



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament

21 January 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jonathan Bell	Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mrs Arlene Foster	Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Ms Jennifer McCann	Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Edwin Poots	Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Witnesses:

Mr Ivan Baxter	Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament
Dr Tony Damoglou	Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament
Ms Patricia Donald	Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament
Mr Martin Gallagher	Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament
Mrs Margaret Galloway	Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament
Mr Robert Hasson OBE	Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament
Mr Francis Hughes	Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament
Mr William Hutchinson	Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament
Ms Mary Morrison BEM	Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament
Mrs Anne Watson	Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament

Mr William Hay (Northern Ireland Assembly): Before we begin our proceedings, I welcome you all here today to our Senate Chamber. I am particularly pleased to see that so many of you have come back again in 2014 after two previous Pensioners Parliament events. The two previous events took the form of debates, but this year, as representatives of the Pensioners Parliament, you will be taking part in Question Time with four Ministers.

Question Time in the Assembly takes place every Monday and Tuesday when the Assembly sits and Members see it as an opportunity to ask Ministers for information and to press them for action. Members are selected in a random ballot to submit oral questions in advance to Ministers, who take it in turns to come before the Assembly to answer questions. It is also another opportunity for the Assembly to hold the Executive to account. This allows Members to address a range of issues that are important to them and to their constituencies.

With four Ministers in attendance today, you should be able to get a better understanding of how the Assembly works in practice. I hope that you will enjoy your time here and find the experience very valuable. I also hope that those of you who ask questions can relax and not feel overwrought by the formality of the surroundings of the Senate Chamber.

We will have four Ministers to respond to your questions. I am pleased to welcome junior Ministers, Jonathan Bell and Jennifer McCann, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Edwin Poots. I remind you that the session is being recorded by Hansard — the Official Report — and that the proceedings will also be captured on video. However, please feel free to take photographs if you wish.

Before we move to the formal proceedings, I invite Mr Francis Hughes, the chair of the Age Sector Platform, to say a few words of welcome and briefly set out the context for the issues that will be raised by the Pensioners Parliament today.

Mr Francis Hughes (Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament): Unfortunately, due to a medical emergency, I have had to stand in at short notice for Mr Michael Monaghan. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for arranging this event for the third year running. We are delighted that the main issues that are raised annually by pensioners are going to be debated today and will be the subject of questions to the various Ministers. Without further ado, I wish to proceed to Question Time.

Mr Hay: Thank you very much. It is time for questions to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Hughes: Why was the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment not involved in the negotiations that took place between Her Majesty's Treasury and the energy companies, which resulted in the £130 discount for older people on low incomes in Great Britain through the warm home discount scheme.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Thank you for your question. Before I answer, I want to say how pleased I am to be here with the members of the Pensioners Parliament to be challenged on energy policy in particular, which is the main issue for me here today.

In my role as energy Minister, I am acutely aware of the pressures and costs associated with energy bills for all consumers, whether they are people such as yourselves, domestic consumers or, indeed, business consumers. The warm homes discount scheme operates only in England, Scotland and Wales. It is a form of social tariff for particular groups of customers. It is also time-bound to winter 2014-15 and is specifically aimed at those on low income or receiving particular types of pension credits. As a social tariff scheme, its cost is covered by a levy paid by other consumers, and it is well understood in the energy sector that a tariff is brought in relation to one sector is paid for by other parts of the industry.

So, were a similar scheme to be implemented in Northern Ireland somebody would obviously have to pay for it, most likely other consumers and customers. For us, a substantially lower number of customers in Northern Ireland means that the additional costs to those who would pay the levy to cover the scheme would have been considerably higher than that in Great Britain, which would have meant higher bills for consumers who were not entitled to support under the scheme.

It remains the case that we have a different market, and I hope that we will explore that through the other questions that I receive today. It is a different market here than that which operates in the rest of the UK, not just in size but also in matters such as the proportion of customers who may qualify for assistance and the stage of development of competition. Another factor is that gas is a dominant form of heating for domestic customers in Great Britain and, of course, that is not the case here, where it is oil. Therefore, any form of social tariff for Northern Ireland would have to look at oil and, indeed, coal rather than gas. So, the full implications of introducing a scheme in Northern Ireland would need to be considered by the Executive very carefully and as a whole.

Mr Hay: Before I call Mr Hughes, some people may not be able to hear the proceedings. We are trying to resolve that issue.

Mr Hughes: Minister, what consideration have you given to introducing an alternative, local scheme?

Mrs Foster: Because we get the Barnett consequential to the Executive as a whole and not directly to my Department, which I think that most members understand, the matter must come to the Executive. As I indicated, because our market is completely different to that in GB, it would have to be a different type of scheme. Our energy policy needs to look at all Northern Ireland's the competing social, economic and environmental needs and deal not just with today's consumers — you and I — but those of tomorrow. The decisions that we make on energy policy will have implications for people 20, 30 or 40 years from now. I often say that it is the only part of my Department where a decision may have implications 40 years hence, as opposed to trying to do things within election cycles, as most politicians try to do.

Therefore, although I acknowledge that prices are of particular concern to people in this room, we have to look at the balance with other consumers as well, and I think that people recognise that. We

also need to recognise that we can help pensioners in other ways. For instance, my colleague Nigel Dodds has been pushing the Prime Minister to make sure that the winter fuel allowance stays a universal allowance, because there have been conversations about making it a means-tested benefit and we oppose that. We think that it should remain a universal benefit and its amount increased in line with inflation rather than reduced. So, there are other things that we need to take into account as well.

Mr Martin Gallagher (Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament): Minister, what is your Department doing to help older people who are struggling to afford to stay warm.

Mrs Foster: Thank you. Although my Department holds the Northern Ireland energy policy brief, the Department for Social Development (DSD) has strategic responsibility for issues such as the community and voluntary sector, urban regeneration, social legislation, housing, social security benefits — the panoply of issues that you have had the opportunity to talk to Minister Nelson McCausland about.

DSD operates the warm homes scheme such as it is in Northern Ireland. It focuses on energy efficiency such as home insulation, as I am sure many in this room will know. It is for people who receive certain benefits and who own or rent their home from a private landlord in Northern Ireland. DSD has advised me that its targets have been met consistently since 2009, including in respect of making homes warmer, healthier and more energy efficient.

Energy efficiency is an issue that people sometimes bypass in relation to managing cost. It is an issue that we need to look at in more detail. There have been some conversations about using smart metering, which makes people aware of how much energy they are using and enables them to manage their energy more effectively. I am very much a supporter of smart metering. I hope that, from conversations with the Utility Regulator, we will be able to have more smart metering in Northern Ireland.

The energy efficiency levy, which now has the very snappy title of the Northern Ireland sustainable energy programme — you will have to get to know all the acronyms, Mr Speaker — is available. That levy, which is really a levy on electricity providers, is available for loft and cavity wall insulation and draft-proofing of homes. One has to apply for that, and I accept that there is sometimes a very short window within which an application can be made.

Finally, the Utility Regulator is looking at what are the main drivers behind the cost of energy at the moment to see if there is anything that we can intervene on. That is a very important piece of work, which I hope to have by March.

Mr Gallagher: Has the Minister had any discussions with her Executive colleagues in relation to introducing new schemes to assist older people with home-heating costs?

Mrs Foster: Again, this is about working together with other Executive colleagues. It does not fall to just one Executive Department; that will probably be a theme of your session today. That is not to say that we, in our individual Departments, should shy away from trying to make a difference. For example, DSD has the boiler replacement scheme, which has proved very effective right across Northern Ireland.

It is about trying to find out the reasons why energy costs are as high as they are at present. That is why the piece of work from the Utility Regulator will be brought to me. I will be able to see what are the main drivers behind the costs in our energy market. We can then intervene — hopefully, in a meaningful way — for consumers right across the piece, including pensioners.

One thing that I should have said is that we have now five providers of electricity in Northern Ireland and there is always the option of switching. I am always interested in hearing how the experience rolls out for people when they decide to switch. Is it an easy process, as it should be, or a difficult process? If members here have experienced difficulties, I would be very interested to hear about those.

Mr Hay: We move to question 3. Unfortunately Mr Monaghan is not able to be with us, so the question will be asked by Mr Hughes.

Mr Hughes: Will the steps being taken by political parties in Great Britain to freeze or reduce energy prices apply here, and, if not, what measures are being taken locally to tackle the high cost of energy?

Mrs Foster: Again, that is a very important question. There was confusion in and around the Chancellor of the Exchequer's autumn statement. On 5 December, he made an announcement specifically in relation to the British electricity trading and transmission arrangements (BETTA) market, which covers just Great Britain. We, in Northern Ireland, are part of the single electricity market on the island, which is a separate arrangement for us. Therefore, seeing if there is anything that we can do has to be looked at in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland terms.

A typical electricity bill is made up of three parts. The largest part is the cost of the fuel used in the generation of electricity. Of courses, prices for this part of the Bill are set in global markets not locally. We do not have any influence on that part of the electricity bill. At the lower end of the scale, it is the actual cost to supply the electricity to consumers from the generation point. In Northern Ireland, Power NI is the supplier with the highest market share of customers at the moment and, for that reason, it is regulated by the Utility Regulator — the office that I was speaking about earlier. At the moment, it is allowed to make a profit margin of 1.7%, and that profit margin is regulated by her office.

We have the piece that we have no control of at all and the piece that we can control through the regulator's office. In the middle, we have a build-up of what is referred to as network charges, which is where the Government taxes for renewable policy and where charges are applied by Northern Ireland Electricity to transmit and distribute the electricity to your homes from substations and its generation point. That is where the work is that I mentioned between my Department and the regulator. We look at the transmission costs to see whether there is something that we can do in that space. I know that the Age Sector Platform will look very closely at that when it comes out, and taking that forward will be an important piece of work.

Mr Hughes: The Minister mentioned that we are part of an all-Ireland energy market. Has the Minister had any discussions on the potential for a cross-border approach to help vulnerable customers cope with the high cost of energy?

Mrs Foster: It can be quite difficult to understand why there is a differential between what consumers in the Republic of Ireland pay and consumers in Northern Ireland pay, given that we are in a single electricity market. The market operates at a wholesale level, not at the retail supply end of the chain, and it is about trading where the cheapest energy comes from so that we can access it here in Northern Ireland. One of the constraints at the moment on accessing the cheapest electricity at a wholesale level is the second North/South interconnector. At the moment, we have one North/South interconnector, which is in and around the Tandragee area on the Northern Ireland side. There is an application for a second North/South interconnector, which, to be open about it, is controversial, because the people who live in the area where the interconnector is planned for do not want pylons close to them. However, we need a second North/South interconnector, because its absence at the moment is costing Northern Ireland consumers £7 million per annum, and that is added on to people's bills. As energy Minister, it is very important to see that North/South interconnector put in place and then to try to free up energy to come across at the cheapest level at the wholesale market price. It is a constraint a present, and I hope that we are able to progress with that issue.

Mr William Hutchinson (Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament): I respectfully ask the Minister whether some of the additional £136 million to the block grant anticipated by the Executive will be used to help older people with their energy bills this winter.

Mrs Foster: As you correctly state, the Chancellor's autumn statement provided an additional £136 million for Northern Ireland, with just over £55 million for the next financial year starting in April 2014-15 and just over £80 million for the 2015-16 financial year. It has been determined that the 2014-15 allocation will be incorporated into the Executive's June monitoring process and that the 2015-16 allocation will form part of our new Budget process for 2015-16. This morning, the Finance Minister gave a statement to the Assembly on his January monitoring process, and he will give another one in June when the £55 million will be redistributed. Unfortunately, I — I say I — cannot unilaterally tell the Finance Minister what he should do with that £55 million. We, as an Executive, will decide how to use the funding in the context of — as everyone in the room knows — a wide range of competing public service pressures. This morning, as I understand it, £30 million was put into the health service, and I am sure that the Health Minister will reflect that later in Question Time. Of course, assistance to older people with their winter heating bills is something that we will take into consideration, and I am sure that we will be lobbied by the very effective age sector platform.

Mr Hutchinson: Has the Minister made representation to the Minister of Finance and Personnel with regard to allocating further funds for energy bills?

Mrs Foster: As I hope I have tried to indicate today, and I make no apologies for saying it, energy policy is the most complex area of my portfolio. If I take a decision in one area of energy policy, it has an impact on another area of that policy, so I need to look at a wide range of issues, such as security of supply, which I have already touched on in relation to the North/South interconnector, and facilitating economic development for businesses. Businesses complain quite a lot to me and to other MLAs about the cost of doing business here because of their energy costs, therefore I have to have a stable energy industry.

To go back to the piece of work that I look forward to receiving in March, that will give me an indication of what I can do to intervene in relation to energy bills, be they those of domestic consumers like you or high-energy users such as manufacturers here in Northern Ireland. Decisions will be taken at an Executive level and I am sure that I will have conversations with the Minister for Social Development on this issue before those decisions are taken.

Mr Hay: Order. That concludes questions to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. It is now time to move to questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Hay: Minister, you are welcome.

Mr Robert Hasson (Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament): Minister, will you tell us why a full quality impact assessment was not carried out at the start of the Transforming Your Care policy development process?

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Thank you. It is good to see you all this afternoon. It is slightly drier in here than outside, but that is a good thing.

Transforming Your Care is a strategic policy. It is not an implementation document. An equality screening exercise was undertaken on the policy at the outset and further equality steps will be considered when the policy is at the point of implementation. So, when we are implementing aspects of Transforming Your Care we will move beyond equality screening. As it is a strategic overview rather than an implementation document, a quality impact assessment was not carried out at the start.

Mr Hasson: Given the impact that the policy has had on older people in recent months and to ensure that older people are not negatively impacted by any changes, will the Minister commit to conducting a full equality impact assessment before any further actions under Transforming Your Care are implemented?

Mr Poots: Actions that are proposed in Transforming Your Care will be subject to equality impact assessments where appropriate. That will be a core element of the actions that flow from it. A prime example is the issue of statutory residential care, and all the issues will be considered in an equality impact assessments when the proposals in that area are implemented. That is an example of the sort of thing that we will carry out equality impact assessments on rather than equality screening. There may be other areas that will directly impact on people for which we will carry out full equality impact assessments rather than just screening.

Dr Tony Damoglou (Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament): Given the projected annual shortfall of £500 million of funding by 2015 and the impact that that may have on older people, will the necessary funding to support older people's health and social care needs be provided?

Mr Poots: That is a very good question that is quite difficult to answer in many ways.

I do not set the Budget, but make appeals to get the money. The national Parliament decides what taxation should be and, from that, what spending should be. What flows from that is decided by the Barnett formula. When they create their overall Budget, be it £300 billion or whatever it happens to be, Northern Ireland gets its share, which, I think, is 2.8%. Northern Ireland gets roughly around £10 billion a year, not counting benefits, pensions or anything like that, to spend on core services like education, health and so forth. Of that, health takes over 40%. We spent £4.5 billion a year, which is £2,800 for every man, woman and child. I do not have the healthcare costs for those who are over 65,

but I think that it is £6,500 for each person. We currently spend £760 million directly on the elderly and a further £1.3 million on acute services that also serve the needs of many elderly people.

Do I have enough money? The straight answer is no. However, I have to try to spend the money I have as wisely as I can. Consequently, we cannot keep doing the same thing. The wages are still rising, the money has basically flatlined and demand is also rising. If we do not do things differently, the services will suffer as a consequence, and that is why we are considering things like Transforming Your Care. It is not about trying to do things on the cheap but trying to do things more efficiently and, perhaps, drive services up and improve them.

I always go back to the old adage that prevention is better than cure. If you can prevent an illness from happening in the first place at a cost of maybe £50 or £100, you can save thousands of pounds later. It is not actually about cutting corners; it is about doing the thing better.

Frankly, I do not have enough money, but I am going to do the best with the money I have. In doing that, we will always give recognition to our elderly population, which is growing all the time. It is an indication of good health in Northern Ireland that our average age has grown over the past couple of decades.

Dr Damoglou: Thank you, Minister. From where will the funds will be released? What impact will that have on other services?

Mr Poots: Therein lies the problem again. If we are scooping up well over 40% of the existing Budget, it is difficult to say to other Departments that we could do with £500 million. The Finance Minister was very generous to me this morning: he gave me £30 million. I was looking for £65 million, by the way, but he gave me £30 million. Half a loaf is better than none. That is helpful. In truth, although we could spend £500 million more next year, I am not likely to get it. It will be a balancing act between what you might desire to do and what you are able to do. The starting point of all that is what you are statutorily required to do, and all things happen thereafter. If a wonderful new drug comes out, people will expect us to buy it. Perhaps it is available in England. We might not be able to do that in the next year. If that decision is taken, it has a huge impact on people.

I will tell you about one particular drug. The breakthrough happened in Northern Ireland. It affects people with the Celtic gene of cystic fibrosis. Wonderful work was done between Queen's University and our hospitals in that breakthrough. Twenty three people are now receiving that drug in Northern Ireland. The cost to our exchequer is £3.8 million, but they will have a normal life expectancy as a result, as opposed to dying at 40 years of age. Those are big decisions to make. If you spend that £3.8 million on that, you do not have it to spend on something else. Those are the complex decisions that face us every day.

Ms Mary Morrison (Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament): Given the recent announcements about the closure of statutory residential homes and the impact that that has had on the current residents, I ask for an update on the policy on statutory residential homes. Minister, we would like you to address that.

Mr Poots: OK, thank you. I was greatly upset at the upset that was caused to people in residential care homes. That is not how we should be doing things. We should not be causing unnecessary upset to people. That was quite clearly the case, which was why we discontinued that process.

Every resident has been consulted, or should have been by this stage, on their wishes and desires. I do not see a point where every statutory residential home is closed. There will be an ongoing need for that kind of care. An element of that being in the statutory sector gives us a degree of cover, so that we are not wholly reliant on the private sector. I should say at this point that 100% of nursing home care is in the private sector — that happened before my time — and 85% of residential care is in the private sector.

There is a particular problem when you come to needing respite care. A private residential home does not hold a bed for someone to say that they could do with that bed for a week in July or two weeks in August or whatever. When someone says that they need the bed, they will immediately use it. People find that they can have great difficulty with getting respite care. So, we asked Fionnuala McAndrew of the Health and Social Care Board, to go through that process. She has not come back

to me as yet with her views and findings, but I do not believe that we will be moving to the point of closing every statutory residential care home, as some of the trusts thought they might do.

Ms Morrison: This question is on the same theme. What steps are being taken to ensure that the current residents are being treated with dignity and respect? I would like to add to that, Minister, about people being able to go into the homes and assess what is happening there. Is there a panel that goes into homes to have a look at that? Does it get back to you how that is that going on?

Mr Poots: As I indicated, Mrs McAndrew was asked to lead on this process and I think that she has been doing a good job. She has been doing it in a way that is compassionate and caring, and she demonstrates that in her conduct which is very important. Let us be clear. Anyone who is in a residential care home happens to be there because someone has carried out an assessment of their care needs and has identified that that is the care that they need. That is very important at the outset. Therefore, to go in and say "We do not need this home", the starting point has to be the individual and about how best we meet the individual needs of that person. So I think that that has to be at the core of what is done, and that is why it was wrong in the first instance, because it put the cart before the horse. It started talking about the homes, rather than about the people who happened to be in them.

I think that the process now looks at the persons who are in the homes and we want to move to a position where people can stay in their own homes for as long as possible. I then want to move to a situation where people will have a choice of moving to supported living, where you can still have your own front door and a greater degree of support, perhaps in a community setting where you have a greater degree of security as well. Then we will look at how we can provide supporting needs in residential and nursing homes thereafter.

However, I think that there are a number of steps that we can take to improve the quality-of-life of older people and promote independence for older people, before we get to the stage of residential homes or, indeed, nursing homes.

Ms Morrison: Minister, can I ask whether A Sector Platform will be made aware of reports that come to you about how things are going in those nursing homes? In other words, can we ask your office about this?

Mr Poots: Absolutely. I always believe that the more we do things in an open way, the less suspicious people are of what we actually do. I have sought to drum that into the civil servants since I came into office. I should add that we have taken advice from the Older People's Commissioner on the process that is currently happening, and we sought her advice during the process as well. I would like to think that any information that you seek will be provided. If it is not, contact me directly.

Mr Hay: We now move to question 4.

Ms Patricia Donald (Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament): Minister, this leads on nicely from what you said about meeting people's needs, because sometimes it is something very simple that will enable people to stay in their own homes, such as someone who will do a bit of what would have been called "home help" work. When the assessment of individual domiciliary care is done, will it include the aspects of home help deemed essential for an adequate standard of living with realistic timescales — and we have all heard about the 15-minute slot — for fulfilling the necessary duties included in the process and will staff providing the services be trained to a sufficiently high standard to ensure that older people receive good quality care at all times? There is a lot of very good care going on but there are places where there are not the bodies to do it, and that is causing great concern. When you contract out this work, you find that the trust can do it at a certain price, say £16, and a private contractor can do it at £12. There is a gap. What is that gap? It is that the need is not being met.

Mr Poots: You are absolutely right on a number of points. For example, in County Fermanagh, we have great trouble covering our domiciliary care.

Ms Donald: I can tell you where. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Poots: One of the issues is the distance that has to be travelled between visits because, geographically, it is a difficult county to get around. So, we are aware of those problems. Domiciliary care is hugely important to us because, if we go down the route of trying to keep people out of nursing homes, residential homes and hospitals, we need to ensure that, when we keep people in their own

homes and support people to stay in their own homes, we provide appropriate and adequate support. It is difficult to get right. There are very few 15-minute visits in County Fermanagh.

Ms Donald: That is open to debate.

Mr Poots: I will reframe that. Very few contracts are put out for 15-minute calls. The problem is that people are travelling between calls and, therefore, the time that they spend there may not be as long as they are contracted to be there for. That is an issue. So, you must recognise that domiciliary care is really tough for us because people need to be able to spend adequate time with the person. You do not want to be trying to feed someone who happens to be using a bathroom at the same time. That is not dignity in care and is not the appropriate support. I have heard about things like that and I do not approve of it. I would not want it for my family or for myself. So, if I do not want it for my family, I do not want it for somebody else's. We need to continue to work on that. I recognise that. We can get the right domiciliary care for the people who need it.

You mentioned training, and that is another important aspect. I know that the standards of domiciliary care can range quite a bit from absolutely brilliant to quite poor, and that is about the individuals who are providing it in the first instance. If people have the right mentality, you will not need that much training in a way. You could train some people from now until doomsday and they will still not get it. It is about getting the right people to do it, and that is a challenge to us because those people are low paid, and, very often, Tesco, Sainsbury's and companies such as that will offer them more money for probably less stressful work. However, many people find providing care rewarding, and I know that many good carers really enjoy their job. It is not purely about the money. However, we need to look at all that.

Ms Donald: You also need to look at the time that people take to travel because they are not being paid by the contractors. That is a real issue. You talked about Fermanagh, and there is a lake in the middle of it. It is difficult.

Mr Poots: If you are somewhere in my district, it might not be so hard to get round from Hillsborough to Lisburn or to Dromore.

Ms Donald: You might get caught in a traffic jam, of course.

Mr Poots: Maybe at Sprucefield, but you should know to avoid that. I recognise that in Fermanagh in particular and in Tyrone, the distances can be significant and that causes a problem.

Ms Donald: I have a supplementary question. How will the Department measure its success in delivering in that area?

Mr Poots: The best measurement of success for me is the feedback that I get from the general public. I get a lot of feedback. We can conduct all sorts of surveys, and I pay a little attention to them. The best survey that I can get is from walking down my own street and round the streets of Northern Ireland because there is always somebody who recognises you. You never get away from this job because somebody always has an opinion on health. I hear all sorts of things at all times and also through the Assembly. Sometimes, it can be a bit political and people say things just to try to get one over on other politicians, but, very often, we get genuine feedback from the Assembly when issues have been raised with Members. It is incumbent upon those of us who have been given the opportunity to serve as Ministers in the Executive to respond to that and seek to accommodate the issues that have been raised by Members.

Ms Donald: Minister —

Mr Hay: Patricia, I dare not intervene.

Mr Poots: Who is that guy up there?

Ms Donald: Minister, I will give you this piece of experience free, and it is borne of experience. It is understandable that, because nursing homes are in the private sector, people will not keep a bed. If the trusts were prepared to pay a certain amount of money for that bed, it would be kept and it could be used as and when required. Ring-fence it.

Mr Poots: Respite, not only for elderly people but for vulnerable adults, is so important.

Mr Hay: Order. That concludes questions for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. There have been a lot of signals throughout the room that people cannot hear. The acoustics in this room are not very good. The sound is up as far as it can go. If people need to switch to the hearing loop, they can do so. Minister, thank you very much.

Mr Poots: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

Mr Hay: Order. It is now time to move to questions for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mrs Margaret Galloway (Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament): Will legislation to outlaw age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services be implemented in this mandate?

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Yes, in as far as I can say that. It is our intention to do it within that time frame. Thank you, Margaret, for the question. We should also thank Margaret, who sits on the Age Sector Platform for OFMDFM. We have been friends for a while. I always do not like getting a question from Margaret, because civil servants know all of the tricks that Ministers hide behind. Having Margaret as an advocate for the age sector gives you an advantage over me with the experience that you have.

The procedure is that we are looking very carefully at the exemptions that quite rightly exist in some areas of goods, facilities and services to get a reduced rate to use a swimming pool or to use a facility to promote healthy living. We are ensuring that those justified exemptions are protected and that we do not bring in a rule to justify unjustifiable age discrimination and, in so doing, do not develop the law of unintended consequences so that people who are entitled to a reduction or a discount for good reasons are not penalised by the law that we bring in. That is where the complexity is currently, and it is our intention to have this through within the time frame of the mandate of this Assembly.

Mrs Galloway: Will the junior Ministers give their assessment of the impact that this legislation will have on older people locally?

Mr Bell: It will have a major impact. From going round Northern Ireland to some of the local events that the Pensioners Parliament has had and from speaking to the age charities, I know that the issues range from the unjustifiable hike in travel insurance, for example.

I have seen situations, including that of my own father, at the age of 81, who wanted to visit my brother who was working as a doctor in Australia. I saw what they charged him for travel insurance. Other people have told me, even ones with very modest health conditions, that they are being asked to pay nearly more than the entire holiday costs just to get the travel insurance. That is just one example whereby a clear law that is definitive in stopping discrimination against the person on the grounds of their age should make a tangible difference. It should make an impact on the quality of people's lives as well as on the cost for them.

Mr Ivan Baxter (Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament): This is also a question about the proposed goods, facilities and services legislation. It is really to do with the financial aspect. We would like to know whether the local age discrimination regulations will be a bit more restrictive unlike the age discrimination legislation in Great Britain, which has broad exceptions for financial services?

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): As you know, financial services are a reserved matter, so we will have to consult the Secretary of State on this part of the legislation. While a number of organisations have responsibility for financial services, it is mainly a GB issue. However, the equality act is something that we will be keeping a close eye on because it contains strong conditions in that you have to have a certain reason. You cannot just look at it and see a person's age and put assessments on that, you have to look at the whole picture. We will keep a very close eye on that.

Mr Baxter: Once the legislation is passed, will there be something in place to measure its effectiveness on the financial services side?

Ms J McCann: Yes, we will first look at the formal complaints system to see whether there is a pattern of where the complaints are coming from and whether there is a particular service area that the complaints are coming from. We will then consult with you and with groups like this to ensure that we are getting it right. It is very important that, as we go into this, we look at it over a long-term period. Any review will be done in consultation with organisations and local people who are directly affected.

Mrs Anne Watson (Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament): Can we have an update on the status of the new active ageing strategy?

Mr Bell: I will take that question if you want to take the supplementary.

Thank you very much for the question. We are imminently ready to put this out to consultation. We have worked extremely hard on it, and I want to record my thanks to those who worked with OFMDFM in helping us develop the active ageing strategy. It is important for us that that is what it is: it is active ageing. I see the contribution that my parents make, and my dad is 81 and my mother, well, you are not allowed to say what a lady's age is, but she is not too far behind him, at their friends club in Park Avenue Free Methodist Church and different things and that is all about active ageing. In Strangford, just to give you an example, the population increase with people getting older means that we are looking at a new town the size of Ballynahinch every 25 years. That is the success of people growing older. That is not with anybody new being born, and is just in the Strangford constituency. Older people have a massive amount to contribute. Granny Bell managed to produce 12 children. We talk about austerity measures now. My dad, at 81, is the last of the 12 children alive. She raised 12 children against an austerity that none of us could handle, so there is an immense amount of value, experience, skills and importance within that.

That will go out to consultation and when that becomes a strategy we will be looking for the age sector to participate with us in the monitoring and review of that strategy. The best way to find out what older people think is exactly as Patricia said: ask them. The contribution that older people made in the development of this strategy through suggestions, ideas, refining the strategy, taking it away, looking at it, testing some of the theories and then bringing it back to us was probably the best of any sector I have seen since I became a junior Minister.

Mrs Watson: You have answered my supplementary question but be aware that we will be watching. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Galloway: We are Margaret Galloway. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hay: Minister, do you want to respond?

Mr Bell: I welcome the fact that the sector is watching us because we have to deliver for you. One thing that Jennifer and I probably want to say is thank you to all of you in this room. Thank you to my own parents for what they have done. Thank you for them as grandparents for what they are doing with my children. There is an immense amount that we owe to grandparents. I know that not everybody is a grandparent but I want to place that on record. You have delivered for us and it is now our role in government to make sure we deliver for you and the only way that we can find out we are doing that is if you tell us.

Mrs Watson: Hopefully, we are not going away. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Bell: Not any time soon.

Mr Hay: Order. Time is up. That concludes the session on Question Time for the Pensioners' Parliament. I understand that the chairperson of the Age Sector Platform would like to make a few concluding remarks.

Mr Hughes: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I jotted down some thoughts because I was not intended to be the speaker at the end of this. On behalf of the Age Sector Platform, I thank the Speaker for once again hosting this Stormont debate. I also thank officials from the Speaker's Office and other staff, including those who were kind enough to put those asking questions through a rehearsal last week. I thank the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, the Minister of Health, Social Service and Public Safety, Edwin Poots, and junior Ministers Jonathan Bell and Jennifer McCann.

As the Speaker mentioned at the start of proceedings, this is the third year of the access given to Age Sector Platform to meet and debate with Ministers. I noted that a number of MLAs from all other parties attended this session. I hope that they found it useful and it did not frighten them from taking part in future.

Unfortunately, funding for this event is up for the third year, so we would like to think that at some stage perhaps local authorities, in particular the new local authorities that may be in place in the near future, will consider contributing towards this debate. I thank all who attended and hope that you have a safe journey home.

There were times when it became more of a debate than a question-and-answer session but it was the better for that.

Mr Hay: As Speaker of the Assembly, I thank everyone present. A final word of thanks goes to the organisers from Age Sector Platform. Events such as this do not just happen. A great deal of work went into making sure that the event was a success, and that is more important than anything. I hope that you enjoyed the occasion as much as I. I found your contributions informative and delivered with passion and caring.

It will be interesting to hear whether you found the Question Time approach better than the debates you had previously. I say that genuinely because we are here to accommodate and maybe we should look to see whether this is the format to use in future in drilling down and finding out information from Ministers and holding them to account, so I look forward to see what feedback we may get from this event, which was slightly different to how we held events in the past.

We did not follow the Question Time procedure exactly, otherwise I would have thrown Patricia out. *[Laughter.]* Sorry, Patricia, but I had to get that one in. However, I hope that the event helped to give you all a better insight into how we run business here in the Assembly. You had the opportunity to raise issues that matter to you and you pressed the Ministers for information and answers. I am sure that you now also have a better understanding of the issues that are important to you and the people who you represent.

I thank Ministers McCann, Bell, Foster and Poots for taking time out from a busy schedule to be with us this afternoon. I know that they have busy diaries. I think that you will all agree that their responses were key to making this Question Time debate interesting and informative. They were as close as possible to normal Assembly business. Once again, I thank you all for your cooperation and I am sure you will be back again.

I say sincerely, however, that all our MLAs know the importance of this event. They also know the importance of the vitally important work that your organisation does. To you all, thank you very much.