



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament

2 December 2014

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Mr Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Mitchel McLaughlin): Order. Before we begin our proceedings, I welcome you all to our Senate Chamber. I am particularly pleased to see that so many of you have come back following the three previous Pensioners Parliament events. Just like last January, representatives of the Pensioners Parliament will be taking part in Question Time with four of our Ministers.

Question Time in the Assembly takes place every Monday and Tuesday on which the Assembly is sitting, and Members see it as an opportunity to ask Ministers for information or to press 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. That allows Members to address a range of issues that are important to them and their constituents. You will have that opportunity today with four of our Ministers, which should help you to get a better understanding of how this aspect of the legislature works in practice. I hope that you enjoy your time here and find the experience valuable. I also hope that those of you who are asking questions can relax and not feel overawed by the formality or the surroundings.

We will have four Ministers with us to respond to your questions. I am very pleased to welcome the Minister for Social Development, Mr Mervyn Storey, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Jim Wells, and junior Ministers Jonathan Bell and Jennifer McCann. I remind you that this session is being recorded by Hansard, the Official Report, and proceedings will also be captured by the cameras. However, please feel free to take photographs if you wish to. That is a privilege that Members do not have.

Before we move on to the formal proceedings, I invite Mr Michael Monaghan, the chairperson of the Pensioners Parliament, to say a few words of welcome and briefly set out the context of the issues being raised in the Pensioners Parliament today.

Mr Michael Monaghan (Chairperson of the Pensioners Parliament): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. We welcome the invitation from the Speaker's Office to host this event for the fourth time. We are particularly glad that the tradition that was started by Mr McLaughlin's predecessor, Mr Hay, is continuing. That is very welcome, so thank you.

As well as providing Question Time between members of the Pensioners Parliament and Ministers from the Northern Ireland Executive, we are officially launching the 2014 Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament report. I handed over the first copy to the Principal Deputy Speaker on behalf of members just before proceedings began. The report is a piece of major research that has been carried out throughout Northern Ireland to find out the key issues affecting older people. What is clear from our work over the past four years is that the Pensioners Parliament model is something that provides older people with a channel to get their voices heard.

The Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament provides an inclusive, grassroots, bottom-up and democratic approach to tackling the issues of concern to older people. Whilst it is important for the Age Sector Platform to organise the Parliament, it is also important for those in power to hear our views and listen to our voices. That is why it is so important that the Northern Ireland Assembly has opened up its doors in such a way and provided older people with an opportunity to make their voices heard in such a formal and effective way that is relevant to the issues that Ministers are dealing with.

The 12 of us around the table this afternoon are not speaking for ourselves: we have a mandate from the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament. Therefore, we are speaking on behalf of thousands of others throughout Northern Ireland. The 80 people who are here in support of us are the lucky ones, because all 200 members of the Pensioners Parliament really wanted to come here this morning.

In conclusion, I want to quote your predecessor, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. On his second visit to the Pensioners Parliament, he was asked by a journalist to sum up the Pensioners Parliament in a few words. What he said was very important, and I keep it in mind all the time. He said that it was a real example of participative democracy in action. That is why we are here and why we welcome the opportunity to put our point of view across today.

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. It is time for questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I have just been told that Mr Jonathan Bell is unable to attend — I do not think he is even on the premises — so junior Minister Jennifer McCann will be fielding your questions.

Mrs Margaret Galloway: How does the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister plan to ensure that the Active Ageing strategy is properly funded and includes measurable targets.

Ms Jennifer McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank Margaret for her question. First, the Active Ageing strategy is in its final stages of formulation. There was a bit of an issue with getting documentation to you before today's sitting. I apologise for the deadline not being met. The Active Ageing strategy has been developed by working closely with older people, their sector and their groups, but also with the advisory panel chaired by Claire Keatinge. One of the things that was very much to the fore when we were having discussions with the advisory group was that it had to be properly resourced, particularly its signature projects. Where Departments have a responsibility in their core budgets for delivering targets or actions under a strategy, we have a role ensuring that they do so. Similarly, where Departments have a responsibility for fuel poverty, health and social care, the fear of crime and other issues, then they will be responsible for delivering under their core budget and funding.

There are a number of signature projects, including the dementia project, which we have funding to deliver jointly with Atlantic Philanthropies. Delivering Social Change central funds will be used for that. We are keen not just to set targets for targets' sake this time, but to set a range of outcomes. Sometimes you can reach a target without achieving an outcome. For instance, we have certain outcomes for the numbers of people we want to reach through benefit take-up and fuel poverty strategies. This time we are going to look at outcomes rather than just targets. I hope that partly answers your question.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I did not want to interrupt, because it was an important question and you were imparting important information. The two-minute rule, however, applies here, as it does in the formal Assembly.

Ms J McCann: Sorry.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I just wanted to remind you of that. I call Mrs Galloway for a supplementary.

Mrs Galloway: How will you ensure that old people are involved throughout the lifetime of the strategy? What role will the Pensioners Parliament play in reviewing and supporting the strategy?

Ms J McCann: We are going to work along with the advisory group not just on the strategy itself but on rolling it out. There is a bid that looks at the age-sector platform in the parliament, as well. A strategy is a living document. It is only as good as what it is delivering. We are keen to ensure that the advisory panel, the sector and the Pensioners Parliament are engaged as the strategy and services are delivered.

Mr Nixon Armstrong: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Could you please outline the legislative proposals to outlaw age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services and indicate when the proposals will be released for public consultation?

Ms J McCann: This piece of legislation was in the Programme for Government, and there was a commitment to take it forward. Age is a factor when discriminating against people in the provision of services. Unfortunately, we have not reached the political agreement necessary to take the legislation

forward. I am very conscious that Jonathan is not here, but our party believes that the bill should apply to all ages, so that nobody should be discriminated against on the ground of age. We have not got political agreement to take that forward.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Armstrong for a supplementary question.

Mr Armstrong: How will you ensure adequate time for engagement with older people throughout the legislative process?

Ms J McCann: I regret to say that it will not be taken forward in this mandate. The legislative timetable will not allow for that to happen without the agreement. I hope, however, that we can still work with all the parties and ensure that this legislation is brought forward. It is a very important piece of legislation. No one should be discriminated against because of their age in the provision of services, facilities or goods, and we hope that it will be taken forward as quickly as possible. We will certainly engage with organisations such as the Pensioners Parliament to identify the best way of doing so.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Miss Anne Watson.

Miss Anne Watson: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Given that the First and deputy Minister have responsibilities for older people, and pensioners on low incomes in Northern Ireland continue to be excluded from the warm home discount scheme, will they bring forward a proposal to the Executive to fund a reduction in domestic energy bills for pensioners during the winter months?

Ms J McCann: Thank you for your question, Anne. As you know, the warm home discount scheme does not operate here. Fuel poverty and pensioner fuel poverty in particular are the main issues that we are trying to address through the strategy by creating projects to ensure that people do not live in fuel poverty. We met with DETI about this, and the First and deputy First Minister wrote directly to DETI about liaising with the Department of Energy in Britain so that we could introduce the scheme here. I am led to believe that DETI is looking at that now and will see whether they can take it forward. There are other schemes here, such as the affordable warmth scheme, of which we are keen to increase the up-take. Certainly, we are looking to bring forward the affordable warmth scheme. Basically, it is a DETI issue, and they are responsible for taking it forward.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Miss Watson to ask a supplementary question.

Miss Watson: Do the Ministers plan to make representations to Westminster in order to extend the warm home discount scheme to Northern Ireland?

Ms J McCann: We did. The deputy First Minister and the First Minister wrote to DETI about it. I do not know what the reply was. I know that they were in contact with their counterparts in Britain, at the Department of Energy, but I do not know if they are saying it is going to be brought forward. Fuel poverty is linked to energy efficiency, and there are a number of schemes here, such as the affordable warmth scheme. We have also got a boiler replacement scheme and an oil bulk buying scheme. It has been developed over a period of years and allows people to buy oil in bulk because the price of oil is one of the main causes of fuel poverty, although I believe the price has gone down recently. We are trying to develop that and take it forward. I will go back today and write to the Department to see what was the reply to the First and deputy First Minister's letter requesting DETI to take the matter up with the Department in Britain.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the questions to the Office of the First and deputy First Minister. I thank junior Minister McCann for taking questions.

Social Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We will now be joined by the Minister for Social Development. You are very welcome, Minister Mervyn Storey. We will begin questions to the Minister.

Mr Francis Hughes: What is the Minister's assessment of the impact of the measures used to combat fuel poverty since 2007?

Mr Storey (The Minister for Social Development): Thank you. I want to say a word of welcome to all who have gathered today for the Pensioners Parliament. I am delighted to be here.

Thank you for the question you posed, Mr Hughes. We meet at a time of concern amongst many pensioners, given the follow-on from the survey carried out, which clearly showed that many people of pensionable age put that as a high priority. Of those surveyed, 74% said that keeping warm in their home was a priority. In my Department, going back as far as 2001, we started to look at the amount of money that was spent. It is always sad that we end up in a situation where all these things come down to the amount of money you spend. I take a different view that it is actually about the outcome you receive as a result of the amount of money that you spend. However, we put it in that particular envelope.

Since 2001, we have spent over £130 million to improve energy efficiency. That equates to over 120,000 low-income households. I endeavoured then to try to find out how many of those households were actually families that included senior citizens. It is difficult to get that number and break it down. As you may be aware, we have now decided to move from the warm homes scheme to a new scheme, the affordable warmth scheme. The scheme is a new approach that tries to proactively identify people, particularly senior citizens, who have needs relating to energy efficiency. In the two pilot schemes we have carried out to date, we estimate that over 50% of those involved were aged 60, 65 and older. We believe that the affordable warmth scheme will make a difference because it will be targeted in relation to the way that we address the problem. I want to underscore this: you should be under no illusion that, since taking up office, some six weeks ago, I know that this issue continually persists. When we look at the number of senior citizen deaths over the 2013-14 winter, we see that we all owe a duty of care to ensure that we do all that we can to put in place the right procedures to ensure that people have access to good, comfortable homes to live in.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule.

Mr Storey: It is not the first time that you have had to do that, Deputy Principal Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There are some persistent offenders. I call Mr Hughes to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Hughes: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. What is the Minister's assessment of the whole-house insulation solution to tackling fuel poverty?

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Hughes, for the supplementary question. The affordable warmth scheme will identify the energy efficiency improvements required in the dwelling. Again, it is an issue that we have to look at holistically. It is not just an issue that relates to loft and cavity insulation. It is also about the replacement boiler scheme, draft proofing and replacement windows. It is about the totality of provision, which will, I believe, be helpful. The last 24 hours have been interesting for me. Some people came to see me about a particular scheme and thermal imaging that was carried out on properties in the last weeks. I saw that, as a result of using thermal imaging, you can determine how efficient a property is. I am not making any particular political point when I use these colours, but the image will turn either orange, blue or red. *[Laughter.]* The colour that we want to see is blue. That means that we are not in any difficulties around political allegiances. For me, it was very important to see that, as a result of intervention through those particular elements, we can make a vast difference to keeping people warm in their homes.

Mr Martin Gallagher: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Given that the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament has called for all new build dwelling for pensioners to be built to a standard that requires little or no expenditure on heating, will the Minister outline the action that he is taking to realise that aim?

Mr Storey: Thank you, Martin, for the question. I would be the first to say that my Department is committed to improving energy efficiency across all types of housing as a means of addressing fuel poverty. All dwellings that are constructed under my Department's social housing development programme, including those for our seniors, are constructed in accordance with the higher energy efficiency competency.

The regulations that govern that area were changed in 2012, and were subsequently changed again. We love long titles in the Assembly, because it makes things sound very important and if they are of great substance, but the Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 came into operation on 25 February, and they introduced a new regulatory requirement of all new buildings, including new house buildings, to be nearly zero energy by 2020. That places an onus and responsibility on builders to ensure that they are in compliance. Of course, we are all aware of the energy performance certificate, and, if anyone has had recent experience of selling a home, they will

know how important that programme i.e. am keen to look at that again. This is a classic case of a politician passing responsibility, because that actually falls under the jurisdiction of my colleague the Minister of Finance. He has the authority to make regulations in that area. It is a continuing issue and, as a Government, we need to ensure that we are doing all that we can, not only in regulation but in practice, to deliver a better standard of energy efficiency in our homes.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Minister give us his assessment of housing benefit only being paid to landlords in the private sector who have maintained their property to an acceptable standard of energy efficiency?

Mr Storey: Thank for the supplementary question. I think that there is a review of the statutory minimum housing fitness standard, which is applicable to all dwellings. I would probably still be of the view that it is not appropriate to restrict access to housing benefit for applicants who are living in homes that are not energy efficient. If we were to go down that road, it would create more difficulties than it would solve. There may be other methods and means by which we could encourage everyone involved to deliver, whether they are in the public or the private sector, to ensure that they live up to their requirements and obligations and do the very best that they can for the people who occupy the properties they own.

Mr Monaghan: Given that the warm homes discount scheme provides pensioners on low incomes throughout the rest of the United Kingdom with £140 off their electricity bills each year, will the Minister of Social Development outline the action that he has taken to have the scheme introduced in Northern Ireland?

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Monaghan, for that question, which has repeatedly come up in the Pensioners Parliament over a number of sessions. It is an issue that needs a wider detailed response than the two minutes that I will be allotted by the Principal Deputy Speaker.

To cut to the chase as to the reasons why we do not have it in Northern Ireland, it is, in some respects, based on the way in which the warm homes discount scheme was introduced in the rest of the United Kingdom. It commenced back in 2011. I think that we need some understanding that it is, in basic terms, a social tariff, and the GB energy companies pass on the cost of the implementation of that scheme to its customers. The energy companies have a minimum requirement of 250,000 for access to the scheme. The challenge in lifting something that is delivered in the United Kingdom to this part of the kingdom in Northern Ireland is based on the number of people who would have access via an energy company. We estimate that only one company in Northern Ireland, Power NI, would have the ability to implement the scheme. To have only one organisation or one energy company would not be the best way of doing that. A variety of energy companies in the rest of the United Kingdom pass on to the remaining numbers of their customers the cost of the scheme. There is a cost for other customers, albeit there is a benefit to the recipients.

It is also important to say that there is a range of schemes that we have made available in Northern Ireland to support customers with their energy costs, such as the affordable warmth scheme, the warm homes scheme, the boiler replacement scheme and the Northern Ireland sustainable energy programme (NISEP). As well as those schemes, my Department runs a very successful "Make the Call" campaign, which cannot be underestimated. I continue to encourage everybody to make that call to my Department to ensure that they are maximising the total amount of benefit that they are in receipt of. That is a huge help. Of course, we have winter payments and other elements of provision which help people in their day-to-day lives.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. These are, obviously, very important questions but I am seriously thinking of getting a red light for this man. [*Laughter.*] I invite Mr Monaghan to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Monaghan: I will preface my question by saying that I am a passionate believer in energy efficiency. Brilliant work has been done in Northern Ireland and I know how beneficial that is. This is a fairly high-profile issue at the moment and we would take the opportunity, if you are prepared to have a delegation from the Age Sector Platform, to brief you in more detail about our arguments. Consideration has been given to extending the scheme in the United Kingdom. You will be aware that we have got cross-party support from our representatives at Westminster, not only through direct meetings with them but in the form of an early day motion which was tabled just last week. Will the Minister add his strong support to our campaign to get Northern Ireland integrated — not just a standalone scheme — into the scheme that applies in the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr Storey: I am quite happy to say publicly that I welcome the opportunity to meet representatives of the Age Sector Platform and continue the discussion with my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, because the scheme is cross-cutting and cannot be implemented by one Department; it involves a number of Departments. I am quite happy to give an assurance that I will have that discussion with my colleague and I look forward to meeting the representatives when they come to see me.

Mrs Margaret McGreevy: I want to ask the Minister about the individuals who worked from the age of 14 and 15 from 1947 to 1957 and who paid their national insurance contributions but have not had these contributions added to their state pension. Will the Minister outline any discussions he has had with the Department for Work and Pensions on this issue?

Mr Storey: Thank you, Margaret, for your question. This matter has been brought to my attention by a number of MPs, who have also raised the issue at Westminster. It involves a category of people who paid contributions at age 16 and feel disadvantaged. However, the same can be said of those who are in that category and have paid more than the maximum number of years that they required for the full pension.

The national insurance contributions scheme is a social insurance scheme, based on a universal pooling of resources. The national insurance fund is run on a pay-as-you-go basis with current income paying for today's pensioners and other contributory benefit expenditure. Consequently, contributors do not build up an individual pension pot as they would under a personal or occupational pension scheme. In addition, national insurance contributions help fund the health service and account for the purposes of sickness and unemployment benefit. In a sense, the theoretical loss in individual cases arising from the decision to set the working life start point at 16 rather than at school-leaving age is estimated to be small. That does not underestimate how it impacts on individuals in most cases, and it will have been offset by the availability of category B pensions, pension credit. I always like to use quotes. Sometimes politicians use them as cover to hide behind, but that is not why I am using this one today. Eileen Evason is someone whom we respect as being an expert in this field. Speaking recently on the programme 'On Your Behalf' she said, "People say it would make such a difference; it will not. If there were a change in the law to take account of those contributions, gains would be modest and people would probably lose those gains through reductions in other benefits, such as pension credit."

Mrs McGreevy: I also heard the programme that you speak of, and Ms Evason said that she did not realise that this was unique to Northern Ireland, so I am broadening my reply to the Minister. This affects women more than men, because our working life was broken because we had to stop work to have children. In relation to this being unique to Northern Ireland, I will use myself as an example; if I had been able to defer my pension and work for another two years, I would have had a bigger pension when I retired. I feel that I have already worked those two years, Minister, so I feel that I should be entitled to them. People like me who did as the Government said — work and save for your pension — are now being penalised.

Mr Storey: I fully appreciate your concern. Since taking up office, I am fully aware that, along with the Secretary of State who looks after social security in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), I have a responsibility to ensure that I am in compliance with section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which ensures that we, as far as possible, deliver a safe and secure benefit system and maintain parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. On the particular issue that applies across the United Kingdom and the points that you raised today, I have written to the Minister of State for Pensions, Steve Webb, on the issue. When I receive a reply, I will be in contact with the Age Sector Platform and particularly with you, because you asked the question.

Mrs McGreevy: Thank you.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister for Social Development. On your behalf, I thank the Minister for making time in his very busy schedule and for his very full and comprehensive replies to your questions.

Mr Storey: Apologies, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for my profound answers.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Not at all. I found them very informative myself. Thank you.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is on his way. We are, surprisingly enough, despite Mervyn's best efforts, slightly ahead of schedule. Seamus, there is a moment, if you want to give us some observations on an ad hoc basis of today's events.

Mr Seamus Lynch: I would be delighted. It has been fantastic to come along here to meet elected representatives. *[Inaudible.]* We are pleased that we have been able to talk about extremely important issues that dictate our quality of life, particularly those who have to make decisions about whether they heat or they eat *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Can I also take the opportunity to acknowledge, on your behalf, the presence of so many of my MLA colleagues? I think that reflects just how significant and important your issues are to the Assembly. Their attendance is appreciated.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We welcome the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Jim Wells. You are in for a very tough time, Minister.

Before we begin questions to the Minister, there will be a five-minute warning bell for the resumption of the Assembly plenary session, which will be Question Time. It will be a slight interference, but, in fact, it has no significance. It is not a fire alarm. It is simply to summon the Members and the Minister for Question Time, which will begin in the Assembly Chamber. Minister, thank you very much. I know that you had to make some efforts to be here on time. I call Mr Robert Hasson to ask question 1.

Mr Robert Hasson: I would like to ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether an equality impact assessment will be carried out on Transforming Your Care.

Mr Wells (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Transforming Your Care is halfway through its five-year process. Therefore, the question may be a bit late, because Transforming Your Care went through the Assembly and the Assembly's Committee and was put out to massive consultation throughout the community. There were public meetings. The document would have been screened for equality. The document covers all communities in Northern Ireland, so there would not be the normal issue, because it covers 1.826 million people, which, by its very nature, means all minorities, male and female. There is a very high disability content in it as well. I would not have thought there was anything in the document that could be described as discriminatory from an equality point of view. I am intrigued as to where the question comes from, because there have been numerous attacks on Transforming Your Care, but not on that particular aspect of it. The problem has been not so much that it is discriminatory but that we do not have enough money at the moment to implement it properly.

Mr Hasson: There is much that I could say on what the Minister has said, but I would be escorted out of the premises.

Mr Wells: You probably have privilege in the Chamber. As long as you do not call me a bounder or a scoundrel, I will be quite happy. Anything else that you say is perfectly acceptable.

Mr Hasson: We are grateful that you are here, Minister. I have a question, which I have tinkered with. Does the Minister share the Equality Commission's concern that failure to screen and assess policies at the higher level strategy stage weakens the protection of vulnerable groups envisaged by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998?

Mr Wells: I have to say, in the vast amount of paperwork, emails, twitter messages and interviews I have had on Transforming Your Care, that has been well down the list. It is an attempt to improve the standard of care, particularly for the elderly. The main premise of Transforming Your Care is that, commensurate with our needs, there are far too many people too far up what is called the ladder of healthcare provision. They are in a residential home when they should be cared for in their own home, or they are in a hospital when they should be in a nursing home etc.

The process will include re-enablement. Elderly people will be given help and advice as to how to live more independently. The absolutely fundamental decision in Transforming Your Care is to take over £60 million out of the hospital care budget and transfer it to domiciliary care. That is clearly to the benefit of the vast majority of older people in Northern Ireland. So, I cannot see how that could in any way transgress an equality agenda if you feel that elderly people are being hard done by, because we are pouring more resources into the care of older people in our community rather than less. That is

throughout all five trust areas and all communities. I just do not see the argument that it would be inequitable to do that if the concern is in regard to the age profile.

Dr Tony Damoglou: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. What is the Minister's assessment of whether Transforming Your Care (TYC) has sufficient funding to deliver change?

Mr Wells: In a word: no. When John Compton published his report, 'Transforming Your Care', he could not have envisaged the very difficult financial situation that our Executive now faces. If you saw the pain that I am experiencing, you would understand how difficult it has been. I have to implement £70 million of cuts by the end of the financial year. There was an attempt to address this shortfall in the October monitoring round when we were allocated an extra £8 million for the TYC budget. This was to help move things along. We made a mistake in believing that we could use what is called monitoring round money — to the uninitiated, that is slippage money Departments give up as unspent — to beef up the TYC budget and ensure rapid delivery. Unfortunately, monitoring round money has been very thin on the ground this year.

That said, we have still achieved quite a bit. We have 17 integrated care partnerships. The enablement policy has been quite a success. We have also encouraged doctors to come together in federations or conglomerates and are making progress on the new health care hubs, as I saw when I was in Banbridge the other day. Real progress is being made, but we are half way through a five-year programme and, unfortunately, it is very difficult to find all the funding required to transform our care adequately. It may actually take a bit longer. I remember, however, a concluding remark from John Compton's report to the effect that, if we do not do this, we cannot sustain a health care system in 2030. We simply have to do this. There is no other option because the resources will not be there to continue on in the way that we are. Some progress has been made, but there is much more to do, and it is going to be very challenging to come on target by the end of year five.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Dr Damoglou to ask a supplementary.

Dr Damoglou: Can the Minister assure us that the integrated care teams will have the full complement of appropriately trained staff across all disciplines, including senior decision makers and dedicated consultants who are available 24/7?

Mr Wells: I go back to my previous answer. We have had considerable success in establishing the 17 integrated care partnerships. The benefits of what John Compton was suggesting have become very evident. In answer to your question, I am not certain that we will have the resources in the next two and a half years to guarantee full funding for TYC. If you think this year is bleak, you should look at next year. We are facing huge difficulties next year. We will carry £168 million of unmet need into the next financial year. You may have heard recent reports that we are getting an extra £41 million. Technically, that may not be the case. The £41 million goes to the Department of Finance and Personnel. It is up to the Executive then to decide how it is distributed. DRD or DARD or another Department may say that they have a greater call on the money. Obviously, I am in there fighting for every penny of that £41 million on behalf of health, and, if I get it, we will have more money available for the integrated care partnerships and TYC generally. At the minute, however, I do not know where I stand. I am still down about £110 million for next year, despite all the savings and changes that have been made. Unfortunately, my life over the last 71 days — it seems like 71 years — has been very difficult. It is all budgets, budgets, budgets. The implementation of TYC is predicated on getting the money from some source. I have some ideas as to what those sources might be. I am still upholding my predecessor's commitment to TYC as the way forward for health care in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We now move on to question 3. I call Miss Patricia Donald.

Mr Wells: Good to meet you again, Patricia, after all these years. Patricia and I used to work together in the National Trust.

Miss Patricia Donald: I still work there. Thank you very much indeed, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Given that travel expenses are not available to carers who work for private contractors, is the Minister willing to review employment terms and conditions so that those working in rural areas get their mileage paid?

Mr Wells: I was quite surprised by that question because I understood that most private providers did pay travel expenses. It may be that in Fermanagh there are a few anomalies. We have a mixed market in Northern Ireland for domiciliary care. Trusts provide it, but two thirds of it is provided by private sector companies, which recruit their own staff, who are regulated by the RQIA and have to be

up to a certain standard. Their terms and conditions are set out when they start work. Carers in south Down certainly do get mileage. There has not been a lack of carers in my constituency for that reason. There is a shortage of carers generally, but I have not heard mileage cited as one of the main reasons. It is estimated that within 10 years we could be 5,000 short of the numbers needed to cover Northern Ireland, factoring in our ageing population and the increased emphasis on the home as hub of care under TYC.

People generally want to spend their later years at home with their family, and I am glad that we still have strong family networks. This is a matter for negotiations between the private provider and his staff. Obviously, the minimum wage has to be paid, but anything above that is negotiated. I have not come across this as an issue causing difficulty. Whether it is an issue or not, we are going to have a problem getting adequate levels of carers in the future, particularly at Christmas time and during the holiday period in July, when some of our private providers really struggle to meet their quota of hours. The business mileage rate is set nationally. We have to be careful, because this is a very big part of our budget. We provide domiciliary care to 25,300 people in Northern Ireland. It costs us £250 million, so we have to be very careful that we do not do anything that increases the costs of private and state providers. It is another budget argument. Domiciliary care is under big pressure in next year's budget. I would not be minded, therefore, to have a radical overhaul of terms and conditions as long as we can attract staff. The market is tightening rapidly, however, and we may have to look at that in the future.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The bell will go off shortly. It is not to warn the Minister that we have a two-minute rule for this session. I call Miss Donald to ask her supplementary question.

Miss Donald: With your permission, I will make a comment to Mr Wells. You have referred to the fact that we worked together in the National Trust. We pay the junior staff who act as guides the minimum wage. We pay the same amount to people who go out to deal with old people in their own homes, some of whom are doubly incontinent. It is very difficult work. Does the Minister have plans to provide a more realistic time slot for those older people requiring domiciliary care? Ten or 15 minutes in and out is not very long.

Mr Wells: This question comes up all the time. I was the person paying those wages when I worked for the National Trust, so maybe I was guilty at the time.

Domiciliary care is absolutely essential to health and social services in Northern Ireland and is a vital component of TYC. We pay nothing but tribute to the thousands of people who provide that care throughout Northern Ireland. The time slot, I am told by the trust, is based on a clinical assessment of the needs of the person requiring care. I am told that, if it is a 15-minute time slot, that is the assessment. It is not based on budgets or resources. It is what they believe the person needs. If it is half an hour, it is half an hour. If it is an hour, it is an hour. If it is three times a day, it is three times a day. I frequently hear shouts of derision from MLAs when I say that. I accept that there is doubt about that. Professionals in the trust tell me that is what they are doing, although I am also told that they are finding it incredibly difficult to keep within budget.

The area is growing rapidly and, frankly, you can never have enough care because people will always ask for enhanced hours. I notice that, in places such as Ardglass, there are teams of domiciliary care ladies — they are all ladies in Ardglass — getting out of minibuses and literally running from house to house because they have to get to their 15-minute or half-hour slots. They have trainers on, which indicates to me that those ladies are under pressure and are finding it quite difficult. I also have to accept the judgement of my staff in the social care teams that they believe that that is what the person needs.

Ultimately, we want to pour quite an additional amount of resource into that field through Transforming Your Care (TYC) and I would like to think, when we have that, we can be a bit more sympathetic to the requests of families who want more care.

Mr Willie Carville: I would like to thank Patricia for asking my question as her supplementary question. *[Laughter.]* Given that the Health and Social Care Board recognises that domiciliary care is one of the most important services associated with implementing Transforming Your Care, what is the Minister's assessment of the adequacy of 15-minute domiciliary care slots?

Mr Wells: My answer would be similar to the one I gave earlier.

Mr Carville: I would imagine so.

Mr Wells: My officials are telling me that, if it is 15 minutes, that is their professional assessment of what the person needs. One of my biggest issues as a constituency representative is that there are people who are saying that that is not the case. However, if we were to double that to half an hour in most cases, we simply would not have the money to do it. There are four budget lines in my allocation for next year that are under incredible stress and that is one of them. We have to keep an eye on that very tightly.

I have to set aside £35 million every year in my budget just to take account of the fact that we are all getting older. Before we do anything, that is what I require just to take account of that increased pressure on my budget. The difficulty is that we have had a 6% growth in demand over the last four years and a 2% rise in income. Eventually, it is bound to happen that if you continue that on, no matter how efficient you are, the stress will begin to show. It showed last autumn when the trusts all came back to me saying that they were having huge difficulties meeting not only their general budgets but their domiciliary care budgets. In the real world, we would have the money to do this but unless there is a radical change to how our budget allocation is given to us under the Barnett formula, we will still be in this position for the next eight years and certainly for the next six years until 2020. There will be flatline budgets and rapidly rising growth.

Mr Carville: Does the Minister have plans to provide a more realistic timeslot for those older people who require domiciliary care?

Mr Wells: Again, I would refer you to the answer I gave earlier. I cannot really add to that. *[Interruption.]* The previous Minister has come to help me; that will be good. *[Laughter.]* He maybe has the answer; he was there for three and a half years and I have been there only for 70 days. That is as far as I can take the answer to your question, but I am being lobbied extensively on this issue. What you have not yet seen has been that transfer from hospital to domiciliary; therefore, we are not really seeing the benefits of TYC as yet.

Mr Victor Murphy: Will the Minister reinstate respite and permanent admissions to our statutory residential care homes?

Mr Wells: They are all easy ones today, aren't they? Residential care has been one of the most difficult issues for me and the previous Minister. We are all aware of the intense public interest when an announcement was made several years ago to close a large number of residential care homes.

At the moment, we are waiting for a report which is having an in-depth look at the issue to see what the viability is for the continued use of these valued facilities. We need to accept, however, that there has been a change in the demographics of Northern Ireland. More people want to live at home with packages and the need for residential care has reduced; there is no question that the demand is getting lower. Certainly, there are homes that previously had been surplus to needs. In my community, in Ballynahinch, there was Grove House, which closed long before the most recent controversy. At the time it was closed, there were five people in the house. It was going to cost £800,000 simply to make the roof safe. It was costing an absolute fortune per resident, and there was capacity elsewhere within the residential home sector in south Down. So the difficult decision was taken to close it and the residents were moved. And that was painful, but now it is accepted as the right decision. From looking at the stats recently, it is quite clear that there are some homes that are very much in demand and others which are not.

I think that we need to make painful decisions in health as to whether the large amount of money tied up here can be used more effectively elsewhere, particularly when the private sector is accommodating the vast majority of people living in residential care. In my situation in south Down, there is a residential care home which is in difficulty, but there is an application in from my housing association to build much superior supported accommodation just down the road. That does not come out of my budget at all; the capital cost of that is incurred by the housing association. So, there may be other options and we need to consider the future. Also, if there are better ways in which we can use those properties for care in the community, we need to look at that. So, I cannot rule out, or rule in, what will happen to residential homes. All I can say is that, if there is not a demand for certain number of homes, we will have to look at our capacity because we have so many other issues to fight. We are firefighting, and we are going to have to look at every pound that is spent in this field and see what we can do. I know that, when this decision is made in the spring, there will be a lot of public interest. That is absolutely guaranteed.

Mr Murphy: With proper, appropriate investment, can residential care homes continue to provide high-quality care for older people?

Mr Wells: I have no doubt that they could, but whether there is the demand for them is a different issue. The demand, as I said earlier, would seem to indicate that we need to concentrate on allowing people to live in their own homes, rather than in statutory residential homes. If statutory residential homes are available, is the private sector, which also provides this type of care, a more appropriate vehicle for the care of our citizens?

I put it this way: all of nursing home provision in Northern Ireland is now in the private sector. All of it. If we went back to statutory provision, the health service budget would collapse overnight. We could not afford to do that. We simply could not. Other parts of the United Kingdom have already moved on to that entirely private-sector model. I have no baggage about the private sector, if it provides a high standard of care, is compliant with RQIA and all the statutory provisions are adhered to. I do not see why we should be hung up about whether that is provided by the private sector or the public. I was at Cornfield Care Centre in Limavady, a private nursing home, two weeks ago. I have to say that it was the most extraordinary nursing home that I have ever seen. It could easily have been mistaken for a hotel. It was a marvellous new facility. I do not see why the state should be stepping in to provide that level of care when the private sector can do it, and do it effectively to the satisfaction of those who live in it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. That brings us to the end of time for questions. I thank the Minister for providing such full and comprehensive answers. I understand that the chairperson of the Pensioners Parliament would like to say a few concluding words.

Mr Monaghan: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker, for welcoming us back to the Senate Chamber for this debate, which is really very vital and important to us all. We are grateful for the attendance and constructive engagement of the Ministers, who have listened to the concerns that we have expressed. Obviously, we will be following up the motions with the Departments and indeed with the Ministers. We have had an invitation to meet the Minister for Social Development which we will take up very shortly.

And let me say a very sincere word to you, personally. We are grateful for your time and for your engagement with us today. This process enables older people to represent their views at the heart of Government, and that is so important. Let me say a particular word of thanks to the staff of the Assembly. Thanks to the Outreach Team, and in particular to Louise Close and Ursula McCanny, for pulling the event together. I would like to thank the staff of the Speaker's Office and of the Business Office, in particular Roisin Kelly and Nick Mitford, who put us through our paces earlier so that we would not transgress any rules, etc. And let me say a special word of thanks to our own team from Age Sector Platform: Eddie Lynch, Alison McKenna and Seamus Lynch, Eleanor Mallon and Nichola Johnston, who do a tremendous job for older people. We have an easy thing to do because everything is presented for us. We have very little to do in that field. And thank you, again, to all the Members of the Pensioners Parliament who have come from all over Northern Ireland to be with us. I hope that you have enjoyed the day and that you have had your issues presented effectively. And again, thanks to the 12 people around the table who have put the points so strongly to the Ministers.

Now there is some lunch for everyone. And again, thank you everyone.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Lunch is a very important part of the agenda. *[Laughter.]* As Principal Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank everyone present. I really appreciated how the questions were presented and the Minister's answers were both received and responded to. And a special word of thanks goes to the organisers from Age Sector Platform. I know that events like this do not just happen. A great deal of work, and Mr Monaghan alluded to some of that already, goes into making the arrangements to ensure that the event is a success. I hope that you all enjoyed the occasion as much as I did. I myself am a pensioner, by the way, *[Laughter.]* so I declare that interest.

We did not follow the Question Time procedure absolutely or precisely, but I hope that this event gives you all a better insight into how we run business in the Assembly. You had the opportunity to raise things that matter with the Ministers and you pressed them for information and answers. I am sure that they also have a better understanding of the issues that are important to you and the people you represent.

I take the opportunity to thank the four Ministers. Mr Bell was unavoidably delayed, but Ms McCann, Mr Storey and Mr Wells have taken the time to be with us. I also want to recognise, again, the time

taken by MLA colleagues out of what is quite a busy day in the Assembly. You will have seen some of them going in and out because there are meetings going on and we are now back into the plenary session. However, their attendance, I think, is testimony to just how significant your agenda items are to them.

Adjourned at 2.08 pm.