

Private Members' Business

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Supporting People Fund

Ms Lo: I beg to move *That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review the current budget for the Supporting People fund to include inflationary increases, so that the programme's existing sustainability and quality of service is not put at risk.*

The Supporting People programme was introduced in Northern Ireland in April 2003 as a UK-wide reform to separate support services from housing benefits and to centralise several funding streams into a single budget. Supporting People aims to provide housing-support services to enable vulnerable people to access and maintain accommodation that is suitable to their needs and to help them to fulfil their capacity to live as independently as possible. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive administers the programme and works in partnership with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the four health and social services boards and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland to commission housing-related support services.

In Northern Ireland, there are 121 providers that deliver services in more than 900 accommodation schemes. There are also 84 floating-support-service schemes throughout the Province. Those services provide some 23,000 of Northern Ireland's most vulnerable people with advocacy and practical and emotional support, such as providing wardens in a sheltered-housing scheme as well as housing-related advice services.

Supporting People funding is available to people in hostels and to those in short-term, move-on or temporary accommodation. It is also available to people in their own homes, sheltered dwellings, houses of multiple occupation, and clustered housing. The programme helps client groups with learning disabilities, mental ill health, physical and sensory disabilities, addictions, criminal convictions, and those who suffer from domestic violence or who are homeless. Many schemes also work with older people, vulnerable young people, young people leaving care, black and minority ethnic communities, refugees and asylum seekers, and lesbian and gay people.

One of the principles of Supporting People stipulates that its services must represent value for money. It is clear that Supporting People's services — which are provided mainly by the voluntary sector — are cost-effective in that they keep people out of institutions such as hospitals, residential homes and prisons. The organisation's schemes have been accredited for good governance and quality assurance by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Since the establishment of the programme, its services have expanded and its budget has grown from an initial £44 million to £61 million for the 2008-09 financial year.

An annual inflationary uplift has been awarded to most supported-housing services over the years. However, in April 2008, the Housing Executive announced that the Supporting People budget would receive no inflationary increase for the financial years 2008-2011. As a result, the budget has been set at a baseline of £61 million per annum for those three years. The Housing Executive's justification for that

decision was that there were under-spends in the programme in the previous three years.

However, the Housing Executive admitted that those under-spends were largely due to delays in the completion of housing association new-build schemes, for which Supporting People had budgeted revenue costs that could not be drawn down for expenditure. Given the escalating costs of overheads and of salary increases faced by supported-housing providers, the freezing of Supporting People funding amounts to net cuts. Organisations are asked to deliver services under existing contractual agreements with the Housing Executive for less money against a rising tide of costs. That flies in the face of Positive Steps — a policy to promote partnership-working between the Government and the voluntary sector.

Organisations in the voluntary sector stated that they had already absorbed above-inflation cost rises in the past few years; that further financial constraints would jeopardise the quality of their services and, ultimately, put at risk the most vulnerable. A survey conducted in September 2008 by the Council for the Homeless and the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations, regarding the likely effect of reductions in Supporting People funding, indicated serious concerns in the sector over the sustainability of current schemes.

The findings show that by 2010-11 an estimated 73% of respondents' schemes will be in deficit. Of those, at least 50% will be in deficit due directly to shortfalls in Supporting People funding. By the end of 2011, respondents estimated that 14% of the schemes would be at risk and that the organisations involved would seek to withdraw from their Supporting People contracts. The survey also found that 39% of respondents thought that there would be a decline by 2010-11 in the proportion of the Supporting People budget spent in relation to the number of hours of housing support delivered. That will have direct implications for performance quality and safety.

It is also difficult to envisage how further cuts can be made by organisations that are committed to minimum standards. Some 59% of those surveyed believe that staffing levels will probably decrease. At the moment, about 75% of organisations' budgets pay support workers' salaries. Organisations committed to NJC scales and to incremental salary increases fear that they will have to choose between increasing wages and employing fewer staff or maintaining wage levels and losing well-trained staff. Undoubtedly, both options will have a detrimental effect on tenants. Furthermore, the survey shows that most organisations anticipate a reduction in the training and development of staff, which will have long-term negative consequences for the future quality and development of schemes. Overall, larger organisations may have more flexibility in sharing resources, but, for smaller providers, cross-subsidising or pooling courses may not be possible.

In conclusion, the flat-lining of Supporting People funding will damage the quality of services to the most vulnerable. We urge the Minister to find the means to defrost the freeze on the ban on allowing inflationary increases for such valuable services. In the medium term, the sector would benefit from departmental approval of any inflationary uplift for 2008-09. If that is not an option, the Minister must ring-fence for uplift any additional funds realised as part of the in-year monitoring rounds.

Supporting People funding for existing schemes must be increased by at least the rate of inflation in 2009-10 and 2010-11. We suggest to the Minister that, in future years, any unavoidable under-spends in the Supporting People budget should either be spent on relevant non-recurring items of expenditure, such as staff training, or

should be carried into following years. It would seem prudent for the Supporting People budget to be agreed on a three-year rolling cycle to enable long-term financial planning and projections. That would provide some stability for the sector, which has been a valuable resource to the community.

Miss McIlveen: As Members have already heard, Supporting People plays a vital role in enabling some of the most vulnerable adults and young people to live in the community. It is a crucial link in delivering community care and in enabling those at risk of homelessness to access supported housing. As such, the voluntary agencies that are involved in delivering the Supporting People programme provide the kind of care and housing support that allow many of our most vulnerable citizens to be more fully included in our community.

A substantial number of the young people who access Supporting People come from a care background and require focused and intensive support to enable them to gain the skills of independent living. I had the privilege of visiting a voluntary provider of such services and meeting a group of young people living in accommodation provided under Supporting People. I listened to their stories and saw for myself how important it is that such care and support is available in a housing setting. Most of those people were without family support, and many had experienced very difficult and sometimes traumatic childhoods. However, most of them were in work or training, and, with the help available from services provided under the Supporting People fund — in conjunction with health and social care trust schemes — they were trying to improve their lives. When young people work extremely hard to overcome the difficulties that they have faced, it is imperative that we support essential front-line services.

Structural funding issues around Supporting People were identified in the Semple Review, and providers have indicated that they continue to be problematic. In particular, the review identified wrangling between Supporting People and housing benefit over reappportionment of costs. Providers have indicated that decisions regarding who funds the care and Supporting People costs for young people were causing difficulty. There is a need for greater clarity about the interface between care and housing, and how costs can be allocated in a way that supports the best interests of young people.

On several occasions, we have debated the issue of young adults in Muckamore Abbey Hospital and their right to live and be supported in the community. We have debated the Bamford Review and endorsed its call for a reduction in the number of adults with learning difficulties living in hospitals. However, we cannot achieve that without the correct support and without ensuring that we are willing to provide adequate and appropriate funding. If we do not address the need for additional supported housing services now, we will find ourselves still discussing the needs of adults with learning difficulties in five years' time without having made any real difference.

It is impossible for voluntary providers of services to continue, year on year, without any inflationary uplift, as, in effect, we are asking them to continue with a reduction in funding. No cost-of-living increase was awarded to service providers this year, and, as we have heard, many providers are considering reductions in front-line services to extremely vulnerable people if additional funding does not become available. In fact, a couple of weeks ago, the Committee for Social Development had a presentation at one of its informal receptions from the Triangle Housing Association, which indicated just that.

It seems somewhat contradictory that the Minister has indicated that some of the Supporting People budget was handed back in previous years, yet providers say that they have faced difficulties in securing funding for new projects or in extending current projects. Some of the difficulties seem to be attributable to the lack of facilities for carrying forward expenditure and little ability to reallocate within the existing year's expenditure. Surely that is a practical issue that must be addressed. My understanding is that a review of the five-year social housing development programme shows that the overall number of supported housing schemes is in decline.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that there are not enough schemes to meet existing need, let alone address the additional needs that would be generated by the implementation of the recommendations of the Bamford Review.

Failure to address the legitimate concerns of providers about the need for an inflationary increase — and for more funding overall — will lead to the closure or retraction of some schemes at a time when more provision is clearly required. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable people in society are given priority and are addressed.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In my experience, when it comes to cutting budgets, the services that provide for the people who are most in need in society are, invariably, the first to be axed. In the case of the Supporting People fund, we are told that what is being proposed is merely a freeze on inflationary increases, which will not affect programmes that are already up and running. Furthermore, we are told, service providers can draw on reserves to make up any shortfall. That is utter rubbish. Those with responsibility for managing budgets must consider the impact that cuts will have on those people who rely on services provided by the Supporting People fund. Those services can provide a lifeline for people who totally depend on those resources to survive.

It is understandable that at a time such as this, when the credit crunch is having a detrimental effect on all in society, everyone should tighten their belts. However, how can people who are lying in the street with nowhere to go, or those suffering from mental illness, tighten their belts?

The Supporting People fund was introduced by the Housing Executive in the North of Ireland in 2003 in order to provide a lifeline for vulnerable people in our communities. The fund's objectives sought to enable vulnerable people to live independently, to promote their inclusion in wider society and to develop a partnership with statutory agencies, service users and providers.

Many networks have been built over the years to deliver services under the Supporting People banner. Those organisations have now been informed that they will suffer inflationary freezes for the next three years. None of those organisations were prepared for that announcement, and many of them now believe that their ability to deliver services will be seriously affected. Much-needed programmes and valuable staff will be lost, which will ultimately have an impact on vulnerable groups of people, such as those who are homeless or mentally ill, elderly people and young people.

Several months ago, I was told that efficiency savings would not affect essential community programmes. I took the opportunity to raise the issue of the Supporting People fund at last week's meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I

asked whether it was intended that efficiency cuts would affect those people who are most in need in society, and I was told that that was not the case. I was informed that it was up to the Minister of the relevant Department to decide where savings would be made.

I raised the issue again at last week's meeting of the Committee for Social Development, and asked that the Simon Community, among others, be invited to give evidence to the Committee on how those efficiency cuts will affect their ability to deliver services to the wider community. One of the reasons given as the rationale for the cuts was the under-spend in the Supporting People fund's budget between 2004-05 and 2006-07. However, the officials failed to say that most of that was due to programme slippage in the housing associations' new-build programme, which affected the ability of Supporting People schemes to draw down funding.

The Welcome Centre, which is in my constituency, relies heavily on the Supporting People fund. It provides a place of security where homeless people can gain access to essential basic services, and provides hot meals and bedding for people who are sleeping rough in Belfast. Those projects could become victims of cuts to inflationary increases. If that is the case, what will become of those people who rely on such an excellent and vital service?

Those are only two of at least 900 schemes that provide services under the Supporting People fund for an estimated 23,000 people. Other programmes cater for individuals suffering from substance and drug abuse or provide staff who facilitate the programmes that are necessary to stimulate activity for elderly people who live in sheltered dwellings.

Many Members are familiar with the work of the Simon Community and the huge role that it plays in provision for the homeless. The proposed freeze on inflationary increases over the next three years will seriously affect the Simon Community's ability to cover salary increases, which will then result in greater financial pressure on the organisation to raise funds.

That will particularly affect its ability to function effectively in years two and three. In addition, the homelessness sector is currently subject to a major review and modernisation agenda through the publication of the Housing Executive's homelessness strategy, which will include a review of supported accommodation. It is imperative that the underlying financial stability exists to support the sector to negotiate any change agenda.

When all is said and done, a serious mistake has been made by the Departments involved in the resourcing of the Supporting People programme, and their actions have caused panic in the sector.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this very important debate. In our response to the Budget in January 2008, the Ulster Unionist Party voiced support for the Supporting People scheme, and raised concerns that the budget allocated for the scheme would be inadequate. The Supporting People scheme, which was established in 2003, and is implemented locally by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, is a progressive way of delivering housing support services for vulnerable sections of society through the use of the voluntary and private sectors, and is more cost-effective than relying on statutory services.

The programme funds a range of supported housing services in over 900 schemes, which assist approximately 23,000 people to improve their quality of life and attain independence by living in their community, rather than facing the prospect of spending years shut away in care homes. There are 11 main client populations, including those with a learning disability or mental-health problems, victims of domestic violence, older people and vulnerable young people. It is crystal clear that those are the very people who are least able to look after themselves, and who should receive assistance from society.

In our response to the Budget, the Ulster Unionist Party voiced particular concerns regarding the need to develop a new sheltered housing pilot scheme for adults with learning difficulties, many of whom are being cared for by ageing parents who maintain that role with increasing difficulty.

Supporting People programmes cut across departmental lines — I know that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been involved in various projects, and the health and social care trusts have been involved in resettling long-stay patients from mental-health and learning-disability hospitals into appropriate places in the community.

The sums involved are considerable. Between 2004 and 2007, some £10.6 million was allocated to accommodation and supporting services for victims of domestic violence, and the total amount allocated to the Supporting People programme in 2004-05 was nearly £49 million. It is absolutely crucial that the Supporting People budget for the financial years 2008-11 is increased in line with inflation. Failure to achieve that has caused fears relating to staff retention and staff recruitment, as 75% of Supporting People funding goes towards the salaries of housing support workers.

Mr A Maginness: I have great respect for Ms Lo, and I understand the points that she raised. However, I think that some of the worries that she expressed are misplaced. The current position is that £61 million has been granted for each of the next three financial years, amounting to £183 million. That represents an increase of £3 million on the budget for last year — determined under direct rule — which was £58 million. Given that uplift, it seems that her concerns are misplaced, or premature.

The Department and the Minister are committed to maintaining this vital service for the most vulnerable people in society. At least 23,000 people benefit from the scheme, and it is a scheme that all of us in this House fully support. I reiterate what other Members already said about the scheme and its importance for vulnerable people in the community.

Mr F McCann: Is the Member saying that the Simon Community, and the many other groups that deal with Supporting People, have nothing to worry about?

Mr A Maginness: I am not saying that any group has nothing to worry about; I am simply pointing out that Supporting People has received a substantial uplift in funding. When Mr Fra McCann spoke earlier, he may have confused efficiency savings with what he termed as inflationary cuts. The Supporting People scheme has been exempt from any efficiency cuts; they do not apply to that scheme. Efficiency cuts of 3% apply uniformly throughout many other schemes in the budget of the Department for Social Development, and of other Departments. That helpful element is inbuilt into the Supporting People programme, exempting it from any cuts. That should, in itself, be a sufficient safeguard.

Ms Lo is quite right to say that Supporting People will be subject to rising costs. It is important that the Department monitors those and ensures that the net value of the programme is maintained so that the services that it presently supports are not put in danger. In fact, if there were any risk of that, one would hope that the Department and the Minister would avail themselves of in-year monitoring in order to assist the scheme if necessary.

The programme has not been affected by efficiency-savings cuts, which has allowed flexibility. Funding for the programme has, in fact, been substantially increased. That will safeguard the future of the scheme, and I hope that that will satisfy and reassure those organisations that are genuinely concerned about the situation.

Mr Craig: I listened with interest to the comments of Mr Maginness on the additional money for the Supporting People fund. The Simon Community and other organisations have spoken to me and other members of the Committee for Social Development. Figures can be bandied about, but those organisations have genuine fears that their funding has, according to them, been capped. Only the Minister knows whether that is a true reflection of the situation.

Those voluntary organisations face the problem of high staffing levels. They rely heavily on their staff, and wage increases this year will become a severe problem. Anna Lo has a valid point in that the real problem is that the sector cannot be expected to live without inflationary increases and still maintain the levels of support that it has provided to the community. Civil servants from the Department for Social Development have told the Committee that the Housing Executive is unable to deliver the housing programme under the Supporting People fund.

What was not made clear at those Committee meetings were the reasons behind the programme's lack of delivery. The reasons were not attributable to the Housing Executive. If anyone was to blame, it was the Planning Service, and there was a classic example of that in my constituency, where Trinity Housing was building five special-needs houses. The project kicked off approximately three years ago with the full support of the community and me. The project took five years to deliver — and one would question why it took five years to deliver six houses — because the Planning Service argued for two years about the size of kitchens.

That shows how ridiculous the system is in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, it led to slippages in the programme, and that is what the Housing Executive has been up against for the past two or three years: when it allocates bills, planning causes severe troubles, and the programme slips.

What happens to the money that slips in that year? Is it put into the following year's funding? I do not believe that to be the case, but perhaps the Minister will be able to clarify that. Therefore, there is a knock-on effect that gathers pace each year, and it is a difficulty for the Housing Executive in delivering the programme that it hoped to deliver. However, the failing is not the fault of the Housing Executive. It is, unfortunately, attributable to other Departments.

A number of months ago, the House heard the Minister of Health deliver his report on the Bamford Review, towards which he allocated £44 million for community-based services. That is all about getting people out of institutionalised care and back into the community. However, therein lies the conundrum: how can those people be returned into the community if the housing build for those special-needs people is continually slipping? Perhaps the Minister needs to examine that situation, provide

additional support to the project, and speak to the Planning Service in order to try to expedite that housing build.

However, there is a situation out there among those bodies whereby they believe that they are facing problems and cuts in services. Perhaps that is an issue that the Minister needs to re-address with those groups. I commend the motion.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When the direct rule Social Development Minister, David Hanson, launched the Supporting People strategy, he said:

“Supported housing services have an important role to play in helping vulnerable people live independent lives in the community and reducing homelessness. In the past, services available were determined by the requirements of the funder rather than the needs of the individual. The Supporting People Strategy, which is underpinned by significant Government funding, is a clear indication of how we have moved to a situation whereby the provision of support services is determined by the needs of individuals and not by the requirements of funding sources.”

Let me tell the Assembly about the experience of one group who believe that the Supporting People strategy is not working for them. At Muckamore Abbey Hospital, there is a group of patients called “Tell it like it is”. They started a training course to learn how to speak to the public and politicians in order to communicate about their lives and their hopes for the future. Each member of the group has been told that they are ready to be discharged from hospital. However, they, and many more patients like them at Muckamore, have been unable to set up home in the community because the right level of support is not available.

I met Sammy, who has been waiting for two years to be discharged, and Richard, who has been waiting for six years. However, for various reasons, they have not been able to be safely placed and supported in the community. As a result, they are, effectively, prisoners in the hospital.

The Health Committee visited Muckamore in order to see at first hand the situation for those who have experienced serious delay in being discharged. It was clear to Committee members that we must have a cross-departmental approach in order to ensure that those who are ready for discharge are given every support to live independently in the community.

The people at Muckamore are not the only section of society that is affected. There are, as Members have said, numerous vulnerable people who are being let down by the Supporting People fund. Among the groups who benefit from the fund are women who need support as a result of, perhaps, domestic violence, or who need a safe and secure environment to be available when necessary. Withheld or inadequate financial support will lead to a reduction in services and put those women in a more vulnerable position.

My colleague Carál Ní Chuilín and I visited some young women in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre who hoped to find a place in society and to be supported on their release. I also have concerns that those women’s hopes will not be realised. We must ensure that we develop services, in line with service users’ aspirations, to help those women settle back into society and to get the support that they need.

I support the motion, because many sections of society require the help of the Supporting People fund. I urge the Minister for Social Development not to let those people down.

Mr Beggs: The Supporting People fund, which is a UK-wide programme, has reformed the way in which housing support services have been commissioned and funded. Before 2003, services were deployed largely on an ad hoc basis, sometimes commissioned by statutory agencies, but mostly arising as a result of lobbying, and no small amount of innovation, by the voluntary sector.

The Supporting People fund has given strategic direction, stability and sustainability to housing support in Northern Ireland. That has resulted in significant benefits to vulnerable individuals, as well as cost benefits to Government services such as the Health Service. The fund has also helped to prevent some young people from entering the criminal-justice system. Without the help, support and guidance provided through the fund, those people may have gone down that route.

In April 2008, the announcement that the Supporting People fund was to receive no inflationary increase for the financial years 2008-11 has put the fund in serious jeopardy, the cost of which may be significant to individuals and the Government. The Ulster Unionist Party recognises the current situation of financial constraint; however, in this instance, there is a danger of being penny wise and pound foolish. The voluntary sector, in particular, adds to the fund from its own resources. Often, volunteers' contributions go far beyond that for which they are contracted. Why should we put that sector at risk?

The Supporting People fund, through strategic housing support that various organisations administer, improves the quality of life for vulnerable families, children and young people, and the elderly, and enables them to interact with, and often to reintegrate into, the wider community.

The fund is particularly geared towards people who are in danger of becoming homeless. I have an interest in the issue of children and young people. Early support can often assist vulnerable young people, such as those leaving care, to integrate into and contribute fully to society. Those people need additional support during that critical period in their lives when they leave a stable institutional setting and go out into the world on their own.

The ability to maintain tenancy or to remain at one's own home can also stop people from becoming a burden on other parts of health and social services. That service is critical for young people who are leaving care, or who have learning difficulties, poor health or mental-health problems, and who want to live independently from their parents, many of whom may also be in poor health.

Young people who have been through the criminal-justice system must be reintegrated into society. The adaptability of the service to meet individuals' needs is crucial if we are to break the cycle of criminality. That is something that we want to succeed.

I accept that, when there have been no inflationary pressures, the fund has not been subject to efficiency cuts, as the Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness said. However, it is obvious that actual costs will be passed on to service providers, for which they cannot pay.

The decision not to give an inflationary increase in real terms is a cut to funding. Real concerns exist that that will have a destabilising effect on the sector as it faces those significant inflationary pressures. Voluntary organisations have entered into contracts with the Department for service-provision standards, and enhanced regulatory compliance, but they are then often put in a legally difficult position as they face what is effectively reduced funding.

Many staff in that sector are tied to the NJC pay scales. Savings may be possible only, therefore, through job cuts and, effectively, loss of support.

I urge the Minister to liaise carefully with service providers so that the implications of what effectively represents a cut do not put services at risk. There is a danger that organisations will start to tailor their provisions to funding requirements, instead of individuals' needs. The programme is progressive, and it is vital that it continue. We should not make short-term investments in this area. I urge the Minister to liaise with the Finance Minister to ensure that the inflationary increases can subsequently be met in budgetary considerations.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP was founded on the principles of equality and social justice. Many people across the community will agree with me when I say that, in Margaret Ritchie, we have a Minister who genuinely listens to the concerns of people from all sections of our society — particularly the community and voluntary sector, which is under particular stress at a challenging time for all sectors of our community.

Not many people foresaw the extent of the current economic crisis as it has developed in recent weeks. It is, therefore, commendable that the Minister, despite the advice that she received from Mr Fra McCann to accept her lot in the Budget debate of October 2007, was successful in drawing an additional £3 million into a budget that was under-spent. Many of us would ask why we are adding money to an under-spent budget.

The Minister knows that Supporting People is a matter of social justice. There are many vulnerable people in our community, and the SDLP is serious about ensuring a greater access to wealth and better health outcomes for those living in poverty. It is most unfortunate that, due to the failure of the Executive to meet, we do not have an anti-poverty strategy that the Minister for Social Development could work within to tackle the real issues facing the most vulnerable in our society.

It is also true that, although the Housing Executive is the main administrator of Supporting People, the commissioning of services generally falls on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. As someone who worked in health and social services for 22 years, I believe that there is disjointedness — a crack in the pavement — in the integration of services.

At least under devolution there is an opportunity for Ministers to work together and with officials to ensure that everything works smoothly. It is interesting to note that, when there was a great debate in 2006 about whether Supporting People should be transferred to local councils along with housing powers, the Housing Council chairperson, Dineen Walker, said that her organisation thought it:

“difficult to justify the transfer of this critical function to new councils who have no previous expertise. It will cause confusion and disruption to an otherwise well-administered service to the public.”

The key words are “well-administered service to the public”, and bearing in mind that the Department for Social Development administers that service, that is praise indeed. As Members are aware, all parties are represented on the Housing Council, and the chairperson would not have issued such a press statement if she did not have the support of her fellow members on the Housing Council.

I am sure that, in her reply to the debate, the Minister will take on board the concerns that Members have expressed, and will reflect on the challenging times in which we live, and the issues that the community and voluntary sectors have raised in relation to the retention of skilled staff — not to mention service delivery. There is widespread recognition that all businesses, services and agencies are facing increased overhead costs because of rising fuel and energy costs. No doubt the Minister will examine that issue.

Mrs O’Neill correctly highlighted the difficulties with delayed discharges at Muckamore Abbey Hospital. That is not just a problem for residents of Muckamore Abbey Hospital but one for patients in other psychiatric hospitals who have been there for far too long. Rather than it being down to a lack of funding for the Supporting People initiative, those delayed discharges occur because not enough staff are employed in the health and social services sector. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said that there was a shortfall of 400 mental-health nurses. Mental-health nurses are vital professionals when it comes to the process of discharging patients and former clients into the community. Therefore, interdepartmental work is required, and I have every confidence that Minister Ritchie will deliver.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I commend Anna Lo and Kieran McCarthy for tabling it. I also thank Anna Lo for giving me a briefing paper published in April 2008 from the Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Service Providers (CRISPP) and CHNI (Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland), which is titled, ‘A joint response by CRISPP and CHNI on the impact of the ‘Programme for Government’ on the Supporting People budget for financial years 2008-2011’.

Although Mr Maginness said that there is no need to be concerned, the briefing paper is worth examining. It states that the Supporting People budget has been baselined at £61 million for 2008-2011 as a result of the Programme for Government. Mr Maginness referred to that figure, but the paper goes on to state that that represents a net cut in funding. It also states that there are serious concerns about the destabilising effect that that is likely to have on the sector.

I am not saying that Members should accept such papers without casting a critical eye over them, but those comments come directly from the sector and are important should people not be convinced that a problem exists.

Mr A Maginness: First, the Member has not taken into consideration that there are no efficiency savings in the scheme, which represent 3%. Secondly, as Mrs Dolores Kelly said, there was underspend in the programme. Thirdly, if there are problems in future, in-year monitoring can always be performed.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for his intervention. I accept his point about the 3% efficiency savings — I had it in my notes to comment on.

In response to a question for written answer, the Minister said that she had not touched the fund or made efficiency savings, which, I was going to say, is welcome. I note that Mr Maginness did not say that he would look at the briefing paper, so I recommend again that he does — I can give it to him on the way out of the Chamber.

Michelle O'Neill gave an example from her constituency, so I will refer to two groups in my constituency to which I spoke today — the Strabane Association for the Temporary Homeless (SATH) and the Open Doors Housing Association in Dillon Court, also in Strabane. Those two groups gave us definite examples of where they would struggle. Although those groups do great work, are content and appreciate the funding that they receive, they feel that the rising costs will affect them. The Open Doors Housing Association has flats for a range of vulnerable people, including those with disabilities, those with mental-health issues, the homeless and single parents. SATH deals with many crisis situations and is concerned about its funding.

SATH provides a floating support service. It must travel and, therefore, pay increased fuel costs, and so on. For example, a child whose parent is a service user had to visit a hospital that was not in the locality; SATH funded the hospital visit for the child's appointment. The organisation is concerned that such services will be lost.

I commend those two facilities in my area, and I have spoken to people who are involved with them. Contrary to some of the contributions that have been made, there is concern that because there is no inflationary increase in funding, that will, as the briefing paper states, amount to a cut.

I do not wish to pick on Mr Maginness; it is just that he mentioned a recommendation to which I have also referred in my notes. The briefing paper also makes two or three recommendations. It suggests that the Minister could apply for funding through the in-year monitoring round. My party welcomes that. One of the paper's other recommendations is that in the immediate term, members would benefit from departmental approval of an inflationary uplift for 2008-2011 that is no less than the retail price index.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. I welcome the opportunity to take part in it and to respond to the motion. I am aware that Anna Lo has been concerned about the matter, and I hope that I can provide her with some reassurance. The debate gives me the opportunity to clarify some of the issues that have been raised. Of course, I will try to deal with all Members' concerns. I assure you, Mr Speaker, that I will read the Hansard report, and if I have left any question unanswered, I will write directly to the Member concerned.

Perhaps I should provide Members with some background information on the Supporting People fund that may help to put the debate in context. It is a policy and funding framework that provides support to enable people to live as independently as possible in their own homes. That can be done through the provision of temporary shelter — for example, for women who have fled domestic violence — or through somewhere for vulnerable adults to develop the skills that are necessary for them to live independently in their own communities.

During the past year, I visited many of those facilities throughout the North of Ireland to talk to young people who have gained skills and expertise that hitherto they would not have been able to gain. They have been able to live in a stabilising environment

that has provided them with a great degree of security of tenure. I strongly support those programmes.

The Supporting People programme was introduced in 2003. As many Members said, the fund targets and supports the most vulnerable. We must never lose sight of that. The programme is designed to give more choice in how and where those vulnerable people live, which has opened up more opportunities than previously possible. The number of people who are supported has almost doubled since the programme's introduction in 2003. At the outset, its target was to support 12,000 people into independent living; at present, more than 23,000 people benefit from that support. Therefore, it has been hugely successful.

I am determined to continue to reach out and support even more people who may need it. At present, 120 providers deliver services to 23,000 people in more than 800 schemes throughout Northern Ireland. Providers, such as Mencap, Women's Aid, Homefirst, Age Concern, and the wider housing association movement deliver support service to the most vulnerable in the community.

All providers deserve our deepest respect and gratitude for working tirelessly towards making a significant difference to the lives of all those people.

Let us get down to the money. In 2003, the allocation for Supporting People was £40 million. That figure jumped to £48 million the next year, then to £52 million, then to £55 million, then to £58 million. The current allocation is £183 million over the next three years. The budget stands at £61 million for this year, and that underlines the growing success of, and increasing support for, the programme, and my commitment to it. Given that increase, I am a little surprised to hear concerns that funding for the programme is insufficient — or worse, that it is under threat. That is not the case; the facts speak for themselves.

In the last year of direct rule, only £58 million was made available for the fund. Members will recognise that I have increased — not reduced — the resources available for Supporting People, at a time when my Department is under pressure, year on year, to find efficiency savings of 3% right across the board. I remind Members that the Executive made that decision. The Executive are made up of the parties represented in the House; some members of those parties spoke today, and they were the very people who promoted those 3% efficiency savings, against the wishes of others in the Executive. Some in this Chamber have a short memory; I do not.

That further underlines how determined I am to support the most vulnerable in society through the Supporting People fund. I might add that I take that approach right across DSD, squeezing out savings in bureaucracy and administration to free up resources to enhance services to people. Millions of pounds of neighbourhood renewal funding have been refocused towards services, and the same will be done in relation to housing and tackling fuel poverty.

When I launched the new housing agenda earlier this year, I made it clear that I wanted to increase the supply of housing, including the supply of supported and sheltered housing. I assure Members that, in addressing the housing need, I will continue to give priority to those who are most vulnerable.

I further reassure Members that I am by no means drawing a line under that funding, as Mr Maginness and Mrs Kelly indicated. If the case for more funding is made, then

more must be done, and that can be delivered. I will avail myself of the opportunities that arise to bid for more resources. I will work closely with service providers to continue to deliver high-quality, cost-effective and reliable housing-related support services. My Department already works with the Housing Executive, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the four area health and social services boards, the Probation Board, and not least of all, the service providers to help inform its future work, and I assure the House that it will continue to do that.

I shall deal with some of the issues raised by Members. Anna Lo referred to an inflationary increase. I will continue to seek additional funds to deliver that very important service. Michelle McIlveen raised the issue of the number of people working in the Supporting People programme. I recognise the important work undertaken by all those people who provide Supporting People's service. Indeed, some 4,500 people provide that valuable service — an increase on three to four years ago, when approximately 2,500 people were employed.

Let us move on. Fra McCann is continuously in a state of confusion. He is having difficulty with his sums and somebody should tell him what is new. As Minister, I have protected the fund by ensuring that cuts were not applied to the budget.

When I took responsibility for the budget, it was at £58 million. I ensured that the budget was increased to £61 million. In October 2007, when Sinn Féin said that I should stop whingeing and accept my lot, I fought a hard, but successful, battle with DFP to ensure that the funding for subsequent years would not be affected. I wish that Fra McCann would listen, rather than repeat the same old, tired message.

On Friday, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is due to meet representatives from the Welcome Centre to consider its ongoing funding requirements.

Fra McCann's colleague Claire McGill mentioned two groups in Strabane. If she could possibly provide me with the details of those groups, I will ensure that the issues involved are investigated.

I agree with Alban Maginness that there is no efficiency cut. By taking action to ensure that no such cuts were applied, I ensured that £6 million will be available to direct to Supporting People over the next three-year period.

Jonathan Craig raised several issues, and I assure him that any underspend will be carried forward to future years to meet recurring commitments. I bid for additional funding to implement elements of the Bamford Review, but DFP did not approve it. I wonder who the Minister of that Department is. Perhaps Mr Craig should direct his funding queries to DFP, and I also advise him to put any queries on planning and housing programmes to the Minister of the Environment.

Michelle O'Neill talked about Muckamore Abbey Hospital, and my Department will develop 38 new units, at a cost of £4.6 million, for the resettlement of that hospital's patients.

I emphasise my continuing commitment to the Supporting People programme, and I underline my assurance to Members that I will continue to bid for additional funds during the in-year monitoring rounds, if and when they are required.

Mr McCarthy: I am not sure that I need 10 minutes for my winding-up speech.

Supporting People has made a welcome contribution to the provision of warm and comfortable homes for the most vulnerable people. The initiative was introduced to give people who are less fortunate than us the option to live independently. The programme has performed an excellent function since its foundation in 2003.

However, it appears that threats to its progress now exist. All Members who spoke raised the genuine concern that, from now until 2011, no inflationary increase will be applied to the funding of the programme.

My colleague Anna Lo, and most of the other Members who spoke, talked about the fears that result from the static funding arrangements.

Michelle McIlveen spoke out — rightly — for the needs of young people. Supporting People has been an essential element in giving young folk a decent life. There must be no question of handing back any unspent money. A genuine need exists, and it is essential that the Department seeks out that need and uses all the available resources to meet it.

Mr F McCann: Most of the groups under the Supporting People programme briefed Members of various parties. All say that due to the lack of an inflationary increase, some of the services and jobs that they provide will be affected. Those who listened to the Minister today may agree that the confusion lies not with me or those groups, but with her and the Department.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for drawing that to the Assembly's attention. I will move on and perhaps return to what he said in my closing remarks.

Mr McCann spoke passionately about his worries about any shortfall in funding for Supporting People. He talked about the good work that is carried out by local organisations such as the Simon Community. The Minister must listen to those concerns, and I think that she probably is.

Billy Armstrong outlined that the programme helps more than 23,000 people, and the Minister referred to that. Those people must not be abandoned. Furthermore, Mr Armstrong spoke of Minister McGimpsey's effort in that regard. I thank all Members who attended today's rally at Stormont to support people with learning disabilities.

I am glad that Alban Maginness has confidence in the future. Members would be disappointed if he did not support all the Minister's work. All Members would do the same.

Mr A Maginness: It is the "supporting Minister" programme.

Mr McCarthy: He explained that some concerns are misplaced or premature, and it is good news that the Minister is committed.

Jonathan Craig is worried — as all Members are — about the future of housing for vulnerable people. He presented a strong case for the Planning Service to work with the housing associations. That notion is worth considering. The Planning Service moved slowly, and, therefore, the building of the homes was not completed on time. That could have — and may have — resulted in money not being used where it should have been. Moreover, Jonathan expressed concern about the provision of housing for people with learning difficulties.

Michelle O'Neill outlined that the Supporting People fund was not working in Muckamore Abbey. It is a pity that housing need is not being met in that facility. Further provision for victims of domestic violence would be useful, and the Minister responded —

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. However, I remind him of the Minister's concluding remarks in which she outlined that an additional 38 units will be commissioned and built to facilitate the discharge of patients from Muckamore. Does the Member agree that, to a large extent, the progress of those discharges is the responsibility of the Health Service?

Mr McCarthy: I agree.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: Hurry up.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I listened to the Minister's statement, and I commend her work on efficiency savings. Although I accept that there have been no cutbacks, there has been no additional money — that is why we face those issues daily.

The situation at Muckamore is not solely a health issue. There is a lack of houses and supported accommodation for people leaving Muckamore. The issue must not be clouded.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for her intervention. I accept the point, and I will comment on that later if I have enough time.

I agree with Dolores Kelly's assertion that the Minister listens to people's concerns. However, the Minister must prove that that is true more often.

She will be judged on whether or not she delivers a good continuous service to our most vulnerable people. Dolores mentioned that skilled staff will be required to deliver a well-administered service to the public. That matter is of concern to all Members.

I wrote in my notes that it was good to see agreement between Alban Maginness and Claire McGill. I had written that before the disagreement between Alban and Claire.

Claire mentioned the future of two groups from Strabane. All Members are concerned about that matter, and it gives the Minister good reason to convince the House that our people are not threatened.

During her speech, the Minister blew her own trumpet — and why not. We welcome the fact that the Minister is visiting communities. In fact, she will, I hope, visit my constituency next week. It is important that other Ministers do likewise.

I am pleased about that. The Minister pointed out that, at the start of the programme, 12,000 people were seeking independent living: that figure has now risen to 23,000. That is good, that is progress.

I come to the crux of the matter: the Minister gave us her Department's annual budget figures from 2002 to 2008. Since 2003, her budget has increased annually by £3 million, and, by 2008, it had reached £61 million. I am worried that, next year, the year after and the year after that, the budget will remain fixed at £61 million. That means that, over those three years, her budget will lose out on nine million quid that could be used to provide more housing or services to the most vulnerable people.

I was interested in the Minister's assertion that she had asked for more money but that the Minister of Finance and Personnel had refused. I do not know who the Finance Minister was at that time. However, I call on Michelle McIlveen and Jonathan Craig to use whatever influence they may have on the DUP Minister to get him to cough up when it is necessary.

All Members agree that the Supporting People fund has been very useful. I urge Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved: That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review the current budget for the Supporting People fund to include inflationary increases, so that the programme's existing sustainability and quality of service is not put at risk.