



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

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**COMMITTEE  
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE  
FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY  
FIRST MINISTER**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Northern Ireland Commissioner for  
Children and Young People**

20 October 2010

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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FOR THE OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND  
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Danny Kennedy (Chairperson)  
Dr Stephen Farry (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Martina Anderson  
Mr Allan Bresland  
Mr Tom Elliott  
Mr William Humphrey  
Mr Barry McElduff  
Mr Francie Molloy  
Mr George Robinson  
Mr Jimmy Spratt

**Witnesses:**

Mr Gerry Campbell     )  
Ms Patricia Lewsley    )     Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Mr Jonathan Traynor    )

**The Chairperson (Mr Kennedy):**

Good afternoon. I welcome Patricia Lewsley and her colleagues Gerry Campbell and Jonathan Traynor. You are no stranger to the Committee, and you know the format. You are here to present your annual report almost, or your overview of the work of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) from 2008 to date. You may wish to make an opening statement and leave yourselves available for questions. The session is being reported by Hansard for future consultation.

**Ms Patricia Lewsley (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):**

I thank Committee members for giving me the opportunity to speak to them.

We have already sent you a briefing of our work, and we want to touch on some of that this afternoon. I will start by putting our work in context. We have divided our work into three main areas: the legal and case work team; research and policy; and communications and participation. The staff in each of those areas carry out the duty that the Assembly laid on NICCY when it voted for the creation of the commissioner. As you know, Mr Chairperson, that legislation went through the Committee almost 10 years ago.

At that time, the Assembly said that the commissioner must safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people. That translates into ensuring that Government do what they must do for children and young people. Uniquely, I carry out legal and case work for individual children and young people and/or groups of children and young people.

Over the past three years we have had more than 900 inquiries, ranging from bullying through special educational needs, school transport, provision of care for children with disabilities, housing adaptations for children with special needs and speech and language therapy. There are currently 118 live cases, 18 of which have progressed to the case stage — that is, they have been identified as being of sufficient complexity to need further work.

I want to highlight some of the work that we have done. For example, we have just intervened in a case in the Supreme Court a few weeks ago involving precautionary suspensions. Those are suspensions of pupils from school in which an allegation has been made, but where the pupil suspended has had no opportunity to offer an explanation and sometimes has not been told the allegation or why he or she has been suspended.

A couple of cases have come to us which, we believed, did not warrant our taking legal action. A case was pointed out to us by a parent who was taking it in his own right. We were asked to intervene and that is what we did.

When the case came to the Supreme Court, as I said, I made a written intervention. My intervention added value to the argument that the child's legal representatives were making.

Assembly legislation said that I must have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Supreme Court said that precautionary suspensions are unlawful. Members of my staff are monitoring the Department of Education's response, and I hope that it will update the guidance on suspensions and ensure that a proper process is put in place.

Providing advice to government is also a key part of what I do, and that can happen in many ways, from consultation responses through to service reviews. Often, it comes about when parents and children contact me. An example of that was when I received 80 letters and emails from parents and pupils on the draft equality impact assessment on the proposals to end funding for preparatory schools. We looked at the matter and decided that it was not a rights issue. If the children who went to preparatory schools were being prevented from doing so, the Minister of Education would, nevertheless, fulfil her obligation by giving them education. However, we asked whether the policy was in the best interests of the children. I know that the Minister took into account all the arguments, both ours and others, and decided to reduce the funding of preparatory schools rather than abolish them. That was a positive outcome.

One of the duties set by the Assembly is to seek the views of children and young people as I go about my work. Many Members will have seen my recent consultation on the transfer process, which heard directly from pupils who went through last year's transfer. Contrary to some press reports, the pupils told us a lot more about the process than the fact that they did not like tests. I am also following up on the consultations by engaging the key stakeholders to identify how the current transfer situation might be improved for pupils. If the Committee has not already seen a copy of that, we will send them one or they can see it on our website.

Every day I listen to the voices of children and young people. I do that by going to events and schools. My staff also meet children and young people. Over the last three years, we have met almost 26,000 children and young people. I also have a youth panel of 25 young people whom we have trained as peer-researchers. We have trained them in media skills and they have their own YouTube channel. They sit on all my recruitment panels for staff. They accompany me to meet Ministers. Sometimes, they come to events with me and take some of that time to deliver speeches. Recently, they have been involved in a European network of young advisers, in which they met with children from 17 countries across Europe to give presentations on a European level and platform. I am very proud that children from Northern Ireland have the opportunity and ability to do that and share their experiences with other children.

In this presentation, I hope that the Committee will have seen that NICCY works on a strategic level with government; as a critical friend to Departments and one that is not frightened to censor them when they leave out children and young people. We also work at an individual level.

Before discussing the details of my corporate plan, I wish to highlight more examples that serve to remind us that decisions taken by Departments, boards and trusts have a real effect on individual children. The first one is about mental health. A child was wrongly accused by a school, was sent home on a Friday afternoon, and was told not to come back until the school had notified his parents that he could do so. Luckily, the parent went home early on that Friday afternoon. Sadly, she found her child in the attic trying to hang himself. They contacted us quite quickly, and we were able to intervene and alleviate some of the pressure for that parent and for her presentation at the school. The young person intended to take forward a career in the armed forces, and the fear was that if the parent took the child to a GP, it would go on his medical record and might go against him in the future. We were able to get them help through one of the other children's organisations. As a result, the school settled the issue. We would have liked to have taken it further, but the parent decided that the issue had been dealt with because the child had settled. He took his entrance exams for the armed forces and passed with flying colours even though he was the youngest. He now has the opportunity to further the career that he wanted. That was helped by the intervention of the office.

The next example is about a project that operates in deprived schools across Belfast. I visited one of those schools 18 months ago. An eight-year-old had tried to hang themselves, another eight-year-old found a piece of glass outside school and slashed himself 38 times, and a child of nine had just found her brother trying to commit suicide for the fourth time. The programme worked with those children and their difficult paths. The principals received letters from the Health Department in August that stated that the service was going to be withdrawn. They came to our office for help, and we intervened. The service is now to be extended and evaluated. The power of the office in intervening helped people to stand up and attract attention.

Departments should look at impacts when they start to cut budgets. That is particularly the case today with the outworkings of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) and their implications. Departments sometimes look for small pots of money here and there that add up to a big pot, but they do not look at the impacts that those small pots of money have on people. I am

sure that many Members know of Home-Start, particularly in the Down district. It is run by volunteers and works with 97 families, including 220 children. Home-Start gave me a case study of a parent who was an alcoholic but has now been dry for three years. Her middle child has just been assessed as having autism. Obviously, there is a lot of stress for that mother and the children. If a volunteer did not provide help, where would that family be?

The volunteer, at the thought of that service being cut, went to social services to flag the family as a priority but was told that social services would not get involved until it became a child protection issue. What will those children and that parent have to go through before they reach the child protection stage? Putting one of the children into a children's home would cost just over £2,000 a week. Putting them into a foster placement would cost £500 a week. Running the service costs £6.90. It is about looking at how small sums of money have a big impact. If we are talking about early intervention and prevention, we should be looking at the amount of money that the Department will save down the line in respect of the mother and children's health and all of the issues that go with that.

This month, I launched my consultation into the next three years of work as commissioner. I take members back to 2007. We had just completed a major review of children's rights entitled 'Children's Rights: Rhetoric or Reality', which involved speaking to and meeting more than 2,000 children and young people. It has been downloaded almost 2,500 times. It has been cited extensively by academics and individuals engaged in policy development and evaluation in the statutory and voluntary sectors. It has also informed the work of individuals and agencies who seek to promote the rights of children and young people through legislation, policy and practice.

We had already reduced our number of priorities from 15 to five. We had the concluding observations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to build on. Next year, we will carry out a mid-term report on the progress made by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. This year, we have been involved in the Make it Right campaign, which encourages children and young people to campaign on issues that affect their lives. All MLAs have received a copy of the policy briefing for each month, and we are delighted that some of them have used those policy briefings in debates in the Chamber.

With all that information, we have created a consultation on our corporate plan. The plan focuses on my duties and on safeguarding and promoting the rights and best interests of children.

I look forward to feedback on that corporate plan from this Committee and individual MLAs. Thank you for your time. Of course, we are open to any questions that members want to ask.

**The Chairperson:**

Thanks for your presentation. I am sure that you are aware of the suggestion that has been floated in these straitened economic times that there should be collaboration and co-operation between the various ombudsmen that we have in place. As you are aware, legislation on the Commissioner for Older People and, indeed, the ombudsman is going through. What is your view: is it possible to collaborate and co-operate in respect of staff and resources?

**Ms Lewsley:**

We already do that. We share our IT services with the Equality Commission and outsource our payroll. We house the Older People's Advocate, which saves government money because the rent and overheads are far less than they would pay if that office were in accommodation of its own. We have been very forward thinking about how we can share services. Gerry can back me up or fill in any gaps that I have left; he was part of a shared services group.

**Mr Gerry Campbell (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):**

We contributed to an OFMDFM-sponsored shared services project. It has been stalled, but we are open to examining the options that are available, through OFMDFM-sponsored bodies, to improve the sharing of services for the greater good.

**The Chairperson:**

You conducted a survey and commissioned and published a report on the transfer process. However, was it not a wee bit obvious to get the answers that you got by asking children what they thought of examinations and tests?

**Ms Lewsley:**

To clarify, it was not about whether there should, or should not, be a test or what kind of test there should be. It was about asking young people what it was like to transfer from primary to post-primary. They outlined the issues that stress them out and asked that someone listen to them and rectify those issues in whatever process is put in place. We have had follow-up meetings with the Association for Quality Education (AQE), GL Assessment and all the stakeholders involved, including schools and the unions. They had not thought about some of the issues that

young people raised.

One of the issues that we raised to AQE on behalf of the young people is that they go into what they feel is strange environment and, although some of their friends from school are there, they are put in different rooms, or they are lined up from the front of the classroom to the back. The children said that it would have been easier if they could have gone another way. AQE said that, if the arrangements continue, it will take that into consideration.

The young people accepted that they had to do exams but asked for the things that made exams more stressful to be looked at. I have given a very simple example of the issues that young people raised, but they raised others too. It was about young people having a voice in the debate, because that voice had been absent for some time.

**Mr Kennedy:**

Do you understand the ammunition that that potentially provides for those who are opposed to transfer arrangements of any kind? If a body such as yours indicates the pressures that are felt by children, it gives weight to their argument.

**Ms Lewsley:**

It is not about ammunition. It is about children being able to say that they need to be consulted on whatever process is in place and raise concerns that adults may not think about.

We did not speak only to children who did the test, we spoke to those who did not do the test and talked about how they felt throughout the year. Some of them had serious concerns about getting access to the school of their choice, because there was confusion around free school meals or whether they had a brother or sister at the school. Those are some of the issues that the children raised. As I said earlier, it was not only a case of whether there were exams; it was about taking into consideration some of the issues that young people felt strongly about when they were transferring from a primary school to a post-primary school.

**The Chairperson:**

I apologise to members for asking more questions, but this is interesting. Temporary suspensions are a general issue. You are promoting the best interests of the children. Are there competing rights of teachers and managers of the school to be considered as well? How do you take those



into account? Or, do you take those into account?

**Ms Lewsley:**

It is important to note that regardless of what process a child is involved in, there has to be a proper process. Children had no voice in the process for precautionary suspensions, in particular. They were not allowed to voice their opinions and defend themselves. That is what we are talking about. It is about the processes and guidelines that need to be put in place to ensure that young people have a voice and that appropriate processes are gone through. Young people who received precautionary suspensions from some schools could have been out of school for 45 days because there was no mechanism in place to regulate the timescale in which the suspension had to take place.

**The Chairperson:**

What about the competing rights issue?

**Ms Lewsley:**

For me, you are saying that the young person is guilty before they even have a chance to —

**The Chairperson:**

No. I am saying that everyone has rights.

**Ms Lewsley:**

Of course they do.

**The Chairperson:**

Parents, children, teachers and school management have rights. How do you approach the rights of others, other than the child? Do you approach those rights?

**Ms Lewsley:**

My job is to promote and safeguard the rights of the child. I am saying that children are being denied their rights in many circumstances. Adults' rights may be fine, and they may be following the process that they think is right, but the rights of children are not being upheld because they are not even getting a voice in the process. They are not getting an opportunity to defend themselves in any of that. It is interesting, because we often hear questions about the number of assaults on

teachers. Nobody ever asks the question about the number of assaults that have been recorded on children.

**The Chairperson:**

Are you satisfied that teachers and schools have defenders to defend their views and rights?

**Ms Lewsley:**

I want a proper process so that everyone's rights are upheld.

**The Chairperson:**

That is what you want, but are you satisfied that that is what is happening?

**Ms Lewsley:**

Are you asking whether I am satisfied that adults have defenders?

**The Chairperson:**

Are you satisfied that parents or teachers have defenders?

**Ms Lewsley:**

Teachers have teachers' unions, and parents have the opportunity for legal redress, but, very often, children do not have the same rights.

**Ms M Anderson:**

Thank you for that, Patricia. Given the fact that children are more likely to be the victims of crime than the perpetrators, and we have the statistics and information to see that, it is good to have a body such as the Commissioner for Children and Young People to provide the type of rights and protection that are needed. I want to talk about legal inquiries and cases. I have looked at the sorts of issues that you outlined that you cover. There are a number of them. I sit on the human rights and professional standards committee of the Policing Board. We have almost completed a children and young people thematic inquiry, so it would probably be a good idea to collaborate and co-operate with each other on that before it is published.

I am particularly keen on disability services and speech and language therapy. An action plan on speech and language therapy is out for consultation, and I wonder about your involvement in

that. There is a burning issue in the north-west, specifically in Derry, around assessment and trying to retain what is received once the assessment has been made.

I am also wondering about the power of your findings in respect of disability services for children and young people. If you were to make a recommendation to a trust or Department, for instance, is it accepted? If not, what processes do the individuals or you go through?

**Ms Lewsley:**

We have been proactive in the area of speech and language. Just before I took up post, 128 complaints, particularly about special schools, came to us from parents and young people about the services that they had been denied. As a result, our report came out and showed very quickly that the allocation of services was based on a postcode lottery and that the majority of speech and language therapists were spending their time on administration work such as answering the phone, cancelling appointments and making new appointments.

We have the power to carry out a formal investigation to identify the gaps. We said that we intended to do that, and the Department asked us to have a conversation and try to come to a compromise. That time, the compromise was that the Department put £1.2 million into the budget to help with administration, and established the taskforce on speech and language. The taskforce did its work and made recommendations. Sadly, for whatever reason, those recommendations sat in the Department for some time. We are disappointed with that.

We welcome the fact that the action plan has now been delivered. Some of it is about policy and changes in practice and does not cost money. I met some people from Ms Anderson's constituency some time ago, and, when we went back to the four schools that were originally involved, they said that services were much better and that they were happy. However, we found that that left a gap in the community. They had taken from one side to help the other rather than looking at the delivery of speech and language as a whole in the first place. We continue to monitor that. We welcome some of the movement on it, but a lot more work needs to be done.

I will talk about disability services. We have dealt with individual cases that we brought to fruition, and, when a case is brought to my office, we want its resolution to be as speedy as possible. It is not about considering what legal route to take: very often, as I explained earlier, it is about making a phone call, writing a letter or making an intervention. That makes the outcome

much quicker and much more positive. However, if that does not happen, we have the opportunity to do a formal investigation or take legal action of some kind.

**Mr Humphrey:**

Thanks very much for the presentation, Patricia. I have a couple of wee questions. You mentioned the youth panel of 26 young people. How is that group selected?

**Ms Lewsley:**

They come from a geographical spread and from different social backgrounds. We do not ask someone to be on our youth panel because he or she has a disability or because he or she comes from a certain religious persuasion. We encourage all young people across Northern Ireland to apply. In the last recruitment drive, 52 young people from across Northern Ireland applied for 13 places. We gave them some training, and they peer-selected the young people themselves.

In the last round, we selected for our panel a young person who is a carer, a young person who is deaf, a young person who is severely disabled and young people from ethnic minorities. We select young people from across the spectrum and from different social backgrounds. We now have young people from Derry and from as far away as Enniskillen. It is about encouraging young people from different areas to get involved, and the Assembly's own Youth Panel is based on our youth panel model. This is not about being prescriptive or labelling young people and asking them to join because of their background. That makes them feel like a token gesture.

**Mr Humphrey:**

You mentioned 13 places; is that from the overall 25? Is it rolling?

**Ms Lewsley:**

Yes.

**Mr Humphrey:**

You said that you have been working with six schools across Belfast. What are the names of those schools?

**Ms Lewsley:**

We work with six schools in deprived areas in south Belfast and east Belfast. It was a school

liaison project.

**Mr Humphrey:**

Obviously, I encourage you to roll that out in north Belfast if the resources become available.

**The Chairperson:**

And in Newry and Armagh.

**Mr Humphrey:**

You mentioned suicide, which is a hugely difficult issue across Northern Ireland. It is particularly acute in north and west Belfast, where a number of people have recently died. Very recently, a young fellow took his own life, and that is very difficult for the families and communities.

Is there more proactive work that your organisation can do? I am grateful for the work that you have been doing with schools and youth organisations to try to reduce the number of suicides.

**Ms Lewsley:**

That has exercised the office for some years. The previous commissioner held a conference called “HOPE”, which was run by young people for young people and focused on suicide. As an outworking of that, a lot of young people created a message for the then Minister with responsibility for health, Shaun Woodward by sending him a postcard.

We work very closely with some of the organisations that deliver support. We know about PIPS and some of the other organisations in rural areas that try to work with young people. The key message is about mental health and the related services that need to be delivered in communities. We need to look at innovative ways to deliver those services. Some young people will avail of the services in school, such as school counselling, which was rolled out by the Minister of Education. However, some need that help after 4.00 pm and may need it in the middle of the night. There are helplines, but it is important that we try to extend services.

I talked earlier about our Make it Right campaign. The campaign’s theme for October is mental health. The big issue coming from young people is the stigma around mental health, the

fear of talking about it and not being able to be open and honest about it. One of the biggest issues is the suicide of young males.

**Mr Humphrey:**

Point 5 of your presentation is about communicating with children, young people, families and other key stakeholders. Do you and your organisation liaise with the state youth organisations, such as the Boys' Brigade, the Scouts Association, the Girl Guides and so on?

**Ms Lewsley:**

I have been asked to speak, make presentations and talk about what the office does at many events held by such organisations.

**Mr Humphrey:**

Do you liaise with the people who are at the centre of those organisations?

**Ms Lewsley:**

That happens on an ad hoc basis; it is not a statutory requirement.

**Mr Humphrey:**

I encourage you to do that.

**Mr Jonathan Traynor (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):**

We have a number of projects. We have spoken to the headquarters of those organisations. We will be rolling out a number of projects to encourage the adoption of some of the standards in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We look forward to those engagements continuing.

**Dr Farry:**

I have three questions, which I will ask together for the sake of speed.

The first one follows on from our discussion of mental health issues. I appreciate that our profile of health spending will have mental health spending at below the UK average. Within that, do we still have a situation in which the balance of investment from child mental health is

even worse than it is for adults? If so, are you lobbying the Department to address that balance?

Secondly, you mention in your documentation the importance of tackling bullying, particularly outside schools. I appreciate that every school has a policy on bullying, but the LGBT sector would draw attention to the fact that many are not specific about the topic of homophobic bullying. There may be cultural reasons why our local schools are not prepared to address that specific issue. Are you trying to address that gap?

Finally, you referred to Home-Start, which, by bizarre coincidence, I was talking about on the radio this morning. The logic of the argument for the community and voluntary sector taking forward early interventions is overwhelming. If we are to do that in the context of a public expenditure cut, the flip side of the coin would be to encourage the Department to be prepared to release money for care, because, if early intervention works, the pressure on care should be reduced down the line. However, Departments are often very reluctant to cut spending on their statutory obligations and take the leap into investing in the community and voluntary sector, even though it may be more cost effective and better for the children and families.

**Ms Lewsley:**

Your first point was about mental health. Some time ago, my office did a piece of work on expenditure for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and DFP, and it is probably from that work that you got some of those statistics. It showed that in England £402 per child is spent on personal social services; in Wales, the figure is £427; in Scotland, it is £513; and in Northern Ireland it is £287. We are at the stage in which we are underspending. The best way forward is the implementation of the Bamford review recommendations. However, as with everything else, that needs to be resourced. Mental health, particularly among young people who commit suicide, is one of the biggest and most glaring issues. We will continue to try to influence the Government to make changes and put money where it is needed.

Bullying is a big issue for our office. We produced guidance on bullying for teachers and pupils and sent it to every primary and post-primary school in Northern Ireland. Some schools used the guidance to great effect; others left it on the shelf to gather dust. Schools may have policies in place, but, unless those policies are implemented and the guidance is used, that is not enough. We recommend that schools have school councils to look at policies. Perhaps school councils could provide an opportunity for young people to discuss whether school policies cover

all the issues that they need to cover; for example, LGBT issues, religious issues, ethnic minority issues and so on.

**Dr Farry:**

It is not just about the need for policies to be in place. Sometimes, the problem may be institutional or cultural, and, in those schools — and I am trying to be polite and not call a spade a spade — there may be almost a reluctance to engage on the issue or recognise that it is a genuine problem in our society.

**Ms Lewsley:**

I agree. Sometimes, when we phone schools to ask about their bullying policy, we are told that there is no bullying in the school. However, through the cases that come to us, we know that there is bullying. Therefore, we need people to come forward. Sometimes, if bullying stops or the issue is addressed, the parents and the individual child involved do not want to continue the case. One case that we are looking at involves a young person who has now finished his A levels and left school. The problem is that his solicitors say that his mental health is so bad that he is not able to be put through the case. Sometimes our hands are tied. It is not that we do not want to be harsher or use our powers to make a difference, but we have to look at the well-being and interests of the young people involved. We are looking at the situation, and we need to make sure that, when we do so, we do it properly.

Your final point was about early interventions and good practice. I would like Governments to look at the impact that taking money away would have before they make cuts. I would like them to look at our good practice models and to engage with people, particularly in the voluntary and community sector, because I am not sure that even the Government are aware of all the different services being delivered by that sector.

I do not know whether any of the Committee members were in the Long Gallery when Steve Olds from Washington State spoke. He works in cost-benefit analysis. In the child family practice that he talked about, he said that having a health visitor in a child's life for the first two years costs \$8,000, but that, after those two years, \$27,000 will have been saved. The Health Promotion Agency here is looking at a similar pilot scheme. However, it would need to be linked to all the other services in the community identified as necessary by the health visitor involved. For example, does a family need Home-Start or Lifestart? Services that are more cost-effective



but cheaper to run can have a bigger impact.

**Mr G Robinson:**

My first point is about the make-up of your staff and where you operate from. Is it mainly from one central office in Belfast or are there satellite offices throughout Northern Ireland?

**Ms Lewsley:**

My main office is in Belfast. We used to have three or four satellite offices in which we had space. We took space in a community centre in Ballymena, in the Derry Children's Commission and in Newry.

We found that that was not the best use of our money. Our participation officers go out across Northern Ireland: they are not specific to a particular area, and we have found that that has worked much better. Although I should have a complement of 28, I have 26. Two posts are vacant but, because of the freeze, I am not allowed to recruit.

**Mr G Robinson:**

You talked about the issue of suicide. Do you have social workers working for you?

**Ms Lewsley:**

We have a multiplicity of skills in the workforce. We do not say that we need someone with a social work background to work specifically as a participation officer. Similarly, although we prefer people with a legal background to work in our legal and case work, that is not necessary. Our workforce includes people with a range of skills, including a teacher, someone from the legal profession, and someone who has worked in the youth sector. They work with young people face to face, and they are fairly highly skilled.

**Mr G Robinson:**

Is it all completely cross-community work across Northern Ireland?

**Ms Lewsley:**

Yes, across the board. We go to Ballymena, Armagh, Derry, Enniskillen and Fermanagh — anywhere where we are asked to go. We also work with schools across the board: the 26,000 children are not just from the Belfast area but from across the whole of the North of Ireland.

**Mr McElduff:**

Have you been successful in working with other Departments to ensure that consultation exercises are youth-friendly? This morning, I attended an event in Drumragh Integrated College with sixth-form students. However, it was largely their initiative and concerned the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. They discovered that there was only one event in Belfast where young people could feed into that consultation. A youth-friendly document was drawn up to assist them, but it was inadequate. Therefore, Drumragh Integrated College stepped in and organised the very meaningful event this morning to feed into the consultation. How successful have you been with individual Departments to make those exercises more youth-friendly?

**Ms Lewsley:**

There are two strands to that. The first is that OFMDFM set up the participation network, which is supposed to go out and engage with the adults and to train, help and support them to engage with young people. It is trying to get that mindset, culture and ethos across all the organisations, schools and anywhere else. It is important for us to consult with young people.

We produced a participation statement of intent and sent it to 12 Departments. Nine have signed up, three have not, and we are working very hard with another Department. We are hoping that the other Departments will come on board. We know that the two junior Ministers launched the participation standards last year. We have a children's champion in each Department. We would like them to have a much stronger role of accountability at the end of the year, with respect to how the Department has engaged with young people on legislation and policy, so that it filters down through the Department that whatever policy or legislation is being discussed, it has gone some way, at least, to consult with children and young people.

The issue of participation is strong, and there is some move in that direction. Some Departments have engaged much more proactively than others. We are still trying to bring others round to that way of thinking. Some Departments think that they do not have any contribution to make. For example, the Department of Finance and Personnel says that it does not have any direct contact with young people. Nevertheless, when it comes to budgets, DFP has the opportunity to ensure that money is being spent proportionately and appropriately on children and young people. Participation should be a part of that when the budgets are coming through. It is a work in progress. It is better than it was, but it could be a lot better.

**Mr McElduff:**

Which three Departments have yet to sign up to the participation of intent?

**Ms Lewsley:**

Do you want me to name and shame? We have just written to the new Minister of Justice, and we hope that he will come back to us on that. The other two are the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of the Environment.

**Ms M Anderson:**

I have a question about the provision of services. I appreciate your efforts on early intervention.

Many of you have probably heard of an organisation in Derry called Foyle Search and Rescue. It struggles to get funding year on year. It deals with suicide, and by the time that it is contacted, someone has either tried to take his or her own life or has succeeded. Can you support that organisation? It is struggling to source money from the system. It is such a valuable organisation for everyone across the city and throughout the north-west, regardless of their religious denomination or of whether they even belong to one, and yet it gets a pittance and is operating on a shoestring budget.

**Ms Lewsley:**

It is not my job to lobby Government for funding for any school or organisation such as Home-Start. However, it is my job to point out to Government the impact that any loss of funding for Home-Start or other such organisations might have on children and young people. For example, I will point out the impact that the loss of the search and rescue service would have on the young people and families who have met such tragedy. My job is to put a human angle on the issue but not to lobby for funding on behalf of any organisation.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much for your presentation, and good afternoon.