



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament

4 February 2016

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**Mr Speaker:** Good morning. I am delighted to be here today to open the Pensioners' Parliament and welcome you to the Assembly Chamber in Parliament Buildings. This is the first time the Parliament has convened in the Assembly Chamber, and I hope we will all enjoy the experience. Before we move to the formal proceedings, I invite the chairperson of the Pensioners' Parliament, Michael Monaghan, to say a few words of welcome and briefly set out the context of the issues being raised today.

**Mr Michael Monaghan (Chairperson of the Pensioners' Parliament):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for that introduction and for your welcome this morning. I welcome all our colleagues from across Northern Ireland. It is great to see so many people here for this event. Thank you for allowing us to have the debate in the main Assembly Chamber, which is a real privilege that we are looking forward to. As your predecessor said, this event is a great example of participative democracy, and we value it very much. That is manifested by the attendance of our members from across Northern Ireland this morning. We are looking forward to the event, which is a great opportunity for us to engage with Ministers. Thank you for arranging it.

## Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

**Mr Speaker:** It is time for questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Unfortunately, the Minister is not available today. However, Ms Paula Bradley, my friend and colleague, the Assembly private secretary to the Minister of Health, has kindly agreed to answer on his behalf. There will be no supplementaries to the questions to Ms Bradley.

**Mr Willie Carville:** Given that the Donaldson Report recommended a costed and timetabled implementation plan for Transforming Your Care, why has this not been produced to date?

**Ms P Bradley:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the member for his question. I pass on apologies from the Minister. I hope I am able to answer your questions. I will be a poor substitute for the Minister, but I hope I can get there.

The Sir Liam Donaldson report, 'The Right Time, The Right Place', acknowledged the case for change set out in Transforming Your Care, but highlighted concerns around communication and the perceived pace of implementation to deliver the service model set out. The report suggested that, as a result of weak communication and little action, there is substantial scepticism around Transforming Your Care. The review's third recommendation concerned the production of a costed timetable and implementation plan and two projects to be implemented forthwith, namely to create an expanded role for pharmacists and to expand the role of paramedics in pre-hospital care. Work has already been done on both projects.

More recently, the focus has been on making changes to support Transforming Your Care as part of mainstream business. Key changes are set out, for instance, in the Department's business plan or in the commissioning plan rather than a stand-alone service. To expand, we know that the service we have at the moment cannot continue. It can no longer go on. We do need Transforming Your Care. As someone who worked in the service for a number of years before becoming an MLA, I believe that Transforming Your Care was a very good model. We did think it was going to take three to five years, possibly more, for all of it to be implemented.

One of the main problems was the funding. We were solely relying on monitoring rounds to put money into Transforming Your Care, and that certainly was not the ideal. We also had the welfare reform issue last year, which diverted money from Transforming Your Care. We do know that health is changing all the time, so parts of Transforming Your Care now need to be expanded and further

implemented. It is hoped that the work of the expert panel, chaired by Professor Bengoa from Spain, can now look at that, and also at expanding and implementing Transforming Your Care.

As a Member of this House, I would like to see this become part of the next mandate. I want transforming to continue because, as I said earlier, we cannot continue with the way things are at the minute. We need to move much of our provision for health from the acute sector and back into the home again, because that is where people want to be — not in hospital.

**Dr Tony Damoglou:** How can the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety ensure that older people, as primary users of the health service, are protected from any negative impact resulting from changes to departmental policy?

**Ms P Bradley:** I thank the member for his question. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires the Department, in carrying out its functions, powers and duties, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation, between men and women, between persons with a disability and persons without and between persons with dependants and persons without. If any amendments to departmental policy are proposed, all such changes are subject to robust screening. This includes equality impact assessments where applicable, and public consultation. Where a result of the screening is the identification of a negative impact on a particular group, proposals are made to address this impact where possible.

This is something that we live by in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Under section 75 we cannot discriminate against anyone, and that includes all aspects of the Assembly, whether it is in any other Department or in the Department of Health. I know you will be asking the junior Minister from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister some questions on the active ageing strategy. I know it is already in force, and that will be across all Departments. We cannot discriminate. As I said to you earlier, I worked for the health service for many years before becoming an MLA and, where possible, it was seen that discrimination most certainly did not happen against anyone within the older age group.

**Mr Victor Murphy:** Will the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety maintain free prescriptions to people aged 60 or over?

**Ms P Bradley:** I thank the member for his question. This has been a very topical debate in recent months within the Assembly. I just put it on the record that prescriptions are currently free to all patients, including individuals over the age of 60, and there are no plans to change the current arrangements. Any consideration around the reintroduction of prescription charges would require decisions as to what rate of charge would be levied and the potential for any exemptions to the charge, which would possibly include an exemption based on the age of the patient. Any proposals for change would be subject to public consultation, so I can put it on record that there will be no prescription charges as we stand here today.

Recently I attended a “keeping well” campaign that looked at prescription charges not just for those over 60 but for those who are living with long-term conditions. We have many people within our community, and they had brought the argument forward — as we hear the argument from this Parliament — about people who have to choose between prescriptions, heat, food and all those things. The same is being said by people of all ages, and especially people with long-term conditions.

I can understand, to a degree, why this idea was floated because, in the year 2012-13, £377 million was spent out of the health budget on prescriptions, and, for this year, 2015-16, over £400 million has been put aside for pharmaceuticals. We know that more drugs are coming onto the market that are more expensive, albeit we have drugs that fall off the market and then become generic, which are cheaper. I do not think that that should be at the cost of people who rely on these drugs, and especially people who are on low incomes. As far as I and my party are concerned, there will be no reintroduction.

**Mrs Caroline McKeown:** Given that the waiting times for non-emergency treatment and care are increasing, what action is the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety taking to reduce the waiting times for operations for older people?

**Ms P Bradley:** I thank the member for her question. This is another issue that is extremely topical at the moment. The long-standing Health and Social Care policy is that all patients are seen and treated in order of clinical priority. It is the urgent first, and thereafter in chronological order in order to provide equity of access. Clinicians make the assessment and decide the priority for individual patients. Age is not taken into consideration. I have checked the position with the Health and Social Care Board and it has no special initiatives under way to reduce waiting times specifically for older people, but it has initiatives to reduce the waiting times for everyone.

Members will be aware that, in the November monitoring round, the Department of Health received £40 million specifically to look at waiting times. We know that, at the start of this mandate in 2011, waiting times were extremely high. The Minister had reduced those times significantly, and then they have gone back up again. There have been issues to do with welfare reform. We had a full year where budgets were cut and budgets were tight in order to supplement that. There have been difficulties and there have been issues, but from the £40 million that has been given from the November monitoring round, a proportion has been given to the independent sector to alleviate the pressures within waiting times — £27 million has been given to outpatients and £8 million has been given to inpatient procedures. This will make a significant difference to our waiting times and to waiting times across the board. I know this is no comfort to someone, whether they are over the age of 60 or below the age of 60, who is in pain and who is in need, but the Minister is committed to reducing waiting times.

We also need to remember that our services and referrals to clinicians have been up by 15% since 2011. This is not due to anything in particular, but we have much better diagnostics, we have much better screening and people are coming forward to do the PHA, the bowel testing, the breast cancer testing and all those things — which are great things. We want to see people living longer. This increase is going to continue as people take better care of their health and avail themselves of the testing and services that are available. We are going to see an increase, year on year, of referrals coming through, and it is up to this Department to catch up with those referrals and make sure that people are seen at an opportune moment. It is something that the Minister has committed to, and the £40 million will go some way to alleviating those pressures.

**Ms Patricia Donald:** How will the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety ensure that care packages, including the time allocated for care, are determined by clinical need?

**Ms P Bradley:** I thank the member for her question. Care packages are only in place as a result of an assessment of need using the regional standardised tool, which is designed to focus not on clinical need but on an individual's needs for assistance with their activities of daily living that are crucial to the person's independence, rehabilitation, recovery or safety. Delivery of these packages is monitored by individual trusts and reported to the HSC Board on a quarterly basis, and also annually through the statutory functions process. In addition, providers are required, under care management arrangements, to review these packages with service users and carers in order to check that the package is sufficient to meet the goal of independence.

Again, I am going to hark back to my previous career. I was part of the hospital social work team in Antrim Area Hospital, so it was my role, before I became involved in politics, to actually put in those packages of care. I understand when I hear from many of you about the 15-minute calls or even the 10-minute calls, which really are not good enough for what people's needs are. I remember that, in my job as a social worker, it was very much based on need. That is what we need to remember, but we also need to remember that people's needs change and fluctuate, so it is not a static process. It is something that needs to be looked at all the time by the care providers.

I am pleased to say that, only this week, the Minister reported that he was giving an extra £1.6 million to the private sector, which does most of our social care — it is not the health trusts that do it; it is the private sector. I know that part of that will be mopped up because of the pay increase, which they most definitely deserve. I have worked with people who provided care for many years, and I know what a difficult job it is and also that it is a professional job. We want to maintain people's dignity, we want to maintain people in their own home and we want them to maintain as independent a life as possible — and that is what people want.

I am glad that the Minister has given this extra £1.6 million. It will help not only with residential care but, most certainly, with private home care. I think that we need to keep on the ball with this one and keep an eye on the statistics and reports that are coming back to say what level of care is being provided.

I know we all go out electioneering, we all live within our communities and we get stopped by people frequently, and this is an issue that comes up time and time again. It is something that we cannot ignore, because part of Transforming Your Care is for people to be maintained in their own home and to stay in their own home. That is what we want, and that is what you have told us you want. Therefore, we need to have the service to match that. I am glad to say that the Minister is looking at this very positively and wants to see that develop and change.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, Ms Bradley. I know the members will appreciate the depth of personal knowledge that you bring, but I want to particularly acknowledge that you stood in for a Minister who was otherwise engaged today.

It is now time to conclude the questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and to move straight away into questions to the Minister for Social Development. I very much welcome the attendance of the Ministers at the Pensioners' Parliament today.

## Social Development

**Mr Francis Hughes:** Given the Department for Social Development's commitment to focus on outcomes rather than expenditure, how has the Minister addressed fuel poverty amongst older people?

**Lord Morrow (The Minister for Social Development):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank Francis Hughes for his question. I welcome everyone to Stormont today. I hope you have a good day, and I hope you go away with some knowledge of what we are doing around the issues that concern you.

Since 2001, my Department has spent over £130 million to improve the energy efficiency of more than 120,000 low-income households. Many of those households were made up of older people. The affordable warmth and boiler replacement schemes focus on those in fuel poverty. It is fair to assume that, given the income threshold, many of those targeted will be beyond retirement age. Anecdotal information from the first year of the operation of the affordable warmth scheme supports that assumption.

Since September 2014, my Department's primary tool for tackling fuel poverty has been the affordable warmth scheme. In partnership with local councils and the Housing Executive, privately owned and privately rented households considered to be the most at risk of fuel poverty are being targeted and offered energy efficiency improvement measures. To qualify, households must have an annual income of less than £20,000. A technical assessment carried out by the Housing Executive will identify the energy efficiency improvements required in a dwelling and recommend the measures to be installed. Measures include: loft and cavity wall insulation; removal and replacement of any ineffective cavity wall insulation; new replacement boilers; draught-proofing exterior doors and windows where necessary; replacement windows where a technical survey identifies them as defective; and solid wall insulation where appropriate. I believe that this will really be a whole-house solution.

Furthermore, the Department is undertaking a review of the affordable warmth scheme. This will be a comprehensive review and will consider the qualification criteria for the scheme, including what is counted as income when calculating the household's annual income and the measures available under the scheme.

In addition, my Department offers the boiler replacement scheme, which is only available in Northern Ireland, and it helps owner-occupiers to improve the energy efficiency of their home. The scheme was introduced in September 2012 and aims to improve privately owned households with a grant towards replacing a boiler that is at least 15 years old. This scheme is expected to assist many pensioner households. Boiler replacement is a self-referral scheme, with householders making an application directly to the Housing Executive. The scheme is open to owner-occupiers whose annual

income is less than £40,000 and who have an inefficient boiler of at least 15 years. The allowance does not apply to Economy 7 heating stoves used exclusively for cooking, back boilers or room heaters.

The grant of up to £1,000, depending on total gross annual household income, is available to help with replacing an inefficient boiler with a more energy-efficient condensing oil or gas boiler, switching from oil to gas or switching to a wood-pellet boiler. The amount of grant payable will depend on total gross income. For those with an income of less than £20,000 the grant is £700 to replace the boiler, but it rises to £1,000 if heating controls are also installed. For those with an income of between £20,000 and £40,000, the grant is £400 for the boiler but rises to £500 if heating controls are installed.

The Social Security Agency proactively supports the economic well-being of older people in Northern Ireland through its ongoing benefits uptake programme, administered by the improving benefit uptake team. In 2014-15, benefit uptake activity generated over £11 million in additional annual benefits for 3,550 older people – many of whom are amongst the most vulnerable in society. These were benefits they were entitled to but not previously claiming. The Make the Call advertising campaign has been, in the main, targeted towards older people and their carers. The campaign is supported by the Make the Call promotional materials, which are widely distributed by relevant partner organisations and events.

Winter fuel payment is a benefit paid to older people to help them keep warm in winter. Winter fuel payment is not means tested. It is available to older people who work and those who claim benefits. The winter fuel payment amount ranges from £100 to £300.

The cold weather payment is for older people who claim certain benefits; for example, state pension credit. Extra money is available for each week that there is very cold weather in their area. A cold weather payment is £25 per week. If an older person is in receipt of a qualifying benefit and the temperature in their postcode is, or is forecast to be, zero degrees or below for seven consecutive days, an automatic payment is made. A period of cold weather is defined by the Met Office.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you, and before I call Mr Hughes to ask a supplementary question, I just remind you and the Ministers in attendance that the two-minute rule applies, as we have in the normal business of the Assembly. I thank the Minister for that very comprehensive reply.

**Mr Hughes:** Will the planned reduction in the number of Departments result in one Department having sole responsibility for tackling fuel poverty in Northern Ireland? Currently, it is dealt with by seven Departments.

**Lord Morrow:** I thank the Member for his question, and I apologise for the length of my answer. I thought Standing Orders had been suspended today. *[Laughter.]* Mr Speaker has allowed me a degree of latitude, but I do sincerely apologise for that serious indiscretion on my part.

My Department has responsibility for reducing fuel poverty in domestic dwellings. I continue to focus on improving the energy efficiency of those dwellings. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, better known as DETI, is responsible for energy efficiency in the domestic and commercial sectors. DETI also has responsibility for the Utility Regulator, who oversees processes for energy such as gas and electricity. Furthermore, the current responsibility that DETI and my Department have for energy will be subsumed into the new Department for the Economy and Department for Communities. My Department and DETI are working collaboratively to deliver a new energy efficiency programme. Whilst there may be an opportunity to rationalise responsibilities moving forward, there are currently no plans to do so.

I hope I am inside the two minutes.

**Mr Martin Gallagher:** Given that, by the end of December 2020, all new buildings will be required to be nearly zero energy, how does the Minister plan to ensure that older people who live in older properties will be assisted to achieve this level of energy efficiency in their homes?

**Lord Morrow:** I thank Martin Gallagher for his question. In July 2015, the UK Government announced that they do not intend to proceed with the zero carbon allowable solutions carbon offsetting scheme or the proposed 2016 increase in on-site energy efficiency standards.

Building regulations in Northern Ireland had been upgraded with a view to meeting the 2016 standards. New builds and housing associations will be building to these current standards. The question of whether or not there will be any further upgrades in Northern Ireland to require new buildings to meet near zero energy standards should be directed to my Executive colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

There was never a UK Government commitment to make existing older houses meet a near zero energy target as such a proposal would be so prohibitively expensive as to be impractical. However, my Department is committed to substantially upgrading the energy efficiency of existing housing stock to alleviate fuel poverty. In that regard, what is being done for older people in existing housing includes a number of programmes such as the Housing Executive heating programme, which upgrades existing heating to high-efficiency gas, where available, or oil boilers with modern controls. When heating upgrades take place, the loft insulation is also topped up to at least 270 mm. When gas becomes available in the west of Northern Ireland, high-efficiency gas boilers will be available to tenants in these areas. This programme includes many dwellings occupied by elderly tenants.

All Housing Executive stock has had its windows upgraded to double glazing. For private sector houses, my Department funds the affordable warmth scheme across Northern Ireland, with those areas suffering the highest level of fuel poverty being targeted first. Eligibility criteria target households whose annual income is less than £20,000. Many of those who are eligible for assistance with a range of energy efficiency measures will be elderly persons' households.

I do not want to break the rule twice, Mr Speaker, so I am going to stop there.

**Mr Speaker:** On behalf of the Pensioners' Parliament, I thank the Minister for his attendance and for his complete and very comprehensive answers to their questions. That concludes questions to the Minister for Social Development. It is time to move on to questions to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Jonathan Bell.

## **Enterprise, Trade and Investment**

**Mr Michael Monaghan:** How will the Minister work with the UK Government's Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change to ensure that Northern Ireland is included in the warm home discount scheme that provides discount on energy bills for pensioners on low income?

**Mr Bell (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am delighted to be back with the Pensioners' Parliament. It was the late Enoch Powell's political rule that the Opposition is in front of you but the enemy is behind you.

It is a good question, and energy policy falls directly into my responsibility; we have the main energy policy remit. We comment on the feasibility of what Lord Morrow said. They bring forward the energy efficiency initiatives and specific schemes. The warm homes scheme that you directly asked about is a GB scheme that is paid for exclusively by GB customers. We met officials from the Department of Energy and Climate Change in 2014 to discuss the issue. The information coming back was that, as it was specifically tailored to the GB market, we could not participate in that particular scheme.

The question is what we can do to develop our own scheme. We want to make sure that, if we develop our own scheme in Northern Ireland, we do not significantly add to the bills of all customers. In the first instance, there are people who could benefit, but that benefit would have to be covered from a very small customer base. The GB scheme only applies to those energy providers who have more than a quarter of a million customers. In Northern Ireland, only one supplier would be able to take that forward. The Executive are looking, as Lord Morrow has said, at a specific energy efficiency scheme. We intend to look at that as our means, along with boiler replacement and other measures of insulation and different things like that, to help the scheme.

To give you some idea of the costs, the GB scheme allowed people on particular state benefits to get an approximately £135 one-off discount on an electricity bill. If I was to apply that directly to Northern Ireland customers who are in fuel poverty, according to the 2014 prices, I would have to put £59 onto every other household bill. If we look to cover the cost of a scheme by excluding from the contribution those who are in fuel poverty — ie, we make everyone else pay — the bills for the other people could be around £101. We cannot do it in Northern Ireland, as we only have one supplier who can do it, so we look to what we can do, and that is around energy efficiency and the boiler replacement scheme. That is where my Department will work alongside the Executive to give every assistance to pensioners.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mr Monaghan to ask a supplementary question.

**Mr Monaghan:** I am sure the Minister thought he had escaped us when he moved from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but he knows he is in the firing line again. I thank the Minister for his comments, but, to make it quite clear, we never campaigned for a stand-alone scheme in Northern Ireland. We put that on the record so we can dismiss that item. What we sought was inclusion in the GB scheme. Scotland and Wales, also devolved regions, are included in the scheme.

As the Minister quite rightly points out, the scheme is funded by a levy on other customers, and that is £11 per annum on the bills of other customers. This can be found on page 20 of the consultation documents published in 2014. To include Northern Ireland in a greater UK scheme would add 85p, so you would be talking about £11.85 for a UK-wide scheme. We think there is an arguable case on the parity issue alone to include Northern Ireland in the warm homes scheme discount.

Obviously we cannot go into all the details today, but I ask the Minister whether he will do something for us. We had a meeting scheduled for 24 September past, but it had to be postponed for other reasons. Will the Minister undertake to reschedule this meeting as a matter of urgency so that we can go into the detail of the scheme? That is the basic outline of where we stand on it.

**Mr Speaker:** I have to remind you, Mr Monaghan, that the two-minute rule applies to you also.  
*[Laughter.]*

**Mr Bell:** I would be more than happy to reschedule as a priority. I think we should look to what we are currently doing for affordable warmth. We have targeted 100% of support to the lowest-income households — that is households earning less than £20,000. We targeted the grant support for up to half of people from the lower-income households to have their boiler replacement taken forward. The Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation will grant support for priority households that are not covered by the affordable warmth scheme — the higher-income households — and some businesses.

I am more than happy to look at the GB scheme again with you. The information that I have been given by my officials is that this could, in certain measures, lead to placing up to £101 on people who are not eligible for the scheme. We would need to be very careful about that, but we can examine the figures together, discuss them in detail and try to find a solution together.

**Mr Nixon Armstrong:** How many households have access to the gas network?

**Mr Bell:** In the greater Belfast, north Down, Lisburn and Larne areas, where Phoenix Natural Gas is licensed to provide the gas network, natural gas is available to 313,000 properties, with 192,000 of these already connected to gas. That includes some 180,000 domestic gas customers and, with an existing gas network in place, there is potential to increase the number of connections.

In the Firmus Energy gas licence area, which is outside of greater Belfast and includes Londonderry, Limavady, Coleraine, Antrim, Ballymena, Craigavon, Banbridge, Warrenpoint, Armagh and Newry, natural gas is available to about 84,000 premises, and some 27,000 of these are already connected to gas, including around 25,000 domestic properties.

Anyone wishing to connect to natural gas should contact either Phoenix Natural Gas or Firmus Energy, depending on where they live, and, in due course, SGN will be connecting gas consumers in the west.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mr Armstrong to ask a supplementary question.

**Mr Armstrong:** Can the Minister outline the plans in place to extend the gas network to allow a greater choice of home-heating options, especially for older people?

**Mr Bell:** There are a number of schemes in place. In February 2015, if I take the west in particular, the Utility Regulator awarded licences to Mutual Energy and SGN. That was to bring natural gas to towns in the west, including Dungannon, Coalisland, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Omagh, Strabane, Enniskillen and Derrylin. Construction work to connect Strabane to gas started in November 2015, with works to install gas pipelines between the remaining towns to be taken forward in 2017, subject to the necessary planning approval and consents being obtained. The overall project should connect around 39,000 domestic gas customers in the west over the development period.

In my own area, east Down, in December 2015, the Utility Regulator granted Phoenix Natural Gas an extension to its greater Belfast gas licence, and that was to connect 13 towns and villages directly to gas. Work to provide new gas pipelines to connect Hillsborough, Annahilt, Dromore, Ballygowan, Saintfield, Ballynahinch, the Spa, Crossgar, Drumaness, Downpatrick, Castlewellan, Dundrum and Newcastle is going to start in 2016. That should see around 27,000 customers connected to gas, and 25,000 of those customers are expected to be domestic customers.

## **Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister**

**Mr Speaker:** It is now time to move on to questions for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, represented here today by the junior Ministers, Mrs Emma Pengelly and Ms Jennifer McCann. Thank you both for your attendance.

**Mr Ivan Baxter:** Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister introduce legislation to outlaw age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services before the end of the current Assembly mandate in April 2016?

**Ms Jennifer McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome you all to Parliament Buildings, and it is great to see so many here at this Question Time.

Public consultation on proposals to extend age discrimination legislation to the provision of goods, facilities and services ended on 8 October 2015. During the consultation, we held a series of public meetings, which many of you attended. We welcome the very valuable input that this made to the consultation process. In addition to the views of the 156 people who attended our consultation events, we received a substantial number of written responses — 222 in total — providing substantial commentary and contribution to the policy debate.

The purpose of the exercise was to develop a clear and robust policy position before legislation is brought forward in this area. Officials are in the process of finalising analysis of all the consultation responses and input. They are bringing together the responses to each of the consultation questions to provide us with an overall picture of the views emerging from the process. We are aware from work carried out to date that, in general, respondents welcomed the consultation on proposals to extend age discrimination legislation. Most of the proposals were accepted by a majority of those who responded or attended our events. However, there were a few key aspects of the proposals to which many respondents were strongly opposed, including the scope of the proposals for age and the proposed exception for financial services. When the analysis is completed, we will determine our final policy position, taking into account the range of views provided on our proposals. Decisions on the content and timing of the legislation will flow from the final policy position.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. I ask Mr Baxter to ask a supplementary question.

**Mr Baxter:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Given that equivalent legislation has been in place in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland for some, if not many years, we are at a loss to understand why this matter was not given a higher priority by our Assembly during this mandate. It seems to us that this is a form of age discrimination by default, perpetrated against older people by the very institution we were relying on to protect us.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. I am going to ask junior Minister Emma Pengelly to answer that very hard question.

**Mrs Emma Pengelly (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):**

Thank you very much, and thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I have been involved in the issue of age GFS, as it became known, since right back in 2007-08, when a small group of people — I am not sure whether some of them are here today — came along to speak to the then First Minister, Dr Paisley, about seeking a Commissioner for Older People and about issues around discrimination and the way older people were treated. I know that Dr Paisley was very open to doing everything that he could to support and help older people. He immediately tasked me and others to go away and put in place the arrangements to create the office of the Commissioner for Older People. The legislation got through, and the first Commissioner was put in place. Hopefully, very shortly, we will announce the new Older Person's Commissioner.

Age GFS became, as you are aware, much more complicated. At the time, all the discussions centred around age discrimination for older people. That is very much what we signed up to, that is what we agreed to, and that made its way into the Programme for Government. Unfortunately, as you are aware, the debate changed somewhat with a lobby from the younger people to be included in that. That came along relatively late in the day. We had felt that it should be a very straightforward matter, because there had been legislation in other jurisdictions. We could use that drafted legislation and bring that in to the Assembly very quickly.

I do not believe it is an issue of lack of prioritisation. I think everybody around the Chamber, as far as I am aware, is 100% on the page of bringing GFS protection for older people forward. The difficulty lies in the fact that there is no policy agreement across the Chamber in relation to younger people. I think the younger people issue is much more complicated. As you know, it was debated extensively in the Republic of Ireland and in the rest of the UK, and decisions were made not to implement that. That is where it became complicated, and that is why there has been a delay.

**Mrs Margaret Galloway:** When will the active ageing strategy be published and implemented?

**Mrs Pengelly:** It is not often that Ministers can stand up and say, "It is not only good news but it already has been published". The Executive's active ageing strategy was published on 26 January, and I am pleased to see that. I would like to thank, on behalf of the officials and other Ministers who have been involved in this work for some considerable time, everyone who contributed. I know many people around this Chamber today will have contributed to a very significant degree to the drafting of that strategy and the assessment of the various drafts that has led to this final strategy being published.

The purpose of the active ageing strategy is to transform attitudes to, and services for, older people. We believe it is important that we fully acknowledge the enormous contribution that older people continue to make in our society and that we collectively challenge the negative stereotyping of older people. It will provide direction for a Department's policies, make connections between strategies and lead to, we believe, improvement of services for older people right across all Departments. In developing the strategy as outlined, we worked closely with the former Commissioner for Older People, Claire Keatinge, and the ageing strategy advisory group, which included as members older people and people working for organisations — and I recognise some faces across the Chamber today.

The strategy sets a vision of Northern Ireland as an age-friendly region in which people, as they get older, are valued and supported to live actively, to their fullest potential and with all rights and dignity protected. The strategic aims are based around the United Nations Principles for Older Persons. There are 18 of these, grouped under five themes: independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity. The strategy's vision and strategic aims will be implemented by those Departments and agencies with the resources, expertise and specific responsibilities for the key programmes and services that improve the lives of older people. That is unlikely to be the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister, which will become the Executive Office, but it will actually be the Departments of Health, Education and others.

The draft indicators for the strategy, which will establish baselines on the current levels of need, will be used to monitor the implementation of the strategy. These will be issued for public consultation. This is very much about our new way of working. It is an outcomes-focused approach — we do not want to have strategies that achieve nothing. We want strategies with a clear idea of what it is that we want to do and a clear monitoring framework to make sure that it is achieved. If it is not being achieved, that is addressed at the earliest possible opportunity and the actions changed.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mrs Galloway to ask a supplementary question.

**Mrs Galloway:** I did not have a supplementary prepared. I would like to say that we did not realise that this was going to be published. It was published without us, who sat on the advisory panel, being given any prior warning. Are we going to get copies of it, and what is going to happen?

**Ms J McCann:** You are totally right. I can only apologise on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It should not have happened. I know sometimes — not very often — you get people in here throwing their hands up and saying they were wrong. We were totally wrong in this case; apologies to everyone in this Chamber. It will not happen in future. I apologise that it has happened.

On Monday we were with you and talked about the strategy. We hope to engage because, as I said on Monday at the signing of the dignity code, the strategy is only as good as the way it is rolled out, resourced and implemented. We want to work with the advisory panel and all the other groups and individuals that are here today, and people out in the community, because there are a lot of issues and programmes that are already there. This strategy is an Executive strategy that is going right across Departments. There is new stuff in it that we want to work with you on.

To answer your question, I totally apologise for that, and it definitely should not have happened.

**Mrs Ann Watson:** What is the timetable for the recruitment of a new Commissioner for Older People?

**Ms J McCann:** Interviews for the position of the Commissioner for Older People were held on 14 and 18 January. A list of those considered suitable for appointment was sent to Ministers for consideration. Following this, the necessary security checks need to be carried out before any announcement can be made. The date when the new Commissioner will take up post is dependent on the length of the notice period the successful candidate is required to give to their present employer.

I know this is a very brief answer, but obviously this is a live process so there is not a lot we can say. I hope you will appreciate that that is why the answer is so short.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mrs Watson to ask a supplementary question.

**Mrs Watson:** I do not have a supplementary question, except that I think that a lot of consideration and thought should go into who takes the post.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mrs Pengelly for a concluding comment.

**Mrs Pengelly:** We can assure you that we want to have the best possible person for this job. I think it is a critical job, particularly as we move through the transition with the new Departments. There will be a number of Departments having to deal with new policy responsibilities, and the voices of older people in particular, in relation to the health service and others, will be really critical to make sure that those issues remain at the forefront of the agenda. I know that Ministers have been considering this, and I am optimistic that a decision will be announced very shortly. I am confident that it will be a good person who will do a good job.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank on your behalf the junior Ministers for their attendance and their very interesting responses to what I thought were very pertinent and probing questions. That concludes this session of Question Time for the Pensioners' Parliament. I understand that the chairperson of the Pensioners' Parliament would like to make a few concluding remarks.

**Mr Monaghan:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. On behalf of Age Sector Platform and the Northern Ireland Pensioners' Parliament, I thank you personally for your ongoing support and indeed for arranging the event today. It is not only important, but a fairly crucial event in our calendar. We much appreciate the opportunity to put the issues on the record and we all come away better informed. Thanks to the four Ministers for taking part, and indeed a special thanks to Paula Bradley for standing in for the Minister of Health; we appreciate that.

The engagement is very important for older people, and that has been manifested by the numbers here this morning. Thanks also to the staff: to Nick for all his help and guidance and for the run-through on Friday past; to Louise and Janet from the Outreach office, who have always been very helpful; and to Frances and the team from the Speaker's Office for all their help.

Thanks to all of you for coming along. I am sure the Speaker has noted how well behaved you have been — *[Laughter.]* — and we look forward to engaging with you now and when 2016 local Pensioners' Parliaments commence later this month. Safe journey home, and thanks to everyone for being here this morning.

**Mr Speaker:** It has been my pleasure to contribute with you to the Pensioners' Parliaments and by hosting the final debates over the last two years. I am aware that my predecessor, Lord Hay, thoroughly enjoyed his relationship with the Parliament as well, and it has been good to see how it has developed and gone from strength to strength since its inception in 2011.

From my perspective, these debates are an excellent example of the work I would like to see the Assembly doing to encourage further involvement with the democratic process, and, as I constantly remind it, to be representative of the community that we belong to. It is a very diverse community and there are many sectoral interests, represented very ably and demonstrated very ably by you today.

I hope the debates and understanding the workings of the Assembly and procedures were useful to you. From the programme for not only today's events, but the previous ones that I was privileged to attend, it is obvious that you are not afraid to set out your case, and you are not in the least bit shy about pursuing those who have the Executive responsibility to listen to your voices and make decisions that reflect the advice and the perceptions that your life experience has given you.

The Pensioners' Parliament has been a shining example of participative democracy, as you said yourself, chair. The views that you represent here and the attendance of our Ministers, junior Ministers and Ms Paula Bradley demonstrate just how important that relationship is to your elected representatives and to the Ministers. I thank the Ministers and Paula Bradley for giving us their time to attend today and congratulate all of you for the work you have done.

Personally, as a 70-year-old about to step down at the end of this term, I probably should have declared an interest, as you were asking questions that I wanted answers to as well. Thank you again very much, and I look forward to following the progress of the Pensioners' Parliament, particularly the discussion around active old age. I intend to be a very active pensioner.

I thank you all very much — another successful session for the Parliament, and I think we will go from strength to strength together. I think you should all give yourselves a round of applause before I call the Adjournment. *[Applause.]* Always the most popular event in normal plenary sessions is when I call the Adjournment. People are glad to be getting home, particularly with the late-night sessions. We now formally close our proceedings in the normal way, and the meeting is adjourned.

*Adjourned at 11.12 am.*