



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Concurrent Committee of the Committee for
Justice and the Committee for Health, Social
Services and Public Safety

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Sexual Exploitation of Children and Young
People

16 September 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Concurrent Committee of the Committee for Justice and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Sexual Exploitation of Children and Young People

16 September 2013

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Wells (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Mickey Brady
Ms Pam Brown
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Samuel Gardiner
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Seán Lynch
Mr Alban Maginness
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Patsy McGlone
Ms Maeve McLaughlin

Witnesses:

Mr Poots	Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Mr Ford	Minister of Justice
Mr Seán Holland	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Assistant Chief Constable Mark Hamilton	Police Service of Northern Ireland
Mr Hugh Connor	The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland
Dr Helen Beckett	University of Bedfordshire

The Chairperson: I formally welcome the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. They are joined at the table by the PSNI's Assistant Chief Constable (ACC) Mark Hamilton; Seán Holland, the chief social services officer from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS); Hugh Connor, chair of the Safeguarding Board for

Northern Ireland (SBNI); and Dr Helen Beckett, who conducted the research for the Barnardo's report, which members have been provided with. Minister Poots, Minister Ford and ACC Hamilton will make opening statements. Once that is done, I will open it up to questions from members. Ministers, I thank you both for making yourselves available for this joint meeting.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Thank you very much, Mr Chair. Last Tuesday, the Minister of Justice and I invited the Chairs and Deputy Chairs of the Health and Justice Committees to a summit to consider the issue of child sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland. Junior Ministers Bell and McCann also attended, as did key health and social care and justice agencies in Northern Ireland. We know from research that children and young people in Northern Ireland are being sexually exploited, and that is now corroborated by the ongoing police investigation. In light of the definitive evidence that now exists, we, as Ministers, wanted to get as accurate a measure as possible of the extent of the problem here and get assurances from our respective agencies that sufficient action is being taken to tackle it. That is, that young people who are being exploited are being effectively protected and that the activity of those who are exploiting is being curtailed and they are or will be charged for those activities and brought before the courts.

A presentation was made by Helen Beckett, an academic who conducted and published research on child sexual exploitation in 2011. Helen carried out the research on behalf of Barnardo's, and it was funded by my Department. Helen has kindly agreed to join us today and, with your agreement, I suggest that she takes members through the key findings of the research. I should say that Helen's research focused on children and young people known to social services, including looked-after children. That was her commission. However, as Helen will explain to members, it is not a problem that is confined to looked-after children. The cases that led to prosecutions in Rochdale and Oxford show that it can affect children living in a stable and loving family home as well children and young people in care, whose early life experiences often heighten their vulnerability. Within the last week, we have seen how relatively easy it is for schoolchildren to be contacted by individuals who have the potential to exploit them. Those cases demonstrate the particular challenges generated by modern technology. This is not a problem in Northern Ireland or the UK only; it is an international problem.

Last Tuesday, the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) took us through some of the action taken to date, including the publication of guidance for staff working in residential care who sometimes have to deal with young people who go missing. I should point out to members that children's homes are intended to offer the children who reside there a home from home. Children are not brought into care on the basis that they have done wrong. They are not guilty of anything and are not locked up. More often than not, they are the wronged party and have been let down, time and again, by the adults in their lives.

I mentioned the guidance, and I invited Tony Rodgers, assistant director of children's services, along today to take members through other actions taken to date involving social services and action that is being planned. That includes the imminent launch of a child sexual exploitation helpline and a number of awareness-raising leaflets targeted at young people, parents, carers and professionals who have contact with them. Also joining me today is Hugh Connor, the chair of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, which members know was established exactly a year ago. I am reassured that, in its first year of operation, the SBNI, under Hugh's leadership, has developed a strategic plan that identifies child sexual exploitation as a strategic priority. The membership of the SBNI is in the process of developing and agreeing a multiagency action plan to tackle child sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland. Hugh has joined us today to take members through key elements of the action plan.

Members are aware of the ongoing police investigation. ACC Hamilton is with us to update members on the progress of that investigation. We need to ensure that we handle information on the ongoing investigation with extreme care. I am sure that Mark will emphasise that point. Members need to be aware that victims of child sexual exploitation are very vulnerable. They are the victims of villains; of dangerous people who abused them already and have the potential to do them further harm. As elected representatives, we have a duty to deal with information relating to an ongoing police investigation responsibly and sensitively to ensure that we do not create further risks for children and young people already at serious risk.

It is my intention to continue to monitor the extent of the problem of child sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland and the effectiveness of what is being done to tackle it. I will continue to work closely with the Minister of Justice to ensure that we respond on an interdepartmental and multiagency basis. I will make certain that sufficient attention is paid to looked-after children. In particular, I will ask my officials to look specifically at how we can assist staff to prevent children going missing from care. If that requires us to introduce new legislation, that will be done as a matter of urgency. We will, of

course, draw on learning from other parts of the UK and beyond. I now hand over to David, with your permission.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): Thank you very much, Chair. I welcome this opportunity to speak to the joint meeting of the two Committees on this issue. Clearly, because there has been significant media coverage of this disturbing issue in recent days, it is appropriate that we have this meeting. I apologise that you have been supplied with something of my notes; half an hour before I came in, they were transformed from hand scribbles. They are at least now legible but not necessarily grammatical. It is a case of checking against delivery.

Let me be clear from the outset that I believe that child sexual exploitation is an appalling crime. Any child in this society can be at risk. The circumstances in which a child can become a victim can vary, but I emphasise again that any form of child sexual exploitation is child abuse and a crime, and it must be treated as such. As a former social worker, I know that our first priority has to be to protect children from abuse and exploitation. Although the protection of children is a role for the Health Minister, tackling that horrendous crime effectively requires us to all work collaboratively and in partnership, and there is clear and convincing evidence of the need to do so.

The role of the Department of Justice (DOJ) is to ensure that, where such crimes occur, we work together to protect and support victims and bring perpetrators to justice. The DOJ has taken a number of initiatives recently in that area. For example, as part of the victims and witness strategy, victim and witness care units are to be rolled out to all court tiers, which will provide victims and witnesses with a single point of contact for their support. Registered intermediary schemes are being piloted for those with significant communications difficulties, including children. Support services are available for children and adults as they move through the criminal justice process. My Department is providing funding of over £2.1 million a year to Victim Support Northern Ireland and around £450,000 a year to the NSPCC to provide a young witness service that helps and supports young prosecution witnesses under the age of 18 when they are called to give evidence in court. Those are part of the range of special measures available to assist vulnerable and intimidated witnesses to give their best possible evidence in criminal proceedings. I hope that all those measures will ensure that child victims and witnesses are not further traumatised by their contact with the justice system, and that that will encourage them to assist us in bringing the perpetrators to justice.

Secondly, as members will recall, last week, Edwin Poots, the Chief Constable and I officially launched the Rowan centre at Antrim Area Hospital. The Rowan is Northern Ireland's regional sexual assault referral centre. It is a significant step forward in supporting all victims of sexual violence and abuse. It is a place that is able to provide healthcare, social care, counselling and criminal investigations together in a very practical demonstration of joined-up working.

I turn to the current issues. As there is an ongoing police investigation, it is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, not a matter for the Department, and, therefore, I cannot comment on the specific issues of this investigation. However, much work is ongoing in Departments and a range of statutory and voluntary agencies to tackle issues of sexual violence and abuse, including human trafficking and sexual exploitation. I believe that we have to continue to do that work and to continue to do so in partnership.

I welcome the role of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland and the work that Hugh and his team do in focusing upon this matter as one of its strategic priorities. I am committed to supporting the Health Minister in his role of protecting children and ensuring that the whole justice system plays its part in that.

Assistant Chief Constable Mark Hamilton (Police Service of Northern Ireland): Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to speak. First, I want to reassure the Committee that this is a major priority for the Chief Constable. Although there is a live investigation, I want to try to ensure that I give members as much information as I can without compromising the investigations that are going forward.

Perhaps I will start by giving some background on how the police have arrived the point at which we are at today and by giving some of the detail around that. That might be a help to everyone. The police probably started looking at the specific issue around this investigation around June 2012. An internal decision was made in the PSNI to review our public protection approach, and a development team was set up. One of the strands that that team looked at was the issue of missing persons. We are looking at a range of public protection issues, including domestic violence, sexual violence and so forth. We had this strand of missing persons, and the team started to have increasing concerns about missing young people. Without getting into all the parameters that we drew, we looked at specific

young people who went missing a number of times. We came up with a group of people who, collectively, had gone missing 137 times between 1 January 2011 and 31 August 2012, when we started the research. We started looking at the vulnerabilities of the young people who had gone missing, allegations that had been made around them and the investigations into them. We saw that there had been allegations of serious sexual crimes and other crimes, and, although all of those had been initially investigated with arrests made in most cases, very few of those had been successful. Secondly, there was not any broader analysis of any connectivity in the types of offending.

Obviously, we were casting a look across other jurisdictions for learning on what they have seen on this type of stuff. You cannot just look at it individually, so we started to look at those cases, and we identified 22 cases that we looked at holistically. We looked for connections either through victims or through offenders. As a result of that, the Chief Constable appointed a senior investigator to take the analysis that was being started by the review team and to move it from an analysis into an investigation. An investigation was commenced under joint protocol working, and we established a team with a gold/silver/bronze structure. It is multiagency and has full-time social workers embedded in it. It will have people from Barnardo's working with us. It has an operational group that includes the NSPCC, Barnardo's and the Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC). It now also has a specialist prosecutor allocated to it from the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) to help us to review the cases of the 22, look for more opportunities to add to the arrests that have been made, identify and re-examine the suspects and look more broadly than just at the original suspects.

My senior investigating officer (SIO) was commenting in the press today and, for operational reasons, he indicated that the actual suspect list around those 22 cases is fewer than 50, but we are looking more broadly than at just those 50 suspects. We are looking at all sorts of areas of concern and links to see who else could be or might be involved. We are not terribly confident about saying that on the outside at the minute, because we do not want to do anything that in any way undermines victims or in any way supports or assists offenders in what they are doing. So, we are trying to be cautious with some of the detail. We are looking at joining up and putting cases together rather than dealing with individual cases on an individual basis. We are looking at historical cases, but we are also now looking at today's offences today. We are readjusting and bringing in a new approach to child sexual exploitation offending as it is happening today. So, other arrests are occurring that are unconnected to those 22 cases.

The Police Service is approaching this from a different angle. We brought over colleagues from Greater Manchester Police, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) from England and a local authority from England along with other people, and we are also joined by Helen Beckett, an academic, in order to try to understand and learn lessons from other jurisdictions about how to better face this type of crime and how better to produce our response. Effectively, that is what is happening now: the Police Service of Northern Ireland is turning from individual investigations into having a collective and more strategic understanding of these offences and working with partners to address that.

The first of our main priorities under the operation is to identify children at risk, so we are not just focusing on known victims. We have decided that we have to spread our remit beyond that and, through social services, Barnardo's and the NSPCC, we asked other people to come to us with those who they think are at risk. We have agreed a multiagency risk assessment tool to try to identify children who may be at risk of exploitation for sexual purposes. That is not identified victims, it is those who are at risk, and that is an ongoing process. We also have to identify victims — we talked a little about victims who were identified — and put in the right measures to protect and safeguard them. We then obviously have to identify and take action against suspects, and that is not just the people who we see as immediate suspects but to then expand our view of this beyond and see where it goes.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland can say that we are seeing this type of criminality across Northern Ireland. Child sexual exploitation itself is not a designated criminal offence. The offences would be ones of grooming, for example, or of prostitution, assault or sexual contact with children, but there is no chargeable offence of child sexual exploitation. Child exploitation is being developed and understood more as a crime type than a specific chargeable crime. There are other experts here who can help explain that, but what we are doing in the Police Service is addressing this type in a different way and trying to pull all the strands together in order to understand. We have not identified a sex ring, for example, in Northern Ireland, but we are starting to look for groups of associations of people who are involved in combined offending. I am not saying that those rings do not exist; we are out looking. What we are trying to say to the people of Northern Ireland is that the Police Service of Northern Ireland is now out looking to try to establish the scale of this. If it is there, we will hopefully find it and we will try to take the criminal justice intervention.

Our critical priority in this as a Police Service is the safeguarding of children. That overlays all our investigative approaches. The safety of the child is the paramount decision-making tool before we decide about any evidential recovery, and I want to reassure people of that. We are determined to take a far more aggressive stance against those offences. Arrests have been made in the cases that I referred to, and people have been charged. Some of those arrests were at the time of the initial offence, but we are now reviewing all those cases. We have made arrests over the last number of months on issues related to those cases but not necessarily specific to the original crime.

What is clear is that the victims of these crimes are very vulnerable. In some cases, they have complex needs and, therefore, require a complex and sophisticated approach and response by the Police Service from a criminal justice point of view and from colleagues in other areas. The Police Service is committed to learning how to do that better and has launched this inquiry. This inquiry will spread as we identify more risks or as we identify more people who we want to look at. Not everybody identified as being at risk will be a victim and not everybody we look at will be a suspect, but, rather than looking just at what is in front of us, we are trying to look out and around. That is the learning that we are trying to pick up from this whole area.

I emphasise that, in my experience, the operation that we are running now is the probably most effective joint partnership arrangement that I have seen. The collaboration with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the support of the charitable and voluntary agencies have been and continue to be superb. There is a collective appetite, if I can put it that way, in the professional field for addressing the issue to bring those responsible to justice and, most importantly, to protect the children.

I am happy to take and answer your questions as best I can.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much. Ministers, as questions develop, please feel free to bring in the other officials and experts who are here with you. Undoubtedly, the public will be shocked at the information that they are hearing today; it is horrific. Obviously, we need to balance getting information to the public against ensuring that the investigation is not compromised. Undoubtedly, this is on an unprecedented scale, and it rightly, then, merits the form of accountability taking place in this meeting.

I have a number of matters that I want to pick up on. You indicated that there are around 50 direct suspects and that there is then a wider number of individuals who may be associated with the 22 victims. How far can you elaborate on the extent to which the investigation is bringing others into its scope?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: It is a number considerably larger than 50. We are looking as far away and as close as we can. What I mean by that is that we are looking at immediate associates and beyond that. We are trying to pull in every piece of information on everybody we could identify who may in any way be connected. Some of those people may have no culpability in this, and some have more than others. We are stretching it as far as we can go. Clearly, therefore, the number will be greater than 50. We are trying to be careful, because we do not want to put inaccurate detail out there. We obviously have a large list of people that we want to explore further.

The Chairperson: How many of the people who may be associated with this are convicted sex offenders? Can you give us that detail?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: That is a very useful question, Chair. It is tempting to categorise this in the normal field of child sex offending. However, none of the primary suspects is known to me, as I sit here, as a registered sex offender, although we may see some people way on the periphery of this. I am not saying that people involved in this type of criminality at the minute are not sex offenders — clearly they are, and they are predatory. Some of them do not see themselves in that sense, but they have not fallen neatly into patterns that we in society would view as being those of a sex offender. They may be involved in other forms of criminality, but they are not sex offenders. At the minute, there is no sense that the public protection arrangements have been lacking; they seem to be fairly secure.

As a professional in the field, the other thing that I have been learning is that we as professionals and even as members of the public tend to try to box this off into certain categories of people. In other jurisdictions, people have tried to box it off by ethnic origin and so forth. There is absolutely no correlation with this.

Early in the inquiry, I asked Helen about the profiles of those involved in these types of offences, and we still discuss that. There does not seem to be an awful lot of data available. The age group can be broad, and it is across all social backgrounds. Our focus at the minute is primarily on young men in their early 20s, and there is associated criminality with quite a few of them.

The Chairperson: Are you able to indicate how many of the victims are girls and how many are boys?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: Clearly, I have those figures, Mr Chair. Twenty-two is a large number, but, if I were to be very specific, that might indicate or reveal someone's identity. The vast majority are girls, but, if I were to give you specific numbers, that would indicate how many were boys, and I do not want to stigmatise or indicate that, particularly if we are trying to make approaches or more approaches to them. Again, my understanding is that some of those kids are so vulnerable that it takes time after we intervene for them to have the confidence to give us the statements and so forth that we will need. I want to be really cautious about what I say about them, other than to say to them that we are on their side, we want to protect them and we want to do the same thing for anybody else in that situation. I do not mean to be evasive on that, Chair, but I just want to treat it with some degree of caution in the interests of the children.

The Chairperson: Can you give some indication about how the grooming procedure ultimately commences? If it is predominantly young males who are involved, how do they initially prey on the victims and then how does that abuse extend beyond one individual?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: I will make some comments and, if Helen were to make some comments as well, you could get a slightly more educated answer. I will tell you about the criminological approach. Grooming is a very subtle form, initially, of trying to win the confidence of a child or young person. It could happen online, by text, at parties or by association. What we normally see with grooming is that those who groom identify vulnerability. You do not groom somebody who you think will spurn your advances. Many of the children are offered friendship, care, love, presents, alcohol and drugs. Some are then threatened. It can be a progressive set of criminality. That is why I said that a number of different crimes can occur for the kids who are in this most vulnerable area. In the worst scenarios, we see children who are taken to parties and offered drugs for free but then at some point have to pay that back through sexual acts. That is the extreme that we are talking about. It may be helpful to ask Helen to comment about some of the profiles of how that offending happens, if you are content to hear that.

Dr Helen Beckett (University of Bedfordshire): Thank you. It is great to be here with you today, and I really welcome the commitments that are being made. On the grooming model, I would reiterate a lot of what the assistant chief constable has said: there is no one particular model around this. What we know from research — I am drawing on work that I did on behalf of Barnardo's in 2011, but I am also deputy director of a specialist research centre at the University of Bedfordshire now, so I can talk about how it fits with what we know from elsewhere as well — is that there are different models of sexual exploitation. Some of those happen within a sexually exploitative relationship, where the young person actually understands or conceives the abuser to be their boyfriend or girlfriend, and it happens within that context of a relationship. Other times, it can be that they are approached about a friendship and, as Mark said, there is an introduction of drugs and alcohol. That is not necessarily in every case, but I have to say that there is a real pattern of the use of drugs and alcohol in these relationships. They can also be offered somewhere to stay, if they have gone missing from care or home, or a place to party.

The young people whom I have met and interviewed who have been through this and the young people whom services here work with talk about how they do not realise what is going on until it is too late. It all seems quite innocuous at first and, in fact, to a 13- or 14-year-old, getting to a party and getting drugs and alcohol all seems great; then suddenly it takes a sinister turn.

We need to be careful not to just nail our colours to one particular model of this. The young people whom I meet and hear about have different experiences, but there are common factors around identifying a young person's vulnerability. There is a quotation in the research from a young woman who had been in care about how "They pretend that they have had similar experiences to yours and that they get it. They would say, 'I know what it feels like for your family not to want you' ". So, they start feeding in to those needs and insecurities. That grooming can happen over a very long time — again, the time can change — but suddenly it takes a much more sinister turn once the young person has developed a dependency on the abuser and when the abuser has also managed to interrupt and

disassociate them from the positive contacts in their life. Then, it takes a more sinister and fearful turn.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Is there any evidence that, once the victims whom the police investigation is related to have been groomed in that sense and plied with drink and drugs, they are then internally trafficked and taken to other abusers?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: The short answer is yes. Part of the pattern of offending — not in every case but at the worst end of offending — is that we have evidence of children being put in a taxi and sent to another town for the purposes of attending a party or meeting other people. So the same activity is moving around, and, for us, that is the hallmark of trafficking. I, personally, have not yet seen evidence of people being trafficked into Northern Ireland for that purpose, but some of the kids will be given the ability to be mobile and facilitated to go from one part of Northern Ireland to another. Does that concur with what you understand?

Dr Beckett: Yes. It concurs with what the research shows about young people being transported for the purposes of being sexually exploited by a particular individual or by others who are brought in. There were a number of such cases, and Barnardo's could give you the detail of local cases that have been accepted under the national referral mechanism as cases of trafficking.

The Chairperson: Are there any examples or evidence in those cases that some of that internal trafficking has been for the financial gain of the abusers or those who move them?

Dr Beckett: Again, I cannot comment on the police operation.

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: I cannot comment definitively or specifically on that element at present. I cannot confirm that, Chair. Generally, it seems to be for sexual exploitation as opposed to financial gain. There may well be an incident or incidents of financial gain, but the broader issue of understanding for us is that of the exploitative element of these offences, as opposed to any other offence. That exploitative element could include someone being transported for sex, which would include grooming and being offered money or drugs. It is trying to understand the bigger picture, as opposed to just dealing with each victim as a single entity, putting enough packages around that victim to encourage them to come forth and give evidence and then creating the appropriate criminal justice response.

Dr Beckett: If I may add to that, the research identified some cases in which it was for the financial gain of a third party. I would like to highlight that, as Mark clearly said, there is no sexual offence of sexual exploitation, but there are plenty of offences under part 3 of the Sexual Offences Order. When thinking about this, we need to remember that the offence of abuse of a child through prostitution does not necessarily have to be for money; it can be for other forms of financial gain. It can be for alcohol, drugs or the discharge of a debt. When we interpret the sexual offences legislation in that manner, we suddenly start to see that a lot more cases could be prosecuted.

The Chairperson: You said that the investigation will extend beyond these 22 people and, indeed, it already has. What resources are available to you, and is there a need for those resources to increase?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: In our current model, we have a centralised team of about 15 people, which includes detectives and social workers. They are being supported in police terms by the eight public protection teams at district level. It is my responsibility to flex the resourcing model up and down as required. At the minute, I am seeking additional detective resources so that we can expand. So the resource will be a moveable feast. We are trying to create a balance between the need for a central team to have an overview of all these cases and direct investigations, and the need, along with social services, for local area accountability and local interventions. We are trying not to suck it all up into the centre. In the centre, we see ourselves as leading on understanding analysis and on the complex investigations under the senior investigating officer, who spoke publicly today about his inquiry. The Chief Constable and I will give him whatever support he needs. I have been offered unqualified support for the criminal justice element of this from all departments. Clearly, the criminal justice element is a very important element, but another, perhaps larger, element is safeguarding. That is why we are working very closely with our colleagues, Seán in particular, on this matter.

The Chairperson: When was the specialist prosecutor with the PPS put in place and why?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: I cannot give you the exact date, but it was certainly during the summer and since we started. We also have to keep a critical eye on the quality of evidence that we bring forward and the decision-making. Among the lessons learned from other jurisdictions is that we have not been vigorous enough in pushing prosecutions because we have felt that the evidential standard would be too difficult to meet. It requires a joined-up approach, across the whole system, to push hard against that. The PPS has also recognised that it needs to cast a more critical eye over these offences; ensure, where possible, that we prosecute the worst offences; and ensure that the evidential standards are reached. The PPS is willing to do that. So this is part of a package of criminal justice trying to provide a better response. It lines up with our improved approaches to hate crime and other areas of vulnerability; our commitment to and joint working on the sexual assault referral centre (SARC); and a general sense that we want to learn the lessons and improve. The situation that we have is and has been by no means perfect, and we want to fulfil our obligations more fully. The PPS is willing to support us in its role.

The Chairperson: Thank you. I will now bring in Mr Wells as vice chairman of the Health Committee.

Mr Wells: I think that my question is best addressed to Seán. I have no doubt that, last weekend, children were missing from care in various parts of Northern Ireland. Given what you now know — say that they returned this morning — do you try, first, to ascertain where they have been and what they have done? In view of the extent of what was revealed in the media on Friday, if you have suspicions, what do you do now?

Mr Seán Holland (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Interviews are conducted with children when they return after they have been missing from home, and we have been using a risk assessment tool developed with Barnardo's to try to identify whether there are particular risks associated with where they have been and what they have been doing. If we have concerns that they may have been a victim of abuse and, in particular, of crime, we share that with the police. I would like to emphasise that that has always been the practice. Before this current investigation, we always shared referrals with the police when we were concerned that children may have been subjected to abuse, whether when absconding from care or in any other situation.

Mr Wells: Do those interviews reveal that this is ongoing?

Mr Holland: They are revealing that we have young people in the care system who are at risk of sexual exploitation. However, I must say this very clearly: we would be doing a disservice to the people of Northern Ireland if we led them to believe that this was a problem solely associated with children in care. Children in care are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation for a number of reasons, particularly the experiences that probably led them to being in care in the first place. However, the academic evidence is that they represent only about 20% of children likely to experience childhood sexual exploitation. So it is a much bigger issue than just children who are in care. The fact that these particular children are in care enabled us to identify them, which facilitated the police in this investigation. This, however, is an issue that goes well beyond children in care, even beyond those known to social services. That is why it is really important that we encourage parents and carers to be aware of this as a potential risk.

Mr Poots: It is worth adding that children in care are at highest risk. They are twice as likely to be preyed upon as others. However, other children — those taking alcohol or drugs, those who were damaged at an early point in their home life or have needs that can be identified by a perpetrator — are also at considerably greater risk as well. There are levels of risk, and children in care are at the highest, but every parent should be aware that perpetrators are out there and will prey on children who demonstrate signs of vulnerability.

Dr Beckett: Perhaps it would be helpful for the Committee to know about a survey that we undertook as part of the Northern Ireland Young Life and Times research. Nearly 800 16-year-olds replied: one in nine reported that they had experienced sexual grooming before the age of 16; one in 15 said that someone had given them substances before taking advantage of them sexually; and one in 20 said that someone had offered them money, drugs, alcohol or something else. That was among the general population. So, absolutely, we know that among those in residential care, a much higher proportion are at risk, and we need a very targeted and focused intervention for them. However, we would be doing a disservice if we did not acknowledge that this is a much larger issue.

Going back to the resourcing issue, I have experience of working with local authorities elsewhere that have looked at this issue. Once they start to throw the net wider, they always identify this to be a much bigger issue of concern than was initially thought. Although I know that the figure of 22 cases that we have heard is potentially shocking to people, Barnardo's is working with 60-odd cases. In the research, social workers identified concern for nearly 150. We found rates of one in nine and one in 15. Once the police start to proactively investigate — I really welcome the fact that they are doing so because that is what the protocol says should happen — we will find that it is a much bigger issue.

That is not intended to cause a moral panic. We need to think carefully about how we manage the message that lets parents and young people know of the risk and equips them to be protected, without also creating a moral panic.

Mr Wells: Many sexual offences are committed by friends and relatives of the victim. Is there any evidence that children who leave care without permission are going back to their home to be abused by relatives rather than strangers?

Dr Beckett: The research found that the majority of offences were by strangers, although some family members were linked into that. It is not that sexual exploitation cannot be conducted by a family member; it certainly can, and there are examples of that. Very often, however, the offenders are people whom the children have met in the community or, potentially, online. Mark, what do you know from the operation?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: I broadly concur with what Dr Beckett is saying. It is important for practitioners in the field not to draw lines between the two but to understand some of the differences. Child sexual abuse is child sexual abuse. It can almost be easier to categorise it in the familial area and so forth. As I have tried to explain, this is a slightly more complex area. I have not seen that happen in these cases, although I have not examined every one personally in that level of detail. Those exploitative relationships could happen, but, generally, these are kids who are heading out and being assaulted — that is what it is — by others who are outside the family context.

Mr Wells: Finally, may I just check how much confidence we can place on the figure of 22? If someone who has gone from care and been abused then comes back and is questioned but refuses point-blank to cooperate with the authorities, is that assessed as being a definite non-offence, or is it included in the statistics?

Mr Holland: I will start, and maybe Mark will continue. Certainly, there are young people who go missing from care, and, when they come back, they refuse to discuss what has happened to them. However, that does not mean that people simply assume that nothing has happened to them. A risk assessment is done, and the very fact that someone has been missing and is refusing to talk about it, added to other information and certain vulnerabilities, means that the child would probably be identified as being at additional risk. A risk assessment and risk plan will be placed around that child. That does not mean that he or she is necessarily among the 22 cases; that is a very specific number. However, I think it important to face up to the fact that the 22 children on whom the police investigation has been focused are by no means the only children in Northern Ireland who have been victims of childhood sexual exploitation.

Dr Beckett: I just want to add that, generally, we know that sexual offences against children are not reported. Particularly in cases of child sexual exploitation, it is very rare for a child to be the one who highlights the fact that something is going on. More often, a professional picks up concerns — I have to say that there are very dedicated professionals working in the field and trying to protect children from abuse — or a parent or, perhaps, a friend reports concerns about what is happening. If we wait for young people to come forward and tell us that they are being sexually exploited, we will hear nothing. All the research from across the UK, all the evidence and all the reviews carried out in Derby, Rochdale and Oxford have shown that young people will not come forward and report. They do not see themselves as victims. Let me clarify that: it is important to say that just because a young person does not see themselves as a victim does not mean that they are not a victim. Just because they do not see that they are being abused does not mean that they are not being abused. As professionals, we have a responsibility to exercise professional curiosity, ask the questions behind what a young person is saying, start to look for signs and put together a picture of what is going on with them.

Currently, there are very interesting developments in England. The CPS recently had a consultation on responding to cases of sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse. There is a real emphasis now on recognising that, often, the young people will be reluctant victims. The ACC and I have talked

about that. There is also an emphasis on moving to a very case-based approach as opposed to a victim-centred approach. I have met and interviewed young victims who, for example, are red case files. A person has repeatedly raped them and brought in other people to rape them. That person is now in prison, but the victim still sends love letters to their boyfriend. All the complex dynamics in play and the vulnerability of the young people mean that we cannot wait for them to come forward as victims. I ask people to bear that in mind when considering how we take this forward.

The Chairperson: Thank you. The point that this is a broader societal problem has been well made. I ask you to try to curtail any commentary not on the 22 victims. Otherwise, we will get into much broader conversations, and the public could confuse that with the message about these 22. Members, bear that in mind and stick to the particular investigation that the police have launched.

Mr McCartney: Thank you very much for your presentation. Obviously, there has been a lot for us all to take in. I know that I can speak for Sinn Féin members when I say that we will want to come back to the issue, because we have to keep an ongoing eye on it.

I have three broad questions, Chair, with your indulgence. Mark, given the nature and extent of the investigation, are you satisfied that you have tasked enough personnel in the here and now to carry it forward?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: My first response to that is that I am increasing the resource now. I am satisfied that the Chief Constable and the senior team decided that there needed to be resources specifically dedicated to the investigation when it was first identified to them. The senior investigating officer (SIO) has requested more resources, and I am trying to fulfil that request. We are going OK at the minute, but I will need to keep asking that question of myself throughout the inquiry.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland has its resources. This is a critical priority for us. Obviously, we have other areas of work, and members are very clear on where we are doing a lot of work. Sometimes, resources get diverted to other things, for other reasons, but we are trying to make sure that we focus entirely on this. With the level of focus on this now, Deputy Chair, I can also say that there is no way that we will do anything other than resource this to as high a level as is needed.

I am also very satisfied that the resource is not just about the police. Given all the complexities that we talked about, we need close support from social services and the other agencies. With respect, this is not about a cop wandering up to a kid and trying to get a complaint out of them. I do not mean to be trite. This is more than what falls within the professional competency of the broad policing approach. It is far wider than that. So I am satisfied with the resource in question, at the minute. I might not be satisfied going forward, and I will have to keep challenging that. We are fine now.

Mr McCartney: Thank you. This may be a broader question for the Department. It is based on the research by Dr Beckett. There were six specific recommendations in that report. Can we be satisfied that all that needed to be done was done to in some way militate against 22 children being made vulnerable when that could have been prevented?

Mr Poots: I will take that at the outset, and others may wish to come in. First, we have invested further in Barnardo's Safe Choices. It provides a service to support children and young people who are looked after and go missing from care. The project also supports staff working with those young people. Safe Choices works with male and female young people up to and including the age of 18. Referrals to the service come predominantly from the health and social care trusts in connection with young people in residential and foster care.

We have trialled a range of therapeutic support approaches throughout children's homes in Northern Ireland. These were subject to a recent evaluation, which found that therapeutic approaches help social workers to develop a better appreciation and understanding of the complex needs of young people in their care. The findings of that evaluation have been made available across the UK by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE).

In the past few weeks, Minister Ford, the Chief Constable and I opened a new SARC. It opened its doors in May 2013 and now accepts referrals from a range of sources that includes self-referrals. It operates 24/7, and the latest SARC statistics show that, during the first quarter of its operation, it received 106 referrals — men and women, adults and children. Forty-nine children under the age of 18 were referred to the centre during that period. We established a joint protocol between the PSNI and the health and social care services. It was published in 2012 and sets out specifically what action

will be taken by the PSNI and the relevant health and social care trust when a child goes missing and what action should be taken when the child is located. It introduces a traffic-light system, which is risk related. The level of assessed risk determines the action required. The highest level of risk — the code red — requires the police and the trust to communicate developments with each other every two hours. We are in the process of finalising new children's home standards, and the Health and Social Care Board is putting the final touches to a major review of residential care provision in Northern Ireland. The safety and protection of children are central to both.

We are on the cusp of issuing new fostering regulations for consultation. Again, the regulations will seek to ensure that the safety of children and young people is paramount. Those regulations will be supplemented by the fostering service's standards. An ongoing investigation by the police, by its very nature, requires careful handling. So the last thing that we want to do is compromise that operation in any way. We are drawing on the learning from events in Rochdale, for example. We have applied a multiagency approach to the investigation under a police lead. Social services staff are colocated with police officers who are undertaking the investigation. Leading voluntary sector organisations, such as the NSPCC, Barnardo's and VOYPIC, are also involved. We need to ensure that child victims are properly supported through what is a very difficult ordeal. The last thing that we want to happen to them is re-victimisation.

Our aim, as far as possible, is to move away from crisis interventions towards more early interventions. By intervening early, we will build resilience in children and their families, making them less likely to be the fodder of exploiters. We are finalising the details of an early intervention fund of approximately £30 million, made up of equal contributions from a collective of Departments, the Executive's Delivering Social Change policy and Atlantic Philanthropies. The fund will be in place by April 2014. It will focus on embedding early intervention into professional training and development in mainstream children's services. It will deliver an early intervention service portfolio accessed through family support hubs, which will be put in place throughout Northern Ireland. Aside from that, last year, we established the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, whose chairperson, Hugh Connor, is here. Its role is largely to ensure that agencies work very closely together on these issues. It is hugely regrettable that we are discussing this issue today, but it did not arise as a result of our being ignorant of the problems or not examining how we could address them.

Mr Holland: Those are a number of policy initiatives that we have taken to try to improve safeguarding arrangements. I want to assure both Committees that, at the level of an individual child identified in this investigation, we have been wrapping services around those young people. Police officers and social workers are doing individual risk assessments. In some cases, they have been accompanied almost one-to-one, 24/7. However, it is difficult because, as both Dr Beckett and Assistant Chief Constable Hamilton said, sometimes these children do not believe that they have been the victim of a crime. So it is about making sure that there are services available to them, trying to entice them into those services and trying to help them to develop the insight to recognise the situation that they are in. I do not mean to be flippant about this, but any of us who have had teenagers of our own know that, sometimes, getting through to them and engaging on what is in their best interests is difficult. These teenagers have had particularly difficult experiences, and engaging with them is a very, very difficult task. Hugh may want to add a little about future plans, or maybe that question is coming up later?

The Chairperson: That is OK. Go ahead.

Mr Hugh Connor (The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland): As we try to move forward, we are conscious that there are four prongs in any strategy. We recognise that, here and now, there is a police operation but that it will not solve this problem. There will be an ongoing risk to vulnerable children from people who would exploit them for gain. So we do not think that, if we crack down hard on the problem, we will eliminate it. We are thinking about what we need to do in the longer term on prevention and awareness-raising.

The first of the four prongs is raising and enhancing awareness, and today's meeting is part of that process. We want to make sure that communities, families, children and professionals are aware of some of the tell-tale signs and know what to do.

The second prong is that we want to identify and protect the children who are at risk. That does not apply solely to those in children's homes. This is clearly a wider issue. We can all anticipate circumstances in which a child who is old enough, living in a house that may be a bit chaotic or in which there may be domestic violence or other issues, may leave and not come home until 2.00 am or 3.00 am. That may not be reported, but such a child is equally vulnerable.

Our third prong is working to disrupt the perpetrators. That disruption must be led by our police colleagues, but it is not a matter solely for them. If there are further issues, other professional colleagues and agencies — be they other parts of the justice system, the education system or councils — may need to play a particular role in galvanising that disruption.

The final prong is prosecution. We have been working on a joint approach, which sufficiently separates the operational responsibilities of the police and health and social services for the investigation of this ongoing matter, and seeking to complement that with the roll-out of a strategic plan.

We have put in place a strategic group. Among the issues that we will look at in the weeks and months ahead is prevalence, which was the subject of the first question today. It is very difficult to know how prevalent this is because the issue has been shaped, or boxed, by the cases of children who are in a residential or looked-after setting, and are, therefore, the responsibility of Health and Social Care or the PSNI. As we believe this to be a wider issue, we need to try to gather information on a wider basis across agencies. We have already begun together, and we have worked hard together. We have started to produce information, so, at our press conference today, we brought into the public domain the leaflets that we have produced for children, families and professionals. That is the beginning. It is the first phase of trying to raise awareness of signs and symptoms.

We need to do much more work on education, and I am happy that we were able, with the help of our Health and Social Care Board colleagues, to get the assistance of Dr Beckett and other colleagues in England as part of a knowledge transfer scheme. They will work with us in the coming year to raise awareness. As part of that, we will run a conference — undoubtedly the first of several — for practitioners on 23 October. The following day, we will hold a conference for those involved in policy making. This issue has so many linkages. You can see immediately how this issue is related to alcohol and drugs, as well as to domestic violence. I gave you the example of that. You can also see how it can ultimately be linked to Lord Morrow's Bill and the question of the sex trade in Northern Ireland. So, a range of linkages and connections needs to be considered.

There will also be policy and procedural issues that we need to look at. We agreed from the outset that we will use the risk assessment that is in place. Ultimately, however, at the end of this operation we need to go back and reflect and say, "Is the right risk assessment, what should we add to it and how should we amend it?".

Another issue that was mentioned, which I think that we will want to discuss in detail, was the co-location of police and social workers to deal with this problem. Have we a problem of sufficient severity? I suspect, personally, that we may have, but do we have the evidence to say that? If we have the evidence, how do we then begin to specialise in some of those issues and look again at co-location?

Another issue that we will look at here, land-bounded as we are with our colleagues and friends in the South of Ireland, is that these children are clearly at risk of being exploited in not only the North but in the South. We will want to be making contacts with our colleagues in other parts of the island to look at how we tackle that.

So, those are some of the issues that we have planned to take forward in this process. I think that we are very keen on this occasion to work closely with the media to ensure that those messages are delivered in a responsible, coherent fashion.

Mr McCartney: I asked the question, because as we go forward, we have to reflect back. Therefore, a part of this is not about apportioning blame for blame's sake, although blame may have to be apportioned in certain circumstances. If I picked you up right, Hugh, you said that this was the first time that there has been a public awareness campaign on this issue, yet one of Barnardo's recommendations was that there should be a public awareness-raising campaign. That is why I spoke about a gap.

The PSNI will conduct an investigation, and you are hopeful that there will be the right outcome to that. However, if there are lessons that we have to learn, I do not think that we should be frightened of them or stand back from them because it might mean criticism or apportioning blame. If there should have been a public awareness-raising campaign as far back as October 2011, I think that we have to say that to the public. The public expect us to say that, particularly when this extensive piece of research said that there should have been a public awareness campaign and 18 months later we find that there was not one.

We and the public will say, "Why was there not a campaign?" I think that that is what we have to consider for the future, so that in 18 months' or two years' time we will not be saying that there is another investigation into 22 more vulnerable children and that we did not do all that we could to prevent it. I am not saying that there is a situation where you could stop this from happening, but if there are good measures that we can put in place, we need to start doing so as soon as possible.

The Chairperson: Let me move on to questions. I know that some members will be going to Question Time and will be moving in and out to the Chamber, and I understand that. However, I have a comprehensive list, and I will take you through it.

Mr Dickson: I thank everybody for coming today. This has been a very interesting and important discussion for a joint Committee. As a joint Committee representing Health and Justice, what can we do as an Assembly to assist the Executive and the Health and Justice Ministers, as well as the PSNI, to take this matter forward and, as Raymond McCartney said, to highlight it to the public? First and foremost, however, what can we do to assist you to protect some of the most vulnerable young people in our community?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: I think that this is the start of the process from the legislators' point of view. One issue that we in the Police Service were most concerned about when we took a decision to move this into the public domain was that the type of discussion that goes on around the children is crucial. Not stigmatising children because of the sexual acts that have been committed against them is fundamental to this, and we do not want to conflate that with the issues that the Vice-Chair just raised about the adults in this and the other questions that have to be answered. Collectively, we have to try to ask the questions that have to be asked but also to have as informed a discussion as we can about this type of offending so that it encourages offenders to desist, closes down opportunities, makes the environment harder for them to offend, allows victims a better opportunity of being protected and allows us collectively to intervene on their behalf.

The professionals have also had to start with this approach. It is about understanding the debate clearly, understanding the issues, getting the vocabulary and understanding right, and adjusting systems and processes to understand the issue in a way that we have not done before. That is part of learning the lesson and part of the recognition that, in the past, we did this differently and now we have to do it in a new way. The police already told you formally today that we have had to adopt a new approach to this issue.

There has to be a collective recognition that we need to do this better and do it differently to protect kids. I know that that sounds a bit general, but I do not mean to be general. For us, there has been a lot of talk internally and with other professionals in the field about how to describe this and about how to make it land publicly in the right way without causing too much alarm. The issue is about safeguarding for families but also, crucially, trying to make the right interventions for children who, in many cases, see a big disconnect between people such as ourselves and the environment in which they see themselves. That is how I would respond initially, Chairperson.

Mr Connor: Could I —

The Chairperson: Minister Ford indicated that he wished to speak.

Mr Ford: I thought that Seán was about to trump me, so I will go quickly.

I think that there is a real issue for us all in raising awareness without stigmatising the victims further. In some cases, we are talking about young people who do not realise that they have been exploited, because they think that these are kind people who gave them drugs and alcohol. That may also lead them into a cycle where they are frightened to talk about what happened, because drugs and underage drinking were involved.

There is a real need to ensure that we recognise who the perpetrators are and who the victims are and that we do not continue to create further difficulties for victims as we seek to encourage them. I outlined earlier what we are doing to try to make it easier for victims when they come into the justice system. However, the crucial issue for vulnerable young people is getting them to be willing to talk in the first place and enabling them to engage, whether that is with police officers, social workers or some of the voluntary childcare agencies. There is a real need to get that out in a way in which children do not feel that they are going to be made to feel more vulnerable if they do talk.

Mr Holland: It sounds like a simple thing, but exactly what you are doing today is really valuable. This is a joint Committee that has come together at amazing speed to highlight this issue. I think that that is really important, because it promotes knowledge and understanding.

There are myths about this issue. One of the myths that has emerged in England, for example, is that this is an ethnic issue that particularly relates to men from certain areas of the Indian subcontinent. That is clearly not the case, because that is not the issue that we are dealing with in Northern Ireland. It is not actually the case in the majority of child sexual exploitation cases in England.

A hearing like this certainly helps, but it is also important to recognise that this is one aspect of child abuse. Periodically, those of us who have been involved in protecting children over the years can recall that, at certain times, particular elements of child protection come to the fore. I remember when I first started in practice that the issue was shaken baby syndrome, and then we had infant sexual abuse and satanic abuse. So, at certain times, certain things come to the fore.

The important thing is that we realise that this is part of protecting children. Uniquely in Northern Ireland, the Executive made a Programme for Government commitment to strengthen safeguarding not just for vulnerable children but for vulnerable adults, which was really important. The work of Committees is also significant. I recall that, and this was a lot of work for us at the time, the scrutiny that the Health Committee did when we were taking forward the legislation for the SBNI demonstrated a commitment on the part of political leaders to improve safeguarding.

We had an evening event earlier this week that four Ministers and a lot of professionals attended. Those four Ministers stood up and said that the issue was at the top of their priorities. We also had Chairs and vice Chairs of Committees attending that meeting. So, I think that demonstrating that kind of leadership is one of the most important things that politicians can do on the issue.

The Chairperson: I am going to go back to Stewart, because every member here has asked for an opportunity to put a question.

Mr Dickson: I will be very brief, Chair. Given that this has been an ongoing issue from a report identified in 2011 but clearly an ongoing issue from, perhaps, time immemorial and certainly in times of modern social services, can we be assured today that the dots have been joined up and that social services, the police, social workers and others are now fully aware of the problem and that you are all freely talking to one another and sharing the appropriate parts of the information? I have a particular concern, because the Justice Committee visited the juvenile justice centre where we met a young man who had not been sexually exploited in any way but was there because of criminal behaviour. He told us that his entry into criminal behaviour was because he had absconded from school from the age of 11 to 16. He said, "Nobody ever came to find me". In joining all this up, will we include the wider family, including the Department of Education, in considering truancy?

Mr Holland: I can make a couple of points in response to that. I can safely say that, every year that I have been involved in social work and protecting children, we have improved. This year, we do things better than we did last year. We are certainly doing things better than we did 20 years ago. People are not particularly aware of the fact that, in the UK, we have dramatically reduced the number of children who die from child abuse. It is not a trend that has been followed internationally, but the child protection services in the UK have dramatically reduced the number of children who die violently from abuse. So, we do get better.

I also have to say that we can never give you a guarantee that we are going to be able to protect every child in every situation from every kind of abuse. That is never going to be the case. Each year, we look very carefully to see whether we can learn from what has happened in the past, and we will certainly look back and see what can be learned, not out of any sense of trying to point a finger of blame but because it is our duty. It is absolutely our duty to see whether we can do things better, and the SBNI will play a crucial role in that.

Where cooperation is concerned, particularly on this investigation, I can say that I have not witnessed as close a cooperation before. When the police briefed us about it, straight away their instant concern was about how they would manage the victims in the most sensitive way possible, and our immediate concern was about the support and resources that we could give them to make sure that they carried out the investigation. So, I think that cooperation is at its highest level ever.

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: It is important to say that this is an investigation into cases that we identified, and there will be more victims in that. However, this single investigation is not the answer. Experience from elsewhere says that you end up with different investigations. It has still to be decided whether we will pull them all into this one investigation, which is something that we will decide investigatively. However, we have to recognise, as we have recognised in the Police Service, that we continually need to update and be quicker than the offenders, and that is just in this crime type. That is what we are trying to do here: we are trying to make the environment more hostile for the offenders. That will require more work. So, I cannot give you a guarantee that all those dots have been joined. That is because I cannot guarantee that we have seen every dot, and it would be disingenuous for me to say that we had. However, I can guarantee that we are determined to try to find them.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much for your deliberations today. Mark, I think that I heard you say in your presentation that some of the young people may have been gone up to 137 times between January 2011 and August 2012.

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: How many of those young people would have been in care?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: The children who we looked at were nearly all in care. They were looked-after children, as you would describe them.

Mr Humphrey: I also picked up that you said that there was no crime, therefore no charge can be made in Northern Ireland in child sexual exploitation. Is that right?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: That is right. There is no statutory crime.

Dr Beckett: It is an umbrella term.

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: It is an umbrella term for that type of behaviour.

Mr Humphrey: Does such a crime exist on the mainland?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: No. To my knowledge, it does not exist in statute anywhere on these islands. I am not aware whether it exists in any other jurisdiction. I do not know whether Helen has any more information on that.

Dr Beckett: No. Likewise, in England, there is no offence of child sexual exploitation. It is an umbrella term that looks at a particular form of sexual abuse. However, to reiterate what the Assistant Chief Constable said, there are many offences for which someone can be prosecuted in cases of child sexual exploitation. We are not sitting here with no options available to us; we have plenty that can be used under the sexual offences legislation.

Mr Humphrey: Perhaps the Assembly may need to look at the scandal that we are now faced with. Mark, resources were mentioned. You said that you have enough resources, and I think that you used the term "at the moment". You also said that this is the start of this investigation, that it will broaden out and that there could well be more vulnerable young people out there who could be caught in this net, so it may well be that you need extra resources. I imagine that that would be specialist officers. Is provision being made for specialist resource to be brought in from the mainland?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: Not at this time. That has not been a consideration. We are currently dealing with this from inside our own detective and associate resources. That is the plan at the minute. Like any commander, when the SIO makes the bids to me for what he feels he needs in this case, I will then have to try to supply the resources. If I cannot find them, I have to look elsewhere.

We have a considerable detective resource in Northern Ireland. Speaking candidly, we are working on lots of other stuff, and we are investigating lots of other crimes. We have other large, complex investigations running in the public order field, in the organised crime field and in the terrorist field. Obviously, these investigations find their place in the organisation at various times as a higher or lower

priority according to the volume that we are looking at. That is part of what the Police Service has to do on a day-to-day basis.

This has been discussed at the most senior levels of the Police Service. It has been given full endorsement at senior levels of the Police Service, and I am confident that there is no lack of appetite to resource it to the level that it needs.

Mr McGlone: Thank you for being with us today. In the first instance and just for a bit of clarity, Assistant Chief Constable, am I right in picking up at the moment that the nature and scope of your inquiry is exclusively for children who have come from care and who are being abused? Clearly, if there are these party houses for perverts, you will potentially have other young kids sucked into this. That would give me cause for concern.

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: Absolutely. Our initial scoping around the 22 cases where we started was primarily about looked-after children. Those cases are a starting point for this, and we have started to spread beyond that already. I also mentioned that we have asked Barnardo's, the NSPCC and social services to provide us with lists of people who they think are at risk. Those people are either cared for or are not in the looked-after environment. The Police Service has access to only so much information, and it can lead on only one element of this, which is primarily the criminal investigation. So, we are trying to broaden this out to assess and find out where any child is at risk of this. That is a considerable task, but that is why we have the joint partnership approach.

Two things then need to happen. We need to assess through investigations whether they have been a victim of this or put the right interventions, safeguarding or risk assessments around them. That comes back to the previous question about doing things better in a more joined-up and holistic fashion. Yes, you are right: our view on this is that we are starting an investigation into looked-after children, but our sense has always been that it is not reflective of the entire problem.

Mr McGlone: Following on from that, given that we are public representatives and people in communities will be reflecting and have reflected their concerns to us, can you give us any indication at all about which general geographic locations these investigations zone in on at the moment?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: The SIO and I discussed this point deliberately yesterday. Our agreement was to use the expression "pan-Northern Ireland". To try to pin it down to any geographical area takes the focus away from the problem and tries to focus it geographically. That will happen, and our evidence indicates that it will happen across places. I know that many communities and, perhaps, politicians in particular, want to know whether it is happening in their area. The evidence supports Barnardo's position, which is that it probably is. Certainly, in our 22 cases, the SIO described the offences to me as being "pan-Northern Ireland". I think that that is as much as I can say at the moment without getting into the specifics of the cases.

Mr McGlone: OK, thank you for that.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Mine is a general question, and I will leave it open to you to decide whether the Department or the PSNI responds. The report indicates specifically that sexual exploitation is "an issue of serious concern". The report was published in October 2011, but the research dates back as far as 2009. So, effectively, we have a piece of work that has a background that is four years old. The question on all our lips, and which is asked in the wider community, is that, given the identification of an issue of serious concern and given its magnitude, why was it not picked up sooner?

Mr Holland: I will start. It was picked up sooner. I can think of cases of child sexual exploitation that I dealt with as a social worker in the 1980s and 1990s. This has always been an issue. We have developed a range of responses to try to protect children from sexual and other kinds of abuse over those years. What happened in 2011 is that we had a report that added to our knowledge of that issue, and we have been responding to it. In 2011, as those children were identified, they were responded to. Each time that we identified children, and certainly the children involved in that research, as being potentially at risk, they were referred to the police and subject to risk assessments. Since then, we have deployed a screening tool to identify risks among children who we think might be victims of child sexual exploitation. You cannot do everything in one day, so it is a picture of things that we have always been doing and things that we have done better over the past few years. Hugh described things that we are going to be doing in the coming years. However, it certainly would not be fair to say that there was a report in 2011 and nothing happened about it until today.

Mr Poots: The fact is that the Department commissioned the report in 2009 because there was recognition that this potential existed. So, the Department commissioned this report to build the information and to create a greater degree of intelligence on all these issues. The report is of great assistance to us in that respect. We have also identified learning from the experiences of others, such as those in Rochdale and Oxford. It was unfortunate that those events happened, but, nonetheless, they gave us information that we need to be working on. The message for the public is that there are perpetrators and exploiters; that is a reality. We all need to be working together to identify steps to ensure that they do not have their evil way.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Thank you for that, Minister. However, I am hearing today are references to the beginning of processes and raising awareness. It reflects specifically on the work that you referred to about the Safeguarding Board and the development and agreement on what you called "the multiagency action plan". Yet, recommendation 3 in the 2011 report is a clear commitment to:

"the development of a targeted and fully resourced action plan".

So, given that five out of six of these recommendations currently sit in the Department of Health's remit, has the Department failed?

Mr Poots: Earlier in the meeting, I spent six or seven minutes explaining what steps we had taken in response to the report since 2011. It was a fairly comprehensive report that I updated the two Committees on, and I do not think that there could be any suggestion that there has been anything other than a considerable amount of work done on the back of that report. Apart from all of this, in the spring, Minister Ford and I convened a meeting of all the players to discuss early intervention. We indicated that we saw early intervention as something that can help us to avoid these things happening in future. Therefore a wide range of activities is taking place to eliminate this.

Let us focus the blame on where it belongs: with the perpetrators and the exploiters. We will do our best to ensure that we reduce the opportunities for people to engage in the exploitation of children and young people. Most, if not all, the voluntary organisations realise that the Department of Justice and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have never worked more closely together than at present and over this past while. Minister Ford and I are absolutely committed to doing that.

Mr Gardiner: I welcome this. It is the first of its kind, and it will impress on the media what exactly is going on in our society. In the past, it has been pretty much covered up.

Do we have a special telephone number that people with problems can ring? What is it? You just cannot say that they should phone the police or the fire brigade. Again, we are falling down if that is not to the fore. We should be bringing it to the attention of the public. Will you get some ads out that tell those who are being abused by a parent or someone else that they can phone a special helpline to report it?

Mr Holland: There are special helplines. The NSPCC and Childline have helplines that do exactly what you have called for. We are also about to launch a helpline that specifically focuses on child sexual exploitation.

Mr Gardiner: How soon will it be launched?

Mr Connor: We launched it this morning at a large gathering of the media. The number is 0800 3891701.

Mr Gardiner: I am sure that there are members of the press here who will welcome that and use it when they are carrying the story. I also welcome that.

It is not only through people meeting up with young girls or boys that sexual activities have gone on. I know of a case of a father was abusing his daughter, who was in a wheelchair and unable to walk. It is not just teenagers who get involved in this; it is in families as well. It good that we are taking this opportunity to highlight things like that. I welcome it. If neighbours or anyone else know of anything going on like that, they should ring one of those hotlines and make them aware of it. I welcome this big step forward — admittedly it is long overdue — and I wish you well.

Ms Brown: I thank all the witnesses for briefing us on this horrific subject. You will not be surprised that my questions are more for our Ministers. Have any of the victims identified in this inquiry been through the new sexual assault referral centre (SARC)? If so, what support are they receiving to deal with the trauma that they have experienced and to enable them to proceed through the criminal justice system?

Mr Poots: I do not think that we can answer the first question because of the issue that Mark raised earlier about the potential of identifying some of the people who are involved in the investigation.

Mr Ford: It is slightly ironic that, had this special meeting not been taking place, the three of us would have been meeting to discuss the operation of the SARC.

We have a variety of support mechanisms in place. Generally, they are operated by the health and social care trusts, but they are also operated by the voluntary bodies. That support is available for victims, regardless of whether they have been through the SARC or if, through the work of The Rowan, they wish to be referred to those bodies.

The key issue is that if individuals come forward, we now have the centre available 24/7 for anybody who wishes to self-refer because for the first few months it could be by police referrals only. It is now available for self-referral but on an entirely confidential basis for individuals to take whatever services they wish from it. We should encourage anybody who feels in that position to make the most of the centre.

Mr Poots: The biggest problem is that many of the young people do not see themselves as victims, so they do not refer themselves. It has been identified by going through all the data and so forth that they have been at risk of exploitation, but the young people are not that co-operative when it comes to those issues.

Ms Brown: I want to thank Dr Beckett for the stats provided to us today. Hopefully we will have a successful awareness campaign through this meeting and subsequent media attention. I trust that we will be able to get into schools and be proactive in preventative measures against that kind of activity. Given that, and we hope that we will be successful in raising awareness, do you think that the SARC, as it stands, would be able to cope with potentially a very high increase in usage?

Mr Poots: The SARC is manned for the numbers that are expected. Should we require more people, I will give a commitment from my Department, and I am sure that David will be in the same position, that we will ensure that victims receive the support that they should. As for a campaign to highlight the issue, out of bad things very often good can come. In recognising that bad things have happened, that children were exploited, and that there are perpetrators and exploiters out there, the public is becoming more aware of that and what to watch out for. That can be positive, and we need to maximise that and ensure that the public do know what to look out for.

As I made clear, this does not relate exclusively to children in care homes. It relates to children all over our countryside, and we believe that about 80% of children who are not in care homes are children who are potentially being exploited.

Mr Lynch: Mark, you said that this is the start of a process, and I hope that you are right. I can relate a story that highlights the failings in the system. A woman who had a daughter in care approached a colleague of mine last year. She suspected that her daughter was going out at night and going missing. She made some enquiries herself and found that she was going to a house where there were parties. When she went to the home, however, they told her that their hands were tied and that they could not sit on her. When they went to the PSNI, they said that they had more to do with their time than chase 15-year-olds.

That type of breakdown in coordination and approach — that was only last year — can lead to the failings that we have here today.

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: I know. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) recently looked at the issue of missing persons and how people who disappear a lot are designated. We resisted diluting that. I would be doing a disservice to the child abuse investigators who have been working in Northern Ireland for many years to indicate that they have not been investigating exploitative crime or sexual abuse against children. That is just not the case.

We have people who are highly dedicated and working long hours on sensitive and difficult cases, who, in many cases, successfully prosecuted people for child abuse offences. What we the police are accepting is that we need to drive forward on a more joined-up, cohesive approach around understanding the victimology, the connections between suspects and the exploitative nature of these crimes. That is what we are signalling in this operation. We have looked with a different lens. These are all cases that have been examined in some shape before, but we are now trying to look at them through a different lens and in a more joined-up way. People will have stories of where they felt let down in the past; I will not dispute that. However, the point for us today is that we are determined to drive this forward in a better way. It is not as if we have not been investigating child abuse or offences against children — whoever has committed them — it is one of our busiest and hardest-working departments.

Mr Lynch: I was listening to the story as it broke yesterday, and I heard that one of the keys to success is creating a trusted adult to whom young people can speak. Are there any plans to do that?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: The interesting thing about the helpline is that it is not staffed by professionals. We are looking to health and social services, Barnardo's, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) for expertise to create a space where kids can talk to the police. The police are not necessarily viewed as trusted adults in this situation. That is regrettable, but it is a recognition of where some victims are.

Mr Holland: We have been trying to make sure for some years that young people in the care system have access to adults who are not social workers or policemen with whom they can build relationships. We have a personal adviser scheme where young people are befriended, we have an independent visitor scheme that goes into residential homes, and we also support the Voice of Young People in Care, which is a charity explicitly set up to ensure that we better meet the needs of young people in the care system. It runs schemes to connect with young people in the care system, and we support that. There are great successes from all those initiatives. Unfortunately, however, this is not an area where you can have a 100% solution.

Mr Poots: We greatly appreciate the many voluntary mentors who guide young people and demonstrate to them how they can progress in life.

Dr Beckett: That reflects a wider issue that we have had around failing to recognise the safeguarding needs of adolescents sufficiently. There are plenty of examples of inappropriate language: a forty-year-old being talked of as a "boyfriend", of young people engaging in "risky behaviour", and "making bad life choices". However, looking in from the outside, I have seen a real change in the past number of years, and I continue to see that change. I hope that we will have fewer stories of young people not being taken seriously. We are starting to have a greater recognition that we need to safeguard adolescents in the same way as we do younger children.

Mr Anderson: I apologise for having to leave, as I have to go to the Chamber. Mark, why did the PSNI not launch an investigation on the back of the Barnardo's report of 2011?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: Candidly, I have no easy answer to that, Sydney. We started our work specifically in this area in the summer of last year as opposed to in direct response to the Barnardo's report. Those are just the facts of the matter.

Mr Anderson: : It started after the internal review.

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: Yes, our internal review started after the Barnardo's report. The Police Service is always looking to do better. There was identification inside the Police Service that public protection needed to be improved, and that was born out of our response. That is as candid as I can be.

Mr A Maginness: I commend you on your submissions and wish you success in all your work.

I want to revisit an issue that Mr Wells and Mr Lynch raised: children missing from care. If my child left school without permission, the school would contact my wife or me. The same would occur if the child did not go to school. In my area, the headmaster would come to the door and ask where the child was and why they were not at school. I use that analogy in relation to children in care; I just cannot

understand how children in care can disappear for days on end and then return, yet no procedures are put in place to protect that child in future. I know that you cannot lock children up; nonetheless, I assume that those in care homes are acting in loco parentis. You would do everything to ensure that a child did not disappear again. Given that 137 —

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: A hundred and thirty-seven times children disappeared.

Mr A Maginness: — disappeared over 18 months, roughly eight a month, which is very high. What procedures can be put in place to reduce those figures?

Mr Holland: It is not the case that there are no procedures; there are many procedures in place. We monitor children missing from care; we have an agreement with the police about sharing information; we try to identify where they are and try to bring them back to the unit if they are in a children's home. When they are returned, an individual risk assessment is done, and you engage with the children and young people. If it appears that they have been abusing alcohol or drugs, we will try to get them involved in appropriate alcohol and drugs abuse services. If you think that they have been engaging in sexual activity, you will make health services available to them, and we will share that information with the police. A great many things are done.

You are right: you cannot lock children up. Occasionally, however, and in very extreme circumstances, we use the legislation to obtain secure care orders, which means that we can restrict the liberty of some young people. That has to be a very extreme measure, and I do not believe that it is the answer to child sexual exploitation. Indeed, I would be fairly confident that some of the young people involved in this investigation have at times been in secure accommodation, yet it has not solved the issue. It can take a child out of immediate danger, but it will not of itself solve the problem.

You have to try to ensure that you have as many opportunities as possible to support and help the child. However, it is very difficult. Children are usually in care for many complex reasons. They have almost universally experienced very difficult family situations, some have experienced trauma, and they are often not amenable to being helped. We can keep trying to make sure that we wrap services around them. I would not want anyone to form the impression that children simply come in and out of children's homes and disappear for days without anyone noticing. That is certainly not the case.

Mr A Maginness: Thank you for that. Nevertheless, it is a key issue that has to be kept under supervision.

Mr Holland: It is. Later this year, we will be hearing a great deal from the historical institutional abuse inquiry, and many of the things that we will be hearing about will come from a time when you could make sure that children could not run away. You could lock doors and secure them, and that really was not a good way of responding to children's needs.

Mr A Maginness: One of the inhibiting factors on reporting may be the threat of children being prosecuted. Is consideration being given to the possibility of giving immunity to children who are in receipt of alcohol, drugs or stolen goods?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: That is an important question. We are not seeking to criminalise victims in any shape or form — nor is the PPS — nor would we seek to do so. Children who feel that they cannot come forward because they are convinced that they are complicit should take some comfort from that. We are not interested in that. We are interested in the perpetrators, and that is an important message to send to young people. There have been instances of children who have been involved, who have been victims of this crime for quite a while and who then go into adulthood and become perpetrators or help to find other victims. Their category differs slightly, which is unfortunate and terrible, but I could not give the same guarantee there. However, we are by no means trying to criminalise children because they have been taking drugs or alcohol, they have been absent from home or they have had crimes perpetrated against them — absolutely no way. That is the fundamental point at the heart of this, and it is a fundamental issue for the justice system to recognise.

Mr Ford: A key issue for the PPS is the public interest test for prosecution and, while neither Mark nor I can speak for the PPS on an individual case, it is clear across the justice system, as Mark just said, that we are not interested in making victims appear to be criminals.

Mr A Maginness: Thank you very much.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Ministers and the panel for attending today. I have a couple of questions for Mark. How do the police manage the missing persons register? My understanding is that there is constant reporting of missing persons to the PSNI by the public and by various agencies. In many cases, the PSNI will be the first port of call. As a result of this investigation, do you see a different approach to how you should manage the missing persons list? Is it the case that many of those young people have been on this list, that the list has not been managed properly, and they have not been identified as being at risk?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: An element of this started with our review of missing persons, and that has also led to a review of procedures, both in the auditing of them and in responding to that. ACPO recently tried to redesignate the recidivist missing persons list to allow police officers not to have to respond in every case. The PSNI has not accepted that and insists that we need to respond in every case. Therefore our policies and procedures on that have been updated.

We have to congratulate the review team on its work. It has mined this out, but it has also changed our systems internally so that there are better internal links on our computer system, better logs are kept and there is better oversight. We are also hoping that, through this, our response to missing persons — particularly missing persons in this category — has improved. That is part of the public protection improvement project. We will not back off from investigating those cases.

The connecting piece is for police officers. As we educate police officers better in the area of child sex exploitation, they should start to look for the signs and signals in each of the missing persons reports. They should look for evidence where previously we, perhaps, had not looked as firmly for it. We should try harder to make contact with the child and, if we cannot get that, we should refer to our system to ensure that somebody — a trusted adult or someone else — has that conversation with him or her. Therefore we are trying to improve our responses and update our approach.

Mr Dunne: Is there considerable demand on police resources in relation to missing persons reported by agencies that, in some cases, have been offloading work onto the PSNI and leaving the responsibility with it? Has that, perhaps, been the case?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: When children go missing they are reported to us, and there is an expectation that the police will look for them. We spend considerable time looking for missing people across a range of vulnerability. We have a traffic light system for risk assessment that runs from high to low risk, which we do for every person who goes missing. We respond according to the assessed risk, so some cases will take a lot more work than others. If the person is high-risk, a detective inspector, at least, will be appointed straight away to have an investigative-led approach for the high-risk missing person, and we will engage other specialist resources. If the person is not high-risk, it will be dealt with at uniform level. We have a demand profile around all that we do, and missing persons are part of our demand profile. It is part of our job.

When children go missing from a looked-after environment and are not found immediately or the care workers do not know where they are, usually the first port of call will be to report the matter to the police. Care workers do so to protect themselves so that they are seen to be taking quick and early action. It is difficult for people in the care environment; they cannot just let these things ride. The quickest thing for them to do is to make sure that they have covered the bases by informing the police so that the police can start a process of using their expertise to find children. We use various things; for example, if a child goes missing and has a mobile phone, there are things that we can do quickly as a police service to track down that child if we think that they are at high risk, and we can do that far more quickly than a care environment. It is important that people report the stuff to us. It can be onerous, but it is important. At the heart of this, we are saying that we have to look beyond the missing person report and do a bit more. Helen, do you want to come in?

Dr Beckett: I just want to add a caveat to that. While there is a clear relationship between being missing and sexual exploitation, with being missing being four times more prevalent in the research of cases that we looked at where there is sexual exploitation as opposed to the other cases, there are also cases in which being missing is not a factor. In one example, a young woman was being taken out in a car and was back half an hour later. It was during the day and she was never registered as being missing, but she was taken and raped by different people. I would just like to add the caveat that there is a very important relationship but we do not want to inadvertently miss people that are not picked up as being missing. We need to look for CSE in other cases as well.

Mr Beggs: I apologise for having to leave to go to the Chamber a short time ago. I commend the Police Service of Northern Ireland and social services for their joint working in this area. They seem to be learning lessons from Manchester and other places, and, indeed, knowledge transfer is another useful aspect that is being applied. In the 22 cases to date, you have indicated that they have largely been in-care cases, but the evidence is that that could be 20% of what you would expect to find in a normal community. The police have said that they can be flexible if necessary if this case widens and more is uncovered. Can you assure me that we will have sensitive victim support in this area, reflecting support from social services, so that those who come forward will be dealt with sympathetically and so that, ultimately, the perpetrators can be exposed and dealt with by the courts?

Mr Poots: I think that that is demonstrated by our investment in the Rowan Centre, where people who would feel uncomfortable going to the police as their first port of call will be treated in a very sympathetic way and will be given a lot more understanding of how to follow things up should they wish to report a crime; and they will be encouraged in a very sympathetic way to do that. This is a demonstration of our willingness, but I can give Mr Beggs that assurance.

Mr Ford: Similarly, I highlighted at the beginning the specific measures to provide support for vulnerable witnesses in court once somebody comes into the criminal justice system. There is also the key element, a large part of which is provided by some of our NGO partners, of the counselling and ongoing support for somebody who has been a victim. The key issue in this case, when we are talking about children, is the responsibility that rests with social services for the support of those children, and if they go into the justice system, those measures are also available to them.

Mr Beggs: We have learnt that the Barnardo's project is working with young people who have been identified as being at particular risk, but in order to strengthen the resilience of young people, whether they are in care homes or in normal families, what is being done — I suspect that it will have to be done through our schools and youth clubs — to make them all aware of the dangers of grooming so that they can spot it themselves or among their colleagues?

Mr Poots: Certainly, it is more of a social services issue, but we have identified that early intervention is key. That involves working across agencies, which is why we wish to establish support hubs. Early intervention can also build resilience. When their peers are saying that they know that something is wrong, that discourages young people from getting involved in something and then failing to recognise that it is a problem. One of the big problems about what we are dealing with today is that many young people who have been abused do not recognise that fact. Therefore, it is essential — Mr Beggs is right to ask the question — that we get the messages to young people about how they can be exploited, what exploitation is, and how it can be misconstrued as love, when someone is showing them a degree of kindness by giving them gifts and things that they want. However, it is not love; it is exploitation, because those people want something in return. So, young people who are extremely vulnerable can be easily confused by this and, therefore, it is absolutely incumbent upon us to get those messages across. Sometimes it is very hard to do so, given the nature of the background. Dr Beckett may want to enlarge on that.

Dr Beckett: I am very glad that you raised that point. Education is critical in this, and we need educators on board. Look at what we know from the research: the vast majority of these cases are first identified at the ages of 12 to 15. I should clarify that that is when they are first identified, it is not necessarily when they first happened, because often we do not learn about them for a while. Barnardo's Safe Choices service deals with children as young as nine and 10 years of age. So, we are going to have to be brave about this and push boundaries. It is not enough to tell a young person at 14 or 15 about these risks. We need to be going in at primary school level, obviously in an age-appropriate manner, but the awareness needs to be there. The young people may not identify it in their own situation but, in other areas where such preventative work in education is being done, as the Minister said, we are seeing that young people may be concerned about what is happening to a friend. In that way, we are picking it up. There needs to be a whole-population approach to preventative education, through schools; but we also need to be very mindful of young people who are outside of schools, who are not attending, and how we can pick that up.

I must also add that health has a very important role to play. When young people do not report their experiences of this, if they are not in the looked-after population, we may find that they will access services, for example, at a sexual health clinic when they need physical support. Therefore, we need to have health professionals coming on board and being aware of what to look for.

Mr Connor: Can I just add to that? As part of the proactive plan that we have tried to put in place, we are developing all those links. We have a strategic planning group that will implement some of the tasks that I described earlier. On that group are educationalists and those working in sexual health, child and adolescent mental health, and alcohol and drugs. We are trying to take a rounded picture in order to get those messages out. That is one of our priorities in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr Beggs: You have answered the question. Thank you very much.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirleach. Thank you for the presentations. Throughout the session, it has been mentioned that there is a difficulty when victims do not see themselves as such. Dr Beckett's research has flagged up a further issue, which is that sometimes victims of child sexual exploitation have not been perceived by the system as being deserving victims. That is a very worrying aspect of all of this. It was stated that maybe it is due to someone perceiving another person's provocative or problematic behaviour as a reason why they are less deserving or may not be a real victim. The recommendation is that there needs to be a significant shift in thinking, so that we can counteract that attitude and change those mindsets. Do those of you who are involved accept that that has been the case, and has significant change happened in the mindsets of people who may have had that view?

Assistant Chief Constable M Hamilton: The Police Service is shifting its mindset. That is why we are here today. We are here, effectively, because of what we started last year. Social services have shifted their mindset. It is difficult for me to place a judgement on us. It is for others to reflect on how well we respond. I think that the conversation on this issue is changing dramatically across the justice system, which is for the benefit of children. However, we have a way to go.

We are saying things to you today that you may not have heard. We talked about the role of education. I will not say that this is a delivered product. We will never stand still on this issue. We have to keep moving and improving.

Mr Connor: It is a really important question. It is not just the attitudes of those who work close to the system, important as that is; there are a lot of wider societal attitudes about young girls, their behaviour and the consequences of that.

For a lot of professionals, exasperation and resignation almost come into play regarding those who may well be seen as being not cooperative or helpful. This is one of the things that we, collectively, have to work with and challenge. It is only by understanding and walking in the shoes of those youngsters that we will have any real understanding of why they do not come forward or say, "This is happening to me." It is not because they are complicit in their own downfall, it is because they have been carefully groomed, sucked into a system, and then intimidated in it. Ultimately, they then do not believe that they have the trusting adults that one member spoke about earlier. The system means that they often see the perpetrators — the boyfriends or quasi-boyfriends — as the people they should go to. We need to work with a big attitudinal shift among not just professionals but on a wider societal basis.

Mr McCarthy: Most of the questions that I wanted to pose have been answered. The public will want to know why, from 2009, when the Department ordered an inquiry, and on the back of the Barnardo's 2011 report, this is coming to the surface only now. I reiterate what I think Mr McCartney asked: why has there been the delay, with all that has happened? Can any answers be given?

I was disappointed when the news broke last week on Ulster Television. We had just had a Health Committee meeting and were not aware of it. Is there any reason that that should be the case? Is it simply because the media were on to a story and broke it? It is so appalling that we are all here today to try to sort the matter out, given that the Barnardo's 2011 report has been lying about somewhere.

Mr Holland: The issue is not one that anyone wants to keep secret. We organised a conference in Ballymena about a year ago — I cannot remember the exact date — and brought police officers from England. I think that you, Minister Ford, attended.

Mr Ford: I believe that I opened it.

Mr Holland: The challenge was to get the press interested in the issue rather than hide it from them. So, we certainly have not been trying to hide it. On this specific issue, Minister Ford and Minister

Poots invited 30 to 35 professionals to a meeting on Tuesday night to discuss the matter. That is not something that you do if you are trying to keep it secret.

The exact timing of taking knowledge of a police investigation into the public domain is a matter for the police. I think that we were trying to work closely with the police to make sure that the timing was most advantageous to the investigation. I am not aware of anyone who thought that this is something that could or should have been kept secret from the public.

Mr McCarthy: Every member at the table has said that young people, particularly those in care, are free to roam the streets at all hours of the night. I have been told by staff in the homes that they cannot bring them in, and that nobody will do anything about it. Therefore, young people are open to, and prone to, this type of activity. Could that situation be tackled and the gap closed to make sure that they are in care when they are supposed to be in care, rather than roaming the streets?

Mr Holland: No, that is just not the case. People who work in the care system go to great lengths to try to make sure that the children in their care are safe and secure. However, we are talking about teenagers. I mentioned earlier the fact that some of us will have had the experience of our own teenage children and how we tried to modify their behaviour. You do it through building a relationship with your child, along with good parenting. You rarely have much success if you try to do it by locking a door. That is just not a practical way forward. You try to connect with the young people, you try to explain to them how to stay safe, and you build a relationship with them. Often, we have had situations in which young people have left care homes and are literally being shadowed by social workers who are on the phone to the police and who try to confront people who pose a threat to the young people. There are no easy answers to this. Simply imagining that you can close the door and keep them in the children's home is not realistic, and I am sure that Dr Beckett will have a view on that.

Dr Beckett: I reiterate the fact that many staff in care homes — I am sure that they are some of the ones who shared their frustrations with you — try very hard and go above and beyond the call of duty to protect young people. However, their inability to control a young person's behaviour is a practical challenge for them. I do not have a solution off pat. Nevertheless, something needs to be put on the table, and it needs some concerted thinking by the parties around the table. We need to acknowledge that it is a challenge; staff are telling us that it is a challenge. We know from the research that one in five young people out of the 1,100 who were known to social services had been missing overnight or longer in the past year. That is a very significant figure, and we know that there is a potential relationship. We are all open, and we know that there is a challenge with this, but there is no simple answer. It is something that needs particular attention, and I encourage the relevant parties to look at how we deal with those particular difficulties.

Mr McCarthy: I have a question for the Minister of Health. Could resources be made available to help overcome those problems as they arise?

Mr Poots: There is certainly a considerable resource in social services. Engaging in historical investigations strips resources away from current activity, and I raised concern about that at the time. We should always be careful about looking for facts of the past, in that we could do damage to where we are now. In that respect, where it is possible to do so, we will make all the resources available. However, our resources are being stretched as a consequence of dealing with the past.

Dr Beckett: I will briefly pick up on the resource issue. We have not talked about the short- and long-term impacts of young people who have experienced abuse. When we do not put in appropriate support at the time, we store up resource implications. When we look at cases, and look at some people who are now further along, we see that they have multiple adversities later in life. There is a need for early intervention, but we must also ensure that we have the appropriate wrap-around support at this point, because we are only storing up problems for ourselves in the future otherwise.

Mr Ford: May I just make a brief point on the wider issue of publicity? In this search, as Seán highlighted, we are seeking to publicise concerns about the issue. Whether the publicity that came through the media on a specific investigation is helpful is entirely different from the issue of publicising the issue in general for protection purposes.

Dr Beckett: I had severe concerns about the young people and their safety with respect to how things broke and the fact that they might have been out again that evening with people who thought that they

had reported on those cases. We need public awareness in taking this forward, but we need to be very conscious of keeping the young person at the heart of the system and make sure that we do not do anything to put them in further danger.

The Chairperson: I will let Jim Wells finish, and then I will wrap it up.

Mr Wells: Seán, while you cannot lock the doors, it is important to know how many people went out the door and what they do when they are outside the door. In 2009-2010, Michelle McIlveen introduced consultation on a private Member's Bill. What she said at that time was almost prophetic:

"Children who go missing from care are often vulnerable and can be subject to significant risks including drugs, alcohol abuse, sleeping rough and being sexually assaulted and abused."

As a result of her research, Michelle also discovered that, in 2007-08, 616 children who went missing had registered addresses as children's care homes in the statutory sector.

Michelle obviously spotted something many years ago. OK, it was a different regime — it was during Mr McGimpsey's period as Minister — but she spotted something and introduced a measure that, had it been implemented, would, in my opinion, have got to grips with the situation long before now. However, my understanding is that, when it went before the all-party group on children and young people, the Department indicated that there was not an issue and resisted it. At a later stage, the Department agreed, very reluctantly, to implement most of it, but has still not reported on the data collected.

Michelle McIlveen, at that stage, was a relatively new Back-Bencher in the Assembly. She spotted something, raised it and tried to do something about it. Why did there seem to be a reluctance from the Department all those years ago to actually do something to stop it?

Mr Holland: I congratulate Michelle McIlveen for the commitment and dedication that she has shown to the issue of children, particularly vulnerable children. I have met her to discuss these issues on a number of occasions. It is something with which she has concerned herself way beyond the introduction of that private Member's Bill.

I cannot give you a definitive answer about the private Member's Bill and decisions that were taken in relation to it. What I can say is that a number of changes that have been made in the intervening years echo a number of the measures that Michelle suggested, particularly collecting information on children who go missing from care. We have improved our systems for recording that information and analysing the data. We also established a joint protocol directly between social services and the police for how to handle information relating to children who go missing from care. I am certainly aware of Michelle's work, and, as you said, it was prescient.

Mr Wells: Would anything have happened had she not introduced that private Member's Bill? Would anything have happened at all?

Mr Holland: I cannot speculate on what the outcome would have been; it is impossible for me to do that.

The Chairperson: OK. I thank members, Ministers and their teams for coming along to the Committee. This will obviously be an ongoing issue that we will look at. I appreciate the time that you have made available to the Committee. Thank you very much.