this year. I know that he is finding it difficult in other areas, but, in that Budget, he was very generous towards NI Water. However, it has been underfunded in

the past, and, going forward, that may be the case again. Efficiencies should be found in the Minister's Department, and I trust that he will do what he can to find those efficiencies to divert as much as possible to the underfunded water infrastructure, which we have been failing for many years. The facts are there for what is required in infrastructure investment. Not taking away from the Water Service, if you look at the same Minister's portfolio, I think that the officials are on record as saying that the investment in roads alone at the last count was £830 million to bring our roads up to a reasonable standard.

I hope that, when the Alliance Party supports water charges, it will not be calling on central government to increase our vehicle road tax to increase the revenue that we can generate to fix our roads and bring them up to a reasonable standard. The two things are on a par; we have hundreds of millions of pounds of underinvestment in both areas. However, let us live in the real world: we have an awful lot less money coming to Northern Ireland. It is a difficult job to try to create a situation where that slice of cake is distributed round each of the various Departments and arm's-length bodies to carry out their role. I commend my party colleague Arlene Foster for the number of jobs that she has brought to Northern Ireland, but we are still not in a situation where our pockets are full and there is money for people to spend, which would pull us out of the deficit that we have on underinvestment.

Underinvestment has not come since devolution here in Northern Ireland; it has been here since we were ruled by Westminster, so it has been a continual problem in Northern Ireland. I certainly do not support the Alliance Party's call for the introduction of water charges now that we have devolved institutions here in Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. Is his contribution on behalf of the Alliance Party, or is he going to wait to hear what we have to say before he continues?

Mr Clarke: If you are having a change of heart because an election is coming, that would be welcome, but the tenor of your argument in the past was always in support of the introduction of water charges. I am coming to an end very shortly. I will sit down with a degree of pleasure if you are hinting that you will support the Executive and the rest of the Ministers to prevent water charges being introduced in Northern Ireland.

I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Cree: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "year;" and insert

"notes that it is an Executive priority to ensure that there are no additional water charges; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to work with his Executive colleagues to ensure sufficient resources are made available to his Department to maintain properly the local water infrastructure.".

I welcome the opportunity to move our amendment this afternoon.

The first part of the motion calls for the Assembly to reaffirm its rejection of the imposition of water charges on the people of Northern Ireland. That is something that has already been dealt with. Danny Kennedy delivered the commitment that the Ulster Unionist Party and the then Executive made to ensure that the public would not pay domestic water rates through the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill. Members will remember that that Bill extended the period in which the Department for Regional Development will continue to pay a subsidy to Northern Ireland Water in lieu of domestic water charges.

The second part of the motion is the reason why we are seeking to amend it. It seems to forget that, as contained within the Programme for Government, it was the Executive as a whole that agreed to defer the introduction of domestic water charges. The decision that the Executive took to defer the introduction of charging should mean that the five Executive parties work together to make sure that the Department responsible is adequately resourced to ensure that water infrastructure can then be maintained to the highest standards. Instead, we appear to be seeing some parties that are content to tell the public how they have resisted water charges as it makes them feel very popular but that are then doing nothing to assist the Minister who is faced with having to spread his ever-shrinking budget a little more thinly.

It is something that all the parties in the Executive — well, apart from the Alliance Party — have actually managed to unite around, yet the DUP seemingly cannot resist the opportunity to try to politically point score. I hope that our amendment will receive the House's support today, as I believe it is a pragmatic proposal.

Given that the deferral of domestic water charges is something that the Executive as a collective have agreed to, it is only right that the onus should be on all five parties to work with the Minister to ensure that sufficient resources are made available to him to allow his Department to properly maintain water infrastructure in Northern Ireland. This should be an issue where other parties are able to rise above the silo mentality that sadly too often permeates through the Executive.

We all need water. It is a cross-cutting issue that affects us all equally. That should be the motivation for every single one of us in the Chamber to ensure that the Department is adequately resourced to maintain the local water infrastructure and the high levels of water quality.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cree: Briefly.

Mr Clarke: I welcome and agree with the Member's point about infrastructure, but I think that, at times, we have to be critical of the likes of NI Water. In our constituency offices, we all probably come across cases where there is a leakage. It takes a considerable time for NI Water to fix it. There is a cost for the production of water. I support the tenor of what the Member is saying, but hopefully he will support my saying that NI Water and many other public organisations need to be more proactive to prevent the waste that they create, which I think we are all familiar with.

Mr Cree: I thank the Member for that interjection. I know that the Water Service is very much aware of that, and I am assured that it is addressing it.

On occasions like this, it is not too difficult to see why the Alliance Party is considered to be the sister party of the Liberal Democrats. A bit like their pals when they flip-flopped on tuition fees at the first sign of getting in through the door of Number 10, the Alliance Party is content to call for water charges, yet it supported the Bill that extended the period of time that DRD would pay a subsidy to Northern Ireland Water to protect the public from added pressure. The Alliance Party will have the opportunity to outline why it would like to present families who are already stretched with yet another Bill to pay. Remember that these are people who are already facing rising prices in their outgoings, such as electricity and gas.

The Ulster Unionist rationale for upholding this commitment is simple. We believe in a society that is fair. Families are finding themselves increasingly stretched. Many, many people are struggling to balance the scale between income and bills, and the last thing that they need is the added pressure of a bill for water dropping through the letter box. Bringing in universal water charging would mean bringing in an additional charge that would apply equally to all, affecting low-income families at the same rate that it would affect those who have the ability to pay. That does not fit in with our definition of fairness.

The Assembly is often criticised for its lack of delivery, but the continued deferral of these charges, protecting some of the most vulnerable from the added pressure of an extra financial burden, has, I believe, been an example of the Assembly doing good for the people of Northern Ireland.

That is not to stifle debate around the future governance of water in Northern Ireland. Of course we should always strive to do better. We cannot afford to become complacent and just cruise along pointing to the fact that water charges have been deferred. We should always be looking at the state of local infrastructure and assessing how we can improve it to best serve the people of Northern Ireland. We should all be determined to make sure that our people have water coming out of their taps that is of the highest quality, and we should protect our environment by having fit-for-purpose sewerage services.

Historically, water infrastructure in this country has been underfunded, not least during the darker times when money was urgently needed in other areas and that infrastructure, unfortunately, did not receive the attention it deserved. It is in that context that Danny Kennedy inherited it. Since taking up the role of Minister for Regional Development, his drive has been to see certainty and stability and to create space to explore long-term options and governance models.

Sadly, today's motion seems to mirror the attitude of our friends in the DUP, and the Finance Minister, in failing to take central responsibility for the Belfast port £20 million. Members will remember that. They lambasted the Minister for speaking about the implications there would be for core services, stemming from the cuts to his budget, and he received criticism from them over the concessionary fares scheme — another Executive priority that some parties are happy to lay claim to, but

suddenly become shy when it comes to releasing the funds to retain it.

Danny Kennedy has upheld a Programme for Government commitment. He should not face politicking activities by other Executive parties, such as today's motion, for seeing through something that most of them will try to take credit for.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cree: If you are quick.

Mr Dickson: It is a quick question. In telling us about what the Ulster Unionist Party has done with regard to water charges, perhaps he will explain what happened to his £100 per household water charge party policy in 2007.

Mr Cree: The Member has a long memory, but, unfortunately, he does not remember the detail of that. I will acquaint him with that when this is over.

This is a strategic issue for the Executive, so the Minister should be able to work with Executive colleagues to deal with the implications that the deferral has for public spending. I hope that in future monitoring rounds the Minister's bids will be met with the same enthusiasm as the original decision to defer the charges was. I appreciate that the proposer of the motion has accepted the amendment, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I rise to support the motion. It gives me an opportunity to outline my party's position regarding water rates.

Sinn Féin is on record throughout the island of Ireland opposing the imposition of water charges for domestic households. In its 2007 manifesto, Sinn Féin promised to block the introduction of water charges, and that is exactly what we did. Just prior to the setting up of the Assembly and the Executive in 2007, direct rule Ministers established NIW, with a view to privatisation and the bringing in of household charges. Conor Murphy, the first Minister after 2007, blocked the introduction of water charges, and I acknowledge the current Minister for continuing that policy. Conor Murphy once likened the situation he inherited from direct rule Ministers to trying to turn a tanker in a canal. He ruled out privatisation and made it clear that these public services will operate within full public ownership, now and in the future. Sinn Féin did so on the basis that households here were already hard pressed

due to the difficult economic circumstances and should not be forced to endure an additional financial burden or stealth tax. As the first Member said, people are dealing with higher rates bills as we speak.

Since 2007, we have invested over £1 billion in water and sewerage services on overhauling an unfit sewerage system that had been neglected over decades by successive British Governments. In Britain, the Tories took utilities that were paid for by the public, invested sums of public money to upgrade them, and later sold them to their friends and charged the public for continuing to use them. Is that what we should do here? We say no.

12.00 noon

Sinn Féin recognises that there are significant challenges across the island of Ireland to achieving a truly sustainable water and sewerage service — one that is affordable, meets environmental obligations and delivers a reliable, high-quality service. However, we have proven in government that that can be done without driving struggling households into further poverty. We recognise that water is a precious resource that is universally recognised as a basic human right, and its delivery should be paid for through general progressive tax and efficiencies in the system. Here in the North, we do not have general taxation powers. Therefore, water is subsidised by the Executive through domestic rates. All parties in the Assembly should be calling for the transfer of taxation powers, which would give us greater control over our taxes and how our taxes are spent, including on keeping water and sewerage services in public ownership.

Mr Dallat: I suppose that it is the SDLP's turn to get involved in this party political programme. [Interruption.] Let me state from the beginning

Lord Morrow: Not like you.

Mr Dallat: I am going to ignore the fact that Mr Campbell is speaking from a sedentary position. I am getting used to it.

The SDLP is, of course, against water charges and does not believe that people should pay twice. Access to clean water is a right, not a privilege for those who can afford to pay. Up until 2016, I believe that it is an Executive priority to ensure that no additional burdens are placed on the people's shoulders to fund charges. That policy should continue, and it is the responsibility of the Assembly and the

Executive to ensure that there are sufficient funds available to maintain the local water infrastructure. The historical neglect was mentioned by the Chairperson of the Committee, and I will go back to that later. Money is needed to improve water and sanitation, and, down the years, particularly during direct rule, the service was robbed of that money.

On a positive note, in recent times, there has been an unrecognisable improvement in the delivery of the service, but sadly not before a near collapse because of the ineptness and incompetence of the former chief executive, Laurence MacKenzie, and, indeed, the Minister of the day, Conor Murphy. Sadly, during those turbulent times, four non-executive directors were removed from the board of directors in a public shaming exercise, when, because of their principles, they refused to sign up to the disgraceful way in which the organisation was then run. Indeed, that was during a period when millions of pounds were squandered.

Those were the wasted years when progress could and should have been made on creating an organisation fit for purpose. It did not happen, but that is history and is best left behind. Perhaps one useful outcome of that, however, was the independent water review panel, which stated clearly that separate water charges and sewerage charges were not a wise or sensible way in which to move forward. That would simply have created a new layer of bureaucracy, a requirement to manage bad debts and all the other associated difficulties.

We are one island, and I am sure that all the political parties are watching what is happening at the moment in the South, where 15,000 people took part in a rally against charges. I suggest that Irish people, by their very nature, see water as something that is their right.

Water charges are, I am afraid, handled by Sinn Féin on a partitionist basis. Conor Murphy allowed more than £1 million to be spent on installing domestic water meters. He did not invoke the legislation that would have stopped that. In recent times, the current Minister for Regional Development has indicated that he will do that, and I look forward to him confirming that promise. It will be viewed by many people

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: Of course. For Lord Morrow, certainly.

Lord Morrow: Thank you very much. You mention the fact that the former Minister Mr

Murphy did not stop the installation of meters. Do you think that this is Sinn Féin preparing itself for the day when it will say that water charges are now a necessity here?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dallat: I am going to avoid that because, in my opening remarks, I was critical of the party political broadcasts and I do not want to go down that road, but I am sure that Lord Morrow, in his intelligent way, will have worked out the answer to that for himself. Do you put in water meters and then tell the world that you are not going to impose water charges? Do you not repeal the legislation when something like that might be at the back of your mind?

In response to a question asked by my colleague Seán Rogers in January 2015, the current Minister for Regional Development said that it was his intention to amend the legislation requiring the installation of water meters in the upcoming Water Bill. As I have said, I look forward to the legislation as an attempt to put right a wrong, which Mr Murphy could easily have corrected.

Mr Lynch: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: No. In conclusion, let me return to the vexed question of underfunding, which the Chairperson referred to in his opening remarks. There needs to be a great deal of discussion on the way forward, which will address the underfunding and provide Northern Ireland with the highest standards of water and sanitation. In that respect, the British Government need to accept that, during direct rule, millions of pounds of funding was switched from water to security. In all the discussions in the posh mansions in Britain and here, that issue was not raised, and it needs to be raised because there is a historical debt where people were robbed of the capital investment that was needed for the Water Service and was put into different types of tanks instead.

Mr Lyttle: I think that it is fairly clear that Westminster election fever continues to infect the DUP contribution to this Assembly. If the contribution of Trevor Clarke is anything to go by, we are going to have scaremongering and misrepresentation of the Alliance Party, as is par for the course, with little to no new ideas about how we address the serious issue of underinvestment in our water system, which is interesting, given that Trevor Clarke was quoted on 4 October 2014 as saying:

"Water charges in Northern Ireland have been deferred until 2016 but everything is potentially up for discussion".

So, it has been an interesting contribution from him so far today. I will take this opportunity to respond to the motion on behalf of the Alliance Party and I will challenge the deliberate misrepresentation of our position by political parties intent on electioneering.

The Alliance Party will support the motion as we oppose the introduction of additional water charges at this time, in line with the Executive agreement and because other Executive parties have failed to tackle waste and inefficiency in their Departments. We do, however, need to give serious consideration as to how water and sewerage infrastructure will be adequately financed and governed if fit-for-purpose provision for existing and new customers, environmental protection, flood prevention and economic growth are to be achieved.

Alliance believes that existing charges for water should be more open and transparent. Households should have an identifiable charge for water separated from the rates bill, with no household paying twice. That would provide a clearer picture of how our water and sewerage system is being paid for, with protections for vulnerable households, and Northern Ireland Water would have, in part, an improved borrowing ability for capital investment in this vital service. So, we support the motion but we challenge the proposers to consider how water and sewerage will be financed and governed on a long-term basis, and to acknowledge the cost to the taxpayer of waste and inefficiency in other Executive Departments.

The cost of division is estimated at over £1 billion every year. That is around £1,000 per household per year. Separate education costs around £300 million. There is separate teacher training: proposals on that were put forward by an Alliance Minister and blocked by other parties in the Executive. Welfare reform fines and the policing of parades and protests cost the taxpayer in Northern Ireland multimillions of pounds every year. That is wasted money that could otherwise be used to fund health, education and jobs and protect vulnerable people in our community. The refusal of other parties to tackle the cost of that waste and division has a devastating impact on the very households that the DUP claims to support. Unlike other political parties, Alliance Ministers are working to reduce the cost of waste and division for households and to maximise the resources that we have to build a shared

society and a strong economy for everyone in our community.

Alliance certainly does not want households to pay more in water charges to simply paper over the cracks of financial mismanagement by the DUP and Sinn Féin with the willing support of other political parties. Political parties need to get serious about tackling waste and have a realistic debate about how we fund much-needed improvements to our water system. People in my constituency of East Belfast know painfully well that the current level of investment in water and sewerage infrastructure is not enough. The current model does little to help those households every time we have heavy rain and the panic of more flood damage to homes sets in. It is my understanding that the Belfast drainage plan alone requires an investment of around £750 million. Funding for NI Water, however, includes a subsidy of approximately £275 million every year, paid for by the taxpayer from the Executive Budget, and that is £275 million that cannot be spent on other vital services and contributes to a funding model that limits the ability of NI Water to borrow for capital investment. I would be interested to hear from other parties how they think the Belfast drainage plan will be funded. The Executive should consider alternative models for funding capital investment in our water system. One alternative would be to mutualise, as has happened in Wales, to improve borrowing ability for capital investment.

Alliance opposes the introduction of additional water charging at this time, but we oppose the squandering by other political parties of Executive Department budgets that are vital to protect the households in Northern Ireland that the proposer of the motion claims to support. The failure to even explore other models of finance and governance for our water system

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Lyttle: — will cost households and the economy in the long term. It is time that all parties faced up to the realities that households and businesses across Northern Ireland need us to address if we are to provide the water system and the vital public services that they need and deserve.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. Water rates is a very contentious issue in Ireland. Many members of the public believe that they pay for domestic water through the current rating system. Obviously, commercial water rates are charged

for through metering, and it is generally accepted that the political consensus in Northern Ireland is that there should be no direct charge to private consumers for water.

On Saturday past, we once again bore witness to the fury of the population in the Republic, as 10,000 people took to the streets to protest against the Government's current plan to implement water charges. I can only imagine similar outrage in Northern Ireland, unless the Assembly and the Executive reaffirm their commitment today to reject water rates. No one in Northern Ireland wants to see a water-charging system that could lead the way to a privatised water company being formed in the future, and that is the worry.

I recognise that, for the past several years, water meters have been introduced in towns throughout Northern Ireland. Last January, I asked the Minister how many water meters had been installed in my constituency of West Tyrone. Although the Minister was unable to tell me the exact figure, he was able to tell me that over 32,000 domestic meters had been installed in Northern Ireland since 2007. The supposed reasoning for that was that new homes being connected to the water supply are required, through article 81 of the Water and Sewerage Services Order 2006, to have water meters. The Minister has confirmed that, as yet, those meters only record the consumption of water and have not been set up to ease the imposition of potential charges. I welcome the Minister for Regional Development's response on the issue, and I hope that he remembers that the people of Northern Ireland will not tolerate the creation of a charge infrastructure that seeks to impose water charges for domestic users by the back door.

12.15 pm

I recognise, of course, that Northern Ireland's water infrastructure is not perfect. I can see why people may be tempted by the lure of privatisation or new charges to solve our problems. I reject that reasoning, however, as homes in Northern Ireland already pay at least £160 on average through the rates system for their water supply. The true problem of Northern Ireland Water stems from the systematic failure to invest properly in our infrastructure over the last 30 to 40 years, although I recognise that there has been capital investment in recent times.

In 2007, the independent review panel found that infrastructural problems were concentrated west of the Bann and that the west suffered from out-of-date and deteriorating infrastructure

that was in desperate need of modernisation. That was eight years ago, and the situation does not seem to have greatly improved. The debacle last January demonstrated the difficulties with our water supply in the west. The same report recognised that there should be no standing or volumetric charges.

I find it surprising that, once again, the west is being brutalised with infrastructure imbalance. Much like the traditional economic imbalance, the struggle with deteriorating water infrastructure stems directly from the consistent failure of Assembly Ministers before and after the economic crash to invest properly in infrastructure in the western parts of the North. I worry that the people of Northern Ireland and specifically those in the west have been neglected and treated without regard and could soon be unfairly asked to pay more for their shabby treatment.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve access to consistent, safe and reliable water. That is a basic human right. The people of Northern Ireland pay for their water through our domestic rates and taxation system. The people should not be asked to pay again for it. I support the re-itemisation of our water charges so that the people of Northern Ireland can see what they are paying for through their rates and will not be duped in the future into paying additional charges.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way. I am sure that, when you are welcoming all that today, you will welcome the shift by the Alliance Party. Chris was reading into the record, and I want to read something that he said in January this year:

"[Alliance] believes that we have to be open and honest about the need for serious consideration of the introduction of fair domestic water pricing based on the ability to pay if we are to meet the demands on ... vital public services". — [Official Report, Vol 101, No 7, p53, col 1].

To me, that sounds like water charges. That was in January, and we have had a change of heart today. I am sure that you will welcome that, Mr Byrne.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Byrne: Mr Speaker, it is beyond my political comprehension to make reference to a third political party. *[Laughter.]* I support the motion being amended to recognise that current infrastructure issues in Northern Ireland Water

require a concentrated effort to solve some of the outstanding capital investment issues. I recognise that decisions on water funding cut across all Departments. Ultimately, it is for the Assembly and the Executive to recommit themselves to rejecting the imposition of domestic water charges and push for new approaches to solve our ongoing problems.

The people of Northern Ireland like their Government to be like their water: fully transparent and crystal clear. I urge the Assembly to commit itself to rejecting water charges, which would be a new version of a stealth tax.

Mr McCallister: Motions like this are inclined to remind me of Ian Paisley Junior's demands for £1 billion as the price for supporting a new Government or Sinn Féin's demands for maybe £1.5 billion for Northern Ireland. When I look at this motion, I know instinctively that it is fiscally reckless Ulster nationalism. I look at the United Kingdom in the midst of a general election and the pressure coming from Scottish nationalists, Welsh nationalists, Irish nationalists and now Ulster nationalists. It is not a good place for our country to be in that it is only about money.

In opening the debate, Mr Clarke rightly said that someone should pay for the water. Absolutely, but in his view that someone should be in the south of England, not in Northern Ireland. He does not want us to pay for anything. I look right through all of the Executive's policies, and we have this motion set against the backdrop of a general election in which two parties are in an electoral alliance. They have a pact, and then they are attacking each other over water and various policies — [*Interruption.*] Well, Mr Clarke is admitting that this is entirely about the East Belfast campaign instead of being about how we seriously deliver water or public services in Northern Ireland and how we pay for them.

How do we avoid EU infractions or other legal action? How do we look at models of governance? Should we change the model of Northern Ireland Water? Should it be clear on a rates bill that we are all contributing to water? The Finance Minister constantly repeats the idea that we are the region in the UK with the lowest household charges, yet we get £2,000 more to spend per head of population from the rest of the UK — and still it is not enough. Although I have no ideological difficulty with a charge for water or with paying for it through my rates, my big difficulty is that I would not give this politically exhausted Executive one penny piece more, because they will not reform anything. They are exhausted and have no

purpose, no direction and no idea where they are going or what they want to do in any policy area.

You can take any example, whether it is topping up welfare with £565 million while slashing early years funding or slashing funding to the environment from the Mourne Heritage Trust to the Causeway Coast. Where is the joined-up thinking in government? We have an Executive who are giving that away and want to cut corporation tax, at a cost of over £300 million, while still slashing the skills budget. Where is the consistency in Executive policies? We have a Health Minister who has claimed that there is not enough money to deliver, having said in a previous mandate that health was nearly overfunded and too well looked after. Yet, Transforming Your Care has stalled. Three and a half years after Transforming Your Care was announced, it has stalled. It is going nowhere and is delivering nothing. There is no money to make it happen. That is another Executive policy that has gone by the wayside.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I am happy to listen.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. If I can, I will bring him back to the debate about water charging. He said that he has no ideological opposition to water charging and was outlining the almost affluent perception that he feels Northern Ireland has, as opposed to the reality. Can he outline what net benefit he thinks there might be from the introduction of water charging, if you exclude all the marginal and vulnerable communities that would have to be protected if you were to go down the route that most of us do not want to go down? What would the net benefit be if he does not have an ideological opposition to the introduction?

Mr McCallister: The Member knows full well that £275 million of public money goes in. He knows that there is no Barnett consequential for that. He knows that that comes out of health, education, skills and every other area of government. That is a choice that the Executive and Assembly have made. If the Assembly and Executive cannot prove, before they raise any more money, that they can solve problems like St Mary's, like welfare and like the crises in housing, health and education, where there are 65,000 empty desks, why would anyone want to give this Executive a penny piece more? You are almost financially bankrupt now. We may not even be able to do our Budget by June or the early part of the summer because of welfare reform. We are

giving away £2 million a week, and he still expects that this is purely about water charging. You set this in the context of a debate for which the lead party in the Government of Northern Ireland tables this ridiculous motion, which is almost as silly as the one that Sinn Féin tabled last week when we had a debate on the block grant. We table these ridiculous motions as government parties, and these are the choices that you, your Executive colleagues and the Assembly are making. It is not setting Northern Ireland on a sound basis to have good governance. There is no purpose and no direction, and the Executive are very nearly —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McCallister: — on the edge of being bankrupt and looking increasingly politically exhausted and out of time.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time and, when we return to the debate, the Minister will be the first to speak.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.25 pm.

On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that questions 1, 2 and 9 have been withdrawn.

Magilligan Prison: CJINI Report

3. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on how the recommendations of the recent Criminal Justice Inspection report into Magilligan prison will be implemented. (AQO 7977/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The senior management team at Magilligan has an action plan in place that records all 79 recommendations that Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) made. The recommendations are broken down into those that have been accepted; partially accepted; accepted in principle; or not accepted. All accepted recommendations have already been allocated to a senior manager, who has the lead responsibility to ensure that they are implemented. A number of recommendations, such as replacing the house blocks, cannot be implemented at this time. That recommendation and others will be addressed when the new prison is eventually built. Magilligan senior management will hold regular meetings on a quarterly basis to monitor closely and record any progress made against the CJINI recommendations. Following those review meetings, the director general and I will be provided with progress reports.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his answer. Magilligan prison has featured very well over a number of CJINI reports. As part of its approach, will the senior management team look at the slippage areas and at what perhaps led to the slippage in some of the areas that are now weaker?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr McCartney's supplementary question, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The key concern is the slippage that was specifically in constructive activity. That

was the disappointing result. It is clear that an element of it is that the increasing prisoner numbers have meant that a lower proportion was involved in constructive activity. Getting constructive and purposeful activity back for all prisoners is a key part of the work, and I entirely accept Mr McCartney's point that we need to ensure that that slippage back is redressed in the next few months.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's response to the question. Certainly, purposeful activity seems to me to be the central requirement of the CJINI report, but it should also be emphasised that it is positive about the overall running of the prison. The retention of the current ethos, which is very positive, should be at the centre. Does the Minister agree?

Mr Ford: I am happy to endorse Mr Maginness's positive words about the report. As we tend to forget when we emphasise the work that has to be done, on three of the four key tests, Magilligan performed well; it is just the unfortunate slipping back on the constructive and purposeful activity that needs to be redressed. In other respects, however, Magilligan has scored extremely well in comparison with the past and with other prisons across the UK.

Downpatrick Courthouse

4. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Justice whether plans for the future of Downpatrick courthouse have been finalised. (AQO 7978/11-15)

Mr Ford: Plans for the future of the court estate, including for Downpatrick courthouse, will not be finalised until I have had an opportunity to consider the outcome of the ongoing consultation exercise. Downpatrick courthouse is not one of the venues currently under consideration for closure. The consultation paper indicates that, in the event of the closure of Newtownards courthouse, family business relating to the petty sessions district of Down would transfer from Newtownards to Downpatrick.

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Minister for his answer. I think that that will bring quite a lot of relief to some people in and around the Downpatrick area who feared for the future of the Downpatrick courthouse and that we would lose yet another service from our county town to centralisation. That comes as quite a relief. I know that the Department of Justice is now looking at the opportunity to perhaps decentralise some of its headquarters. Would

the Minister perhaps look at Downpatrick as a venue for that? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ford: I was going to welcome Mr Hazzard's positive comments about the courthouse consultation. I think he is the first MLA who has stood up in the Chamber and welcomed an aspect of it. That is something of a rarity, and I should therefore be grateful. However, he then pushed me on the decentralisation of services. There is certainly a project ongoing that is looking at the accommodation provision for the Department of Justice and its agencies as a whole. Whether that will involve any decentralisation out of the greater Belfast area is very much under consideration at this time, but, given the range of the Department's responsibilities, I am not sure that there is likely to be a decentralisation away from greater Belfast, as opposed to bringing agencies together within Belfast.

Mr Ross: The Minister will be aware that there are campaigns in a number of council areas to keep local courthouses open. Does he see any reason why local councils cannot work with the Department and the Courts Service to utilise those facilities better so that courthouses could become community facilities in the evenings and be used by local community groups or by councils themselves? That could be a way of keeping those facilities in local areas.

Mr Ford: I agree entirely with Mr Ross's general point. Indeed, in two of the meetings that I have had with council representatives who are concerned about courthouse closures, the issue of the potential additional uses of courthouses was raised.

Courthouses are perhaps not as flexible as some people might wish; they tend to have a lot of built-in furniture and so on. I am open to looking at what might be possible to spread the costs of maintaining those buildings. That was the remit that I left with officials from the Courts and Tribunals Service in at least those two cases where people came with specific proposals. I am quite happy to look at what might be possible. In some senses, courthouses are not as flexible as we would hope them to be. Unfortunately, they are probably some of the public buildings that are used for the fewest hours in the week.

Mr Swann: Following on from that, Minister, will you confirm whether you have had any approaches from the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council on the possibility of additional uses for the Ballymena courthouse?

Mr Ford: I am happy to confirm to Mr Swann that one of the delegations that I have met included the Member of Parliament for North Antrim, members of the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council and some business interests around Ballymena. Indeed, I believe that one of the councillors who was present said that he was representing Mr Swann at that meeting. I am happy to confirm that that was a positive engagement about Ballymena.

Mr Dickson: Minister, this is an inevitable change to the court service estate. When other jurisdictions have reorganised their courts, they have modernised the facilities, brought in electronic facilities and provided a great deal more online services for members of the legal professions. What action plan do you have in place to do that for the courthouses here as the project moves forward?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Dickson for the question. It is indeed the case that we need to look at making the best of the more modern parts of the court estate. There has been a recent investment of something in the region of £10 million to improve the way in which the Courts and Tribunals Service operates, particularly with things like an IT system and the ability to have live links in all the major courthouses.

It is also the case that it is only the more modern courthouses that have facilities for the proper segregation of vulnerable witnesses, especially children, or victims from perpetrators in the case of some serious criminal offences. That is why the issue is ensuring that we give people a better service when they reach a courthouse, even if they may have to travel slightly further from a district that is currently served by one of the older buildings.

Courts: Closures

5. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Justice what avenues he has explored to either make savings or raise revenue prior to consulting on the closure of courts. (AQO 7979/11-15)

Mr Ford: Prior to consulting on the closure of courthouses, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service reviewed all areas of expenditure to minimise the impact of budget reductions on front-line delivery. As a result, cuts totalling £2.6 million were delivered in 2014-15 and further cuts totalling £1.8 million have been identified for implementation in 2015-16. Those cuts, which total £4.4 million or 10.8%, have been delivered from existing contracts, reducing leased accommodation, the

temporary closure of the Old Townhall building in Belfast, an 11% reduction in the Courts and Tribunals Service's staffing complement and reducing judicial expenditure.

In line with DFP's 'Managing Public Money' document, the Courts and Tribunals Service is also considering, in the context of ensuring full cost recovery, the potential of increasing court fees. I have already indicated, including a few minutes ago, that I am willing to consider any other options that are suggested by Members or local councils.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer and hope that he can provide Newtowards with the same relief as he has provided to Downpatrick. Has he consulted other Executive Ministers about the transfer of tribunal hearings relevant to their Department out of expensive city-centre accommodation and into existing publicly owned, under-threat court buildings?

Mr Ford: Miss McIlveen makes a very reasonable point about the use of courthouses for tribunals. It is also the case that, in some areas, most notably Newry recently, other MLAs have complained about the use of courthouses, which they see as being associated with the criminal justice system, for tribunals. We have sought to make the best use of the courts estate and not to hire additional, expensive facilities. However, there is an issue in some areas, where that is not always accepted by those who use the tribunals.

Mr Dallat: Is the Minister sufficiently chastened by the dressing-down that he got from the Lord Chief Justice for his decision to close up to half of the courthouses? Is he sufficiently humbled now to go back and review some of the daftest decisions?

Mr Ford: I do not recognise the "dressing-down" that I was given. I would have thought that, after the length of time that he and I have been in this Chamber, Mr Dallat would appreciate the concept of the word "consultation". It is not a decision but a consultation. However, it is a consultation on the back of a very difficult financial situation for the Department of Justice and the savings that have to be made across the Courts and Tribunals Service. If Mr Dallat has specific suggestions to make on how matters can be dealt with and how those costs can be addressed, I am very happy to hear them and discuss them with him. The reference that he makes to a "dressing-down" and to silly ideas

are not constructive in dealing with the massive financial problems that we have ahead of us.

Mr Allister: Given the obviously strong, negative response that is coming through in the consultation from court users, from practitioners and from the judges who sit in those courts, is the Minister yet ready to face up to the fact and acknowledge that his were ill-thought-out proposals that do despite to the convenience of court users and that would put extra burdens beyond capacity into other courts? Is he big enough to acknowledge that he got it wrong and to retreat from his preposterous position?

Mr Ford: It is good to see that Mr Dallat can be exceeded in hyperbole anyway, but I suppose that that is always to be expected.

The reality is that of course there is a negative response. People may have heard just occasionally if proposals come forward to close schools or health facilities that they get a negative response from people in the immediate area, but that does not mean that changes do not have to be made to deal with the budget.

I will repeat to Mr Allister the point that I made to Mr Dallat — I am not sure that there will be a positive response — which is that, if there are specific suggestions to be made to deal with the difficult budget pressures on the Courts and Tribunals Service, I am very happy to hear them. However, he cannot just come off with words and phrases such as "preposterous" and "ill-thought-out". When the Courts and Tribunals Service did a very detailed examination of the need for court sittings, of the accessibility from one town to another and of the way in which the business could be structured better using IT links, and so on, all of that was done in a practical, sensible and serious way and should not be derided by the kind of language that Mr Allister uses.

Legal Aid: Education Tribunals

6. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the changes to be made to legal aid in relation to education tribunals. (AQO 7980/11-15)

Mr Ford: Currently, special educational needs (SEN) cases are funded under the legal advice and assistance scheme, commonly known as the "green form". Advice can be given to assist the applicant to prepare for the SEN tribunal or to prepare to challenge a decision of the education board if it is believed to have failed to provide special assistance or reasonable

adjustments for a child. The green form is not available for advocacy or representation at the tribunal. I have no plans to introduce changes to legal aid for special education tribunals. Therefore, provision will remain at the current level.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response and welcome the fact that there is to be no change. Will he give an assurance that the interests of all children, particularly those from deprived backgrounds, will remain paramount in any changes that are made in any and every aspect of legal aid?

2.15 pm

Mr Ford: I am quite happy to give Ms Boyle the reassurance that all the changes that are being made are being done in a way that will seek to protect the most vulnerable. So, for example, whilst proposals exist around reforming green form advice, there is no proposal to change it with regard to mental health review tribunals, asylum and immigration, special educational needs or children's order cases — the kind of vulnerable groups that I think Ms Boyle is highlighting — but there are changes that will have to be made in order to live within the budget. The important thing is that the Department is seeking to protect vulnerable people in every circumstance.

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister just doubly reassure us, on a belt-and-braces basis, about special education tribunals? Are there to be no changes at all to any provision that might be made through legal aid that is administered by his Department to people who will use that process in the incoming year?

Mr Ford: All that I can do is repeat to Mr Campbell the last line of what I said earlier. I have no plans to introduce changes to legal aid in relation to special educational tribunals. Provision will remain at the current level.

Mr Cree: What impact will proposed legal aid cuts have on family court proceedings, if any?

Mr Ford: In seeking to protect those who belong to vulnerable groups, there are key issues around the family courts. I have already made clear that I believe that there are cases when, for example, there are repeat applications by a legally aided ex-partner in the case of things like access to children, that have to be addressed, but, on the fundamental issues of work in the family courts, legal aid will remain available as on the current basis.

Hydebank Wood: Artist Residency Projects

7. Mr Ó Muilleoir asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the HMP Hydebank Wood artist residency projects. (AQO 7981/11-15)

Mr Ford: In Hydebank college, the artist-in-residence projects are contracted through the Prison Arts Foundation (PAF). The Prison Arts Foundation has completed a number of projects within Hydebank aimed at changing the prison environment through visual art. The projects have included the painting of a number of wall-scapes throughout the college to channel offenders' energies to positive ends, improving self-worth and helping offenders to build new skills.

Various artworks have been exhibited at the Waterfront Hall, Castlereagh library and here at Stormont. Artists in residence have also inspired a number of offenders to take part in the arts by entering artwork to be judged through the Koestler arts award scheme. That has proved successful, with a high number of awards being achieved.

Due to the reduction of funding across all Departments, the Northern Ireland Prison Service has had to reduce the provision of PAF services across all prisons, including Hydebank.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt don Aire as an fhreagra sin a thabhairt domh fosta inniu. Sílim go dtuigean sé an mhaith mhór a gní cursáil ealaíne do phrísosúnaigh agus don tsochaí seo. I thank the Minister for his response. It is depressing news that the Prison Arts Foundation funding has been cut from £240,000 to £83,000 and that the number of artists in residence has been cut from four to two. Will the Minister look again at that vital area of work? I often think that expenditure on tighter security does not bring the same benefits as expenditure on the Prison Arts Foundation. I know that the Minister is very familiar with the work of the PAF. Is this something that he could review to see if we could increase the number of residencies again?

Mr Ford: I take Mr Ó Muilleoir's point, although I suspect that, if we reduced expenditure on the security of prisons, other Members of the House would complain if anything went wrong, so we need to be realistic. I appreciate that there were concerns on the part of PAF, and, indeed, some of our other voluntary sector

partners, about the reduction of costs. That is why I was pleased that we were able to find the £83,000 that Mr Ó Muilleoir referred to in order to maintain a level of service, but that is the blunt reality of the world in which we currently live. Difficult decisions have been taken in which many positive areas of justice spending have had to be reduced because of the budget that the Executive have given to the Department of Justice. I do believe, however, that we are getting the best possible value from the services that are currently provided.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the constraints that the Minister has to work within from the DUP/Sinn Féin budget that has been handed down to him, can he give some indication as to what progress has been made at Hydebank in regard to providing further or proper education and training skills for young offenders?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McGlone for that question because a significant amount of work has been done. Members will have seen news publications on the fact that Hydebank Wood is now formally designated as a college. There is very significant engagement in constructive activity, whether that might be seen as more traditional education around matters like essential skills or vocational training. I believe that something in the region of over 70% of those in Hydebank Wood on the male side, because it does not currently apply to Ash House, are engaged in some of those constructive activities, with Belfast Met providing these services, which will make it an easier transition for those who are engaged in courses to continue in courses in outside venues as they leave the college. I believe that that is an absolutely fundamental step forward in the way in which we manage services for young male offenders. I believe that it is very significant and almost groundbreaking in the context of UK prisons as a whole. We should actually be proud of the work that is being done by the Prison Service.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Steven Agnew is not in his place.

Indictable Cases: Pilot Scheme

10. Ms McCorley asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the pilot scheme in Newtownards, on speeding up indictable cases. (AQO 7984/11-15)

Mr Ford: The indictable cases pilot was launched on 2 January in the court division of

Ards. It will run for a period of 12 months, with an initial evaluation in June.

Through the scheme, the criminal justice agencies are implementing a number of changes to how cases are investigated and prepared, including the greater use of pre-interview disclosure by the police, the provision of a case outline to facilitate early engagement with the defence and a new statement at police interview stage, highlighting to suspects the potential benefits of entering a plea at the earliest opportunity.

The pilot also makes use of improved investigative pathways; clearer file standards with effective supervision; earlier prosecutorial advice to the police in relation to charging; the timely and proportionate use of forensic and other evidence; and, for contested cases, earlier discussions between parties with a view to narrowing the issues.

Average times for pilot cases, measured against the average times for cases elsewhere in Northern Ireland, indicate significant improvements in performance. This reflects the considerable effort that is being made by the police and the PPS. However, the evaluation will be essential in determining the feasibility of roll-out.

I am encouraged by the positive progress to date and the potential that this offers to improve processing times.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the impact of the pilot scheme impel him to try this in other areas?

Mr Ford: It would be slightly premature to give a definite answer to that. Certainly, early indications — and you will appreciate that we have not even reached the halfway evaluation — are that there are definite improvements in the way in which cases are progressed, to the benefit of defendants as well as victims and witnesses. That has to be applauded.

On the other hand, it has required a significant input of resources by some of the agencies that are involved. We would need to be sure, before we attempt to roll it out, that we are able to put those additional resources into the cases which might be considered for inclusion elsewhere. I will be looking closely at the halfway stage in June and again at the December evaluation to see what is possible, because it is clear that one issue that we need to address significantly in this society is speeding up justice to ensure

that cases are in court quicker, that victims and witnesses are not kept waiting and that those who are to be sentenced are made aware of the benefits of early guilty pleas if they are going to plead guilty and that that also assists in speeding things up.

Antrim Borough Courthouse

11. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Justice why Mid and East Antrim Borough Council will be the only council area, which does not share a boundary with Belfast City Council, without a courthouse under the new proposals. (AQO 7985/11-15)

Mr Ford: In the context of the financial challenges that are facing my Department, the consultation paper sets out proposals for a reduced court estate. These proposals seek to maximise the use of our larger, more modern and better equipped court buildings while seeking as far as possible to mitigate the impact for court users.

There is no requirement for a court to be located in each council area and it would be wrong to make such a requirement. My objective in seeking to rationalise the court estate is to ensure that we deliver a service that is efficient, effective and affordable. I believe that the proposal to transfer business from Ballymena to Antrim and Coleraine, when taken with the additional flexibility that a single jurisdiction will deliver, will achieve that objective.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he assure the House that, no matter what comes out of the consultation on court closure, errors will not be completed in the closure of courthouses? Even in my area of north Antrim, and particularly in Ballymena when we lost the hospital, not one trust official will say nowadays that that was not a mistake. The closure of Ballymena courthouse will be a massive mistake. How can the Minister assure the House that errors will not happen with the closure of any courthouse?

Mr Ford: It would be a foolish Minister who said that errors could never happen, but I am not sure why Mr Frew suggests that errors will be more likely with the closure of Ballymena courthouse or any courthouse. The reality is that we have to work with the available budget, and I believe that it is more important to put budget into ensuring that we have adequate staffing, judicial cover and facilities for individuals when they reach court than use it to maintain buildings, some of which are less than

ideal when those who have to use the courthouses arrive there.

Mr Beggs: The Minister did not mention the importance of justice being seen to be done. Does he recognise that, in not having a court in each of the new council areas, there is a huge danger that court decisions and sentences will not be reported in local papers, and confidence in the law could be reduced?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr Beggs that we need justice to be seen to be done. I remind him, however, that, in his constituency, Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus have not had courts for many years, and I am not aware that the issue has been raised with me when those cases are heard in Laganside. Similarly, Larne has not had a court for a couple of years, and no complaints have reached me about justice not being seen to be done there. I suggest that, in these days of modern communications, it is not impossible for local reporters to drive 10 miles and ensure that local papers continue to carry the stories of local court decisions.

Mr Allister: The Minister talks about living within his budget. Would he then like to explain to the House why he spent £1.7 million upgrading the Ballymena courthouse that he now wants to close?

Mr Ford: The answer is very simple. As I have said on a number of occasions about a number of buildings, in certain cases, essential work had to be done to maintain health and safety for the building and to ensure that buildings were compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. That was before the Department of Justice was hit with the very significant budget cuts that were imposed in-year during the last financial year.

Arm's-length Bodies: Budget Cuts

12. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Justice what budget cuts have been made to arm's-length bodies funded by his Department. (AQO 7986/11-15)

Mr Ford: In establishing the 2015-16 budgets, I sought to protect front-line public services as far as possible against cuts to my Department's budget. Throughout the 2015-16 Budget process, I have highlighted the fact that very difficult funding decisions will be required. It is important to note that the starting point for the Department's budget is a 15.1% cut against our 2014-15 opening baseline, which is a cut of £165 million. The Executive then provided an

allocation of £90 million, which is equivalent to 6.4%. Of that, £20 million was provided as part of the final Budget process and was ring-fenced for the PSNI, which will receive £65 million in total of that £90 million.

The balance of the Executive funding that has not gone to the police has been allocated, based on our priorities. In some areas, it will be used to offset the impact of baseline cuts, so some areas have cuts of less than 15.1%; in others, it has been used to offset specific demand-led pressures as far as possible. The core Department, for example, is making savings of 22% so that savings can be reallocated to the front line. Separately, the Treasury is providing £29.5 million of security funding, which is not baseline-related but is specific funding to the police for a specific purpose.

To inform the decisions on final budget allocations, the Department considered the outcome of the budget consultation exercise and savings delivery plans. Final budget reductions for the Department's arm's-length bodies included the following cuts: the Police Ombudsman, 5%; the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT), 5%; the PSNI, 5.7%; the Probation Board, 9.2%; the RUC George Cross Foundation, 11.8%; the Criminal Justice Inspection (CJINI), 12%; the Northern Ireland Police Fund, 12%; and the Policing Board, 15.1%.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Fatal Foetal Abnormality: Legislation

T1. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Justice to confirm that he will introduce legislation on the sensitive issue of fatal foetal abnormality, regardless of whether the Health Minister brings forward medical guidelines. (AQT 2381/11-15)

Mr Ford: While I appreciate Ms McCorley's question, I cannot guarantee that I will bring forward legislation because, for a Minister to bring forward legislation, it requires Executive approval. I believed that the consultation on abortion would have been better conducted jointly between the Health and Justice Departments, but the previous Health Minister did not wish that to be the case. I proceeded with the consultation on the criminal justice aspects of abortion, on the basis of which I

propose to recommend to the Executive the recommendation that was put in the consultation, which is to allow abortion in the very narrow case of fatal foetal abnormality, where there is no prospect of a viable life for the foetus after delivery and no treatment beyond palliative care could be offered. That is the proposal that I will put to the Executive, and I hope that the Executive will support me in enabling legislation to be put to the House.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. An dtig liom iarráidh ar an Aire an bhfuil amlíne aige nuair a bhéas seo ag tuitim amach? Does the Minister have a timeline for when that might happen?

Mr Ford: I cannot give a timeline at this stage, but I will put a paper to the Executive as soon as one can be drawn up. It will then be a matter for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to decide whether it will be tabled for the Executive, and for the Executive then to decide whether they wish to go ahead. I appreciate that this issue is extremely difficult for many people in this society, but it is right that we should legislate in that one narrow area.

Justice Minister: Election

T2. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Justice whether he now recognises that the way in which we elect an MLA to hold the office of Minister of Justice holds back the normalisation of politics here, given that, on taking up ministerial office in 2010, he said — *“Today is not the completion of a process; the completion of the process will come when the devolved Assembly and Executive carry out all their duties well, consistently and in partnership for all the people of Northern Ireland.”* — [Official Report, Bound Volume 50, p148, col 1]. (AQT 2382/11-15)

Mr Ford: No. It is not often that people quote me; I thought that Mr McCallister was quoting me approvingly. I do not agree with him that the way in which the Justice Minister is elected is holding back politics. The way in which the Justice Minister is elected, which is by a weighted majority in the Assembly, is the appropriate way in which an Executive, as a whole, should be formed. That would be closer to the normalisation of politics than the method by which the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are appointed by their parties and then other Ministers are appointed by parties in series. I would have thought that the way in which the Justice Minister is appointed is the way forward for the Assembly to move towards

normalisation while still maintaining the need for a majority of support that is significantly higher than 50%+1.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for his analysis; he is trailblazing. Does he accept that, although he voted against the 2007-2011 Programme for Government, he took up office? He is now a Minister in an Executive that do not really have a Programme for Government. Does he not think that it is vital that, when you form a Government, you have a negotiated and agreed Programme for Government and collective Cabinet responsibility? That would go a long way to taking the fear out of who holds the Justice Ministry. Will he give an undertaking now that neither he nor any Alliance Member will take the Justice Ministry in 2016 if they do not agree with the Programme for Government?

Mr Ford: I think that there were about six questions in that one. To highlight the point, I voted against the Programme for Government in 2007 because I believed that it was inadequate in certain aspects around building a united community and overcoming our divisions. When I took office, it was on the basis of the agreement of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to what the Alliance Party put forward as the proposals for what would be the addendum to the PFG for the Department of Justice. That is the programme that has been largely implemented over the last five years; we celebrated our fifth birthday last week. It is clear that, on one or two occasions, issues have arisen that were not covered by that PFG addendum and which have sometimes created differences in the Chamber, but, by and large, considering the difficulties of a Department like Justice, there has been a large measure of agreement. I believe that that is because we got that agreement sorted out before I accepted office.

I take his point entirely, and I believe that the world would be better if the Programme for Government were agreed by parties that were then willing to form an Executive, rather than mathematics putting people into the Executive to see whether they can form a Programme for Government. However, I, as a Minister, have to say that we do have a Programme for Government. I will leave it to others to decide whether it is being honoured in full substance. However, when you ask me to give a guarantee that no Alliance Minister will take on the Justice Ministry in 2016, I am minded to quote the outgoing Member of Parliament for Fermanagh and South Tyrone and say, "Never say never."

Legal Highs: Adam Owens

T3. Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Justice what steps he will take to ensure that lethal legal highs are made illegal and placed well out of the reach of the population of Northern Ireland, given that he will be aware of the tragic death of young Adam Owens in Newtownards last week, with Adam's family, and indeed the whole community, blaming legal highs for the tragedy, and, finally, will he and other Members of the House join in offering their total and absolute sympathy to the Owens family at this terrible time. (AQT 2383/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am very happy to join Kieran McCarthy in expressing my sympathy to the family of Adam Owens. It was just a couple of weeks ago that I had a meeting with Beechmount Mums Against Drugs, which was formed following the death of Sean Paul Carnahan, also from so-called legal highs or, to be more accurate, new psychoactive substances (NPS).

As I have said in the Chamber before, the Misuse of Drugs Act is not a devolved issue. It is a reserved matter for Westminster, and, therefore, we have limited powers. However, I have talked in the past about work that is being led in particular by Belfast City Council — Omagh District Council was second, and Larne may have followed as well — to use consumer safety legislation to deal with the issue of legal highs. I have also been lobbying the Home Office, seeking to get it to take the matter seriously. I have had correspondence with the outgoing Minister with responsibility for drug policy in the Home Office, and I hope to meet the appropriate Minister after the election is resolved at Westminster. I believe that it is essential that we use the knowledge that we have of how matters have been addressed in Northern Ireland, and, indeed, of how matters have been addressed across the border, to ensure that we get the best possible action across the UK as a whole. However, that rests with the Home Office and not with us.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's commitment to an improvement in addressing the causes of not only this terrible tragedy but other tragedies. I also welcome his commitment to tackling whoever the incoming Minister at the Home Office might be. Will the Minister ensure that, whatever develops between him and the Home Office, these legal highs will be made illegal and put well out of the reach of everyone, particularly the young population here in Northern Ireland and across the UK? It is a deadly serious issue.

Mr Ford: Again, I agree entirely that we need to ensure that the matter is dealt with. It is, of course, a slight irony that some of these substances that are referred to as legal highs may well contain individual substances that are illegal. We need to find legislation that actually deals with the reality on the ground and the tragedies that people have suffered in Northern Ireland, including quite a number last year, as a result of NPS. We must not allow the niceties of legislation or the occasional changing of a molecule in the chemical composition to obstruct the efforts of law enforcement agencies to protect people, especially the young people who are most likely to engage in the consumption of these substances.

Justice: Innovative Policies

T4. Mr Ross asked the Minister of Justice to state the most innovative policy that he has come up with during his five years in office, given the launch this Thursday at 1.30 pm of the first in a series of justice seminars aimed at promoting innovation within the justice system in Northern Ireland. (AQT 2384/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are so many positive things that I could not possibly highlight just one of them. [Laughter.] If we were to look at the one that will have the most far-reaching effect, it would probably be the reform of the prison system. I was told directly by a former Northern Ireland Office Minister that prison reform was left in the "too difficult" tray under direct rule and was left for devolution to happen. The good work done by the prison reform team, Dame Anne Owers and her colleagues, undoubtedly produced an excellent report. Allowing for the fact that there were some political disagreements in this place as to exactly how some aspects of it would be implemented, it has nonetheless formed the basis of a very significant reform from the culture in which the Prison Service was effectively given the job of guarding the perimeter of the prisons to one in which we now see very positive work going on.

This is the sort of work that I saw highlighted in the Ornella unit in Ash House recently and the additional work assisting women to get their lives back on track; the work that has turned the young offenders' centre into a college; the work that has got the good result that we highlighted earlier for Magilligan; and the ongoing work in the very difficult and complex prison of Maghaberry to ensure that life is much better there. By the time we have the final report of the three-year oversight group this autumn, I believe that we will see all significant recommendations signed off to the point where

all that remains is capital funding. Sometimes, we forget that it is a reform programme that is, frankly, as big as the one that brought the PSNI into operation, but it has gone through in a much quieter way.

Mr Ross: Thank you, again. Innovation in justice, and innovative policies, have the opportunity to produce better outcomes that are more cost-effective to the public purse. One of the areas in the court system where there are significant difficulties is the clogging up of the courts. Has the Minister had discussions with the judiciary or the Court Service about how we can digitise the Court Service and, perhaps, look at online courts for low-level disputes?

Mr Ford: The concept of online courts is an interesting one that has not come across my desk in any formal way. It is in line with what we are seeking to do to reform the way in which the court system operates to make it more effective and more efficient; but I think that, for some time, people are likely to expect to be present if they are to have their proverbial "day in court". However, we should acknowledge that it was not that long ago that the prisoner escort service was spending an enormous amount of time and effort transporting prisoners from jails to courthouses for simple remand hearings of a minute or two. We have got away from that by video links. There may be other ways in which we can develop it, but I shall look to those who have greater experience of the IT niceties than I do to make those suggestions.

Courthouse Closures: Law Society Comments

T5. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister of Justice to comment on the Law Society's comments, in which it suggested that his approach to the closure of local courthouses has the very definite potential to be penny wise and pound foolish. (AQT 2385/11-15)

Mr Ford: I hear lots of things said by the Law Society, including some of the predictions it made about the terrible things that would happen when we reformed criminal legal aid a couple of years ago, and the so-called strike that some of them engaged in for a while before they recognised the reality of what has to be done to live within a budget and to reform the system. So, I am afraid that I do not recognise any sense in the point made by the Law Society. I do not see any suggestion. If the Law Society believes that the proposals around courthouse reform are penny wise and pound foolish, I hope it will engage with the Department of Justice in finding a better way of

dealing with matters, given the budget constraints we live under.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Law Society is critical of the Minister on his position on this issue; the Policing Board is critical of the Minister's position in how he has handled injury on duty; and the law fraternity, generally, has been critical of the Minister around how he has handled the redistribution of legal aid. Can the Minister identify any body within the legal family at the moment that is not critical of him?

Mr Ford: I am sorry that Mr McIlveen highlights that he thinks the Policing Board is critical of me over the handling of injury-on-duty issues, when it is, principally, a responsibility for the Policing Board. If we have the situation where certain solicitors and barristers are not terribly happy with essential reforms to legal aid, then I am sorry, but we might possibly think they have a vested interest in the matter. At the moment, I think I get on tolerably well with most people in probation, most people in youth justice, most people in the Police Service and most of the civil servants working in the core of the Department who support the work that has to be done, despite the difficult budget cuts. So, at the moment, I am reasonably content that we are still winning, thanks.

2.45 pm

Regional Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform the House that question 9 has been withdrawn.

Street Lighting: Annual Cost

1. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much his Department spends on energy costs annually for street lighting. (AQO 7989/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): To get the most competitive electricity prices for street lighting, a tender competition is run each year. The annual cost of electricity for street lighting varies from year to year, depending on the prevailing cost of electricity, the number of street lights and their wattage. In recent years, the annual cost has typically been in excess of £10 million. The out-turn costs for the last financial year, 2014-15, are not yet finalised, but I confirm that, in 2013-14, for example, street lighting electricity cost just over £10.6 million. I am glad to say that, like many other electricity consumers, my

Department has recently seen a reduction in the unit cost of electricity. However, it must be recognised that, while prices have fallen, the number of street lights that my Department is responsible for inevitably grows each year as new housing development streets and other new roads are adopted into the public road network.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. In relation to technology and the availability of low-energy lighting — LED lighting is 80% more efficient than the lighting systems that are currently used — has the Department looked at investing in that to save in the future?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am happy to confirm that the Department is looking at that proactively, and we have a major pilot project on that in the Banbridge and Craigavon area. LEDs for street lighting use have only recently been developed to the point where they are economically and technically viable when compared with other options, such as the more conventional sodium street lights. Until very recently, the high capital cost of LED street lights meant that their widespread use could not be justified. However, prices have fallen by more than half over the past two years, and I have recognised that the time is now right to invest in LED technology on a much larger scale.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Could the Minister confirm or otherwise reports of the practice of street lighting being turned off in some areas during the hours of darkness?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am not aware of those instances. If he has evidence of any cases, I would be interested in obtaining it. There is certainly no planned systematic switch-off of lights at present, even though, as he will know, the resource budget is under considerable pressure.

Community Transport

2. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans for ensuring that community transport remains an integral component of public transport. (AQO 7990/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: First, I acknowledge the valuable services that the community transport operators provide to local communities and their members

across Northern Ireland. Rural community transport partnerships can provide access to local essential services such as shopping, the post office or local health services, such as GPs, or they can link in with the wider public transport network to enable people to travel outside their local area. It is my intention, subject to EU rules and licensing arrangements, to continue to support those organisations. However, while I support fully the services provided by all community transport service providers, there will unfortunately be a reduction in the level of funding available. I have tried to minimise that, and it should be noted that, during my time as Minister, I have protected the baseline budget for community transport year on year and, where possible, supplemented it with in-year funding. I have been working intensively with officials to determine how best to spend the limited resources that are available to me.

The Member will know that my Department delivers key water, transport and road services. The population relies on my Department's services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. However, I am facing £60 million of pressures in this financial year, and the scale of reduction required to meet that cannot be delivered without an impact on core services. My Department will work closely with the service providers to explore ways of providing the service in a more cost-efficient manner and will seek to minimise the impact on the end user.

Mr Dallat: I have listened carefully to the Minister and the problems that he has in balancing the books, but does he agree with me that Causeway community transport, for example, faces cuts of over 30%? Does he agree with me that neither Translink or any other organisation can fill the gap that will be created when people who require specialist transport to hospitals or clinics are left? It is another case of the most vulnerable being the victims of these vicious austerity cutbacks.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. I share the concern about the potential impact. The Member has suggested that some rural community transport is being cut by one third or 33%. The effective cut in grant to rural community transport is from a baseline amount of £2.75 million to £2.4 million. That is an 11% reduction. The figure of 33% refers to the position after last year's in-year monitoring rounds are included, and the Member will know that I have been successful in previous years in supplementing the awards to the groups through the monitoring rounds. I will continue to do that as we enter the new financial year. I do not underestimate the

challenge, but what I am determined to do, through my officials, is to work with the providers and the groups to see where we can minimise the potential impact.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister state whether community transport services for the rural population, such as those in the Limavady area, will be retained to reduce the impact on social deprivation, isolation and health visits? I appreciate what his answer was to Mr Dallat.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. There is no proposal or intention by me to withdraw the services, but I face a fairly critical financial position in my resource budget. The Member will know that, the Assembly knows that and the Executive know that. I cannot spend money that I do not have. That said, we are working with providers and users to try to mitigate some of the issues on the ground, and we will continue to do that in all areas, in addition to the area that the Member mentioned.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Following on from that, will the Minister confirm the success or otherwise of integrated transport, including community transport, particularly in the mid-Ulster area?

Mr Kennedy: I have no doubt that they are successful projects that operate very successfully in areas and provide essential assistance to people who use the services, whether for social occasions or medical appointments, especially in rural areas. Representing a rural constituency, I am aware of the importance of connecting communities and people in local areas. We will continue to seek to do that, but it is a challenge, given the budget that I face.

Mr Swann: Has the Department tried to source funding from any other avenues?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. I can confirm that the Department made a bid for Delivering Social Change funding of some £2 million over the period 2014-16 to extend the services of local rural community transport partnerships in the evenings and at weekends. That initiative has been included as a measure in OFMDFM's draft Active Ageing strategy, but, as yet, the Department has not received confirmation that it will receive the necessary support from those funds.

Ms Sugden: Are the cuts to each rural community transport partnership equally and strategically justified across Northern Ireland?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her question. I do not underestimate the challenge that is before the user groups and the operators. We have sought to apply the cuts as evenly as we can. That will be the case going forward as we seek to work with groups to address the underfunding situation. I will be grateful for any representations that the Member may wish to bring to me.

Cycle Network: East Antrim

3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the development of the cycle network in East Antrim. (AQO 7991/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am committed, as the House will know, to creating a network of high-quality, direct, joined-up routes throughout Northern Ireland so that everyone can use the bicycle to make every day journeys. I envisage arterial and quiet routes in cities and greenways between urban centres to provide links to shops, community facilities, places of education and workplaces. That will take time to develop, but my Department has already begun work to develop a bicycle network for Belfast that I hope to consult on later this year. Work will then begin on similar plans for other urban areas.

In East Antrim, I am pleased to be able to confirm, the scheme to provide a combined footway and cycleway along Prince Andrew Way in Carrickfergus is nearing completion. Combined footways and cycleways have also been provided along the length of the A8 dualling scheme between Coleman's corner and Larne and on the A2 scheme between Jordanstown Road and Station Road, Greenisland. Plans are also in hand to extend the cycle route from Station Road to Trooperslane and on to Carrickfergus.

My Department will continue to deliver cycling infrastructure, as resources permit, in line with the network identified in the existing transport plans.

Mr Beggs: With the A2 at Greenisland road-widening scheme nearing completion and the cycle lane at Prince Andrew Way proceeding, that will be a considerable enhancement to cycling in my constituency, in particular because it links it to the greater cycling network in Belfast. Will the Minister provide more details of the scheme at Prince Andrew Way

and how it might be extended throughout the rest of the town?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and, indeed, for his enthusiastic support for cycling and the cycling revolution that is well under way. I know that he is a keen cyclist. The scheme at Prince Andrew Way is a continuous 2 kilometre-long and 3 metre-wide combined footway/cycleway along the north side of Prince Andrew Way in Carrickfergus. The substantial investment of over £200,000 in the cycling infrastructure will provide a continuous footway/cycleway route between North Road and Craigs Road and will make it easier and safer for people to walk and cycle in Carrickfergus. It is in line with the Department's policy to continue to promote sustainable transport such as walking and cycling as a healthy, environmentally friendly and cost-effective mode of transport.

Importantly, the scheme links several schools in the area and supports my Department's Active School Travel programme, which aims to increase the number of pupils travelling to school actively, whether through cycling or walking. The programme also improves pupils' general cycling skills and road awareness, and their knowledge of the health benefits of cycling and walking. Ultimately, it helps to create a culture of active travel within schools throughout Northern Ireland. I thank the Member for his enthusiasm for cycling in East Antrim.

3.00 pm

Car Parks

4. Mr Milne asked the Minister for Regional Development, following the handover of car parks from his Department to the new local councils, what provision has been made to address councils' concerns regarding the condition and structural integrity of these car parks. (AQO 7992/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department was not given any specific funding by the Department of Finance and Personnel to resurface or upgrade car parks in advance of their transfer to the new councils, and that remains the case. From a condition and structural integrity point of view, the car parks that transferred were deemed fit for purpose. They were inspected regularly and were in daily use up to the point of transfer. Any defects identified in the run-up to the 1 April 2015 handover were prioritised and repaired as the Department's resources permitted.

Following receipt of an additional allocation for routine maintenance in January monitoring, my Department did undertake some minor works such as the renewal of white-lining in car parks where that was deemed necessary for enforcement purposes prior to the handover to the councils. In addition, engineers carried out a special public liability inspection of the car parks and completed any work identified.

The Member will be aware that the new councils will have received budget transfers from DFP for the car parks, which included an element of funding for maintenance. His own Mid Ulster District Council took possession of 23 car parks with a net book valuation of £2.5 million, which are expected to make a profit of some £216,000. Any future maintenance of the car parks that have transferred is now the responsibility of the respective councils.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sé. I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. How many councils accepted or declined the car park handover, or were even undecided?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. All councils accepted the transfer. They also accepted that the arrangements for enforcement will continue until at least next year, when the current contract operated by the Department expires. There are policy aspects, however. I think that two councils opted not to continue to provide the special rate of five hours' parking for £1, which has been so successful in other places. That is a matter entirely for those councils.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will be aware of the particular skills that were deployed by personnel in car parking under the prior arrangement. Is he aware of councils having requested similar training arrangements to ensure that that is replicated in the new system as the councils take control?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Wherever the Department can assist by using its experience to benefit the new operators, we will continue to do that. As I said in my earlier answer, all councils agreed to use the enforcement officials and personnel in that method at least until the contract runs out next year. We stand open to assist wherever we can, given that the responsibility ultimately now lies with the new councils.

Mr Cree: The Minister will know that the vast majority of the car parks came from the councils after the last reorganisation. Minister, can you explain why the Department of Finance and Personnel top-sliced the income surplus?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I can say that DFP did not withhold any income, but it did offset the surplus from car parking against the budgets for other functions that were transferring. DFP, as the funding Department for central and local government, decided on how the transfer of budgets was to be handled. It did not rest with my Department.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister agree that, in some of these instances, the new councils in effect bought a pig in a poke when the powers were transferred, in so far as, undoubtedly, there will be additional costs to them? Indeed, can the Minister advise us on what compensatory measures were provided to them for the enhancement of those car parking facilities in the amounts of money that were provided to them?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I do not subscribe to his "pig in a poke" comment. Earlier, I quoted figures in respect of Mid Ulster Council, where 23, I think, car parks were transferred, with potential income of £200,000. I think that that is not to be sneezed at or sneered at. I trust local government to look after and to continue to maintain these assets, and I think that it will do that. I do not envisage the problems that perhaps the Member does. Work was carried out as necessary to various car parks just before transfer took place, but I have to say that, based on the record of claims against the Department for defective surfaces, I am satisfied that car parks were transferred in more-than-acceptable condition.

Places of Worship: Signage

5. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the criteria for the erection of a direction sign to a place of public worship. (AQO 7993/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise that direction signs are generally only used where they will benefit road users as an aid to navigation, or for road safety or traffic management reasons. The main purpose of a direction sign is to guide road users to their desired destinations via the most appropriate route at the latter stages of

their journey, particularly where destinations may be difficult to find. Direction signing is therefore not normally permitted to places of public worship that are located on main urban routes or on rural A- and B-class roads. However, a place of public worship may be signed when there is a clear road safety need for doing so or all of the following criteria are met: first, that it has a seating capacity in excess of 100 and is open for worship at least once a week throughout the year; and, secondly, that my Department is satisfied that there is obvious difficulty in locating the church building due to its location or remoteness from the main road network or where there are a number of churches in the general vicinity, particularly with similar names. In such cases, the applicant is expected to pay in advance the full cost of any signing provided, which will become the property of the Department.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Minister for his answer. In rural areas, there are a number of mission halls and gospel halls that fall slightly under the 100-seat capacity; they tend to have seating for around 80. Will the Minister consider reviewing the minimum seating capacity?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I do not know why I am smiling. There is a distinction between the number of people attending and the number of seats that are available. I think that the Member gets that. I do not know whether there is any creativity. Sometimes, it is difficult to ask churches to pursue creativity. It is something that I am prepared to look at, and I will write to the Member after due reflection. It may not be immediate; there are other pressing issues that he is aware of.

Millennium Way, Lurgan

6. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on Millennium Way, Lurgan. (AQO 7994/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am pleased to confirm that the notice of making of the vesting order for the extension to Millennium Way was published in the week commencing 23 March 2015. The vesting order will become operative on 28 April 2015. The scheme involves the construction of 430 metres of new road between Malcolm Road and Gilford Road and the upgrading of the existing junctions between Millennium Way/Malcolm Road and Gilford Road/Banbridge Road. The new road, which also accommodates cyclists and pedestrians,

will reduce congestion in the area and traffic flows through residential areas. It is important to point out that construction of the proposal remains subject to the project continuing to have a satisfactory economic appraisal and funding being made available in future budget settlements.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister very much for that report, and I am warmly encouraged to hear that the residents will be compensated. Have you any idea what the figure is likely to be, Minister?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member, who has been a persistent advocate, along with his party colleague Jo-Anne Dobson, in giving representation for this scheme. In particular, he has promoted it and pressed me to continue to make progress on it. Part of the vesting process system is to work through the issues with the current occupants of residential and business premises that are due to be vested in order to secure vacant possession. My Department plans to continue with that work. Six houses and a complex containing six commercial manufacturing businesses will need to be demolished. All those properties, except for one dwelling, are, I understand, owned by the same landowner, with the majority currently tenanted. When possible, officials will continue to liaise with utility companies to complete preliminary works in advance of the main contract. In particular, some advance work by BT is likely to commence shortly and will take a number of months to complete.

Mr Moutray: I am rather disappointed but not surprised that the Minister gave a very party political answer. He will know that I and many others, as well as Mr Gardiner and Mrs Dobson, have lobbied, had meetings and raised questions about this issue. The scheme will cost about £7 million. When will it be delivered? It has been on the books for approximately 40 years.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and accept that there have been widespread political representations. He asked when construction will start. Obviously, we have to get through the processes from 28 April through to the deadline. The construction of the scheme remains subject to the proposal continuing to have a satisfactory economic appraisal and availability in future budget settlements. If funding is available, it is expected that construction could commence in spring 2016 and would take approximately six months to complete. I very much hope that we will

continue to work successfully to provide the scheme as quickly as possible. I am aware of the long-standing arguments over 40 years. The late Harold McCusker was advocating for it when he was the Member of Parliament for the whole of County Armagh. I am aware that there is widespread public and political support for it.

A5: Update

7. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A5 scheme. (AQO 7995/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Following on from the legal challenge in 2013 to the A5 western transport corridor, four draft reports have been developed to assess any impacts on all the designated environmentally sensitive sites in the vicinity of the scheme, of which there were nine in total, and, when appropriate, mitigation measures are proposed. Public consultation on those reports concluded at the end of November 2014, and responses received will be taken into account as the scheme development progresses. The next step is the publication of the draft vesting orders and draft direction order. A new environmental statement for the scheme will be published at the same time as those draft orders. Publication of the draft orders and environmental statement will be followed by a six-week public consultation period. This is likely to lead to the need for a second public inquiry on the scheme, and I can advise that it is my intention to circulate a paper on the scheme to Executive colleagues in the coming weeks.

3.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to topical questions.

Roads: South Armagh

T1. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister for Regional Development, given the success of the Gullion tourism project and the Giant's Lair at Slieve Gullion Forest Park, what he plans to do to improve the roads in south Armagh, which are extremely dangerous to drive on and are unfit for the growing number of visitors. (AQT 2391/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her topical question. I am aware that Slieve Gullion has become increasingly popular as a venue for tourists and for local people to enjoy their leisure. It is important that access roads to

the area be properly maintained. She will know that my resource budget is under considerable pressure. We seek to maintain the network as best we can, not just in Slieve Gullion, not just in south Armagh, not just in Newry and Armagh, but all over Northern Ireland.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. I recognise that budgets are under pressure, but budgets need to be used wisely and in the interests of the public. The Minister needs to look at a strategic plan to upgrade roads across south Armagh because, if they are neglected much longer, repairs will cost much more and public safety will be at risk.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. I accept some of the points that she made, but the state of the network that I inherited as a legacy from her party colleague and, indeed, her immediate predecessor, was not ideal either. Roads and the maintenance of roads have been an issue for many years, and not just during an election campaign.

Flood Alleviation Scheme: Ballymena

T2. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the proposed flood alleviation scheme for Queen Street, Toome Road and Wakehurst Park in Ballymena. (AQT 2392/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. The investigatory report was presented to the flood investment planning group on 23 March 2015. The report identified a number of options to reduce the flood risk in the Toome Road and Queen Street area of Ballymena. It has been agreed that the preferred option outlined in the report should be taken through detailed design to delivery. This will now be progressed as a joint NI Water and Transport NI project and will include improvements to the storm drainage system from the Wakehurst estate, increasing the capacity of the Northern Ireland Water combined sewerage system and separation of road drainage from NI Water's combined sewer. In addition, options to introduce improvements through a sustainable drainage system will be further investigated.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his update. As he well knows, this problem has been ongoing for quite some time. Does he envisage a time frame for completion of these works?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his interest. This will be a significant project with a preliminary cost estimate of £1.5 million. It is estimated that the project could be ready to commence in 12 months, with a further 12 months required for construction. This outline time frame will be subject to any statutory approvals, land purchase and the availability of funding. However, given the potential for further flooding at this location, the scheme will be prioritised accordingly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member listed for question 3 has withdrawn his name; I call Mr Alastair Ross.

Community Transport: Cuts

T4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development, with the belief that Ms Sugden's earlier question on community transport was not adequately answered, whether cuts to community transport have been applied proportionately across all providers in Northern Ireland. (AQT 2394/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Of course, we will always seek to apply efficiencies and cost savings evenly across the board. Sometimes it is dependent on the level of service in an area, and we have to be mindful of that. Generally, however, we seek to do so.

Mr Ross: I take it that that rather long answer is a longer way of saying, "No, they have not been applied proportionately across Northern Ireland". Given that that is the case, will the Minister perhaps outline the disparity between the lowest price per trip and the highest price per trip across Northern Ireland and across the providers?

Mr Kennedy: The Member will know that there are variations in all these things. I am not in a position to outline that to you in detail. If you write to me, I will happily provide a more detailed answer.

There is a significant challenge. My officials will work through that challenge to address it, and they will work with groups and users to minimise the impact on front-line services. I realise the importance of those services to a great many people in rural and urban areas.

Grass-cutting Schedule: Carnmoney

T5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the

grass-cutting schedule for the Carnmoney area of Newtownabbey. (AQT 2395/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her topical question. The Member will know that, as a result of budgetary pressures, the resource budget is under severe pressure. At the moment, we simply carry out work that is absolutely necessary. That is likely to cause problems, but it is done under my instruction that we will continue to do that at least until we see the outcome of the June monitoring situation. I am conscious that any impact will be on front-line services.

Maintenance issues cannot simply be wished away. Grass cutting, gully emptying and street lighting are all day-to-day services that the public expect and need. We need to provide those services, but we need to be adequately funded for them.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer thus far. Given that the grass along the Fairview Road in Newtownabbey was cut only once last year and has not yet been cut this year, does he agree that the reduction in grass cutting will have a detrimental effect on the area for residents and on their enjoyment of their locality?

Mr Kennedy: I accept the Member's point. Where possible, we seek to make at least two cuts a year in rural areas and five cuts a year in urban areas. With the budgetary position at the moment, it is not possible to do that. Those issues are well known and have been debated not only in the Chamber but around the Executive table. Indeed, the Committee for Regional Development is also aware of the pressures. I need the support of colleagues in the House to ensure that adequate funding is provided to the resource budget of DRD so that these services, which are much needed and are important, can continue in the fashion that people have come to expect.

Parking Regulations: Fair and Equitable Enforcement

T6. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an assurance that there is fair and equitable enforcement of parking regulations across our towns, cities and villages in Northern Ireland. (AQT 2396/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am happy to confirm my belief that enforcement is fair and transparent and that the system is not politically or socially blind in any sense.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he then explain why it appears that there is no enforcement and no parking tickets are ever issued in towns that have twice the population and are twice the size of others? Indeed, in one town, Fivemiletown, four parking attendants were operating on one day.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. He is on public record and has submitted questions for written answer and questions for oral answer on enforcement in Coalisland and other areas.

Two traffic attendants are employed by NSL to patrol streets in Fivemiletown for enforcement reasons two or three times a week. The Member suggests that at one point there were four. If he wants me to investigate that incident, assuming it was an isolated one, I am happy to do so. Let me state absolutely that enforcement, when it takes place, is done on an even, fair and transparent basis. I can think of a great many towns other than Coalisland where there are few or no incidents or enforcement cases, and much of that is down to the good sense of people in those areas obeying the various restrictions.

Yorkgate Interchange: Update

T7. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the Yorkgate interchange. (AQT 2397/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question and his interest. He will know that I recently announced my intention to hold a public inquiry into the proposals for the York Street interchange. The scheme is expected to cost in the region of £125 million and £165 million. The public inquiry is likely to be scheduled for late autumn 2015. The proposed construction project is expected to take up to three years to complete. I know that Members of the House, members of the Committee for Regional Development and members of the Executive are keen to see whether we can make progress, because it is one of the keys to unlocking some of the congestion around Belfast.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for his answer. I agree that many of us would like to see changes at Yorkgate. However, he is aware that someone has made a presentation to his former special adviser about an alternative to the scheme — it is encouraging for Northern Ireland in terms of entrepreneurship — that would save in excess of £100 million. When will the Department take that suggestion

seriously and sit down and work out the methodology behind the proposal? Given that the theme today has been the Department's budget, we have an opportunity to save in excess of £100 million.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. By way of clarification, the Department has sought details of Mr Paschal Lynch's proposals on several occasions so that they can be assessed. However, we have been unable to review Mr Lynch's proposals as he has yet to provide those details. In order to move things on, I have agreed to have a qualitative assessment of the proposals conducted. That will be undertaken by an experienced traffic engineer with knowledge of the area to ascertain whether there would be value in progressing them. I have also taken the precaution — the Member will appreciate this — that the assessment will be managed by a different section engineer from the one who brought forward the proposals, so that we can independently assess and weigh up Mr Lynch's proposals.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call Sandra Overend for her topical question, I remind her that, as the Minister's Assembly Private Secretary and in line with the protocol, her question should relate specifically to a constituency matter in which she is directly involved.

A6: Update

T8. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A6, given its importance to her constituency, businesses and commuters who travel to Belfast. (AQT 2398/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her question. I can confirm that consultants were commissioned in July 2003 to examine the route between Randalstown and Castledawson and to develop a preferred line for a new dual carriageway.

3.30 pm

In February 2012, the inspector recommended that a junction located east of Bellshill Road would be a more acceptable alternative. My officials have subsequently developed that. A planning application to construct that junction was granted on 3 December 2014. A vesting order for the east of the Bellshill Road junction proposal was published on 9 February 2015, and the closing date for objections was 20

March 2015. A number of objections have been received and are being assessed. The notice of intention to proceed and direction order for the scheme as a whole were published in March 2011. Vesting orders to compulsorily acquire the land required to build the dual carriageway scheme will remain in draft and will be made only when funding for the scheme has been confirmed.

That is the up-to-date position.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Members may wish to take their ease while we change the top Table.

(*Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair*)

Private Members' Business

Water Rates

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly reaffirms its rejection of the imposition of water rates on the people of Northern Ireland; recognises that, were they to be introduced, households would face an additional cost of at least £400 per year; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to prioritise within his budget to ensure sufficient investment is in place to maintain properly the local water infrastructure. — [Mr Clarke.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "year;" and insert

"notes that it is an Executive priority to ensure that there are no additional water charges; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to work with his Executive colleagues to ensure sufficient resources are made available to his Department to maintain properly the local water infrastructure.". — [Mr Cree.]

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): There is clearly no rest for the wicked. I welcomed and carefully noted the concerns and representations that Members expressed in the early part of the debate. I particularly welcome the opportunity to debate the future funding of water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland. I also welcome that the Ulster Unionist Party amendment has been accepted by, I hope, a majority of Members who spoke and, indeed, a majority of the parties in the Assembly. I think that that

underlines that the funding of water and sewerage services is a cross-cutting strategic issue with significant public expenditure implications. The Executive have given a commitment that, for households, they will ensure no additional water charges during this Programme for Government.

That commitment means that my Department provides over 75% of NI Water's revenue through the payment of subsidy from the public expenditure system; 20% comes from the non-domestic sector, that is, businesses, industry and so on; and DRD pays the remaining 5% for roads drainage works that NI Water carries out. The most recent published figures are for the year 2013-14, when NI Water was paid £275.4 million in the absence of domestic water charging. In addition, £2.2 million was paid for the septic tank emptying subsidy, which is unregulated.

In giving a commitment that there will be no additional water charges for households, the Executive must also accept the consequences of that decision. NI Water's non-departmental public body (NDPB) status means that it does not have the freedoms and flexibilities normally available to a company. It cannot use reserves to deal with unexpected costs, it cannot raise its own capital and it has no end-year flexibility, so it must manage its capital and resource budgets to ensure no overspend and minimum underspend. That is inefficient and leads to stop/start contracting. The Executive must in turn provide NI Water with adequate resources to meet its future funding requirements.

As a result of increased investment since 2000, levels of service have improved significantly across nearly all service areas. Customer service levels have improved dramatically in the last decade, but that means that NI Water has a growing asset base that has to be maintained. We therefore cannot rest on our laurels.

In November 2012, I brought a paper to the Executive that set out issues and risks associated with the governance and funding of water and sewerage services. The Executive decided to remit those issues to the Budget review group for consideration. My officials subsequently prepared a detailed briefing for the Budget review group that set out a number of options for future funding arrangements, together with more detail about the risks involved in continuing with the current system. The paper highlighted some of the continuing difficulties with the current funding arrangements and the emerging pressure on NI Water's capital expenditure budget. The

Budget review group's consideration of these complex issues is ongoing.

In the meantime, the legislation that permits the Executive to provide subsidy for water and sewerage services in lieu of funding by charging expires in 2016. I instructed my officials to bring forward legislation to extend my Department's power to provide a subsidy on behalf of the Executive to NI Water until 2017, and to take the power to extend this further by subordinate legislation. This enabling power does not prejudge the Executive's consideration of the funding of NI Water in that period, but will ensure that there is certainty about funding for NI Water's operating expenditure while the Executive consider those future funding arrangements. By taking these actions, I have sought to ensure that the Executive's policy of not introducing domestic charges can continue.

The motion calls on me, as Minister, to prioritise within my budget to ensure that sufficient investment is in place to maintain properly the local water infrastructure. I remind Members that NI Water operates within an independent regulatory system where its targets and investment priorities are set by the Utility Regulator and agreed as part of the price control process. The Utility Regulator benchmarks NI Water against the water and sewerage companies in England and Wales and builds in an efficiency challenge for operating costs in order to ensure value for money for customers. NI Water and the Utility Regulator agree how much revenue NI Water requires to carry out its operations in order to achieve required outputs and investment for the best value for customers.

The Utility Regulator published its price control determination for NI Water for the period 2015-2021 on 12 December 2014. The determination is the regulator's assessment of NI Water's revenue requirements over the six-year period in the context of meeting targets that are contained within my Department's social and environmental guidance, as approved by the Executive. The ministerial social and environmental guidance sets out the key social and environmental policies for water and sewerage services for the period 2015-2021. The key priorities that are set out in the guidance are to maintain and improve our high standards of water and sewerage services; to continue to comply with our environmental obligations; to develop sustainable solutions to the challenges that lie ahead, like climate change and flooding; and to enable economic growth.

The regulator has told NI Water to reduce its total revenue requirement by £89.3 million from its business plan figure of £2.43 billion for PC15, resulting in a requirement for £2.34 billion during the period. The final determination also provided for £1 billion in capital investment, which is a constrained budget based on the figures that are included in the social and economic guidance. Of this figure, £556 million has been allocated to the repair and replacement of assets, while £446 million has been allocated to deliver new and upgraded treatment works and other outputs that are prioritised with stakeholders to enhance services.

The regulator has determined that NI Water requires £155 million for 2015-16, but the constraints that are placed upon my Department mean that only £140 million can be made available to fund the company for year 1 of the PC15 period.

Turning to the resource position at the draft Budget stage, the proposed allocation was some £15 million short against the regulator's assessment. That was mainly due to a massive increase in the company's rates bill as a result of the recent non-domestic rates revaluation. NI Water has to certify to the regulator that it has sufficient funding to carry out its regulated activities. The draft Budget allocation would have made it virtually impossible for the company to comply with its legal duties and obligations under the licence. To enable NI Water to meet its legal obligations, I have significantly addressed the shortfall through the allocation of a further £10 million, bringing its resource allocation to £109.2 million for 2015-16, thus reducing the shortfall to some £5 million. I anticipate the additional resource funding going a long way towards enabling Northern Ireland Water to mitigate any significant deterioration in water quality or waste water compliance, which appeared to be inevitable at the draft Budget stage.

A significant risk remains. Northern Ireland Water is still £5 million short of the budget cover that the Utility Regulator recommended, and it will need to absorb that shortfall. There is no funding to cover unforeseen events. I remind Members that the current funding issues relate solely to the 2015-16 budget, while the current price control covers the period from April 2015 to March 2021. A long-term funding solution therefore needs to be agreed if NI Water is to be provided with the assurance that it needs to plan for the future. My Department will make robust bids to the Executive for funding throughout the 2015-16 monitoring rounds to mitigate potential negative impacts on customer

service, such as incidence of low pressure, supply interruptions, pollution incidents and out-of-sewer flooding. Given the level of funding, Northern Ireland Water and the Utility Regulator are still seeking to review the required output targets in the PC15 business plan.

Having explained how NI Water's targets and funding requirements are independently developed through the regulatory process, I now want to address the issue of prioritising my Department's budget to ensure that sufficient investment takes place. On 3 March, I made a statement on the implications of the 2015-16 Budget allocation for my Department. Members will be aware that I am facing £60 million of pressures for next year, and the scale of reduction required to meet that cannot be delivered without there being an impact on core services. I have been working intensively with officials to determine how best to allocate the limited resources that are available to me. My Department delivers key water, transport and road services. The population relies on our services 24 hours a day. I have sought to protect, as far as possible, NI Water and Translink from the worst impact of the reduced budget. I have had no choice but to move money from roads to NI Water, because otherwise the company would have been unable to meet its basic legal obligations. NI Water may still not be able to meet all the public's expectations of it with the remaining shortfall in its budget. That has come about as a result of the massive rates revaluation, so there is no link to the levels of services provided by the company.

I continue to welcome Members' suggestions on how we can continue to fund water and sewerage services to the same level in the face of constrained public expenditure. It is ultimately a matter for the Executive to decide the future funding and governance arrangements for NI Water. Therefore, I ask that the House reach a consensus to ensure that NI Water is adequately funded to meet its future funding requirements.

I will now deal with contributions made during the debate. Mr Clarke, speaking as a Member from the Democratic Unionist Party, acknowledged that he and his party would be supporting the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment. It is fair to say that there was a bit of action in the exchanges between Mr Clarke in particular and Members from the Alliance Party. It is the season in which we expect that.

Mr Cree proposed what is in my view a very sensible and appropriate amendment. He made the point that the deferment of household

water charges is a good example of devolution working, and I very much subscribe to that view.

I am sorry that Mr Lynch is not in the Chamber. He indicated that he will support the motion. I am not clear what Sinn Féin's view on the amendment is, but no doubt that will transpire.

Mr Dallat confirmed that the SDLP is against water charging. He referred to the "wasted years".

I detected in Mr Lyttle's contribution something of a political retreat in Alliance Party policy. There was certainly movement in the air. Whilst that is welcome, it is interesting, and the timing of it is perhaps not lost either.

Mr Byrne indicated that he did not —

3.45 pm

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kennedy: No, I am making progress.

Mr Byrne confirmed the situation in relation to his party's position. He also aired his concern about water metering. He will know that I have indicated that, as part of the new water Bill proposals, it is my intention to be allowed the power to stop the installation of metering where there is no need for it. That is my intention and, hopefully, it will come before the House.

Mr McCallister, who is in his place, had a good go at everybody; he blamed the Assembly, the Executive and every political party that he could think of or name. It appears that everybody is out of step except our John. Interesting though it was, it was a little bit light in detail about the current situation that we find ourselves in.

I respectfully ask the House to support the amendment.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his response to the debate on the motion and the amendment. The motions calls on the Assembly to reaffirm:

"its rejection of the imposition of water rates on the people of Northern Ireland".

We have no problem with doing that; we have made commitments to that effect many times. We questioned the timing of the debate, but I was glad that Trevor Clarke, in his opening comments, made clear that it was not to score

points against the Minister. Unfortunately, the Alliance Party could not say the same.

The Minister has made a continuing commitment to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland are not hit with an extra bill for implementing domestic water charges through the ongoing subsidy that his Department pays to Northern Ireland Water in lieu of charges. We sought to amend the motion because other parties at the Executive table seem content to claim the victory for deferring water charges but want none of the responsibility for ensuring that the responsible Department is adequately resourced to maintain the water infrastructure. We welcome the cross-party support that we have received today.

The Minister, in his response, highlighted how his Department will face £60 million of pressures next year. Recently, he has warned of the consequences that that would have for core services, but he faces continued criticism from all parties for doing so. The Ulster Unionist Party has continually opposed introducing domestic water charges. As was reiterated by my party colleague Leslie Cree, we do not believe that it would be fair to lump another bill on our society when many are finding themselves stretched almost to breaking point. Our amendment is reasonable; if the Executive agree to defer something that has implications for public spend, it should be fairly straightforward that they work with the Minister responsible to ensure that that commitment is taken into account and an adequate allocation is made to that Department.

In response to a comment from, I think, Mr Lyttle, Danny Kennedy has, during his time as Minister for Regional Development, sought to create space to allow for constructive conversations and debate to take place about the future governance of water in Northern Ireland. Most Members who spoke reiterated the point that our water infrastructure has been the victim of underinvestment; something that has been the case for decades. While Danny Kennedy has committed to paying the subsidy to Northern Ireland Water, it is important that it does not become complacent. Like us all, it should always be striving to do better, maintaining high levels of water quality, improving customer service and ensuring that our environment is protected through adequate waste water treatment.

I want to respond to some comments that were made during the debate. Mr Lyttle challenged the DUP about the deliberate misrepresentation that he thought was being levelled at the Alliance Party. Stewart Dickson made an

intervention in regard to the Ulster Unionist Party's position when my party colleague Leslie Cree was making his contribution. We should be careful about making accusations about deliberate misrepresentation. John Dallat from the SDLP said that people should not pay twice for water and that we should avoid making the debate party political. On a positive note, he highlighted the faults of the previous Sinn Féin Minister and how he had spent £1 million on the installation of water meters, so he kept party politics out of the process altogether.

John McCallister spoke about being exhausted. As the Minister highlighted, we are all pretty exhausted with what seems to be John's single transferable speech on nearly any subject that is brought before the House.

I am glad that most parties have indicated their support for our amendment.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: No, I am finished.

Mr Bell: This has been a very healthy debate on a matter that is of very real importance to householders out there. What all of us in the House want to do is to make sure that money is retained in families as far as possible. Nobody should underestimate the pressures that are on many family budgets at this time. It was right to table the motion on water rates and to let people know the position, because there has been some confusion. People say, "You are being political", but it is a political matter and a political decision. How we pay is a political choice. When an element of confusion has been created, it is only right that we reaffirm the actual position. I am confident that the Assembly will today reaffirm its rejection of the imposition of water charges on the people of Northern Ireland.

We should also be aware of the fear in many households out there that, were they to be charged for water separately, that could be an additional cost of at least £400 a year, which is not a small amount by any stretch of the imagination. Today, the Assembly, acting collectively, can reaffirm its position. It is an Executive responsibility: there is no problem with that. For my part, the motion was never designed to say anything other than that the Assembly reaffirms its rejection of water charges and wants the Executive to work with the Minister to ensure that resources are available and that we have a proper infrastructure.

We have seen major problems with sewerage and flooding, and we have a very challenging role to play. What I can say to Members is that, when we as an Executive look collectively at this, we know that we cannot spend the same pound twice. We will have to prioritise. When you decide to prioritise, by very definition, you will put more pressure elsewhere in the budget, but that is our job. We were elected to make good decisions and give good stewardship of taxpayers' money. Let us try to do that with some sense of collective responsibility.

I get concerned when we agree priorities. In the Stormont House Agreement, for example, we sat down and agreed budgets with the Government. We then brought them back, and, in the period after that, there were different votes, squabbles and point scoring. The people of Northern Ireland are looking to us to be on the side of the householder, to try to retain as much money as there is in a household, and to scotch the fear of families having to find £400 if there were to be an additional water charge.

Trevor Clarke's contribution was very strong. We look towards not only efficiencies but affordability. We want to support where we can, and we want to protect where we can. We also want to move forward in a range of other areas of government to ensure that the burden comes off the family. We want to use measures to help families to bring in more income for themselves. The importance of water as a collective right, or variations on that theme, was brought out by Seán Lynch and John Dallat. The cost and how we would cover it was brought out by Lord Morrow.

I want to be fair on this: I think that Chris Lyttle clarified the position when he said that the Alliance Party was not bringing water charges forward at this time. That may be where the confusion arose, if I am genuine, because the issue seemed to be that there would not be charges. Then, I think, there was some discussion in the Alliance Party about revenue raising, and, possibly because of an election, the situation seems to be, "We'll not charge you there, but we'll charge you here". That is not revenue raising; that is revenue-neutral. If it was revenue raising, it was revenue raising. However, the important thing is that today the Assembly, collectively, can tell people that we reaffirm our rejection of the imposition of water charges on the people of Northern Ireland. That rejection was reaffirmed by Mr Byrne. We had a colourful contribution from Mr McCallister, who said that he would not give a penny more. Anybody who makes that type of statement is so far out of touch. I talk to the hospitals across Northern Ireland, and I have

family members working in them; I look at the schools across Northern Ireland; I look at the investment that we need in childcare; and I look at how much more we can do on top of what we already do to attract foreign direct investment. I do not think that anybody can reasonably say, when we face a budget cut of the magnitude of £1.5 billion —

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Bell: I have listened to your contribution; perhaps you will listen to mine. I do not think that anybody —

Mr McCallister: It made sense

Mr Bell: Maybe to you. I do not think that anybody having a budget cut of £1.5 billion could say that to our schools, hospitals, nursery schools, roads, street lighting and other areas. Today, the Health Minister hears from a fellow Member from South Down that he would not give one penny more. Frankly, that ranks as a political naivety if not, in political terms, a political stupidity.

We can all rant at the difficulties that there have been in the Executive. What the Member failed to acknowledge was that the Executive have brought more foreign direct investment to this part of the United Kingdom. Until August 2014, we boasted, rightly, that we brought more foreign direct investment per head of population than any other part of the United Kingdom. Until that point, it was with the exception of the greater London area. Now we can supersede that with the knowledge that we are, per head of population, attracting more foreign direct investment to Northern Ireland than is going to any other part of the United Kingdom.

In the rant against the Executive, the Member failed to mention falling unemployment and the 27 months in which, month after month, unemployment has fallen. I think that it stands at 27 months of falling unemployment. He failed to mention the investment in childcare and helping people to get back into work. Additionally, he failed to realise that the Executive work hard to ensure that every household in Northern Ireland has the lowest household charge in the UK. We are not saying that everything is perfect. We have major issues and major difficulties, but we want to look to where we can alleviate those burdens. The Minister, in a comprehensive and detailed reply, set out the needs that are there. Anybody would think that we were in a pact; well, he is. The case for a new and upgraded series of pieces of work has been well made.

The attention being focused specifically on sewerage and flooding is well directed and has been well prioritised.

4.00 pm

The Northern Ireland Assembly is saying, "We will, as far as we can, keep money in the purses and wallets of households. We will not put an additional charge of £400 onto households. We understand the pain across all our constituencies that households face in making ends meet, and we commit ourselves to working collectively, as an Executive, to ensure that we have the necessary water service that the people of Northern Ireland deserve".

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly reaffirms its rejection of the imposition of water rates on the people of Northern Ireland; recognises that, were they to be introduced, households would face an additional cost of at least £400 per year; notes that it is an Executive priority to ensure that there are no additional water charges; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to work with his Executive colleagues to ensure sufficient resources are made available to his Department to maintain properly the local water infrastructure.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs).]

Adjournment

Causeway Hospital

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members will have approximately five minutes.

Mr Dallat: It is my privilege and honour to lead on the debate on services at the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine, and to avail myself of the opportunity to comment on Sir Liam Donaldson's report. It is also an opportunity for me, on behalf of the people whom I serve, to pay tribute to the doctors, nurses and all the staff, past and present, who have dedicated their life to striving to bring about and maintain a level of health care at the Causeway Hospital

that has the capacity to be second to none and unequalled anywhere in the health service.

Last weekend, a visitor to our home took ill suddenly and had to be rushed by ambulance to the Causeway Hospital, where he received a level of care in A&E and subsequently in medical ward 2 of the hospital that is, I believe, unequalled anywhere in the world. No words could ever describe the life-saving medical treatment and care that our visitor received. During those anxious hours in A&E, while a dedicated team of doctors and nurses worked with our visitor to stabilise him, took X-rays and carried out complex tests, I had the opportunity to see the drama, certainly in my eyes, of the working of a fully functional emergency department. I was amazed at what I saw and came to the conclusion that we must redouble our efforts to ensure that this wonderful facility, which people turn to in times of crisis, is secure for future generations. There is no time to dwell, but I want every man, woman and child to know that, on their doorstep, there are the most wonderful people who are driven not by money or reward but by a vocation unique to the health service.

I also acknowledge recent decisions by the Northern Trust to make significant appointments at the Causeway Hospital that have helped to reduce anxiety about its future. I just hope and pray that the Minister does not accept the one-size-fits-all approach that is based on a cost-cutting agenda and is perhaps more relevant to the health-care problems of large English cities. My arguments are in no small way based on the work of the Causeway Hospital campaign group, which is made up of some of the most dedicated, skilled and experienced people associated with community issues and, in particular, health care.

The Donaldson report, which I referred to in my introduction, acknowledges that we are dealing with an ever-increasing ageing population, but it must be said that it has serious inconsistencies and contradictions that, I feel sure, the Minister must be and needs to be aware of. Perhaps the worst of these is that Donaldson supports all acute services being provided by centrally located hospitals. Only 10% to 15% of acute admissions require rapid or planned transfer to regional units, and there is universal agreement here that patients who need regionally based specialist services should be transferred, as they currently are, using the existing clinical networks, joint protocols and guidelines. In that, there is no problem, disagreement or challenge and certainly no need to propose huge hikes in the salaries of senior and middle management, as suggested in the Donaldson

report. In the real-life case involving my visitor, I could see that clearly, as A&E handed over the patient to another team of specialists who followed through the care that was needed to ensure a short stay in the hospital. This is the only sensible way to ensure that A&E is a seamless part of the hospital function. The 85% to 90% who do not require transfer to specialist hospitals should be treated locally, and it is here that we must ensure that the Causeway Hospital remains an acute centre of medical excellence for the vast majority of patients who have no need to be transferred to other hospitals or undertake long journeys, adding to stress, inconvenience and the cost of travelling to Belfast through a heavily congested city with poor public transport and parking.

There is much more to the fatally flawed report by Donaldson, and a lot of it is already obvious. The potential swamping of centre facilities that should be kept for their speciality role must be avoided, but it is already happening with headline news all too often. The unnecessary and intolerable strain placed on the Ambulance Service is already well established, with 96% of paramedic staff reporting stress and other health problems relating to work.

In the case of the Causeway Hospital, if such a daft proposal were to be followed through, it would mean the deskilling and erosion of the confidence of local medical and nursing staff, and that would be a tragedy because I know of no staff more dedicated, more committed and more representative of a health service that puts patients at the centre of its work.

I plead with the Minister not to accept the recommendations of consultants hook, line and sinker, particularly when those recommendations are plucked out of another area which is quite unlike and unrepresentative of our own. Remember, this is the man — I am talking about Donaldson — who was called on to resign by the British Medical Association when he was Chief Medical Officer in England after producing a highly controversial report on modernising medical careers. His record is not without blemish. In our case, he has produced a one-dimensional, management-centred, financially driven report that completely ignores patient-centred local factors.

The Assembly had a difficult birth and its adolescence has not been without trouble, but surely the one thing that we must agree on is our ability to make decisions that suit our people present and future, particularly when there is universal agreement on what should happen for the best reasons.

The arguments for ensuring that the Causeway Hospital remains an acute hospital have been well made by people locally who have worked in the service and dedicated their life to it and by those who have experienced the highest standards of care while they have been patients in that hospital. We all know that nothing remains the same and that change is inevitable, but change must be for the better and must be based on sound judgement and not on the back of a report from an author who does not share the experience of those who have worked in the hospital for a lifetime and know much better what works and what would be a disaster not just for the Causeway Hospital but for the health service as a whole.

In bringing about change, I welcome the increased collaboration between the Causeway Hospital and Altnagelvin Area Hospital. It is something that the previous Minister of Health, Edwin Poots, advocated, and I was pleased to see the current Minister, Jim Wells, in Altnagelvin this week. This is not a one-way street but a genuine exercise in sending patients in both directions to bring about higher levels of specialisation not just for the Causeway Hospital but for the Derry-based hospital, which has important links with Letterkenny General Hospital. Surely, that is good practice that protects the accident and emergency service. We must not allow our accident and emergency service to become simply a shopfront for patients who would be transferred to Belfast hospitals.

Time and again, we are told about problems with the recruitment of senior and middle-grade medical staff over the last five years. That could be corrected by clear investment in the future. Recent appointments and the apparent drive to create new partnerships can remove the uncertainty and will, with little doubt, stimulate interest in applying for posts in the Causeway Hospital and in Altnagelvin. I saw evidence of that at first hand when people from different parts of the world worked in harmony as a team to deliver a health service that is, without doubt, fit for purpose.

It is interesting to note that, since its official opening in 2001, the Causeway Hospital has had no capital investment, while Antrim has had very heavy investment. It is now time to reassess that strategy and to recognise that previous attempts to centralise services 30 miles away were flawed. Perhaps the recent appointments that I referred to are the first visible signs of intent to reverse that policy. I hope so. That needs to be underlined.

In accepting it is time for change, let us make sure that we put the present and the future needs of the community that the Causeway Hospital serves at the top of our agenda. In doing so, let us remember that easy and rapid access to local hospital services is essential, providing as a minimum the services that currently exist at that hospital. That is key.

Let us be reminded that Transforming Your Care has emphasised the need for closer working cooperation between hospitals and community services, with more care to be delivered outside the hospital. The Causeway is ideally suited to develop that concept in view of the already effective links, with GP practices and specialist nurses crossing the hospital/community interface and with the presence of two GP-run community hospitals. Let us learn from the blunders made in other areas, such as Mid Staffordshire, where the disintegration of the health service led to a renewed focus on the basics of general medical and nursing care. The recent report 'Future Hospital' emphasises the need for generalists, rather than super-specialists, to take responsibility for inpatient care and to respond in particular to the increasing prevalence of elderly patients with multi-morbidity. The Causeway is well placed to respond to that.

I emphasised the need for partnership and integration with other providers, but that must be on the basis that the Causeway is not in any way diminished in its core values as an acute hospital not only in name but in practice. The Causeway serves a population of at least 150,000, rising intermittently to 200,000, and caters for a mobile student population. I suggest that it would be utter madness to allow a situation to develop where people would have to travel 40 miles to Antrim or a similar distance to Altnagelvin, leaving a huge area isolated. In that respect, we must use our influence as a local Assembly to rise above those consultants' reports and to do what is best for our people. We should not leave it to a future generation to undo the harm that would be done if a report such as Donaldson's were implemented in its entirety. We need to question those reports and ask who is writing them and what superior knowledge they have over local medical doctors who have spent their entire lifetime working in this area.

Please do not let the hospitals become another railway story. Do not let Donaldson become like the Beeching blunder of the 60s, when thousands of miles of railways were closed down on the back of an ill-informed report that almost destroyed the railway system. Indeed,

since that, many of those railways have had to be reopened.

We need to go for it and tackle all the factors that made the Causeway less attractive for recruitment and training. I mentioned collaboration with other hospitals, but in-house training is also vital and demands immediate plans to gain recognition and re-accreditation for a wonderful hospital that deserves to be the flagship of health care covering the entire north-west and beyond.

The Causeway can and will move with the times. It has already demonstrated that it can deliver acute hospital services that are safe, of high quality, sustainable and effective. The challenge to the Assembly and to our Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is this: will you rise above Donaldson? Will you back a winner and give direction to those who are responsible for the long-term planning of health care in the Causeway area? Will you tell them that you believe passionately in the people who make the Causeway the hospital what it is and can be in the future? Will you ensure that there is capital investment and local leadership in planning the future? Will you avoid the blunders of past consultants who had no mandate and little knowledge of the areas that they reported on? Will you prevent them causing a future train wreck of a different type, involving the health and well-being of our people?

In drawing to a conclusion, I know that there are many issues that I have not dealt with, such as the ongoing management of palliative care, midwifery and the relationship with the Ulster University. Hopefully, others will pick up on those and other important issues. I look forward to other MLAs' contributions, because this is a task that we must do together. I particularly want to hear the Minister's response, whom I have confidence in, to the most important issues facing the people whom I and others represent now and in the future.

The Causeway Hospital has not let us down, the people who serve in it have not let us down, and God forbid that the Assembly lets the Causeway down.

4.15 pm

Mr Campbell: I join in acknowledging Mr Dallat's getting the Adjournment debate on the Causeway Hospital and his concluding remarks about the need for a consensus in dealing with this issue, which has been the case ever since the Causeway Hospital opened. I am quite

certain that it will continue to be the case as we move on.

There were a number of us who, before the present Minister became the Minister of Health, had either the foresight or the advanced knowledge that he would become the Minister of Health. We invited him to the Causeway Hospital anyway, to ensure that he would see at first hand the great facilities that there were and that he would be able to speak to the staff and the officials there and indicate his support not just for its retention but its development as a first-class facility. I think that it was a good move to get the Minister-to-be to come to the hospital and to get him signed up to the future of the Causeway Hospital. We are glad that he was able to do that.

Mr Dallat referred to a number of issues, and I may refer to one or two of them along with other issues. One of the things that sets the Causeway Hospital apart from other acute hospitals is the fact that, between now and September, the catchment population for the Causeway Hospital increases by about 70%, which is not applicable to any of the other acute hospitals across Northern Ireland. Of course, that is because of the coastal resorts, the thousands upon thousands of caravans that are located on the Causeway Coast and the holiday homes and the second homes that are based on the coast. It has the capacity to deal with many, many more minor injuries, and it has to do that over a five-month period that other hospitals do not have to deal with.

There has been a continuing concern, since within two or three years of the Causeway Hospital opening, about its future. About four or five years ago, for a prolonged period of time, possibly about 12 months, there was a concern that the hospital's future as an acute hospital at all was in considerable doubt. Campaigns were launched to ensure the retention of the hospital, and, of course, that moment passed. After that, again for a prolonged period, there was a concern and a fear in the locality that, while the hospital's future was secure, the A&E in the hospital also might be under threat. Over a period of time, thankfully, with work done on that, that concern has receded, although not disappeared entirely. I know that a number of us have been in regular contact with the trust and the Health Minister to try to ensure that this hospital is not just retained in the services that it currently provides but builds for the future.

On this occasion, I concur again with Mr Dallat — I will make sure that this will not be a repeated offence in that I will concur all the time with Mr Dallat — about the need to build the

relationship between Altnagelvin and Causeway. So much can be done about that, whether it is maternity services or other services that I know they are looking to develop between the two sites. This is good and is positive for the future. The staff at the hospital are magnificent, as they are in each and every unit across Northern Ireland, and we need to offer them our unstinting support. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what his reaction and response is to the debate and to keep repeating the assurances of the commitment to the site and to develop it. Of course, as health provision changes into the future, the hospital's staff, the Department, the current Minister and subsequent Ministers will have to adapt to the changing needs.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Campbell: I recommend the Adjournment debate to the Minister, and hopefully he will be able to respond positively to it.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member who secured today's Adjournment debate. It is a very important topic.

I visited the Causeway Hospital last Friday, where I met senior clinicians and staff about their concerns, as I have done many times before. Many of those concerns remain the same today as they were previously; namely, the apparent lack of security of tenure, morale issues, and the perception that the Causeway Hospital has not been developed and resourced in the manner in which it should. The Causeway Hospital is an excellent hospital with outstanding staff, but it could be better utilised, funded and equipped. Indeed, for my part, coming from an area that is equidistant between Coleraine and Derry — that is, the Limavady and Dungiven area — I can say that Altnagelvin is better equipped and more easily accessed due to the better roads infrastructure. The Causeway Hospital remains the choice of many for access and treatment due to the positive experience of the patients there. Those people have voted with their feet, and that is why they are acknowledged by the clinicians and staff there.

A wide range of services and departments is available, including an emergency department; a children's ward; a day procedure unit; dermatology services; a fracture and pain clinic; gynaecology services; a minor injury unit; three outpatient departments; an X-ray department; an ICU; a maternity unit; medical photography;

two medical wards; two surgical wards; a rehabilitation ward; theatres; and the Ross Thompson psychiatry unit. That is a fairly extensive guide to the services provided at the Causeway, but if we drill down into the form and nature of the service provision, we will see a different story. One of the clinicians I was talking to last Friday was Mr Barry Marshall, who is one of the chief obstetricians there. He told me that, even in the maternity unit, staff are not able to take expectant mothers for the birth of their babies if they are, for example, diabetic or have an above-average body mass index, even though they would be well capable of delivering the babies in the unit in such cases. The mothers have to go elsewhere — to Antrim or Altnagelvin. Those are not isolated circumstances. A less-than-holistic delivery service is available at the Causeway, and that is very much to be regretted.

Those matters have led to a degree of frustration among staff there. There is more than a perception that it has led to difficulties in recruiting and attracting staff to the Causeway. I am not sure what can be done to address that inability directly, but we must look at the underlying issues. The location of the Causeway Hospital is also critical, owing to its essential place in the delivery of health provision, both geographically and physically. For example, the glens of Antrim are a large and isolated area served by the Causeway. Furthermore, the entire Causeway Coast attracts hundreds and thousands of visitors during the summer months. That alone would justify the provision of adequate services at the hospital.

Historically, it might have been better to have had an acute hospital somewhere halfway between the two current hospitals at the Causeway and in Antrim, but we are where we are, so we must address the issue. I was recently informed that the urology department is to be moved, and that too is to be regretted.

I fully support fully the Causeway Hospital, the retention and expansion of its services, and the adequate and proper resourcing of those services.

Mr Swann: I start by congratulating Mr Dallat on securing this Adjournment debate, because it was near enough three years ago to the day — 29 May 2012 — that he brought the same topic to the House. Having reflected on the contributions in Hansard from then, I can say that progress is being made at the Causeway Hospital. At that time, the tenor of the debate was very much around the future of accident and emergency services.

As has already been referred to, it is the large geographical area and the populace that the Causeway Hospital services that makes it unique among our hospitals, as well as the fact that the new council area — Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council — has one of the highest levels of elderly and retired people living in it. Mr Campbell referred to the 70% increase in people to be serviced by the hospital as a result of the influx during the summer months. As Mr McQuillan said in the debate two years ago, that hospital is vital for the sustainability of the air show and the North West 200, two highly dangerous sporting events, which could be put in jeopardy should that level of service and support not be there. That is seasonal, but it is not as if everybody disappears during the winter months because that is when the large student population comes into the area, and they need looking after as well.

The basis for Mr Dallat bringing this Adjournment debate are the concerns that are being raised locally by staff, hospital users and the general populous. What is coming down the road, and what is the future of the Causeway Hospital through Transforming Your Care or the Donaldson report? That is what is adding to the local disquiet. Encapsulated in that is the Northern Trust's model of service, which seems to be based on an acute service in Coleraine, with A&E solely facilitated there, and the threat that would pose to the Causeway.

I welcome the recent appointments of senior clinicians to the Causeway, which have started to give a little bit of reassurance and security to the rest of the staff. I would like reassurance from the Minister that that is a continual path of development, involving the retention and expansion of the services that are already there. We see a contradiction in some of the Northern Trust's policies, which is why we are looking for that reassurance. Dalriada Hospital, which is used as a step-down facility to the Causeway, being under threat adds to the general unease in the local area. We really need that reassurance.

I have heard Members comment on the great service we get from the staff but, from the user's point of view, there still seem to be increasing pressures on A&E at times, when it has to close and patients are diverted. So, I would really like reassurance from the Minister that there can be some kind of review of provision to make sure that A&E is adequately provided for, as well as other departments in the hospital. What the Causeway needs at this

time is certainty, and it is the Minister who can provide that certainty and give the staff of the Causeway, people who use it and the general populous around area that reassurance. I hope the Minister can provide that certainty in his summing up today.

Mr Storey: I welcome this opportunity to discuss again what I believe is, as other Members have said, a vital service in our local community. I speak on a personal basis, given that my father has had to avail himself of the services of the Causeway Hospital for the last three weeks, following a small heart attack. I know that I speak with my father's endorsement when I say that the care that he has received, not only in the Causeway, but in Altnagelvin for a short time — Mr Dallat made reference to the working relationship between the two hospitals — was exemplary. Certainly, on a personal basis, as a family, we have nothing but the highest praise for the provision in the Causeway Hospital.

Comment has been made about where we were and concerns and fears. Let us be quite blunt and honest: some of those concerns were hyped up by politicians, who, for their own ends, wanted to use an issue such as the Causeway Hospital for cheap political point scoring. I am glad that what we have heard so far has been not been in that vein, having heard scare stories in the past that the hospital was closing and coming to an end.

Let us remember that I come from a town that knows what it is like to lose a hospital. The Causeway Hospital came into existence as a result of the closure of the Route. It took a long time for the people in my part of the North Antrim constituency to become accustomed to the fact that the new hospital was down the road in Coleraine, but they now look upon it as their local hospital and have bought into it. Just the other day, I called into see Dr John Robb, someone we all have known for many years. He expressed his appreciation of the fact that, after all the years of transition from the Route to the Causeway, people have bought into the Causeway Hospital as their local service. We need to give Fred Mullan and his staff credit; some comments were made about the staff. Fred Mullan has done an exceptional job since taking up his post and needs to be given all possible support.

4.30 pm

The Minister will probably have something to say about this, but let us remember that Simon Stevens, who took up the position of chief

executive of the NHS in England in April, said that small hospitals were vital in meeting the needs of an ageing population and would provide focus for the community services that have become "too complicated and too fragmented". In many respects, that is a reflection of what we see being provided at the Causeway.

The trust has a responsibility to ensure that its sets out its vision for services in the entire area. Despite all that we can say that is positive — there is a lot to be said that is positive — there is still a concern about what happens between the Causeway and the Antrim Area Hospital sites. There is a tension there, and you only have to speak to staff to realise that there is sometimes that concern.

I look forward to the trust setting out its vision in what I trust will be a very short time. Politicians can then collectively give their support to ensuring that we continue to see the provision of services such as A&E. I have been lobbying the trust for some time to provide dialysis services in the Causeway, and I welcome the fact that it is now considering the provision of those services very seriously. That will bring its own challenges and opportunities. We have to look a bit wider at what a service can bring to an area and the implications that it could have, and I am well aware that the provision of dialysis services would raise concerns about the number of medical beds.

I had a very productive meeting with Dr Tony Stevens and with Valerie Watts. We need to keep our focus very clearly on the provision of services. At the heart of it is the community that the hospital serves.

I commend the Member for securing the debate. Let us collectively, as politicians, work with the Minister, the trust and the board to ensure that the Causeway Hospital continues to provide for our community in the way that it has done.

Mr G Robinson: I am pleased to speak in the Adjournment debate, and I congratulate the SDLP Member Mr Dallat for securing it. I congratulate all the staff at the Causeway Hospital, who have proven that they are professional, friendly and caring. I have heard those words used many times by patients and relatives alike. I also want to be positive in my contribution, as recruitment and the hospital's future are being positively addressed.

I have spoken to representatives of the Northern Trust and have learned that five consultants have been appointed in surgery,

gastroenterology, respiratory medicine, obstetrics/gynaecology and internal medicine. I have also learned that a consultant cardiologist is being recruited for a joint post between the Causeway and Altnagelvin hospitals. Specialist doctors in general surgery, obstetrics and anaesthetics have also been appointed. That is fantastic news and will ensure continuing and permanent services at the Causeway Hospital.

I want to outline my support for the Causeway Hospital and express my relief that the chief executive has stated his commitment to it. That has been reflected in the appointments that have been made, which will, hopefully, ensure that the other posts are filled soon. All those positive changes add great confidence and boost morale among the Causeway Hospital's staff and, indeed, the wider community in the causeway area. The list of appointments does not show a hospital that is earmarked for closure. Indeed, I welcome the fact that those new appointments will secure the Causeway Hospital in line with the commitments from the trust's chief executive, Dr Stevens, Dr Fred Mullan and others.

At some stage, a great boost to the hospital and staff would be a programme of separation and independence for the Causeway and Antrim hospitals. I also welcome the trust's developing a service for elective surgery that will further secure the future of the Causeway Hospital and the vital role that it plays for the local community and visitors to the area.

Indeed, the tourist sector benefits greatly from the presence of the Causeway Hospital. The North West 200, the air show and Portrush raft race are just some of the major attractions that we look forward to in the north-west. We may have the Open golf tournament, perhaps as early as 2019, when the Causeway Hospital will play a vital role for dozens of tourists and visitors to our beautiful north coast as well as our student population.

There is also a close working relationship between the trust, the unions and the voluntary and community sectors that, I hope, can be extended in future to serve the entire population of the Causeway area. Despite scaremongering from some quarters, I have always believed that the Causeway Hospital can be maintained as a viable facility, and I have not changed my belief. The most important people of all in achieving this are the staff, who form a remarkable unit of professionalism.

In conclusion, I quote the Northern Trust:

"The Northern Trust is well placed to deliver real and effective integration of hospital, community and social care services. In the Causeway and Glens area, this would be based around an acute hospital in Coleraine with an emergency department and supporting clinical services."

Those words bring me reassurance, as I hope they do to all the staff and residents of the area. The Causeway Hospital has a positive and important future in health provision for the north-west of Northern Ireland. I and my colleagues, including the Health Minister, will always be available to support the chief executive, staff and others in their endeavours to keep a world-class health facility at the Causeway Hospital.

Mr McQuillan: As a Member for East Londonderry, I welcome the debate on the future of the Causeway Hospital, and I want to make it clear at the outset that I fully support its retention as an acute hospital and nothing less.

There has been much speculation about the future of the Causeway Hospital over the last number of years that has caused fear and distress among all in the area and for staff and users of the facility. There is no denying that that scaremongering added to the difficulty of recruiting and retaining clinical staff, which itself added to the question of the hospital's future. However, the recent filling of a number of permanent consultant posts, with more in progress, has given the hospital the much needed morale boost that it has been longing for.

There is no doubt that there is a need for a hospital; otherwise such appointments would not have been made. The hospital is a key asset in delivering integrated services to a very large catchment area. Let us not forget that the population rises on the north coast over the holiday period at times of significant sporting and leisure events, such as the North West 200, which attracts over 100,000 visitors, and the air show, which, last year, attracted around 200,000 visitors to the area. There are many more that I could add.

A large proportion of the East Londonderry constituency is rural and isolated, and for constituents in those areas it is vital that acute services and a 24-hour emergency department remain fully functioning. The hospital has borne the brunt of some seriously negative press in the last year, but there have also been some very positive aspects that did not attract as much media attention. It has had excellent results in achieving improved waiting times

through initiatives such as changes to work patterns for senior medical, nursing, allied health and managerial staff and the introduction of the community rapid response service. The staff must be commended for this because they worked extremely hard at all levels to achieve that improvement when many other hospitals were experiencing an increase in their waiting times.

The Causeway Hospital continues to provide a significant range of services, including an accident and emergency department. I believe that morale at the hospital will continue to improve with the Minister's reassurance of his commitment to retaining these services in future. That can only add to the continuing improvement of the services received by and care provided to this extensive area, including the north coast and further afield.

We are all very aware of the hard times facing all Departments. However, I am sure that the Minister will continue to support the retention of the Causeway Hospital and will make his spending cuts in other areas with less impact on front-line services to the area. I also urge the Minister and the Causeway Hospital management to continue to be proactive in advising and informing staff, users and campaigners at the hospital to reduce the risk of any further rumours escalating and to keep morale up in all areas of service from front-line services such as domestic and caring staff up to consultant and senior management level. Historically, mistrust between senior management and staff has added to the low morale. Thankfully, the new chief executive has so far demonstrated a very hands-on approach and worked closely with staff and elected representatives to build relationships, which can only be welcome.

The Minister has also been very proactive in his involvement with staff and user groups, which is reassuring to them and the wider public. I have always been vocal in pledging my support for the retention of the Causeway Hospital. I have no fear and continue to state my categorical support for the hospital and its services. I will continue to support the staff, users and campaigners in the best way I can to ensure that those services and that hospital have a future for many years to come.

Mr Allister: I commend Mr Dallat for securing the debate and join in the warm tribute that he paid to the staff and personnel of the Causeway Hospital, which provides that vital service not just to East Londonderry but to much of North Antrim. I welcome the fact that there is, at present, the appearance of more stability

attached to the future of the Causeway Hospital. I am a little surprised by the attack by Mr Storey on his colleague the outgoing MP for North Antrim, who spoke about the threat of closure to the Causeway Hospital, but I welcome the fact that, with recent appointments etc, it looks a little more stable.

I want to draw the Minister's attention to one particular issue, because it is important that we nail down some matters in the debate. The Minister said in a recent answer to me — he may well have said it to others — that he is:

"committed to retaining Causeway Hospital as a small acute hospital. The model for services ... will be based around an acute hospital in Coleraine with an emergency department and supporting clinical services".

The same Minister — here is the area that I seek clarification on — has embraced with great enthusiasm the Donaldson report, which sets its face against small acute hospitals. It sets its face in favour of centralising acute services. Indeed, it is so audacious in its first recommendation, which the Minister has, it seems, accepted, that there should be an international panel and that we should all blindfold ourselves in advance and commit to accepting the outcome. I certainly will not do that, and I trust that the Minister will not do so.

I would like the Minister to explain where the future lies between his commitment to the retention of Causeway and his embracing of Donaldson, with his agenda against such hospitals. I do not think that you could read the Donaldson report and conclude otherwise than that the Causeway would be one of the hospitals within his target range for the closure or reduction of acute services. The Minister needs to be very emphatic and very clear with the House tonight about what he means. What will he emphatically stand by in regard to the retention of the Causeway as an acute hospital, or does the equivocation that might arise rest in the use of the word "small"? Is he in fact trying to marry the audacious attempts of Donaldson and his commitment to the Causeway Hospital with some sort of agenda to diminish facilities? Will the Minister be absolutely clear? How does he square his embracing of the anti-small acute hospital agenda of Donaldson with his embracing, which is welcome, of sustaining the small acute services such as we have? I trust that that will be faced up to and made very clear.

Will the Minister also be clear to the House about what he sees as the future of the

maternity unit in the Causeway? That is the other area of considerable concern that the Minister needs to address. He needs to put the matter beyond doubt so that the outgoing MP for North Antrim might not again be concerned about the potential closure of the Causeway Hospital. [*Interruption.*]

4.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I remind Members not to make remarks from a sedentary position.

Ms Sugden: Like other Members who have contributed so far, I thank my constituency colleague Mr Dallat for tabling the Adjournment debate. Whether it is unfounded or not, there remains significant concern about the future of Causeway Hospital in its entirety or in the services it provides. I also welcome the positive contributions by Members in the House thus far, particularly by the Minister's party colleagues, because they are in a really unique position to encourage and ensure the future of the Causeway Hospital. I hope that they will continue to support it in the way in which they have shown today.

I suppose that I want to follow on from Mr Allister's point about the Donaldson report, because it is one of the points that makes me understand the uncertainty around Causeway. Yes, the Minister has shown his commitment to Causeway being an acute hospital with an A&E supporting clinical services. That is fantastic, but the devil is always in the detail. I would like the Minister to give more information about the way in which it will move forward as an acute hospital. Will it have a 24-hour A&E service, and what clinical services will it provide? To be fair to the Minister; up until now, the problem with the uncertainty about Causeway has been the investment it has had. Until recently, there have not been any clinical appointments or capital investment. There has been no development. Is that part of the Minister's future plans to ensure that Causeway will remain part of all this?

To come back to the Donaldson report; it is not a terrible report. I take issue with parts of it. At the end of the day, we are not England; we are Northern Ireland. We do not have the same infrastructure. We are a rural constituency. Perhaps, if the Minister's Executive colleague had seen fit to extend the A26 through to Coleraine, there might be more of an argument to reduce the services at Causeway, but he did not do so. Right now, in the position in which

we find ourselves, the Donaldson report is not quite applicable to Northern Ireland.

I agree with Mr Allister that the Minister, up to this point, seems quite enthusiastic about it. That does give me concern for Causeway, particularly when the Minister was asked about Causeway and his response was that, with a population of 1.8 million, 10 hospitals was not appropriate for Northern Ireland. That was in response to a question about Causeway, so that makes me think that forefront in the Minister's mind is that the Causeway Hospital is one too many for Northern Ireland. I hope that the Minister does follow through on his commitment and is not paying lip service to the people in the Public Gallery and to the fact that we have an election in a few weeks' time. I hope that he really does put substance behind the fact —

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. I understand what she is referring to. However, with regard to certainty or uncertainty about the future of the hospital, would she agree that the recent very welcome clinical appointments to the hospital — and, as I understand it, further appointments to be made in the forthcoming weeks and months — are hardly an indication of a lack of commitment to the hospital, but rather the reverse?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Sugden: Thank you. I thank the Member for that question. Yes, Mr Campbell, I agree that that does perhaps suggest that there is some sort of investment in Causeway, but that investment is a long time coming. We need to ensure that it remains in Causeway. I understand that these appointments, whilst they are at the Causeway Hospital, are within the Northern Trust. That means that they can be shifted about to other hospitals. I hope that the Minister will give his commitment in other ways as well the recent appointments, but I do take that fair point.

To conclude my contribution to the debate, I ask the Minister to clarify and, again, to reiterate his commitment to the Causeway Hospital with a wee bit more detail. Will the A&E be open 24 hours or will it be part time? That was referred to me earlier and I think it is cause for concern.

Mr Dallat: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sugden: Yes. Please, go ahead.

Mr Dallat: Is the Member aware that the A&E department in Coleraine hospital is, on many occasions, much busier during the night than during the daytime?

Ms Sugden: Yes. I thank the Member for that. I am aware of that, but other Members in the House have also brought up the fact that our population increases significantly in the summer holidays, which would also need to be taken into account during the daytime. I am somewhat sceptical about making it a part-time A&E service, but if this debate comes down to that, and if that is what Causeway is going to be, I would rather we get it out now so that we can start preparing for it and so that the people in the Public Gallery can find out what is going on beyond the simple commitment to Causeway Hospital and its A&E.

Mr Wells (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): First of all, I thank Mr Dallat for his patience. This debate was due to have been held last week, but because I was witnessing first-rate care in the Royal for my wife, I simply could not make it. I am glad that the Assembly Business Office and, indeed, the Business Committee were able to facilitate his request to have the debate moved on a week.

As the Member for East Londonderry Mr Campbell said, I visited the Causeway Hospital at his request. I have to say that that was in my capacity as Deputy Chairman of the Health Committee. I was impressed by the large number of staff who arrived at the door to meet me and by the very detailed tour of the hospital that I had. I was due to go back to the Causeway quite recently, but, again, because of the problems with my wife's health, I was not able to make it. However, I commit to visiting the Causeway as soon as possible and to discuss some of the issues raised.

I know Fred Mullan very well. He went to Queen's with me many years ago, and I have kept in touch with him about this issue. I have found his input and that of all the Northern Trust's senior staff very helpful. I thank Mr Dallat for raising the issue, and I take this opportunity to thank all the staff at the Causeway Hospital for their service to the local community and for their commitment to deliver high-quality health services. I think that every Member who rose to speak during the debate made exactly the same point, which is that there is absolutely no problem with the standard of service that the people of the north coast are getting from that team.

The hospital is in one of the most beautiful scenic areas of Northern Ireland. In fact, it is almost as scenic as south Down. That was a joke, by the way, in case 'The Coleraine Chronicle' should happen to raise it in next week's edition. The hospital provides services to the local population and the many visitors who come to enjoy the north coast's beaches, attractions and, of course, its world-class golf courses. Such an area needs a vibrant hospital, and I am, therefore, committed to retaining the Causeway Hospital as a local acute hospital. I hope that that allays Mr Allister's fears.

The model for services in the Causeway and the glens area will be based around an acute hospital in Coleraine, with an emergency Department, supporting clinical services, a well-developed intermediate care service and community teams evenly distributed across the area. Of course, it is a very wide area. Perhaps one of the most fortuitous aspects of local government reorganisation is that the new council area more or less fits very neatly the area the Causeway Hospital covers, going right out to Limavady at one extreme and right over to Moyle in the other.

Mr Allister: I am obliged to the Minister. Can I take it, then, that the Minister is repudiating the Donaldson philosophy in the case of the Causeway Hospital? Is the Causeway proofed against the Donaldson philosophy? Is the Minister prepared to say that to the House?

Mr Wells: It is worth saying that Donaldson did not make any reference whatsoever to the Causeway Hospital.

Mr Allister: He said 10 were too many.

Mr Wells: Yes. He made a statement. I am going to come back to it, because the Member raised a very crucial point about recommendation 1 of Donaldson. I wish to deal with that, because several Members, including Claire Sugden, raised it, and I want to deal with it.

What I can say to you is that that is our position on the Causeway Hospital. Donaldson is out to consultation, which ends on 22 May. I am not going to pre-empt the public response to Donaldson on a whole range of issues. Let me remind you that there was more than one recommendation in the Donaldson report. Everybody has homed in on recommendation 1, to some extent ignoring the other nine recommendations, which are equally important.

I will come back to that, and I am sure that the Member will remind me if I do not.

There are partnership arrangements for the community and voluntary sector within the Causeway area. That supports the integrated model of service. The commitment to maintain acute services at the Causeway Hospital was clearly demonstrated in January this year, when the Northern Trust made new clinical appointments to the hospital. Many people raised that issue. Those are permanent appointments.

I want to come back to the concern about the lack of continuity of tenure. I do not know where that is coming from; these are permanent salaried posts in the Causeway Hospital, including consultants in surgery, respiratory, obstetrics and gynaecology and a consultant physician in internal medicine. They have been appointed and funded, and they are there on a permanent basis.

Ms Sugden: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly.

Ms Sugden: Although those appointments are currently based in Causeway, they are trust appointments as opposed to Causeway Hospital appointments. The Northern Trust also encompasses Antrim hospital and others, so could it, in the future, be that those appointments are moved elsewhere?

Mr Wells: All appointments made in Northern Ireland are made to a trust rather than a specific hospital. These posts were advertised, and it was made very clear to the applicants that they were for the Causeway. They were in response to demands from many MLAs and the MP for the area for new permanent staff. It is a huge commitment by the board and the trust to the Causeway that those have been made. We are also making a joint appointment to a post with Altnagelvin hospital for a consultant cardiologist; that person is in the process of being recruited. That gives us an indication. On top of that, as Mr Campbell said, the trust is recruiting three further posts: a consultant in emergency medicine, a consultant physician in general medicine and care of the elderly and a consultant physician with an interest in respiratory medicine. Those are very highly qualified and highly paid clinicians. If you add up all those appointments, it is a very significant revenue investment in the future of the Causeway Hospital.

I have to be honest — many people have mentioned this — that there were difficulties and uncertainty about the future of the Causeway Hospital, and it was difficult to recruit consultants as a result of that. As a result of the new management team that we have in the Northern Trust, there is a much brighter future and a certainty. There is a commitment from the chief executive to the Causeway that has encouraged senior clinicians to apply for positions in the Causeway. Much of the praise for the turnaround in that situation has to go to the new chief executive and his team, who have done a lot of work to transform the future of the Northern Trust from one that was shrouded in doubt to one where there is a very bright future. That augurs very well for the future of the Northern Trust. Equally, public representatives tell me that there is an open-door policy; Members of the Assembly and MPs who have problems and difficulties are getting their voices heard by the new management team. That has to be a good thing.

Causeway Hospital, like several other smaller acute hospitals across Northern Ireland, has, in the past, experienced difficulties. However, these appointments are good news for the people who use the Causeway Hospital. It is expected that these permanent — I emphasise that word — postings will enhance the continuity and quality of care for patients. I do not know where the problem that Oisin — sorry, I will say "Oisin" because I cannot pronounce his second name — identified about the lack of continuity is coming from.

Mr Ó hOisín: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wells: I certainly will.

Mr Ó hOisín: I accept that the Minister has confirmed the degree of permanence of a number of the positions, but the issue about continuity is referenced in the service provision itself, as well as by some of the individuals. As I said, I believe that the urology department is moving to Altnagelvin as of now. That is where the uncertainty comes from.

Mr Wells: That is a valid point. Urology is a particularly difficult area throughout Northern Ireland. Every trust is finding it difficult to recruit consultants in that field. Indeed, yesterday, in response to a question about cancer waiting lists, I quoted urology as causing 35% of the delays. However, that is a specific issue that is related not so much to the Causeway but to that specialism, where we really cannot appoint people at all when vacancies arise. I would like to think that all the other issues that I have

quoted indicate that there is a commitment to the Causeway.

In capital investment, remember that the Causeway opened only in 2001. I very clearly remember it being built. A friend of mine designed the roundabout at the hospital; I remember chatting to him about it. It is a very modern hospital. You would not expect a huge degree of capital investment in a hospital of that age because it is still relatively modern. That having been said, we spent £2·3 million and £1 million in the last two years, so there is £3·3 million that has been invested in that hospital.

That is entirely normal. Current projects under consideration for the Causeway Hospital include the installation of a wind turbine generator at an estimated cost of £1·2 million. There is already one at the Ulster University and one at Antrim Area Hospital. Again, the fact that we are prepared to spend such a large amount of money on renewable energy indicates a commitment to the site and to the hospital. As Members will be aware, Transforming Your Care recommended three options for the future management of the Causeway Hospital. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, Members.

5.00 pm

Mr Wells: My predecessor indicated that an appraisal of the future management options for the Causeway Hospital should be informed by the work of the turnaround and support team that was appointed to the Northern Trust in 2013. A key element of that team's work was a series of service reviews, including the networking of clinical services and the development of a new model for medical leadership and management.

I remind Members that I was up in Londonderry last week, where I inspected the new cath labs that have been installed. They are absolutely state of the art — the most modern on the island of Ireland and in the United Kingdom. The people of the Causeway area have access to those. Indeed, while I was there, there was a patient from Coleraine and a patient from Castlerock, both in the Northern Trust area, being treated by that outstanding technology. That shows the advantage of sharing services with Altnagelvin. In both cases, within the hour, the patient had been transported from the scene of their cardiac arrest to the cath labs and treated in a very effective way. That shows that the new links with Altnagelvin are bearing

fruit. Now, it would not be possible to have a cath lab at the Causeway in Coleraine or, indeed, at any smaller hospital in Northern Ireland, but it is good that we have hypothesised that service for not only the Western Trust but a very large section of the Northern Trust.

It is important that the work of the turnaround and support team be substantially implemented before further work is carried out on the options appraisal on future management arrangements. When the recommendations from the team have been implemented, the focus can once again turn to the appraisal of the management options recommended by Transforming Your Care.

Donaldson is out for consultation. The points that have been made today should be made to Donaldson. Mr Storey has just made a point of handing me 'Causeway's Future: Proposals for the Way Forward for Causeway Hospital', which was prepared by the Causeway Hospital Campaign group. Those are all the sorts of points that the Donaldson review wants to hear. We are not wedded to any particular recommendation of Donaldson, but I was enthusiastic, because Donaldson has caused us to stop and think on many issues about where we are going in Northern Ireland and how, in many ways, we can configure our services. It has prompted the debate that we need to have. There are MLAs and MPs who see a very bright future for the Causeway Hospital through documents such as this. It is important that the review team has that information and can take it on board.

People who might cast aspersions on Liam Donaldson's track record have to remember that we are talking about the Sir Alex Ferguson of health. This is an individual who was the Chief Medical Officer for England and has vast experience and an impeccable track record in this field. When he makes recommendations, we should sit up and take note. That does not mean that we slavishly follow everything that he says, but we have to give it due and careful consideration. I think that Mr Allister is slightly wrong to say that —

Mr Campbell: Slightly?

Mr Wells: He is entirely wrong to suggest that we should bin the Donaldson review or not take it into account.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wells: Yes.

Mr Allister: I do not think that I said to bin the Donaldson review. I invited the Minister to square the circle between Donaldson, which states that 10 hospitals is too many and therefore — [*Interruption.*] This may be a matter of disinterest to Mr Storey, but it is a matter of great interest to his constituents. Donaldson said that we should bin the 10 acute hospitals and centralise resources: you cannot do that and allow the Causeway Hospital to escape. Therefore, I ask the Minister to reject any Donaldson consequential as far as it affects the Causeway and to make that abundantly clear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I invite the Minister to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Wells: All that I can say in reply is that there is not much sense in me calling a consultation on Donaldson and then issuing an edict as to what I think it should agree. When the consultation is closed, we will have a chance to sit down and analyse what has been said alongside documents such as this and the Hansard report of this debate. We can then have an intelligent debate on the best way in which to configure hospital services in Northern Ireland.

That is as far as I am prepared to go at this stage, but I hope that the huge investment we are making in the Causeway Hospital in staffing at the moment indicates how important a role we see it having in the north coast area.

Adjourned at 5.05 pm.

Suggested amendments or corrections that arrive no later than two weeks after the publication of each report will be considered by the Editor of Debates.

They should be sent to:

- ✉ Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, BELFAST BT4 3XX**
- ☎ 028 9052 1135**
- ✉ simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk**

Hansard reports can be made available in a range of alternative formats, including large print, Braille etc. For more information, please contact:

- ✉ Hansard Admin Unit, Room 251, Parliament Buildings, BELFAST BT4 3XX**
- ☎ 028 9052 1463**
- ✉ hansard@niassembly.gov.uk**

The Official Report (Hansard) is licensed under the Open Northern Ireland Assembly Licence, which can be accessed here: [Open Data Licence](#)

[To receive an alert each time an updated plenary report is published, you can follow @NIAHansard on Twitter](#)