



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Childcare Strategy: OFMDFM Briefing

6 March 2013

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)
Mr Colum Eastwood
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Alex Maskey
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

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: Representing the Department are Fergus Devitt and Martin Tyrrell. You are very welcome. Fergus, are you leading?

Mr Fergus Devitt (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Yes, for the moment. I will say a few introductory words and then we will be happy to take any queries or questions and try to provide as much information as we can. I am very grateful for the opportunity to be here today to provide an update on the ongoing development of the childcare strategy, which the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is leading. The update will cover three main areas: the public consultation; the research that has been carried out alongside the consultation process; and the Executive childcare fund, which supports the development of the childcare strategy.

First, I will deal with the consultation. As you will be aware, the current Programme for Government commits the Executive to publishing and implementing a childcare strategy that will provide integrated and affordable childcare. The strategy will be aligned with the primary focus of the Programme for Government, which is to grow the economy and tackle disadvantage. The strategy will aim to provide quality childcare in a stimulating and nurturing environment. It also aims to enable parents who wish to work, train or study to do so, confident that their children are being appropriately cared for. Those two aims are interrelated and not separate.

The availability of quality, affordable childcare will enable parents to secure employment, learning opportunities or studying opportunities. A system of quality, affordable childcare also gives children a sound start in life and can be the basis for subsequent achievement at school and beyond. It is

essential that all who have an interest in childcare have the chance to shape and influence the final strategy. Public consultation on the strategy opened on 5 December, and we have been accepting written submissions and proposals since then.

An important part of the consultation process was a series of public consultation events. The first of those was held in Belfast on 20 February. The two junior Ministers attended and participated in those discussions. Other events followed in Armagh, Enniskillen, Ballymena, Derry/Londonderry and Newry. The Committee was advised of those public events, and members were encouraged to publicise them among their constituents.

We are also in the process of engaging with children and young people on the envisaged childcare strategy. That will happen in the next week or so. It is happening a little after the close of the consultation, which was yesterday, because it takes time to set up this more specialised type of consultation, and the questions in the consultation document, for instance, have needed to be adapted to make them more child-friendly.

In addition to those formal consultation events, many events have been organised by stakeholder groups, such as Employers for Childcare, PlayBoard and the Women's Resource and Development Agency. The Department has tried to be represented at as many of those events as possible. There was also a very useful discussion of the childcare strategy at a recent meeting of the gender advisory panel, which is chaired by the Department.

Although consultation officially closed yesterday, clearly the Committee will wish to make a formal submission in respect of the strategy, and we will welcome that response. The consultation has already generated considerable first-hand comments from parents as well as from childcare providers, from groups that represent them and from sectoral groups. The views of the Committee will be a really important addition to what we have already received. All comments received will be taken fully into account during the development of the actual strategy. The aim is to draft and publish framework proposals as soon as possible, perhaps as soon as April, and also to look at key actions, and potentially pilot projects, that might be put in place relatively quickly.

Alongside the consultation, research is under way to examine factors relevant to childcare, such as need, cost and capacity, and to start identifying, assessing and costing options for intervention. That research, which is being undertaken by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), will identify potential options for government intervention in the provision of childcare and, ultimately, produce, if necessary, a business case for any preferred option. The SIB researchers are engaging directly with childcare stakeholders and attended all the consultation events run recently. In addition, research is being carried out into the supply of, and demand for, childcare. That will help to inform the SIB's work, as will the recent Equality Commission for Northern Ireland report on childcare.

Finally, to turn to the childcare fund. As you are aware, the Executive have ring-fenced £12 million over the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period to support the development of the strategy. This is intended to assist projects, provided that they are additional to actions being funded from departmental baselines. In 2011-12, Ministers allocated just over £300,000 to childcare projects. In the current financial year, Ministers have made decisions that enable spending of up to a further £4.5 million on projects. The Department has yet to make any decisions regarding the deployment of the fund for the remainder of the CSR period. This is deliberate. A decision regarding how to proceed with the fund will be taken once it is clearer how the strategy will look, what its early actions will be and what its priorities are. That will ensure that the way that the fund is used can be fully aligned with the emerging needs of the strategy and that the money remains ring-fenced for childcare.

To sum up: progress on the strategy is well under way and the formal consultation period has ended, although there will be a planned engagement with children and young people in the days to come. The Committee's response, as I said, will also be extremely important. Research is being carried out in parallel to the consultation, and Executive funds have been allocated to a range of additional childcare projects.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. We had Siobhan Fitzpatrick of Early Years in front of the Committee. The phrase that she used that has stuck in my mind was used on 'Good Morning Ulster' on Radio Ulster a few weeks ago, when the talk was about the delay in bringing forward the strategy. She said that it is not rocket science. Do you agree?

Mr Devitt: Our experience, from the six public consultation events that we have held, is that there is a range of issues around childcare. Sectoral interests will obviously present that they may have the

ideal solution. However, we have to take into account the wide range of views that we are getting, to allow us to try to develop a strategy that will address as many of those issues as possible.

The Chairperson: So is it a question of reflecting, rather than leading, opinion?

Mr Devitt: It is both. Clearly, OFMDFM is leading on the development of the childcare strategy, but we are committed to listening to what is said to us during the consultation events. That is the purpose of the consultation. It would not be right for the Department to develop a childcare strategy without having —

The Chairperson: OK. Do you accept that there has been a delay?

Mr Devitt: I can only speak for when I have been in the Department, which has been for the past year, during which we have developed a consultation document. Martin and I have engaged with a range of stakeholders on a number of occasions. I was recently at the all-party Assembly group on children and young people. So we have been trying to take forward a range of consultation exercises. I sense that there is a frustration among the sector that a childcare strategy is not yet in place, and I accept that it is not there yet. However, we are certainly leading the development of it.

The Chairperson: A specific, if you do not mind, Fergus. Before this briefing, we were discussing correspondence from somebody who claims to use the nursery at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown and the response to them from Richard Barnett of the university. At the start of your presentation, you said that you wanted to achieve childcare facilities that would allow people:

"to work, train or study ... confident that their children are being appropriately cared for."

This seems to suggest concern that the closure of the university's facility will do the exact opposite.

Mr Devitt: I am not aware of the specific circumstances around the closure of those University of Ulster crèches. It was clearly a decision taken by the university, based on information that it had. It was certainly raised with us at our public consultation event in Derry last Thursday evening. At least one individual there was, as a result of the decision, not going to have childcare provision. So it is certainly a live issue.

The Chairperson: At Magee?

Mr Devitt: At Magee, yes.

The Chairperson: Do you think that at the end of this process, you, as a Department, will be giving advice to organisations in receipt of significant public funds, such as the university, as to what childcare provisions and arrangements you would expect them to make to meet this expectation that people can:

"work, train or study ... confident that their children are ... appropriately cared for"?

Mr Devitt: If you categorise the university as an employer, how we interact with employers and the employer's responsibility to provide childcare is certainly something that we are looking at, yes.

The Chairperson: You would expect a lead, would you not, from those in receipt of public funds?

Mr Devitt: Clearly there are a number of organisations, such as universities, further education colleges and others, that are in receipt of significant funds, and we may well want to look at how they can help in delivering what is envisaged throughout the childcare strategy.

The Chairperson: Colum is next. Colum, do you mind, because Bronwyn raised it — is there anything specific you want to bring up before we move on, Bronwyn, or are you content?

Ms McGahan: On the back of the Chair's point, we need to know the areas that those people who are using the crèche facilities come from. I used the crèche facility at Magee, and I travelled for an hour and a half to access that. That is important as well, because rural areas — or elsewhere — may not have access to childcare, and although it is all well and good that financial support is provided, it is not

really dealing with the issue here about childcare. A concern that I have as well is when they talk about it being underused in terms of hours as opposed to numbers. Degree courses might only be for 10 hours a week, so there are a lot of gaps there in the information coming from the University of Ulster, and I think we need clarification on that.

Mr Devitt: I do not know whether you as a Committee have sought anything specific, either from the university or via the Employment and Learning Committee, to try to address those points.

The Chairperson: We had the correspondence directed to us from the Employment and Learning Committee. We are going to go back to that Committee in the first instance, but we believe that there is a broader point of principle there. Colum, thanks for giving way on that.

Mr Eastwood: Not at all. I support the Chair and Bronwyn on that. I know the difficulties around it. It is hard enough to get the courses that we want in the universities, but if we are putting people off going to study there because they cannot get proper childcare, that is a real issue. There was a report published in 1999 called 'Children First'. It was reviewed in 2005, and we have been told that the recommendations of the review have not really been addressed. The main ones were quality, cost, provision and lack of information. I understand that you have only been in the post for just over a year, but is it good enough that, in 2013, when we were told in 1999 what was required around childcare in Northern Ireland, we still do not have a strategy?

Mr Devitt: One of the Programme for Government commitments is to deliver a childcare strategy for Northern Ireland. That is the priority that is now being given to it. Clearly, what we are involved in at the moment is the consultation phase around putting in place a comprehensive strategy that will try to meet as many of those issues as possible around quality, cost and lack of information, because there is certainly a wide range of issues. There is no single issue that, on its own, will address people's views on what is missing in childcare. It is a combination of matters that have to go together to try to do that.

Mr Eastwood: Are you confident that this delay — there has been a delay for however many years. Did you say that it was going to be dealt with by April?

Mr Devitt: The intention certainly is that, by April, a framework document will be published, which will set out key actions.

Mr Eastwood: Is that a commitment?

Mr Devitt: That is something that we are working towards. Clearly, the consultation only closed yesterday, and we want to give every response due consideration and care and attention. People have taken time to correspond with us, and we want to look at all those in detail, but we are certainly aware that there is a desire out there — not just from this Committee but from a range of stakeholders — for something to be put into the public domain as soon as possible. That is what we are working towards.

Mr Eastwood: Briefly, can you talk a wee bit about the fund? The first £323,000 — if I am right — was released. Will you explain to us exactly what that fund is supposed to do?

Mr Devitt: At this stage, it is to support what it is envisaged may well come out of the childcare strategy. Out of that £322,000, for example, £250,000 went to the Department of Health to address the backlog in registration and inspections of child-minding and daycare settings. Some of it also went to provide additional grant funding to South Armagh Childcare Consortium, so it was going into definite childcare actions.

Mr Eastwood: Sorry, £52,000 went to after-school film clubs? I am a big supporter of film clubs; I think that they are very important, but does that really constitute childcare?

Mr Devitt: Ministers and the Department believe that after-school film clubs are a part of childcare. The increase in coverage has now gone from 68 schools to 338.

Mr Eastwood: I do not dispute the validity or importance of film clubs. However, there is £12 million; we have spent about £300,000 so far, and £50,000 of it has gone to film clubs. Is that the purpose, I suppose? Did you leave out the film club example?

Mr Devitt: No, it was third on my list. I was just coming to it.

Mr Eastwood: Does it really constitute childcare? Is that really what we need to be spending the money on? I would like to see money spent on that, but is this the right fund for it?

Mr Devitt: That is a good point, and it is certainly one that has been made to us by a range of sectoral groups. Until now, the fund has only been able to be accessed by Departments. We are looking at how best that fund can be used going forward in support of what comes out of the strategy. I know that there is a desire in the voluntary and community sector to have some way of bidding into the amount of money that is left. They may well be able to do that through the Departments that they are working with — the Departments can bid in on their behalf. Clearly, we want to make sure that whatever money is left is used to fully support the implementation of the strategy.

Mr Eastwood: Just explain to me exactly how this is going to work for community groups and people in the field. You say that they might have to apply through Departments. Is that going to be the case, or what way will it work?

Mr Devitt: I am not trying to dodge the question. It has not been decided. Whatever money is left in the childcare fund, we deliberately have not asked Departments to bid against that, because we want to see how the strategy is going to be implemented and how best that money can be used. So, the decision has not been taken yet.

Mr Eastwood: The money is ring-fenced?

Mr Devitt: The money is ring-fenced for childcare.

Mr Eastwood: For how long?

Mr Devitt: For the rest of the CSR period — for the next two years.

Mr Eastwood: We have only spent £300,000. Do you think that we can get that spent?

Mr Devitt: Ministers have approved up to another £4.5 million out of it already. So, in broad terms, £5 million has been allocated and there is £7 million left, and I am confident that that £7 million will be spent over the rest of the CSR period.

The Chairperson: So, £5 million is allocated before you have a strategy, and £7 million when you do.

Mr Devitt: Well, it is up to £5 million, Chair.

The Chairperson: OK. The consultations closed yesterday?

Mr Devitt: Yes.

The Chairperson: How many responses?

Mr Devitt: We believe that there are around 60.

The Chairperson: You believe?

Mr Devitt: Yes.

The Chairperson: Why not "there are 60"?

Mr Devitt: There are ones that have come in through the website, and there are also the responses, for example, that we got through the public consultation events. If you count the ones that came in specifically through the website, there are around 40.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for your presentation, Fergus. As deputy chairperson of the all-party group on children and young people, let me say that it was good to hear from you recently on this issue. I recognise that this is an issue that you have taken on personally only very recently, but some serious concerns have been raised today with respect to the length of time that it has taken to get to this point of producing a childcare strategy.

Siobhan Fitzpatrick of Early Years, who briefed the Committee, said that she thought that Northern Ireland had basically lost 10 years in relation to adequate childcare provision and has fallen behind England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Given that it is so important to our economy — getting people into work and tackling child poverty — there is a major issue here.

Specifically in the work that you are going to do to bring forward and tackle the key issues of the strategy, how will the strategy integrate education provision and childcare? Will it have a statutory obligation to provide for childcare, as per the Childcare Act 2006 in England and Wales? Are there any plans for awareness-raising campaigns or family information services in order to tackle this extreme problem of unclaimed assistance that is available to people out there?

Mr Devitt: We are looking at the education provision because, as I mentioned at the start, there are almost twin drivers of childcare. It is about giving people the opportunity to get back into employment, learning or training. However, it is also about children's educational development and making sure that that can happen in a quality setting where the children are cared for. So, we will be looking at how that can be addressed.

Statutory provision has come up a couple of times during public consultation, along with where Northern Ireland is placed in relation to other parts of the United Kingdom and other jurisdictions not just locally or regionally but across the world. Scandinavia is often cited as an example of where childcare has been addressed significantly. So, statutory provision has come up as an issue.

Information provision has come up from a couple of angles. It has been discussed from the perspective of the support that is available to people who want to put their children into childcare. That support could include working tax credits or childcare vouchers. Another angle has been on the childcare that is available in a local area for an individual who wants to access it and on what it might cost. Those are areas that we are looking at, and I think that information provision will be key.

Mr Lyttle: Given that proposals for awareness-raising campaigns are years old, when will the childcare fund be made open to non-departmental public bids so that people can explore that type of awareness raising for other services?

Mr Devitt: As I said to Colum, decisions have not been taken on how the money that is left in the childcare fund will be used and whether and how organisations that are outside Departments might be able to access it. We are still looking at how best that money can be used. We are very aware that there is a strong push from the voluntary and community sector for a mechanism through which it can get access to some of those funds. We are very aware of that call from that sector.

Mr Lyttle: So, are you not able to say when?

Mr Devitt: I cannot say, Chris, purely because decisions have not been taken about how the remainder of the money will be used.

Mr Lyttle: So, we are not even at "when"; we are at "whether".

Mr Devitt: That is part of how best to address the issues that are coming out of the public consultation. As the consultation closed only yesterday, I cannot give you an answer. However, we are very aware of the call from the voluntary and community sector that it has access to those funds.

Mr G Robinson: Thanks for the presentation. My question is about the public consultations. How well were they attended throughout Northern Ireland? What were the main concerns that were raised? Maybe that is a bit premature, but I can ask the question anyway.

Mr Martin Tyrrell (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I did not do a headcount, but I estimate that there were between 60 and 70 people at the six events that we organised. In no particular order, the issues that were raised at the events included care and whether it is provided on its own or whether it should be combined with an educational dimension. That was an important issue for many of the people who were at the consultation events.

Also raised was the question of unregistered childminders and whether there needed to be some kind of awareness-raising campaign to alert the public to the risks of using such childminders. Whether unregistered childminders need to be encouraged to register so that they can come into the system to undergo the necessary training in areas such as health and safety was also raised.

The need for an information system and ways in which information about childcare might be provided to the public were discussed. It was asked whether an IT-based system was the best approach or whether more conventional methods of conveying the information might be better, such as including information on childcare in packs that people get when they have a baby. It was suggested that crucial information on the key stages of a child's life cycle should be included, such as when they start primary and secondary school.

The question of childcare for those of school age and the need to meet gaps in that provision was also discussed. Also raised was how that gap might best be addressed and whether using the school estate was the best approach for that.

The issue of whether childcare is something that is required exclusively for people who are in employment or whether we also need to focus on providing it for those who are economically inactive or unemployed was also raised.

Those are just some of the issues that were raised.

Mr G Robinson: Were you disappointed by the numbers, given that there were 60 people at six or seven venues? Was that not very disappointing?

Mr Tyrrell: We always want to get more people and as broad a range of views as we can. In many cases, the people who attended were very articulate and presented ideas that were new to us or that we maybe would not have taken into account or heard. So, the events were important in that they presented us with stimulating input from members of the public and people who are directly involved in childcare provision.

The Chairperson: I am with you, George. At some point, somebody will have to look at the value for money of public consultation events.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. You talked about supply and demand for childcare. Have you taken into consideration the impact of the Welfare Reform Bill on lone parents who will be expected to go out to work when their child turns one?

You also referred to a wide range of views. From my understanding, none of those consultations was held in a rural venue, so there was not that balance. I think that that is a weak link in the process. How do you intend to get a rounded picture? I feel that the needs in rural areas are a bit different from those in urban areas.

Mr Devitt: I will deal with your second point first, if that is OK. Rural childcare came up at a number of the consultation events. People from County Tyrone — Omagh and Cookstown — certainly attended some of the events. They specifically raised issues about rural childcare, in particular transport issues and how difficult it can be for childminders, who can spend a lot of their time simply picking up and dropping off children. So, again, we are focused on that.

Martin gave a list of the issues that came out of the public consultation. I would add to that list rural childcare and childcare for children with any type of disability, whether it is physical, emotional or a mental health issue. Those were certainly additional issues. So, I appreciate that, although specific areas in Northern Ireland maybe did not have a public consultation event, we think that we got a good, broad cross-section of people to give us their views.

Welfare reform issues were also raised with us, and we are working closely with the Department for Social Development on their potential impact. As you outlined, the signals are that welfare reform may mean an increase in demand for childcare and for different types of childcare for different ages of children. We are certainly factoring that in to our thinking on supply and demand.

Ms McGahan: On the back of your first point about people from County Tyrone attending those consultations, I have been contacted by people living in Aghnacloy, Clogher, Augher and Killeeshill regarding the childcare strategy. I encouraged them to respond to the consultation, but I do not know whether they did. For me, there is a demand in rural areas. I do not know whether they reflected their views to you, but I will certainly go back and find out.

Mr Maskey: Thanks, Fergus and Martin. I want to go back over a couple of wee points. In one sense, I am very pleased to hear that you expect to have a framework out in April, although I think that that is quite ambitious. Given the number of years that we have talked about this, some of the stakeholders who spoke to us expressed their frustration and, indeed, cynicism. I think that that was fairly well reflective of some of the comments that we got. So, there is a bit of cynicism out there from people in the sector who I think are very constructive and whose work proves that. The earlier that something can be done to allay that cynicism the better. Indeed, you referred to that work, Fergus.

This subject is over and done with, so I do not want to go over it again, but when you read about that £250,000, you might say to yourself, "That is money that health and social services have dealt with themselves". In the scheme of things, however, that might not be a large amount out of the budget that was allocated for it, but if it helps to get people and places freed up and regulated so that they are on stream and, therefore, able to provide a service, that is well and good. However, in general terms, I would not expect that to be a demand on that particular fund for the next number of years. It is a wee bit like some of the other points that people are making. It is not only about putting capacity in the system; it is about making sure that people get access to the service. I would like to see a large amount of money being allocated to it.

For me, it is about trying to make sure that, when we come to developing an actual strategy, we will have to take on board welfare reform, for example. That is because it is not going to be an option. If it goes through the way that it is currently scheduled, people are going to be sanctioned, including lone parents. We know that, in the previous mandate, the Department did not exercise those sanctions because we do not have the same statutory footing for childcare as England and other places.

There will be a demand. I do not know how to quantify it, but I know that it will be an issue that will have to be addressed. I think that it will have to be addressed increasingly in the longer run, because, time wise and however they play out, the welfare changes will mean that, at some point, there will probably be no escape from this.

I welcome that, as early as April, we are likely to get some advance on where we are now. If that is the case, I congratulate you on that. Can you give us a wee bit of insight into where the other £4.5 million might be either notionally or actually allocated? In general terms, will it be for increasing resources or facilities for people, or will it be for places?

Mr Devitt: I certainly can do that. It goes back to what you were saying. The key element is that Departments had to demonstrate that it was additional spend and that they were not merely replacing money that they had lost out of their budgets. They had to demonstrate that it was something that was additional to what they were going to do.

Of the other £4.5 million, a quarter of a million went to the Department of Health for a review of vulnerable families' childcare needs; another half a million went to that Department to enhance childcare provision for children with a disability; almost £400,000 went to the Department of Education for development opportunities for preschool children; around £350,000 went to the after-school film clubs that we talked about; and we are in discussions with the Department for Employment and Learning about a significant amount of money and how best that it could use it. So, a range of Departments have bid for that, and childcare provision is coming out of it. As I said, there is still quite a bit of money left in the childcare fund. Those Departments had to demonstrate that it was additional. If they cannot use it, it will come back into the childcare fund, but it is not as though it will be lost.

Mr Maskey: I am trying to ascertain how much of that will end up in greater provision as opposed to better capacity-building or developmental work. Where does it end up creating extra places?

Mr Devitt: I think that that might be the next stage. At the minute, we are trying to look at the supply and demand to see how government might intervene. We are also trying to look at the type of financial support that it may be possible to give. You might be talking about huge amounts of money, because if there is to be universal childcare provision for all children in Northern Ireland, even between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm, that is potentially hundreds of millions of pounds. That is just not currently available. I think that it is important to bear in mind that, when it comes out, the strategy will be looking not only at the next couple of years; it has to look beyond that. Maybe it should be a 10-year or 20-year strategy. That would have to be built into CSR bids and such things so that more resource goes into childcare. I think that that is where we want to get to.

Mr Lyttle: I will keep it brief, and thank you for allowing me back in, Chair. I want to follow up on the idea of universal provision. In a recent evidence session, we were advised that European targets for provision for 2000 were around 33%. In 2013, we are advised that our provision in Northern Ireland is around 14%. That is a pretty stark figure. Can you assure me that you are examining potential solutions, such as those that are used in the Republic of Ireland, including the subsidy of private sector provision or a tax allowance for such provision? As Mr Maskey asked, how is this going to lead to increased places for working families, as well, obviously, as people who are in vulnerable situations? I am a bit concerned that some of the money so far is going towards very isolated projects as opposed to being used for game changing across the board for childcare provision.

Mr Devitt: I think that you were referring to the Barcelona targets, and we are aware that there is a gap at the moment between Northern Ireland provision and the European average. If we are to close that gap or seek to address it, I agree that there needs to be a strategic approach. We cannot just give out little parcels of money here and there. It cannot be just about the childcare fund, or what is left of it; as I said to your colleagues, it has to go beyond that into other CSR periods. Closing that gap cannot be done over a couple of years. This is a long-term issue that we have to seek to address with either significant funding or a different approach, and we want to do that through the strategy. For me, a strategy has three questions. First, where are we now? Secondly, where do we want to be? Thirdly, how do we get there? We will seek to address those questions through the development of the strategy.

The Chairperson: I have two quick questions before we finish. Three weeks ago, we had evidence from Employers for Childcare, and Nora Smith, who represented that body, said:

"The current consultation is essentially a consultation on a consultation."

and that it:

"smacks of a delay tactic in the development of a relevant strategy for Northern Ireland."

She also said:

"The current consultation asks very rudimentary questions about childcare ... for example, do parents struggle with their childcare costs; and is that a barrier to work? Those questions have been long answered. We are now in the position where we need to see the content of a draft strategy and consult on that."

How do you respond to those comments?

Mr Devitt: I have a number of comments to make on that. The issue of the questions in the consultation document has come up a number of times. The consultation document was for a number of audiences; it was not just for sectoral groups. It was for individuals who are maybe struggling to get childcare provision. We had to try to balance the consultation document for a range of audiences. I accept that some of the questions were maybe a bit basic, but we were trying to seek information.

You mentioned a "consultation on a consultation". That has also been raised with us. We have tried to explain on a number of occasions what we are seeking to do. I think that a number of bodies, including Employers for Childcare, believe that there should be a further consultation stage on a draft strategy. We will consider that once we have analysed what finally comes out of the consultation responses.

The Chairperson: So, there could be another round of —

Mr Devitt: There may be, Chair. Again, it goes back to the point that some of your colleagues made. We have to balance that against accusations of delaying things.

The Chairperson: Finally, put yourself in the position of somebody who is sitting at home watching this and who is unemployed with a child and has the offer of a job but does not think that it would pay to take it because of childcare costs. If I am correct, they will have heard you say that there is £12 million in the bank — that is how they will see it — up to £5 million of which the Department seems willing to spend before there is a strategy. That leaves £7 million. If you were that person, would you not be thinking: why do we need a strategy?

Mr Devitt: I will make a couple of comments on that. First, there is still a significant amount of money left in the childcare fund.

The Chairperson: You can spend £5 million without a strategy.

Mr Devitt: Those actions are taken in support of childcare. I accept that, although a strategy is not in place, the money has been spent on supporting childcare and childcare provision.

Secondly, I will say to anybody who has a child and who may be unemployed and wants to learn or train: help is available. We want to make sure that we can maximise information to people on what help is available, whether that help comes through childcare vouchers, working tax credits or other mechanisms. We are really looking at how we can best get information out on the help that is there.

The Chairperson: Fergus and Martin, thank you both very much.

Members, I think that there is an issue —

Mr Maskey: I am not advocating that we have a consultation on a draft strategy, but I wonder when we might get you back so that you can give us a fuller critique of the consultation and the essence of the draft strategy.

The Chairperson: Funnily enough, that is what I wanted to come on to. Chris, if I understood you correctly, you want to put in a response at this stage, while the alternative is to take a view of the responses and then to be a super-consultee.

Mr Lyttle: The latter may be worthwhile, Chair.

The Chairperson: Can we have sight of the consultation responses ASAP?

Mr Devitt: Do you want the responses or a summary of the key issues that are emerging —

The Chairperson: Without knowing the volume of —

Mr Devitt: There are two consultation information sources for us: the public consultation events that we ran; and those that have come in through the website. They may say quite different things.

The Chairperson: Could we have a summary, with a view to —

Mr Devitt: Yes. I was going to suggest a summary of the key issues and themes that emerge.

The Chairperson: Officials are due back on 17 April.

Mr Maskey: Will that enable them to give us a sense of the direction of travel?

The Chairperson: That will be for an update on the consultation responses.

Mr Maskey: I would like not just information on the consultation but a sense of where you might want to take it.

Mr Devitt: I am just conscious of how that might fit in with our, hopefully, trying to publish something. I would not want us to be in the position where the Committee believes that we published something without its input.

The Chairperson: If you intend to publish something in April, can we get you back earlier?

Mr Devitt: Can we liaise with the Committee Clerk on that to see what might be possible?

The Chairperson: Yes. When do you think we could have a summary of the responses? At 4.00 pm, 5.00 pm or 6.00 pm? Do you need a bit longer?

Mr Devitt: I like to use seasons — spring and summer. *[Laughter.]* Could we say —

Mr Maskey: When are you leaving that post? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Devitt: Am I right in saying that you are going into recess quite soon?

Mr Lyttle: On 25 March.

Mr Devitt: We could aim to get something to you before recess. What about that?

The Chairperson: OK. As soon as you can. Fergus and Martin, thank you very much.