



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

First Day Brief

26 May 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE FOR
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

First Day Brief

26 May 2011

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)
Ms Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Gregory Campbell
Mrs Judith Cochrane
Mr Michael Copeland
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Mark H Durkan
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Pam Lewis
Mr Fra McCann
Mr David McClarty

Witnesses:

Ms Heather Cousins)
Mr David Ferguson) Department for Social Development
Mr Will Haire)
Mr Tommy O'Reilly)

The Chairperson:

I welcome the departmental officials to the Committee. For the record, the briefing will be recorded by Hansard. I invite you to give your briefing and then we will have questions and answers.

Mr Will Haire (Department for Social Development):

I am delighted to be here and look forward to working with the Committee in the coming years. As you will know, we have a vast agenda before us. We worked with the previous Committee and had a good working relationship with its members; we tried to be as open as we could. There was good, robust debate about issues, and the Committee contributed significantly to the development of our policy and legislation. I look forward to more such work, and I know that our Minister is keen to engage with the Committee as soon as he has had a chance to familiarise himself with the issues.

I want to touch on some of the key challenges and issues that I discussed with your Chairperson yesterday. Then I will ask my colleagues to touch briefly on key issues in their bailiwicks.

First, I will introduce my colleagues. Heather Cousins is head of resources, housing and social security and recently arrived in that job. Many of you will know Tommy O'Reilly, who is chief executive of the Social Security Agency; it has 5,000 members of staff and is a significant part of the Department's process. David Ferguson heads the urban regeneration and community development group. However, in about three weeks, David will leave us to become chief executive of the World Police and Fire Games group to make sure that that event works well in 2013. He is a great loss to the Department, but we wish him well. We are working to get a replacement by the end of June or early July.

In essence, the Department for Social Development is the anti-poverty department. One of the Department's themes is how to tackle poverty. The key themes are not only how do we support people who face challenges in different aspects of poverty and a wide range of issues around that, but we have to ask how the Department can contribute to getting at the roots of poverty. That is my theme. There is a significant budget of nearly £6 billion. The budget that is controlled by the Executive directly under the departmental expenditure limit is more than £800 million, but the social security budget is a very significant £5 billion. The major issue that we are hearing from Whitehall is that it is looking for us to take a much stronger management role in relation to that issue. Therefore, there are major financial issues. The Department for Social Development is the

largest Department; it employs 7,900 staff, widely spread throughout Northern Ireland. We have 3,000 colleagues in the Housing Executive, who are also widely spread. We are a very dispersed Department.

The changes that are in the pipeline and the issues that will be debated in the Chamber include welfare reform, including some of the most significant changes since the Beveridge report. Your constituents will be aware of changes in employment and support allowance and the question of reassessment already starting and major issues around that. However, we are gearing up for the change to universal credit, which will be a radically different way of delivering benefit. It will try to get rid of the benefit traps that have bedevilled the welfare system for a long time and will deliver it in a different way. There will be a significant change with many implications. Moreover, in recent budgets there have been significant changes to individual aspects of the existing system that have affected constituents. We know that those changes will take something between £450 million and £500 million out of the Northern Ireland economy over this CSR period. There are, therefore, significant issues around that.

The issue of the reform of disability living allowance (DLA) is coming up, and a process is being developed. There are also issues about changes to the child maintenance regime. All of that will be done and worked on within the concept of parity. However, the coalition Government in London are also talking about localism and the potential of dealing with local issues. They want to reform the social fund, for example. There may be opportunities to look at how that can be best delivered here. That change will also impact on housing benefit. That will have a major implication for housing policy.

You will be aware that, in the last period, work has been done to look fundamentally at the structures and nature of the Housing Executive. It has been a fundamental review. I think that that document will be coming to you soon, and there will be discussions on how we take those big issues forward and on how we get the best return, in public terms, in social housing. What is the best delivery mechanism? How would that best be organised?

A lot of that will be delivered under the housing associations. Those of you who were in this Committee previously will remember Minister Attwood talking about his concerns about the

structures and nature of the housing associations. How did those work? How can we make sure that there is a fit-for-purpose process here? There is a lot of very strong work in the housing associations here, but many of them are facing major challenges. How do we ensure that their processes work well?

Last winter, we were very conscious of fuel poverty. It is an issue that your predecessor Committee was very focused on. It is a major issue.

I turn now to issues that David Ferguson has led on. There is the question of community regeneration and neighbourhood renewal and how they are developed. As you know, we reviewed and evaluated that recently. The social investment fund is now being led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and it includes the important issue of how we make sure that it works in the most effective way to deliver solutions for the communities involved. It is a major piece of work, and it is one in which, I suspect, your contacts with the OFMDFM Committee will be crucial.

There is also the question of urban regeneration. We have done work on the planning aspects of that. There has been regeneration in urban areas and we continue to have the public realm works, etc. We have a smaller budget going forward, but we know that it has an important economic impact. As you will be aware, it has transformed some of our tourism product, for example, and it has transformed parts of our cities. That is an important aspect and it is an area in which we make a major economic contribution.

There are other issues, such as social legislation and minimum pricing for drink. There are a number of ongoing consultations, which should come to completion soon. They have important implications.

I have touched on some of the issues here. Yesterday, Chairman, we talked about how crucial the Employment and Learning Committee is to us. There are also areas in which the Department of Health is crucial to us. We put £60 million into supported housing, and it is key that we work with the Health Department to make sure that that works well. We must also work with OFMDFM and, with regard to many aspects of our urban regeneration, with the Department for

Regional Development (DRD).

The challenge for you as a Committee is that there are lots of details, and we will give you more regulations than you would ever hope for. There is a vast agenda around the very important aspect of the social security system. The challenge for all of us is to examine how we look at the strategic aspect versus the very detailed business that we have to do.

My colleagues will touch briefly on some of the key issues facing you, but I think that the main object of this morning's meeting is to give you an opportunity to ask us questions and to probe us further.

Mr Tommy O'Reilly (Department for Social Development):

Looking forward over the next four years from a social security perspective, the key challenges will be, first, maintaining the business and continuing to deliver the current benefits to the 500,000 people in Northern Ireland who receive benefits. That applies to all benefits, regardless of whether they are for pensioners, people with a disability or people seeking employment. Running the business will be the major challenge as we move forward over the next four year.

Secondly, the current Government are committed to a series of reforms that are about significantly reducing the cost of the welfare system. Those processes and reforms need to be implemented over the next three years. Incapacity benefit reassessment has commenced, and 76,000 people in Northern Ireland will be reassessed over the next three years. DLA will be transformed into a new personal independence payment and will involve the reassessment of nearly 110,000 people in Northern Ireland over the next three years. The social fund and the new fraud and error strategies are about trying to drive down the costs of the current welfare system in preparation for the introduction of universal credit, which is scheduled to commence in 2013.

In the briefing pack, we have tried to set out a very short synopsis of the key reforms that are likely to happen in the welfare and social security systems over that period. We are happy to take questions and to give further information if required.

Ms Heather Cousins (Department for Social Development):

For me, there will be two main finance issues. First, in the future, we will potentially have to manage actively the annually managed expenditure — the benefits spend — and the implications of that for the Northern Ireland block. That all needs to be teased out and is potentially extremely serious. There will have to be a lot of discussion on that. Secondly, particularly on housing and indeed in urban regeneration, we will look to bring in new sources of finance to make up for the shortfall in capital that we have all faced. Those are two big challenges.

On the housing side, with which, in my previous post, I was very familiar, we will take forward whatever proposals are made for the Housing Executive's future. The Committee will be involved in that major piece of work. Furthermore, we will try to match up the fuel poverty agenda with the green new deal and decide how to take forward that concept. We continue to work on a developer contribution scheme as part of financing social housing in the future, and we continue to lobby for funding for a mortgage rescue scheme. As Will said, major implications for housing policy will come from welfare reform through changes to local housing allowance rates and all the housing benefit reform. We need to work through that.

The new piece of work for me will be the social security policy and legislation and the introduction of a welfare reform Bill and all the associated regulations. That will be a massive piece of work over the next number of years that will have to happen at a pace. It will be a challenge for all of us, but we will need to work through that together.

Mr David Ferguson (Department for Social Development):

I will single out three high-level challenges, one of which Heather already mentioned, namely the funding of regeneration in an economic downturn. I do not mean the physical stuff only; I mean the softer stuff. The non-physical stuff in disadvantaged areas and in areas at risk is a major challenge, and there are no easy solutions to it.

The second significant challenge over the next three or four years and, indeed, beyond is to try to secure better collaborative working between the multiplicity of agencies, Departments and funders that work alongside us to tackle disadvantage and to address the problems that disadvantage produces.

The third broad area is to get what I call, in almost academic terms, better coherence in our strategy and policy. That will start in the Department with my own group. For example, the strategies and policies under which we operate have grown over the years. That is life; that is the way things are. You do not just start with a blank page, put in a suite of strategies and policies, and off you go. They grow by accretion over the years, and there is inevitably a certain lack of connectedness between them and certain holes and missed bits. We need more coherence in the strategy and policy work under which we have been operating, and we have started work on that. However, we need to connect the suite of strategies and policies in the urban regeneration neighbourhood renewal area with those in the rest of the Department and in other Departments, which also work in disadvantaged areas and target a lot of resources there.

Mr Haire:

That concludes the quick overview. We are keen to take questions now. As a group, we are happy to come back at any time. Are there particular areas that you, as a Committee or as individuals, want to be briefed on? You can talk to particular officials here, at the Lighthouse Building or wherever, and we are obviously keen for you to do that. I think that it would be useful for members to visit some of our main operations to give them a sense of the key challenges in what we are trying to do. I will just check the protocol for visits. I heard that the junior Minister is possibly going to Ilex some time soon, but the Department would not be officially told about such visits. So, we will check that out. Another issue is the protocol for advising local MLAs of ministerial agendas, so we will try to get clarity on that point in order to see how it works.

The Chairperson:

Thanks for that and for your colleagues' presentation. A number of members wish to come in.

Mr Brady:

Thanks for your presentation. Will, you said that welfare reform is a major issue that the Committee will face in the next few years. The previous Minister talked about stretching parity as far as possible, and I think that we should be looking at that. I am just wondering about Tommy's point of view. As you alluded to, this is the biggest change since the inception of the welfare state, and there is no doubt that there will be huge changes. I am thinking about the

timescale for the introduction of universal credit, which is also a huge change. Is that feasible within the timescale of two years? The migration of 76,000 people from incapacity benefit to jobseeker's allowance is being spread over approximately three years. I have already found difficulties with the new assessments of people's work capability and so on. I am just wondering whether that timescale is a runner. Is it likely to take longer than that?

Mr O'Reilly:

The current plans for the universal credit programme in Great Britain are that legislation will pass through Westminster by the end of this calendar year. The Department is working on the basis that a Bill will be brought to the Assembly around the same time, so the end of this year or the beginning of next year.

The current plans are that the first claims for universal credit will be made in October 2013. We are working very closely with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to prepare for the introduction of the change. There is no doubt that it is a challenging agenda. There is a lot of work to be done to communicate to customers the way in which we will take the service and how the IT systems will support the new payment regimes.

As regards universal credit, we need to recognise that it is not only working age benefits but housing benefit, working tax credits and child tax credits that will disappear within that timescale. They will all be subsumed into the new universal credit for fresh claims from October 2013. That is going to present challenges. At the moment, the coalition Government have not given any indication that there is any slippage in that. After that, the challenge will be how to get all of the people on those different benefits, as well as working tax credits and child tax credits, to migrate across to the new system. The plan is to have that completed by 2017.

We are continuing to roll out incapacity benefit reassessment. In the near future, we hope to follow up on the information that we sent out to all of the MLAs prior to the election by putting on a presentation in the Assembly to show what the new work capability assessment actually involves and to give you an opportunity to talk to the doctors and to understand the sorts of questions that they will ask your customers. We will also run some workshops for those in all the constituency offices to try to brief everyone and to make sure that they are updated.

All we can do is continue to try to ensure that everyone is informed. We continue to work with Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) colleagues to take that forward, hopefully, within the timescales that have been set and approved.

Mr Easton:

Obviously, we will face a difficult time. One of my major concerns is about DLA. We will be inundated with appeals. Have you put processes in place to cope with that? Thousands of people will disagree with coming off those benefits. Certainly, I do not know how we, as elected Members, will cope with that. It will be huge.

Mr Haire:

I will deal with that briefly. As Tommy indicated, we will want to ensure that we give you and your offices maximum information, so that when pressure arises from those issues, people are as well prepared as possible.

We have transferred responsibility for the running of tribunals to the Department of Justice. It has always been clear that the tribunal system should be separate from us. However, the transfer is not complete. Although the Department of Justice now runs tribunals, we still have the budget. We hope to complete final, full transfer as soon as possible. We are conscious of the funding that we have to put in because we can expect pressures on tribunals and how those are handled. That is one part of what we see as a major programme to try to handle all of that change. As you can see, the key issue for all of us is that, for several years, we will be running two systems. We will have to run a legacy system as we get people into the new system. The pressure on all of us to do that well and to explain it to the public will be immense.

The Chairperson:

Before I bring Gregory in, I want to inform people that the photographer was taking photographs for the Assembly's Communications Office, website, and so forth.

Mr Campbell:

That quick helicopter ride around the Department was useful. I will put my question to Will. I

assume that 8,000 staff include those of all of the different Department for Social Development (DSD) agencies. If you look numerically at the breakdown of Civil Service staff in each Department, DSD is, probably, the largest employer by some margin. I know that there is a big DFP issue there. I have met numerous people on frequent occasions to raise the apparent problem in DSD of achieving an employment ratio that broadly reflects the wider community. For a reasonable number of years — not five or six, but something like 15 or 16 years — there has been a significant under-representation of the Protestant community in a number of DSD agencies. As regards DFP and how it liaises with DSD, is there an ongoing programme to monitor the situation to ensure that it improves, or could the Committee have some input? The situation does not seem to have improved in the past 15 years. It is almost a question of the elephant in the room: it is there, it keeps being raised, but it does not seem to be addressed fundamentally. How does that work with DFP and DSD?

Mr Haire:

An annual report is required from the Department, which is monitored as part of the Civil Service cadre. There is a regime. DFP deals with that process and looks at it at that level. Significant work has been done, particularly recently. There was, for example, concern about the under-representation of Protestants in the intake at junior grades. I am not sure whether it concerned the Protestant male intake. That is why, if I remember rightly, we are starting, through advertising campaigns and other means, to try to draw in, and reach out to, that community. At that same time, we are, for example, readjusting other areas at senior levels in which there have been other imbalances. That work continues, and it is carried out by DFP for the Civil Service as a whole.

The Housing Executive is always separate. Recently, there has been correspondence on a significant issue that concerns it and how we deal with that issue. However, DFP focuses on that. Obviously, as the biggest Department, we are heavily involved in discussions on surrounding issues. Our Department, with its dispersed labour force, probably takes on the highest number of younger staff in that process. We deal with DFP for that, because it handles all our recruitment in the process within which we work.

Mr Douglas:

Thank you very much for the presentation. It was very helpful. I am a bit sad to hear that David

is leaving. I have worked with David in the Department, and he has done an excellent job. I wish you all the best, David, in your new job.

On page 3 of your briefing paper is a reference to “Vaughan’s Charity Trustees”. What is that? I have never heard of it in my life.

Mr Ferguson:

I was hoping that none of the Committee members would ask that. It is a very obscure charity that goes back decades. It is a very small charity — I think that one person is involved — and is something to do with development, regeneration effort and voluntary effort in County Fermanagh. As I said, it is a very obscure charity, and there is not a great deal more that I can tell you. I can get you a fuller briefing on it.

Mr Douglas:

It definitely does not fund projects in east Belfast.

Mr Ferguson:

It does not fund any projects, and there is next to no money involved. It is a very small legacy of an event decades ago.

Mr Haire:

However, if you are in Fermanagh, it is a very significant charity. We have joined forces with our colleagues in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to try to get the situation resolved, because we think that its inclusion is something of an anomaly.

Mr Ferguson:

It is an anachronism.

Mr Haire:

It is a very fine charity, but why is the Department involved? We are trying to get that resolved.

Mr Douglas:

You mentioned neighbourhood renewal and the social investment fund. In my experience over the years, I have found it very difficult to get other Departments to buy into neighbourhood renewal. When going around the doors at election time, I met people who are in tremendous need. I fear for the future of some of those communities. I believe that neighbourhood renewal is a way of encouraging confidence in those communities. In the past number of years, has there been a process or mechanism to try to bring in other Departments? If not, we need to look at something there. For example, the Department for Employment and Learning — another Committee that I am on — has a great opportunity to do work in disadvantaged communities.

Mr Ferguson:

I have several points in response to that. The short answer to your question is that, yes, there is an interdepartmental group chaired by the Minister. The new Minister will be taking over responsibility for that. When the neighbourhood renewal strategy was first launched some six or seven years ago, it was a wide-ranging strategy, which drew in almost every Department, apart from DARD.

Being such a cross-cutting strategy, it inevitably struggled to get on to its feet. That is not a criticism; it is just an observation. That is the way in which such things happen. However, in the past three or four years, there has been much more collaborative working among Departments, not only through the interdepartmental group of officials chaired by the Minister but through general engagement among officials in Departments, particularly the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education. That is a longer answer to your question.

My second observation is that one of the main spending priorities for the previous Minister — a priority that will be continued for the moment — is to protect neighbourhood renewal. Neighbourhood renewal was one of the major departmental policy areas to be protected. We cannot protect the funding that other Departments spend in neighbourhood renewal areas, but we have our own funding protected, and we intend to continue to protect that and not to effect any cuts in the neighbourhood renewal budget at all. We are looking at better use of the resources, but we are not cutting the overall budget.

You mentioned the social investment fund. That has many similarities to neighbourhood renewal, both in its policy intent and in what we know about the emerging structures for delivering it. It has a budget over the four years equivalent to that of neighbourhood renewal, which is roughly £80 million. It is critically important that the Department works with our colleagues in OFMDFM to ensure that the two pots of money are delivered in a complementary way. We are doing that. We have had several discussions with OFMDFM colleagues to talk about practical issues arising from the delivery of the social investment fund. Our next meeting with our colleagues in OFMDFM is on 7 June, prior to a full briefing for our new Minister who, I expect, will want to engage soon with his colleagues in OFMDFM.

Mr F McCann:

Thank you again for the presentation. I know from sitting on the Committee that the Department deals with a number of issues at the heart of social need. I have listened to the presentation and some of it, as members have said, paints a very bleak picture for the future of housing, social security, neighbourhood renewal and all those issues that go to the heart of social need.

I have a couple of points. In respect of the consultation on the housing selection scheme which finishes on 22 June, a number of areas across the North, though mostly in north and west Belfast and Derry, are under severe pressure because of the workings of the present common housing selection scheme. After the consultation closes, will there be a speedy move to ensure that any possible outcome will be put into operation as soon as possible?

In respect of the review of housing associations, I take it that the Committee will be fully involved in any discussion of the future of housing associations.

My last point is in relation to social security. Alex has rightly raised the question of the appeals in respect of DLA, employment and support allowance (ESA) and other things. It escaped the notice of many that, just before the final meeting of this Committee under the previous mandate, an element of social security was privatised and handed over to a private company called Atos Healthcare. The process of examining people has been removed and that is now a box-ticking exercise. Already, in England, serious concerns have arisen about the way that

that company operates. There needs to be constant review of the way those things are operated. I understand that many of the decisions made have been reviewed and reversed by tribunals in England.

Ms Cousins:

With respect to the housing issues that you raise, when the consultation period closes at the end of June, we expect the Housing Executive to come back to us promptly with a summary of responses. It was a preliminary consultation paper; I do not think it will be the last consultation paper. We will bring everything to the Committee as soon as we have it. We will put pressure on for that to happen, so that there will be a speedy response rather than have it drag out for a long time.

Your second issue is about housing associations. Everything that we are doing will come before the Committee for its views. We have not yet mapped out a timescale for the review of housing associations. When something is mapped out, we will bring it to the Committee.

Mr O'Reilly:

With reference to Atos Healthcare and the way that we run the medical assessments, the Department and the agency went through an extensive process of looking at the way that the current system works. At the end of that work, we came to the view that it was best to get further investment into the business which did not come directly from the public purse.

Atos Healthcare is an organisation that specialises in providing that type of service. The work was competitively tendered within the European Union, and Atos won the competition. It provides the services for DWP. We have tried to learn from lessons learned by DWP about how to put these contracts together. Those were split into two sides. We will manage the contract as we would any commercial contract. We will have a group of people monitoring performance on an almost weekly and on a monthly basis to ensure that we pay only for those services provided and that those services meet the level of quality that we work to.

You mentioned appeals. A large number of appeals are going through the system with our own doctors. Part of the problem is that we are not able to provide the types of information that

we want for the appeals because we do not have the IT systems and the processes needed to support a highly professional service. Atos will bring that to the people of Northern Ireland. Atos is an organisation, but the doctors and healthcare professionals who will be employed will be employed under a much closer professional regime. They will be locally based. We are taking them through a training session to ensure that they understand the issues for us in Northern Ireland. However, they will be our locally based doctors and healthcare workers who will be organised by Atos through a management framework. Hopefully, we will get a much better service.

Mr F McCann:

After we dealt with that in Committee, I did a wee bit of research on the Internet. The commentary there about the way the system was being operated in England showed that it was not good. In fact, a news item in a programme on television about six or eight weeks ago was highly critical of the way Atos had operated. It claimed that you did not need to be skilled up on dealing with people with mental health issues. Some of the examples given were atrocious. Are we saying that the system we will put in place here is totally different from the one operated in England?

Mr O'Reilly:

We are putting in much more modern arrangements, Fra. We are putting in professional frameworks under which any of the staff working with Atos to assess people have to be healthcare workers who are qualified to do that.

The mental health issue is not so much one for Atos as for the Department for Work and Pensions. Under the new regimes that have been put in place, I think everyone is struggling in a sense to be able to properly assess people with mental health issues. Professor Harrington, who is carrying out the work capability reviews on behalf of the Department, has recently completed another consultation exercise. Those capability assessments are being upgraded and changed to reflect the emerging guidance. The same thing will happen in Northern Ireland.

Mr Copeland:

Thank you for your presentations. Driving here this morning, I think I heard the Finance Minister

alluding to levels of sickness absence and certified sick leave in DSD. If I heard correctly, he highlighted the difference between age groups of staff. Did I correctly understand that the Department of Finance recruits staff?

Mr Haire:

All DSD staff are recruited by DFP.

Mr Copeland:

Is there a reason for the levels of sick leave? Is it to do with the number of staff that you have? Is it down to age or stress? How can it be accounted for when, according to the Finance Minister, it seems to be dramatically different from the picture elsewhere?

Mr Haire:

We recognise that we have the biggest issue in this way. We are, though, quite similar to the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), which has a similar structure, and other ones that have large numbers of staff, particularly young staff. Our structure, like that of DEL, is fundamentally different from the structure of nearly all other Departments, which have a much older, more senior cadre of staff. The majority of staff in our offices are AA and AO level. We have a lot of young staff and a lot of female staff, and the evidence shows that that is where you get the largest issues of absenteeism.

The report that came out today was for 2009-2010, and we have the provisional figures for 2010-11. In the previous year, we lost 14.4 days. This year, we have lost 13 days. The figure of 13 days is a decline from five years ago, when the loss was of 18.7 days. Dealing with those issues involves a long, hard push down and very detailed management.

The big problem is not people being off on a Monday or Friday; it is people going off on long-term stress leave. Many of those people write to you as constituents. The key issue for us is getting early contact with those people. We go immediately to staff and ask what the issue is, and, in the majority of cases, the stress is not work-related; it is family-related. The big issue for us is that the workplace is often the best place for those people to be. The best thing for them is to not be off, because it is in the workplace that we can support those people the most during that

difficult time.

So, a lot of this is about work. We have very close monitoring, we work with staff and we get out to people through home visits. At the same time, we are trying to implement a health-based process. That is not only about finding ways to bring people back to work, either part-time or through a gradual return to work, if that is the best way; it is about focusing a lot on health in work and trying to deal with those issues.

That is a big challenge for us. Let me be quite clear that we are not at all complacent; we lose a lot of resource due to this issue, and we have to get the level down. We are getting it down, but it is a long, hard process.

At the same time, we have to be very careful. Like every employer, we have cancer cases and other issues, and I am not going to let anybody put pressure on those people. You have to make sure that you are getting the right messages across to people in the right way. The issue is trying to get the right balance, but it is a very significant issue for us.

Mr Copeland:

Could the lessons that are being learned at the coalface and the information that is being gathered be used to influence the recruitment process?

Mr Haire:

There are very clear issues about access in the recruitment process. We have to make sure that there is access for everybody in the process. For example, we have to be very clear about issues of age discrimination, and I do not think that we will ever deviate from that.

Mr Copeland:

The Minister seemed to be suggesting that elderly people had a better record.

Mr Haire:

Very strong laws have been passed on those issues, and we will abide by the law.

Mr Brady:

A very clear comparison was made between the record of DRD staff and that of DSD staff. As someone who has worked in the Social Security Agency and who has dealt with the issues on a daily basis, I can say that, in a sense, there is no comparison, because DSD staff are under tremendous pressure. That has to be recognised. That has to be factored into any figures, because they are dealing with members of the public who are under pressure themselves.

It was interesting that you mentioned family pressures. It is sometimes very hard for people to divorce them from work pressures because they interrelate. DSD staff have specific targets and deal with difficult cases on a daily basis. That has to be factored into any comparison. The comparison was slightly unfair, because many DRD staff are removed from the coalface, as Michael suggested.

The Chairperson:

Will, thank you to you and your colleagues for coming along this morning, giving us your briefing and answering questions. We look forward to seeing you all again in different formats.