



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Childcare Strategy: OFMDFM Briefing

26 September 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Danny Kinahan
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

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| Mr Fergus Devitt | Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister |
| Mr Martin Tyrrell | Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister |

The Chairperson: We move now to a departmental briefing on progress on the development of a consultation document, which will be the strategic framework on which the childcare strategy will be based. Your revised paper, which was received in the Committee office at 10:00 am, has been tabled.

Mr Fergus Devitt (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Chair, apologies for that. I think that there was some debate and discussion with the Committee Clerk about whether this session was going to be today or changed to a different day. I do not know whether that contributed, but apologies for the paper arriving so late.

The Chairperson: That is three out of three from the Department. Let us press on, Fergus.

Mr Devitt: As you say, members have received a briefing paper. I have a few additional comments, and, following those, Martin and I will be happy to take questions. I am grateful for the opportunity and for the Committee's interest. Clearly, the childcare strategy is an important issue. As no lead Department in the Executive takes responsibility for childcare policy, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has taken the lead to develop a consultation document, which will result in the development of a childcare strategy to offer families in Northern Ireland integrated and affordable provision that will best meet their childcare needs. In developing the consultation document, we worked closely with colleagues from key Departments, including Education, Health, Social Development and Employment and Learning. Stakeholder comments have also been taken fully into account, as the draft has been circulated to the childcare group, which includes stakeholder representatives from organisations such as PlayBoard and Early Years.

Significant engagement has also taken place with the childcare partnerships, which represent statutory and stakeholder interests. Our current draft consultation document sets out six key

principles that we believe must be addressed if the strategy is to make a lasting impact. Those are: informed parental choice; quality; accessibility; affordability; sustainability; and an integrated approach. Based on those principles, we envisage a policy involving three main strands: better information for parents and those looking for childcare; capacity building and approved provision in the childcare sector; and research into needs.

We envisage that the consultation document will also identify a number of areas that will require consideration in a future framework for improved childcare provision. Those include provision for: children and parents who have a disability; school-aged childcare; and rural areas.

The consultation document is under consideration in the Department, and when agreed by Ministers and the Executive, will be followed by a 12-week public consultation exercise, after which a final draft childcare strategy will be completed for ministerial and Executive approval. A number of public consultation events will be held during that 12-week period, and the Committee will be a key consultee.

Some £12 million has been allocated from the Executive programme fund for the development of the childcare strategy over the comprehensive spending review period. The first awards were made in 2011, and a further tranche of bids from Departments is under consideration. The fund has already allocated supported projects or initiatives proposed by Departments to improve the provision and procedures consistent with the development of the strategy. A similar approach has been taken to the bids under consideration, with the emphasis on additionality and focusing on identified needs.

That is all I want to say for now.

The Chairperson: So we have £12 million. How much have we spent, Fergus?

Mr Devitt: Some £322,000.

The Chairperson: I do not want to steal my colleague Mr Kinahan's thunder, but we seem to be very good at these high-end strategies that float around and not quite so good at action plans that deliver on the ground. Who would not want informed parental choice, quality, accessibility, affordability, sustainability and an integrated approach? When do we reach the point at which we can offer something truly meaningful to people who are looking for childcare provision?

Mr Devitt: In my view, the development of strategies is a two-stage process. First, we have the public consultation exercise, when ideas are put forward and respondents have an opportunity to air their views. Secondly, there is the development of the actual strategy, which will contain targets and actions. Those are the measures by which we will be judged as to what difference has been made.

The Chairperson: To what extent are you liaising with the Education Committee and the Agriculture Committee on the 0-6 strategy?

Mr Devitt: We have not liaised with Committees, but we have had significant engagement with departmental officials, who are bringing their views and, I imagine, those of their Committees and Ministers to the issue.

The Chairperson: To what extent will the childcare strategy be rolled out as a social economy initiative?

Mr Devitt: We are looking at the strategy as being an opportunity for social enterprise. Denis and I visited a facility in north Belfast not long ago that is a social economy enterprise.

The Chairperson: Is that the Ashton Community Trust?

Mr Devitt: Yes. It is offering very competent and high-quality provision. We want to look at that model to find out whether it can be rolled out.

The Chairperson: Do you think that people get frustrated about all these processes? We produce strategies and consult, whereas out on the ground, as you acknowledge, the Ashton Community Trust has a social enterprise child-minding service. We should just say, "How do you do that, guys? Do you

mind if we borrow your route map and plan?" All that time and money could be cut, and people could get on with delivering.

Mr Devitt: I take your point, Chair. However, we need to consult to make sure that, as far as possible, we are getting it right for everyone. I appreciate that people become frustrated about the way in which strategies and consultation documents are developed, but I think that the position would be worse if we did not consult.

The Chairperson: Last week, the Committee informed your Department that this briefing was going ahead. Wherever the confusion came from, it was not from us. You are the third departmental team to have sent papers in on the day of a briefing session. That is not acceptable.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for that. The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership under the Health and Social Care Board has action plans out for consultation. Have you engaged with the partnership to avoid overlap and parallel processes? You mentioned rural areas, and I come from a rural area. My sister has to travel 15 miles for child-minding facilities. I would like you to develop your thought process on that if you can. The key policy principles are fairly generic, and there is really nothing specific.

Mr Devitt: I will try to take those questions in order. We have been working very closely with the Health and Social Care Board through the childcare partnerships. We have had a range of meetings. As I said, they involve the statutory sector and childcare providers. We are fully engaged with it and are aware of what it is doing.

Rural provision has come up as a specific issue. The draft consultation document asks specific questions about the differences in provision in rural areas. There is anecdotal evidence that suggests that, in rural areas, much childcare is provided by family and friends in what could be classed as unofficial child-minding. In rural areas, there seems to be much more informal childcare, whereas urban areas have more day care and childcare facilities. We need to look at the issue to ensure that rural provision matches people's requirements.

The point about generic areas echoes what the Chair said about high-level policy principles. We want a strategy that nails those down into actions over time that will make a difference.

Mr Kinahan: Chair, you know where I am coming from on this issue. I want to pull my hair out. Twelve million pounds could be spent tomorrow if you worked through existing groups. Will any organisation, such as Sure Start or Early Years, look at the issue? Organisations would put their hands up tomorrow and say that they need the money just to survive.

Mr Devitt: We have bids in for a significant amount of the remainder of the £12 million. Those are being assessed. That money is badged as being entirely new and additional. We do not want to give it to Departments to replace money that they have surrendered. We need to be sure that it is adding and doing new things. However, we need to keep some of that money to implement and deliver the strategy. In areas in which priorities are identified, we may be able to do things quite quickly. It is a balance between spending some money in advance and making sure that we have some left. That is the position that we are in.

The Chairperson: You have significant bids in for the remainder of the £12 million.

Mr Devitt: Yes.

The Chairperson: What do you need a strategy for? Just spend the money.

Mr Devitt: Those are bids from Departments. They are not necessarily —

The Chairperson: Coming from the ground?

Mr Devitt: Yes.

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr Lyttle: What is the nature of those bids? What type of projects will that money go towards?

Mr Devitt: I am not trying to deflect the question, but they are under consideration so I am not sure that I would want to go into that level of detail.

Mr Lyttle: Some of them must be additional.

Mr Devitt: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: This was described as being money towards a new childcare strategy and provision. I am a bit concerned that it is just going to go to existing —

Mr Devitt: Part of the consideration is to make sure that the bids will deliver something additional and that they are not there just to replace money that Departments do not have.

Mr Lyttle: Childcare is not only for childhood development; it is a huge factor in getting people into work. A year has passed for use of the money. Is there a date for the release of the consultation paper and the strategy to start being actioned?

Mr Devitt: I am sure that the Committee does not like seasons to be used as dates, but we aim to get the consultation document out this autumn for a 12-week period and then get the strategy in place as soon as we can following the end of the consultation period.

The Chairperson: Define "autumn". What months make up your autumn?

Mr Devitt: September, October and November make up my autumn.

Mr Kinahan: Are you talking about this year?

Mr Devitt: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: The last time junior Minister Bell attended the Committee, he talked about a summer date. So be aware of the type of information that has been given on an issue that is close to many people's lives.

Mr Devitt: There has certainly been further engagement over the summer with, for example, the childcare partnerships and those who are interested from a provider perspective. We wanted to test it, and at our last engagement a few weeks ago, we got very positive signals from people in the sector that the consultation document was close to what they want to see. That is encouraging.

Ms Fearon: Chris largely covered my question. We are trying to get a date for when you envisage the money being spent. We are lagging behind many other European countries on childcare, and it is a really important issue. Parents are spending £35 a day on childcare. It has to pay people to go to work. It is frustrating waiting for it to be implemented.

Mr Devitt: It is a priority and a Programme for Government commitment to develop the childcare strategy. It is an interesting point. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that Northern Ireland is not well provided for when it comes to childcare. We are undertaking significant research to find out whether that is the case, and if so, why. Scandinavian countries are always regarded as the best.

Ms McGahan: I want to emphasise the lack of childcare facilities in rural areas. I talk to parents whose kids are in the informal settings that you mentioned, and they do not get the stimulation and development that they need. That is a massive issue, so I want you to focus on that if you can.

Mr Devitt: There are a number of aspects to developing the strategy. Clearly, its purpose is to give childcare provision for children and parents, but there is also the developmental aspect for children to give them positive experiences and to promote them with opportunities to develop. We are conscious that it is not just about putting children into a care situation.

Mr G Robinson: Welfare reform is on the way, so it is absolutely critical for the strategy to be rolled out. So many people will be on the breadline over the next year or so. Those are the types of people whom we need to look out for.

Mr Devitt: That is a valid point. We have been working closely with the Department for Social Development, which is leading on welfare reform in Northern Ireland, and we are factoring those issues into what we are trying to do. All the evidence points to an increased demand for childcare resulting from the impact of welfare reform.

Ms Fearon: I second Bronwyn's point about rural areas. I am from south Armagh, and I completely understand where she is coming from on that issue. There should be a focus on rural areas, because it seems that, on paper, a lot of the money is pumped into cities. Rural areas lack childcare provision as well.

Mr Devitt: Part of the £322,000 that I mentioned at the start went to the South Armagh Childcare Consortium, so hopefully that helped.

The Chairperson: I represent a largely rural constituency. On the Ards peninsula, social enterprise transportation and social enterprise child-minding would make a big bang in helping people to get pathways to employment.

Martin and Fergus, thank you very much indeed. Keep us informed of your progress. If possible, we would like to have sight of your consultation document in advance of its publication.

Mr Lyttle: Could we also get details of what the money has been spent on to date?

Mr Devitt: The £322,000?

Mr Lyttle: Yes.

Mr Devitt: We can certainly provide that.

The Chairperson: Thank you. I am sorry that you were the last in.

Mr Devitt: We were bang on time, according to the agenda.

The Chairperson: Unfortunately, you were the third group to table papers today.

Mr Lyttle: However, you had a bit more information to add to them than the other witnesses.

The Chairperson: Apologies if I shot the messenger.