



Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Performance of the Department
for Communities and Local Government 2013-14,
HC 878

Tuesday 16 December 2014

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 16 December 2014.

Evidence from witnesses:

Panel 1 (Questions 1-44)

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Simon Danczuk; Mrs Mary Glendon; Mark Pawsey; John Pugh; John Stevenson; and Chris Williamson.

Panel 1 Questions [1-44]

Witnesses: **Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP**, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: We begin this session, which is a session we have branded as "Ask Pickles". Secretary of State, thank you very much for coming to us this afternoon. This is an opportunity for us to put to you, on a quick-fire basis, some questions that have been tweeted in by members of the public, so we are looking for quick-fire questions and quick-fire answers. Thank you very much, Secretary of State for coming, once again, to this session. The first question that I have is one that has been sent in by Cath McCubbin, who has complained about small villages being under threat due to a local plan and five-year land supply not being in place. What help can you offer? She also helpfully said, "Don't say neighbourhood plans".

Mr Pickles: The first thing I would suggest to her would be neighbourhood plans, because I think it is important to get on the side of the questioner straightaway. Since I last appeared before you, about 80% of the country is now covered by a local plan, at least in a published state. As they start to bed in, they offer a real protection in

terms of ensuring that the boundaries of villages and communities are defined.

Q2 Chair: Nearly 50%, however, do not have an agreed local plan.

Mr Pickles: No, but that will increase. Once you have a published plan, a fair amount of weight is attached to that. As you are aware—and I am not making this point for a political reason—when we came in, relatively few places had a plan. We have seen them blossom very quickly in a few years, and I think that that will mean that, at last, we will have town and country planning in this country as opposed to development control.

Q3 Chair: There has been quite a lot of support, rightly, for neighbourhood plans, but Swanton Morley Parish Council tweeted in asking whether you should be telling communities that, because of the lack of a five-year land supply and the lack of a local plan, neighbourhood plans are being drafted in good faith but are being overruled by the presumption in favour of sustainable development, so people might feel they are wasting their time.

Mr Pickles: No, the presumption in favour of sustainable development is a protection. If you recall, before this there was a presumption in favour of development. Something that has a neighbourhood plan has an additional weight on top of that of a published plan. That is why 10% of England is now covered by neighbourhood planning. You will recall, I think, when I came here last time, that I said that I thought this would be the year in which the full impact of the Localism Act will start to be felt, and I regard neighbourhood plans as the forerunners of this. I think it makes an enormous difference. It changed the nature of Germany for the better when we introduced them in Germany after the Second World War, and I think they have been a very good thing in the sense that the public have shown to be responsible and realistic. People thought they might be a nimby's charter, but they have proved to be anything but that.

Q4 Chair: Some of the other big contentious planning issues are probably around the energy field. Gemma Grimes has tweeted in and asked, "What challenges do you see facing local authorities in dealing with unpopular applications for fracking sites?" Obviously, this causes quite a bit of contention.

Mr Pickles: We will ensure that the proper regime is addressed with regard to safety and environmental impact, and we will treat applications for fracking in the same way as we would treat applications for any kind of development.

Q5 Chair: People might, however, see fracking as much more contentious and are looking for Government to protect them from it.

Mr Pickles: It has certainly been my experience that all forms of energy-generating, whether they are windmills, solar farms, incinerators or fracking, tend to be very controversial.

Q6 Chair: One of the other large number of tweets we had compared perhaps the Government's more stand-back approach to fracking with, to summarise a lot of tweets, why you are ignoring local decision-making and interfering in planning decisions relating to wind farms. Is this not going to have a bad impact on the development of renewable energy?

Mr Pickles: Remember we only interfere with those—unless we call an application in; we rarely call applications in anyway—where there has been an appeal, and it is usually an appeal against refusal. We are talking about a relatively small number. I think the controversy came because I thought there was a problem with the interpretation of the NPPF.

What I sought to do was, because of our need for energy, which you quite rightly say, unless you were putting a windmill up against Dove Cottage or Blenheim Palace or somewhere, the environmental, historical and cultural aspects were just not important enough to weigh against the value of having a windmill. What I sought to do was to say that it was possible, even given our absolute need for energy, to be able to balance the environmental factors. I do not think that we have had that big an impact, and I did notice that, while we do not, of course, pay that much attention to the judiciary, as, indeed, they do not pay that much attention to us, there was a court case last Friday, as you will recall, and they thought the way in which we had considered the problem reasonable.

Q7 John Pugh: My questions from the public are all related to the funding of local services. The first one is a very moot one. Local authority budgets are under pressure; we would all concede that, and I think we will find out more about that tomorrow. Priority is given to the statutory services. Are you confident that the non-statutory services can be adequately protected in all the circumstances?

Mr Pickles: I have never really understood or appreciated the difference between statutory and non-statutory services. I think local authorities are there to deliver according to local priorities.

Q8 John Pugh: People have mentioned specifically parks and libraries.

Mr Pickles: Libraries, of course, come under a different Department. I would love to get my hands on them if I could. There are lots of things we could do with libraries, but that is another story. I think local authorities have managed exceptionally well. I think it is not a surprise that satisfaction in local authorities' services has gone up. I am not surprised that the level of reserves has gone up and is now at a record high. I think local authorities have managed admirably in this whole process of having to deal with the deficit, and I think they should be commended. I am very confident that they will be able to produce quality services, given the relatively small amount that their spending power has gone down by in recent years.

Q9 John Pugh: Specifically on the reserves—I thought you would bring up that subject—to what do you attribute this increase? I understand it is not just earmarked reserves, but non-earmarked reserves. Has the Department done any work to find out why they have gone up, given that local authorities appear to be so hard-pressed?

Mr Pickles: I think it is because they have been particularly efficient in identifying various economies, and they should be commended for doing that. Of course, it is always a very difficult balance dealing with reserves, to ensure that you are keeping something back, to use a cliché, for a rainy day, or you may be planning to do something with those reserves. It is not unusual for councils to save up and apply them versus making sure that you do not keep too much back in reserves and the avaricious eye of the Secretary of State looks upon you and takes that as a signal that you are doing very well, thank you very much.

Q10 John Pugh: So increased reserves are the consequence of laudable efficiency by local authorities. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Pickles: I am sure that is right. I am sure it is not miserly savings and bad management.

Q11 John Pugh: The second question I had to ask you—and you have answered it slightly already—is distinguishing between the essential and the non-essential, in local-authority terms, or the statutory and the non-statutory. What do you regard as the core services that a local authority needs to provide?

Mr Pickles: Local authorities should have discretion in terms of what they provide. To be a councillor and to be a council official, you are very close to the population. You are there, really, to serve the folks. You are there to serve the people who elected you. You are not there

to manage local services; you are there to provide what local people are looking for. Good local authorities have an active engagement with their population and seek to mould those services around what the population wants and needs.

Q12 John Pugh: Core services, then, are defined by the population and might be different in different places.

Mr Pickles: I think that is quite a profound thing to say because one of the biggest pressures on local authorities is the growing elderly population. When I and Mr Betts were a lot younger and involved with local councils, you could kind of see what was going to happen with the elderly population and the numbers that were coming, but we were at the small foothills of the kinds of problems that we are dealing with now. I think the nature of social services has changed enormously in 30 years. I once described it as a backwater—I must just say I volunteered to go to that particular backwater—but it is now very central and almost the dominant service in counties and in metropolitan authorities.

Q13 John Pugh: The NAO has produced a report, as you are aware, on the financial stability of local authorities, and one of the principal findings is that the Department was not wholly aware of the impact of some of the spending reductions. In answer to questions by the Public Accounts Committee, Sir Bob Kerslake said you work with the Treasury in order to assess the impact of the spending reductions. How are you going to respond to the NAO finding?

Mr Pickles: We are in a constant dialogue with the Treasury on all things, and it is always a pleasure to deal with them. With enormous respect to the NAO report, however, I think there is a fundamental misunderstanding about the roles of local authorities and the relationship between local authorities and the Department. Local authorities are independent bodies. I do not seek to overly regulate them and I am only responsible in terms of determining the Government grant, which, increasingly, is not as important, in terms of their financial makeup, as it was a few years ago. I do not control the total amount of expenditure that they have; after all, I exercise no control over the size of their council tax charges, which have remained steady for the lifetime of the coalition Government. If local authorities have felt that the amount that they had was inadequate, then of course they could put up the council tax.

Q14 Mark Pawsey: Secretary of State, I have some tweets that we have received on the topic of local democracy. The very first one is from the Association of Democratic Services Officers, which has asked for

an update on the undertaking that you gave to “Ask Pickles”, which took place last January, on changing the law to allow council agendas to be distributed electronically.

Mr Pickles: I am very much in favour of council agendas being transferred electronically. I am a regular user of my own iPad—not Government-purchased or purchased through this building—but I have never had the courage to do it at the despatch box, because I am always fearful you have to tap in the necessary password to get in. One of the problems has been that we have been trying to persuade our colleagues in Wales to come in with us on this, but sadly the Welsh Government does not want to do so. I am delighted to tell you, however, that, before Santa Claus starts to rattle his bells over us, we will be issuing the appropriate statutory instrument this week.

Q15 Mark Pawsey: I am sure those who sent in the tweets will be delighted. I have another one from James Cain, who is a member of the Youth Parliament and wants to know why councils do not have an obligation to engage formally with young people through youth councils?

Mr Pickles: I think that would be very much like asking, “Why do they not have an obligation to engage with the public?” I think they should do it. I have seen my local rep on the Youth Parliament and I think they do a phenomenal job. It is very interesting that, often, you will find that parishes have a much closer relationship with young voters than many of the principal authorities, although I think there are some shining examples among counties, districts and mets for engagement with young people. I think the most important thing is to do things that are relevant to young people.

Q16 Mark Pawsey: Secretary of State, we have one from Totnes Town Council, and you will remember the report that this Committee did on the role of the councillor.

Mr Pickles: I do.

Mark Pawsey: What the council in Totnes want to ask is, “What will Government do to encourage people to stand as local councillors and does it think current levels of engagement are enough?”

Mr Pickles: It depends. In some places in the country, it is difficult to find councillors, and council-group leaders have to resort to the old line of “It is only a couple of nights a month and it will not really take over your life” and all that kind of thing but, in other places, people are coming forward. I do think it is an obligation that, whether or not you are in a political party, the chairman of the council should do their best to ensure that people can become councillors without having to make a

major sacrifice on their careers and while finding that it is a very rewarding thing to do and that they are not just stuck on committees.

Q17 Mark Pawsey: Secretary of State, is there a role for Government there?

Mr Pickles: No.

Q18 Mark Pawsey: The next one is sticking with the role of local government and how local government operates. Tom Hancock asks how effective you think the local government scrutiny function, and whether scrutiny could be made more effective.

Mr Pickles: I think scrutiny has improved. We had the experiment of the Standards Board, which was unbelievably dreadful and I was pleased that there was all-party consensus to getting rid of it. It just seemed to be clogged up by quite petty objections to the behaviour of particular councils. I can recall, I think, the very pits was when a couple of drunken councillors were fighting in a pub car park on a Thursday evening. I think the electorate should take care of that kind of thing. Scrutiny should be about what the council is doing, what it is spending its money on, its fiduciary duty and its pecuniary duty. It would not have been possible to get rid of the Standards Board unless we were also combining it with a greater degree of transparency and openness in terms of the publication of minutes and, indeed, recently allowing proceedings to be filmed.

Q19 Mrs Glendon: I would like to ask some questions about finance, Secretary of State. This one is from a member of the public known as Joey: "Why are councils cutting staff but not red tape and waste?"

Mr Pickles: That is what I keep asking.

Q20 Chair: Is "Joey" a pseudonym then?

Mr Pickles: I want to thank my aunty for putting that particular question in. I entirely agree. Having been through this process a few times, both in terms of being a councillor and also a Government Minister, when you are faced with the prospect of having to reduce your council, the worst thing to do is to say, "We are going to have a 5%, 10%, 15% reduction". I think it is sometimes called salami-slicing. That does not really help at all. It just causes disruption and you rarely achieve your targets. What I think councils have done, and have done remarkably successfully—and this is right across the political divide—is that they have looked and sought to say, "What should we be doing?" and put the priorities around that. I think it is easier to arrive and fit

within a budget and deliver if you do that. I could quote lots of examples. There is also, of course, this whole process of local authorities working together, cooperating and producing something a lot better.

Q21 Mrs Glindon: The Association of North East Councils—

Mr Pickles: Bless them.

Mrs Glindon: Yes, bless them, indeed. They would like to know, “Will the Government publish an analysis of the cumulative impact of funding reductions since 2010-11?”

Mr Pickles: The short answer is “no”. We have no plans to do that. I am pleased that we have managed to ensure that, in the north-east, the amount of Government grant is something like one and a half times the size that it is in, say, Workington or Oxford West. It is better, I think, in areas that clearly need a lot of Government finance, and we have managed to ensure that that gap has even widened and that more money has gone to the north-east.

Chair: I think somebody’s phone is going off. Could we just make sure that all phones are switched off, please? If it is still going off, please could you leave the room?

Mr Pickles: I was hoping it was not mine.

Q22 Mrs Glindon: The association have another question, Secretary of State: “Will you address the financial pressures facing children’s services from a 40% cut in funding since 2009?”

Mr Pickles: The amount of money that has gone into children’s services is rising, so I do not recognise those figures. In 2010, it was £6.6 billion; in 2013-14, it was £6.9 billion. £1 billion does go rather a long way, so I do not recognise those figures.

Q23 Mrs Glindon: I presume they have grounds to ask that. Could I also ask, from the Federation of Master Builders, “Should local authorities prioritise investment in their procurement departments to increase SME engagement?”

Mr Pickles: I think that is right. We have had quite a bit of push with this, particularly with the Local Government Association, to try to ensure that pre-contract questionnaires were kept to a minimum and, in fact, kept below the EU threshold that they have to have. For reasons that I do not entirely understand, Mrs Glindon, there has been pushback from local authorities on this, and it means that it is so much more difficult for SMEs to get local contracts. It is quite permissible,

under European procurement rules, to look towards local suppliers. The short answer is “yes”.

Q24 Chair: Despite the fact that it could do better, local government does not an awful lot better than central Government in that regard.

Mr Pickles: Yes, do not get me going.

Q25 John Stevenson: I have questions on devolution and localism. My first question is from Councillor Martin Taylor-Smith: “Why has the creation of new unitary councils been blocked? For example Shropshire have streamlined services and saved over £100 million.”

Mr Pickles: There is no block on unitary authorities. I have a framed copy, I think, of the *Municipal Journal* with me with a gun in my hand saying that I would shoot the first person who talked about reorganisation. I think I would like to clarify that, because I am not a very violent man. I took a view, when the coalition came into office, that, if we were try to do a reorganisation, asking local authorities to take a considerable reduction to work that process would just lead to utter chaos, so I put any reorganisation back on hold.

Forgive me—if I could be a little longer on this question, I will be really quick on all the others, because I think it needs to be explained. Most reorganisations have taken place on the basis of governance. Generally speaking, the governance happens and the reorganisation fits. We decided to work through a localist model, and the groundwork was getting the Localism Act into place. Rather than do reorganisations that we have always done, which is on the basis of the lowest common denominator, whereby we say Little Boggleside cannot cope and will not be able to do this, so we produce something that Little Boggleside is entirely happy with and can do, the City Deals have been on the basis of who can cope, and devolving the power and the process to an organisation and a local-government structure that can take it.

In a way, I think we are in a game of catch-up and, sometime down the line, when the pattern of local government becomes more settled, we might look in terms of a reorganisation. I, Greg Clark, the Chancellor and others felt that this was the quickest model to get power out to local government, so that is why we have done it. There is no stop on unitaries but, generally speaking, it is counties that come and ask for a unitary but they just want to obliterate the districts. If the districts and the county come together and say, “We think it would be a great idea to have a unitary”, they would arrive at open arms.

Q26 John Stevenson: There is a follow-on from that from Peter Eckersley: why does local government in this country have such limited control over taxation compared to other developed nations? Will you change this?

Mr Pickles: We are prepared. Part of my frustration I feel sometimes—and sometimes I may get a little grumpy about this—is every time a council wants to talk about devolution, they just want more ways of taxing people. The real success of the City Deals—the Sheffield deal and the Manchester deal—is a bunch of people came to us and said, “This is what we want to do. This is the difference we are going to make on training. This is the difference we are going to make on transport. Give us these powers, this money, this ability and this independence, and we will do it.” If local authorities thought more in terms of how they can improve the service and make it different, then finance, structure, governance and sovereignty would follow relatively quickly.

Q27 John Stevenson: Just a final question from Simon Bowens: “Is devolving resources and powers to unaccountable LEPs a threat to local democracy?”

Mr Pickles: It would be if we devolved it to the LEPs, but the money and the power is devolved to a local authority. The LEPs were completely designed, as I think I said here years ago, as a clothes horse. They are there to ensure that local authorities get used to the idea of sharing finance, resources and sovereignty to do things. Of course, the LEPs give that additional business input and the local-economy input, but the money is going to the local authorities, not to the LEP structure. I was clear that that was the trick to do it and, with modesty, it has worked quite well.

Simon Danczuk: Season’s greetings, Secretary of State.

Mr Pickles: Happy Winterfest to you.

Q28 Simon Danczuk: Thank you. My first question is from Rochdale Online, which is a leading organisation based in Rochdale, by coincidence. Their question is: you have curtailed the use of councils spending public money on free newspapers for propaganda purposes, which I think they are happy with. What can you do about councils who use social media for similar purposes?

Mr Pickles: The regulations apply to all forms of media, whether it is social media, print media, local-television media or radio media. It applies to the whole lot. If they have any abuses in mind, do let me know.

Q29 Simon Danczuk: The second question is from Totnes Town Council: "What evidence is there that the new standards regime has been successful?"

Mr Pickles: I would refer the gentleman to an answer I gave earlier. I think it has worked a lot better. I am much happier that councillors get their collar felt over dodgy financial dealings or failures to declare a pecuniary interest, and I think that is a really important thing. I think the previous standards regime just became an industry and part of a succession of people just sometimes using it to persecute individuals and staff.

Q30 Simon Danczuk: My third and final question is from Mike Short: "Are you concerned about the levels of low pay in local government", with large numbers of council employees being paid below the living wage?

Mr Pickles: I think local authorities have an obligation to deliver good services. Part of that process is respect for their workforce, and part of that process is to ensure that remuneration is paid at the appropriate level. One of the things that we have been through in recent years, of course, was the equal pay legislation, which most authorities, with one notable exception, managed to absorb over a reasonable period. It was really difficult in the initial period—because, in many ways, the legislation was ahead of social attitudes—to get people to understand that people were entitled to reasonable pay. Of course, I do not determine the level of pay in local authorities; it is determined by the employer's side, which are the local authorities.

Chris Williamson: Can I also extend season's greetings to you, Secretary of State?

Mr Pickles: A Happy Winterfest and a Happy Christmas to you too.

Q31 Chris Williamson: That is very kind of you. Thank you very much indeed. I am just going to deal with housebuilding and housing markets now. The first question that I have is from Jennifer Line, and her question is: "What is the solution where affordable housing is unaffordable even for those earning above the minimum wage?"

Mr Pickles: We had a situation where there was virtually no investment in social housing. We had to find a way of producing numbers. We needed to move closer to the market. It is the same problem that people face in the public sector and in the private sector. It is one of the reasons I chose my particular house. I could only go to where I could afford.

Q32 Chris Williamson: The next one is from the Building and Social Housing Foundation: “Compulsory purchase powers are being used”—in London—“for private development. Should they be used for affordable housing too?”

Mr Pickles: I am aware of the specific case in a specific locality. I need to be very careful in terms of what I say, because I cannot prejudge anything that may eventually come to us. Speaking as an ex-council leader, I think compulsory purchase should be used extremely sparingly and extremely carefully because you are, essentially, taking people’s property rights away from them. I think it is up to the individual councillors to explain the decision that they have taken in the context of their wider population.

Q33 Chris Williamson: The third question is from UK Cohousing Network, and is about whether the Government is doing enough in its commitment to facilitate community-build and self-build housing?”

Mr Pickles: We did quite a lot in recent months, and I am really keen on self-build. Self-build sometimes has an image of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* in how we put these things up. I think it is moving into an area where buying a house is going to be more like buying a car. I have seen various developments take place where you decide whether to buy the house minimum watertight and then do the rest yourself, or you build it up to a particular standard and then you do the rest. I think that is the future. It is how it happens in Europe and in the United States, where people will look to get a plot, hire a builder to a particular level, and then finish it off. It has to meet design standards, because no one wants to live next to Frankenstein’s castle or Disneyland.

Q34 Chris Williamson: A penultimate question, if there is time for a fifth one, is from South Downs Park: “Why shouldn’t developers have to contribute to affordable housing, even on small developments?”

Mr Pickles: We have taken a view that, in order to protect the green belt, to develop brownfield sites and to bring back small builders, which have diminished enormously over the last 10 years, and to get some of these smaller sites going, we will release them from certain obligations. Principally, around the country, it is 10. In national parks and other places, it is down to five. I think it is a sensible thing to do, because those are areas that need building and are often small-sized. If we were to charge them full 106, the sites would probably become economic to develop. In order for councils to be able to have a sufficient supply, I think that plays a very important role. In rural communities in my part of the world, getting those two or three houses

in for local people is often very difficult, and you often need the co-operation of a housing association to be able to do it. This is just to try to get small builders back into the process.

Q35 Chris Williamson: The last question is a second one from Jennifer Line: "Community-led housing epitomises localism ... Why are there so many hoops to jump through?"

Mr Pickles: That is a great question. I entirely agree and we are doing our best to increase the diameter of the hoops and reduce their numbers to make it easier. I think it is a really good point. It is true also of planning that you have the decision but then you still have all these things to go through, but I entirely agree.

Q36 Mrs Glendon: According to the charity Guide Dogs, 78% of councillors support strengthening the law to prohibit pavement-parking. Do you agree that councillors need to be given tougher powers to deal with pavement-parking?

Mr Pickles: They have tons of powers. I often find that I get lots of people who keep asking me, "Why do you not do this? Why do you not give them powers?" Often, they have powers to do so. Clearly, parking on pavements is dangerous. It is not just dangerous to people who have difficulty seeing; it is dangerous to people who are carrying something and to people pushing a pram, because often you have to go onto the road to get around the obstacle. Particularly in town centres, the pavements are often not capable of supporting the weight of a car over a protracted period. I would urge councils to look strongly to ensure that parking is appropriate. While they are doing that, they could also free up a bit of parking to ensure that people can go to shops, but there can be no excuse for parking on pavements.

Q37 Simon Danczuk: This question is from the Fire Brigades Union: "As there are virtually no redeployment opportunities, surely this means, if firefighters fail a fitness test, they lose their job."

Mr Pickles: That is certainly not the case. We were very keen to ensure—and we went through a debate yesterday to ensure—that would not be the case. It is now very clear: if firefighters fail the test on the grounds that they are unwell, they will, of course, receive a full pension. The changes that took place yesterday mean that, if a firefighter is unfit, they have to go through a process of trying to get back into a fit condition to be able to fulfil their jobs. If they cannot, and they cannot be redeployed, the effect of yesterday's decision is that they will get a full pension. If I am being really blunt, I was very hacked off with the employers' side, who refused to make this concession for two years, and that is why we are putting it into a

statutory instrument. It is a sign that I thought the firefighters had made a very reasonable point.

Q38 Simon Danczuk: On another point, Simon Bacon sent in a message about whether people should be able to be punished for leaving their wheelie bins in the street after they have been emptied?

Mr Pickles: They should be flogged.

Simon Danczuk: They should be flogged. That will be a headline tomorrow. I can assure you of that, Secretary of State. You were doing so well, as well.

Mr Pickles: Clearly, it applies to a good neighbourhood. If you have somehow managed to leave your wheelie bin ajar or—god forbid—you have put a yogurt pot into the wrong thing, we are on you like a ton of bricks. If you park the damn thing in the middle of the road, it is not exactly good-neighbourly, and people should face a full nuisance. If people are parking them outside their house and not leaving them in the middle of the road, I think they should be just fine.

Q39 Simon Danczuk: Paul Jeffries asks, “Will you improve litter enforcement?”

Mr Pickles: It is up to local authorities to do that but, more importantly, it is up to the public to do that. I am of an age where I will walk miles out of my way to put something into a litterbin, because it was drummed into me at school. I am just amazed at people who you would think would know better about the casual nature of throwing things down. I recently walked around a city centre with a council team who was explaining the difficulty they were having removing chewing gum. The effect of the chewing gum requires high-powered hoses and the like to remove it. Those high-powered hoses often get down a crack in the pavement, which then often lifts the pavement and causes it to shatter. It costs probably millions of pounds a year unnecessarily in order to keep our streets in some kind of order, all because some people are disgusting enough to spit their chewing gum down on the floor.

Q40 Simon Danczuk: My final question is from Philip Whitehead, who I think is a councillor. He asks why local government cannot make their own traffic orders for simple changes such as car parking or speed limits, and says that it would save millions.

Mr Pickles: I will pass that on to Patrick McLoughlin the next time I see him.

Q41 Chair: I think everybody might have a go at him as well on that in another format. Secretary of State, we have also had from Dan Peters a very simple question, really: "What is your biggest regret after almost five years as Secretary of State?"

Mr Pickles: My biggest regret is I have not seen enough of you people. We have not done enough of these sessions.

I suppose my biggest regret is we did not start the Troubled Families programme until a couple of years on. I have seen how effective it is. I have seen the way it has changed not only people's lives but also the way that local authority services are provided. I have had three years; I would love to have had five years at it. I think it is changing social policy and the way that local authorities fund, and it has shown that, if local authorities and national Government are prepared to trust one another's judgment and work together, we can achieve some great things.

Q42 Chair: This is one from Gareth Evans, about whether it is fair for you to be lecturing councils about finding savings, given the size of the Department's bill for limousines. That is not one to pass on to the Secretary of State for Transport.

Mr Pickles: No, I am extremely pleased to be able to deal with the question of the limousine because, for further and better particulars, I have managed to get the sums. The answer is very straightforward: when I came into office, we had six cars for the Ministers. I thought that was excessive, so we reduced it to two. We have reduced our spending by two-thirds on transportation. The only way in which our friends in the Labour Party were able to produce those figures was by combining several years together. Coincidentally, it was the sum that Labour spent in one year that they were accusing me of spending in five years, and I have the figures. For the financial year 2007-08, we spent £401,600; last year, I spent *£191,813* [16:54:46]. Of course, these cars are not just for me but for six Ministers and for top officials to move various things about, but I still have my Oyster card and I still use public transport happily.

Q43 Chair: Finally, Secretary of State—and I do not want you to think I am drawing a comparison between your Department and seasonal theatrical productions that happen at this time of year—if you were given a role in a Christmas show and were offered a series of alternatives, which particular role would you like? You have three to choose from: the Wicked Uncle, Scrooge or the Fairy Godmother.

Mr Pickles: I always think playing villains is better than being the Fairy Godmother. Of course, one of my favourite books is *Scrooge*, and

remember that, after the Ghost of Christmas Future finished with him, and he repented and looked after Tiny Tim, he said many people laughed at him, but if ever a man understood the true meaning of Christmas, then it was Ebenezer Scrooge. I would like to think that, if anybody understands the nature of localism and local government, it is Eric Pickles.

Q44 Chair: On that point, Secretary of State, thank you very much for coming to answer such a wide range of questions. Could I take this opportunity to wish you and your family and the ministerial team a very happy Christmas? I will not wish you too much success in the new year, given what is coming, but no doubt other Members will. Can I also wish all Members of the Committee and our excellent staff who service us a very happy Christmas as well?

Mr Pickles: Can I say, on behalf of the ministerial team, to the Select Committee that I wish you and your families a happy Christmas and a peaceful new year, right up to May, depending on your party?

Chair: That brings us to the end of this session. Thank you very much.