



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Early Years Event

17 November 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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FOR EDUCATION**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Basil McCrea
Miss Michelle McIlveen

Facilitator:

Ms Lynda Bryans

Panel Members:

Mrs Marie Abbott)	Department of Education
Ms Linda Wilson)	
Ms Marie Cavanagh)	Gingerbread NI
Ms Joy Poots)	Early Years Strategic Alliance
Dr Paschal McKeown)	
Ms Kyra Pauley)	Footprints Women's Centre
Mr Ray Cromie)	National Association of Head Teachers
Ms Clare Majury)	

The Chairperson (Mr Storey):

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the Committee for Education and the Northern Ireland Assembly, I welcome you to this event and thank you for your bravery in facing the elements to be with us tonight.

This meeting is a genuine attempt by the Committee for Education to ensure that all those who have an interest — and it is clear that those in front of me have an interest — in early years, can make their voices heard. There is often criticism directed at us in the House on the hill about whether we listen. However, sometimes it is more a case not of whether we listen but whether we hear. Tonight's event will ensure that you have the opportunity to raise your concerns and it will allow for your voices to be heard.

Those who have been invited here tonight are from organisations that have been in touch with the Committee and its members about the Department of Education's draft early years strategy. Many of you have provided submissions on the draft strategy to the Committee, which have helped to inform its consideration of the policy proposals. The Committee has heard oral evidence from the Department of Education, children in Northern Ireland, the National Association of Head Teachers and the Early Years organisation. The purpose of this evening is to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to come together to discuss the proposals, and, as I said, to know that their voices will be heard. It follows on from a successful event that the Committee for Education held some time ago on special educational needs.

As honestly as a politician can, I want to say that this is not a cynical attempt to give the impression that the Committee has gone through the process of doing what it has to do. As the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, I am committed to ensuring that if a policy is not fit for purpose, the difficulties, challenges, defects and problems associated with that policy are challenged and addressed. That is why this event is so important for the Committee.

It is important to remember that the Department's draft early years strategy is a draft strategy. It has generated a high level of interest and concern among the Committee and stakeholder groups, which is why we felt that holding this event was so important. It will allow you to express your concerns directly to the Department, and to seek clarity on them.

The closing date for submissions is 30 November. If you have not already done so, I urge all who are here tonight to respond to the consultation to ensure that your voices are heard. A transcript of this evening's discussion will be provided by Hansard, and I thank the Hansard team for being available. That transcript will be available as soon as possible on the Committee's Assembly webpage, and a copy will be provided to the Department of Education as a record of the concerns of stakeholders and the issues that were raised. Therefore, what is said this evening will be on record.

At its meeting this afternoon, the Committee for Education agreed that it will table a Committee motion in the Assembly on the draft early years strategy. That debate will raise awareness of the issue, encourage further discussion on it and allow Members, as Committee members and as individuals, to speak about the specifics that are outlined in the proposals. I want to relay the apologies of a number of Committee members. Some are unable to make it to the event this evening due to prior commitments and some hope to join us later.

I will now hand over to our compère for this evening, Lynda Bryans. She will outline the programme for the evening and introduce the departmental officials who will make a presentation in the first session to remind us of the draft strategy proposals that we are here to discuss. Lynda, we have a packed programme and I ask you, the officials, panellists and guests to ensure that we keep things moving as briskly as possible, but not to the extent that we hamper or hinder those who want to contribute to what I am sure will be a useful and profitable evening. Thank you for taking the time to be with us. I present our compère for this evening, Lynda Bryans. *[Applause.]*

Ms Lynda Bryans:

Thank you, Mervyn. I add my welcome to the Chairperson's. It is great to see so many people making the effort to come out tonight to discuss this very important issue, even though the wind is blowing hard and it is a night when most would prefer to be at home by the fire.

As Mervyn said, I will be the MC or facilitator for this evening. You may want to refer to the agenda at the front of your packs for details of this evening's programme. We will begin with a short presentation from Department of Education officials on the strategy proposals. That will be followed by a series of panel discussions — statements and responses really — around the main strategy issues and concerns that have been highlighted to the Committee to date. There will then be an opportunity for the departmental officials to respond briefly to each key issue or concern that is raised.

Our stakeholder panellists have provided a summary list of their key concerns, which can be found in the information pack that has been provided for audience members.

I will then invite comments and questions from the audience, which will be responded to, as appropriate, by the departmental officials or the panellists.

The event will conclude with comments from the Committee Chairperson, Mervyn Storey, at around 9.15 pm or thereabouts. Tea and coffee will be available, and you are encouraged to continue with further discussion of the issues that are raised during the evening.

After a presentation on the policy proposals from senior officials from the Department of Education, I will introduce our invited panellists. The officials presenting to us this evening are Ms Linda Wilson, director of the families and communities team, and Mrs Marie Abbott from the early years team. Members of the audience have been provided with a copy of the Department's presentation.

I ask all contributors to try to stick to their allotted time. I am sure that no one will need reminding of that.

Ms Linda Wilson (Department of Education):

I thank the Education Committee for organising tonight's event and for bringing together so many people with an interest in early years. Marie and I are glad to be here on behalf of the Department of Education (DE) and to have the opportunity to engage with you in what I think will be an interesting, thought-provoking and possibly challenging evening.

We are all here because of our shared interest in and commitment to early years. A growing international range of evidence based on well-funded research demonstrates how important early years education and interventions are. Within the Department, there is a growing understanding of how early years experiences can play a key role in contributing to the Department's overall objectives of raising standards for all, closing the performance gap and increasing access and equity. On a wider front, the role of education is recognised as contributing to a range of Executive strategies, including the forthcoming child poverty strategy.

The Department has published three documents: the draft strategy, the underpinning evidence-based paper, and the consultation response document. I am aware that a number of key organisations will have, or have had, meetings to consult their members, and will respond to the strategy on their behalf. The Department is most grateful to those people for their efforts and initiatives on that. Engagement with stakeholders is key, and the Department is very encouraged by the level of interest and debate that there has been around the strategy.

As I said, DE has developed a clear focus on raising educational attainment and closing the performance gap through increasing access, and addressing issues of equity of access, to quality educational services. The draft strategy focuses on strengthening early years provision that is funded and administered by DE, including preschool education in the statutory and voluntary sectors. Furthermore, in recognition of the importance of the early years of a child's life in determining its future well-being, DE now has responsibility for the Sure Start programme, which is a targeted service for those children aged nought to four, and their parents, who live in the 20% most disadvantaged areas. This early provision, through the Sure Start programme, provides families with the necessary support to ensure that children are well prepared for the future.

The early years strategy is not a broad or all-encompassing strategy for every child between the ages of nought and six. Rather, it clearly reflects DE's interests and responsibilities.

Mrs Marie Abbott (Department of Education):

The Department of Education recognises that the early years matter. The early years of a child's life are critical for its future development and well-being. Interventions early in life can help to reduce barriers to learning that may otherwise reduce a child's longer term chances of success.

The slides show the Department of Education's five main priorities: raising standards for all; closing the performance gap and increasing access and equity; developing the education workforce; improving the learning environment; and transforming education management. Under devolution, the Department has developed a clear focus on those themes. The draft strategy focuses on strengthening our early years provision, which is funded and administered by the Department, in recognition of the vital importance of the early years of a child's life in determining his or her future well-being. The Sure Start programme provides support for children and families in the most disadvantaged areas.

The purpose of the draft strategy is to set out a vision and plan for the development of early years services over the next five years. We know that we have very high quality early years services — preschool education and the Sure Start programmes — and that we can build on that. Reports from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) show that the quality of preschool provision is very high and improving year on year. The Effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) report shows that the benefits of quality preschool education can still be discerned up to the end of Key Stage 1. The latest stage of the EPPNI research, which the Department published in October, showed benefits in attainment and progress in maths and English at Key Stage 2 that can be traced to preschool provision and other factors.

The evidence-based paper supports the strategy and draws on international and local research, but it does not claim to cover all aspects of this complex topic. There is a coherent message in the research about the importance to human growth, learning and development of the earliest years from birth onwards. It forms the basis for ensuring that parents and families are aware of the importance and value of their roles in the earliest phases of a child's development. The EPPNI research findings emphasise the importance of the home learning environment. What parents do is more important than who parents are.

The existing provision includes the transfer of the Sure Start programme from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) in 2006. We also have responsibility for the pre-school education expansion programme (PSEEP). In 2009-2010, 21,187 preschool places were offered in that programme through a partnership with different providers. In 2009-2010, the Department of Education invested more than £50 million in the preschool year.

The Sure Start programme aims to work with parents and children under the age of four to promote the child's physical, intellectual and social development, particularly those who may be disadvantaged. Services are provided through a holistic approach that brings health, education and parenting support services together in a co-ordinated way. Sure Start works with health visitors, midwives, speech and language therapists and other family support staff, and it encourages breast feeding, play, managing behaviour and other aspects of child development. Sure Start offers centre-based and home-based services. It is a targeted programme that operates primarily in the 20% most disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland through 32 partnerships and two associated programmes. However, its services are open to all families living in the designated area.

Both Sure Start and the pre-school education expansion programme are non-compulsory phases of education, care and development services. However, the services are highly valued by parents, professionals and other stakeholders. The foundation stage of the Northern Ireland curriculum applies to all children of compulsory school age in a grant-aided school. It is designed to recognise that early years are a distinct stage in young children's lives and learning that needs a specific curriculum that reflects how children of that age learn best. The foundation stage gives teachers flexibility to match teaching and learning activities to allow children to learn at their own pace.

The main, high-level objectives of the strategy are to improve quality; recognise and respect the role of the parents of young children; increase the Department's engagement with families and communities; improve equity of access; and encourage greater collaboration among the key partners to promote greater integration and service delivery. In addressing the key objectives, the strategy outlines some issues that need to be considered. It has proposed a number of actions that will help to deliver those objectives. Those actions will need to be taken forward with the involvement of other partners, including DHSSPS, the Education and Training Inspectorate, the Health and Social Care Board and health and social care trusts, specialist providers, teachers, parents and other early years practitioners.

I will now outline some of the factors that influence the implementation of a final strategy. We are in a difficult funding context, with possible implications across all Departments.

However, we are aware that overall budgets for the next three years will not be finalised until December, so there can be no assumption of substantial new resources.

We must complement other Department of Education strategies and Minister's policies, including the literacy and numeracy strategy, Every School a Good School, and the review of the special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion strategy. We will also take into account other emerging Executive policies and strategies. The strategy will link to the mental health and well-being strategy being developed by DHSSPS, and the anti-poverty and childcare strategies being led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). Strong partnerships and relationships are key to the success of that work.

The consultation period on the strategy closes on 30 November 2010. We have held nine public consultation events, and a wide range of issues have arisen. All views have been welcomed. The table sets out the major issues that arose, and sets them in the context of Executive-level issues, where the early years strategy will impact on, or be impacted by, the wider work of the Executive. The other external factors are those issues whereby the strategy will involve a collaboration of partners outside the Department of Education, and those issues that the Department can consider and address internally.

We have established an advisory stakeholder group, which will play a key role in contributing to the final strategy in the overall objectives and framework of educational services by providing views and advice on key issues relating to the strategy that emerges from the consultation. The membership will bring expertise in early years policy and practice to assist the Department in that work.

There is an indicative timetable for taking that work forward, and there are other factors to consider, such as the time required to undertake an equality impact assessment (EQIA) of the strategy. However, it is the Department's hope that the strategy can be finalised and in place by May or June 2011.

Ms Bryans:

Thank you very much, ladies, for that summary of the draft strategy document. We will now

invite our panellists to discuss the policy proposals. There will be responses after each one.

We will hear, first of all, from Marie Cavanagh and Paschal McKeown of the Early Years Strategic Alliance (EYSA). They will raise issues on the draft strategy around child poverty and disability. Also representing the alliance are Kyra Pauley and Joy Poots, who will speak about childcare in the community sector and Sure Start.

We have Clare Majury and Ray Cromie representing NAHT — the National Association of Head Teachers’ nursery committee, and Pauline Walmsley representing the Early Years organisation.

Each panel has between four and five minutes to highlight their key concerns or issues, after which officials will respond briefly on behalf of the Department. They will also keep their response to four minutes. Hopefully, guests will find that useful in highlighting key aspects of the draft strategy. The Department’s responses may deal with some of your concerns.

As we move through the series of panel sessions, you may wish to take a note of points that you want to raise later on this evening. We cannot take questions from the floor at this point, but there will be an opportunity to ask questions later.

Marie Cavanagh and Paschal McKeown will start the first of our discussions by highlighting concerns and issues around the impact of the draft strategy on child poverty and disability. Marie and Paschal, you have four minutes between you.

Ms Marie Cavanagh (Gingerbread NI):

Thank you, Lynda. I will spend a couple of minutes looking at child poverty issues from the alliance’s point of view and the implications of the draft strategy.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Starting Strong II report makes strong connections between quality early childhood services and a reduction in child poverty. To achieve that, there is a need for strategic vision and the integration of early childhood education and care, which, in other jurisdictions, has improved children’s outcomes

and counteracted child poverty. That integrated approach is what should be upfront in the strategy.

We are also concerned that there is no mention of child poverty or the poorest children in the strategy. Linda referred to the Child Poverty Act, but the focus and emphasis of the strategy appears to be on areas of disadvantage, particularly Sure Start. Although we acknowledge that Sure Start is both progressive and beneficial, it is, unfortunately, limited in scope, both in its geographical coverage and the age range that it represents. That is particularly relevant for children with disabilities or children who live in particularly isolated rural areas. Even though children in those categories may need the service and fit the age range, they lose out because of their geographical location.

It is also essential that the strategy incorporates the introduction of the Child Poverty Act and the current work being undertaken by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the development of the child poverty strategy. As that has not yet been incorporated into the strategy, there is no recognition of the statutory obligation on the Department of Education and others to contribute to the Executive's efforts to reduce and eradicate child poverty in line with targets that are set out in the Act. Nor is there any acknowledgement of Lifetime Opportunities — the Government's anti-poverty strategy — which adopts a lifestyle approach to tackling poverty and focuses on early years, specifically children aged nought to 4. If the Department of Education truly is to lead on the early years strategy and bring other Departments with it, all that must be included in the draft strategy.

I cannot mention child poverty without referring to welfare reform, which has been ongoing over the past number of years. Last week, the most recent welfare reform White Paper was released. That will impact on all families generally, and children specifically. Without going into the technical detail of the welfare reform proposals, it is safe to say that current research indicates that the proposed cuts in public expenditure and welfare benefits will disproportionately impact on those who are least well off and, by extension, their children. Lone-parent families, and families with children generally, are likely to have their incomes reduced by as much as 20% with the proposed reduction of benefits, the implementation of higher VAT rates and the likely rise in unemployment in the coming 12 to 24 months.

The impact of that will be exacerbated, because there is no consideration of whether the draft strategy recognises the rights of every child to a standard of living adequate to his or her physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. Most recently, in reviewing the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in the UK and Northern Ireland, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, while welcoming increases in expenditure on children, noted its concern that the increases were not sufficient to eradicate poverty or to tackle inequalities.

The Committee also noted that the lack of budgetary analysis and child rights impact assessments made it difficult to identify how much expenditure is allocated to children. In conclusion, in line with that, it is essential that some measurement is put in place in the strategy to allow us to see how developments in early years can impact on the alleviation of child poverty and to identify how Departments can contribute, through early years provision, to the targets on child poverty.

Ms Bryans:

Thank you very much, Marie. You took over four minutes. Did you speak on behalf of both you and Paschal?

Ms Cavanagh:

No.

Ms Bryans:

I will break the rules slightly and give Paschal one minute. If you do not mind, you should be as brief as possible, because I have a strict timeline to stick to.

Dr Paschal McKeown (Early Years Strategic Alliance):

I will try to stick to my time. Good evening and thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak on this important issue. My comments are informed by the views of the Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance and by the experience that Mencap has gained in providing play and learning opportunities for over 40 years for children with a learning disability or developmental delay.

Like the Department, we believe that the early years are crucial in a child's life and that early opportunities to learn and early intervention help to ensure the best start in life for all children as they begin their journey of a lifetime of learning. I am surprised, therefore, that children with disabilities are largely invisible in the draft strategy, particularly children whose needs are identified before they go to school, often in the early days or months of their life. Those children rely on early interventions from a range of professionals and agencies to help to minimise the impact of their disability, to promote their early childhood development and to help them to reach their full potential. Furthermore, they need an early years strategy to recognise and to respond to their distinct needs and circumstances.

Children with disabilities should have access to the same early years opportunities and services that are available to other children. There is limited evidence on whether that is the case, but the indications are that early years services are not always accessible or welcoming to all disabled children. The absence of a commitment in the strategy to examine and to address the barriers faced by disabled children and their families makes me less confident that disabled children will enjoy equal benefit from the strategy. The emphasis that is placed on area-based planning and targeted areas of disadvantage is likely to have an adverse impact on children with disabilities, who are geographically dispersed and do not live in one geographical area.

The focus in the strategy on collaborative working with other agencies, particularly those that are involved in health and social care, is to be welcomed, given that disabled children and their families are only too aware of the impact of professional and structural silos on their ability to access the support that they need, when and how they need it. However, I wonder whether the strategy goes far enough and whether the actions that have been identified will really resolve the difficulties that families regularly and repeatedly face as they try to understand and navigate their way through the complex structures and processes by which need is identified and support is provided. I suggest that we need to go beyond asking agencies to work together and, instead, move to a statutory duty to co-operate on the joint planning and commissioning of services for children.

On a final note, I will comment on the links between the early years strategy and other strategies that have been developed by the Department of Education, such as the SEN and

inclusion strategy, and those that have been developed by other Departments, such as the Bamford action plan and the childcare strategy. I understand the complexity of the challenge but urge the Department to ensure that the needs of children with disabilities and with special educational needs are fully reflected in the early years strategy. Moreover, it should ensure that the strategy does more than just focus on educational services. This is a unique opportunity to develop a strategic vision and set the direction for all early years services for all children across Northern Ireland. We should not miss that opportunity.

Ms Bryans:

Thank you very much. I will hand over to the Department officials to respond briefly to the points raised by Marie and Paschal.

Ms L Wilson:

I will be very brief. Education has a very significant role to play to address child poverty in the longer term and to ensure that poverty in childhood does not translate into poor experiences and outcomes. There is a clear relationship between underachievement and socio-economic disadvantage. We are working with OFMDFM in the preparation of the draft strategy. We have a framework of programmes in place that aims to address educational attainment by improving standards and removing the barriers to inclusion, and the early years strategy will be an important part of that response. Therefore, in the final strategy we will be able to reflect clearly the Executive's child poverty strategy. The measurement will link across, and that will be addressed. We will endeavour to weave other key policies more clearly into the strategy on disability.

Mrs Abbott:

In respect of early interventions, we recognise that those are a means of identifying and addressing the specific needs of a child in a timely way. However, before school, identified needs are assessed, and support is identified and put in place by health providers. When children reach school age, the school must pay attention to how it can support those children in an educational setting.

We welcome the proposal for the extension in the SEN and inclusion review of the revised framework in all Department of Education funded preschool provision. It covers the statutory

sector, and it is intended to extend that to include those providing the preschool year in the voluntary and private sector. Through the proposal, those providers would have access to training, advice and expertise in the education and library board or the education and skills authority (ESA).

Ms Bryans:

Thank you both for that response. Our next discussion relates to childcare in the community sector and Sure Start. I invite our panellists Kyra and Joy to briefly highlight their main concerns about the impact of the draft strategy in that area. I remind speakers that you have four minutes in total.

Ms Kyra Pauley (Footprints Women's Centre):

Chair, Members of the Assembly and guests, I am speaking on behalf of the Early Years Strategic Alliance, which is an alliance between the children's sector and the women's sector. As a key part of the early years' sector, we must highlight the important role of community-based women's centres and community childcare providers in the delivery of services to children and families. Those valuable service providers have been virtually excluded from the strategy, along with childminding, home-based care and after schools. We cannot ignore the existing network of community organisations that deliver first-class early years services through the medium of childcare, often in areas of social and economic disadvantage that are still recovering from the conflict and are suffering child poverty. In those settings, early indications of developmental delays can be recognised, and early interventions are implemented. Numerous representatives from the community sector give their time to contribute to regional thematic groups to inform the evidence-based paper that was presented alongside the strategy document. Those groups focused on contributing to the development of an early years and childcare strategy.

Last year, 1,364 children benefited from services in 13 women's centres in Northern Ireland alone. That is not including what the community sector provided. The range of services provided by the women's and community sector is unique and has a proven track record for success in engaging and retaining hard-to-reach families. There will be a cost to those families if the community sector is excluded from that process.

The strategy makes limited commitment to supporting the development of nought-to-three year olds. The reference to Sure Start on the expansion of the programme for two year olds indicates a lack of relevant knowledge. Sure Start is an excellent partnership model, but it is reliant on local community providers to deliver elements of its programme, in particular the programme for two-year-olds is often delivered in community settings. Places are limited and waiting lists are long.

The community and women's sector delivers quality services and encourages ongoing professional development. It is disappointing that the strategy states workforce development as an objective and limits it to Department of Education funded projects only, thus compounding inequity and creating barriers that will restrict the improvement of quality of services for children, particularly in the nought-to-three age range.

The strategy indicates that no assumption should be made for substantial new resources. How will the objectives be achieved without additional investment? It is incumbent on the Minister of Education to lobby her colleagues across Departments to obtain further investment in early years services. Thank you for this opportunity to speak. On that note, I will pass you to my colleague Joy Poots.

Ms Joy Poots (Early Years Strategic Alliance):

First, I thank the Education Committee for the opportunity to make a contribution to this important policy debate. I shall reiterate the points made by the other panellists that we urgently need a medium to long-term vision for early years and for that vision to be delivered through a collaborative approach involving all the relevant Departments and stakeholders. Unfortunately, I believe that the draft strategy contains too many gaps to be either strategic or integrated. I want to draw attention to a few major gaps from a Sure Start prospective.

The draft strategy supposedly starts from birth. It omits any reference to pregnancy followed by scant attention to the vital importance of that early attachment relationship with the primary care giver, who is usually the mother. That is disconcerting given that, from the outset, Sure Start programmes in Northern Ireland were tasked with trying to engage parents from pregnancy, with many programmes having midwives on their staff team, and all working, at some level, with

statutory maternity services. Even if viewed solely through the narrow lens of improving educational outcomes, that omission is unsatisfactory given the Department's research, which showed that a low birth rate is one of the most significant variables in lower attainments in English and mathematics by the end of a child's primary education. There is now a huge body of neuroscience evidence that shows that the last trimester of pregnancy and the first two years of life is the critical period for the hard-wiring of the brain. To put it bluntly, waiting to intervene until the preschool years is too late.

A second big gap with the draft strategy is the almost total focus on services and activities with children and/or parents in group settings. Individually tailored services such as home visiting and family support are referenced only in the description of Sure Start core services. The vital importance of one-to-one work, particularly with isolated and vulnerable families and those who do not wish to or cannot engage in groups, seems to be unrecognised, whether that is provided by Sure Start, generic health visitors or voluntary organisations such as Home-Start or the Lifestart Foundation.

There is also little recognition of the deficits in current facilities for early years services, never mind whether there will be an expansion of Sure Start or the programme for two years olds. The millions of pounds allocated to Northern Ireland for children's centres during the Labour Administration seem to have disappeared into a black hole, and children's centres are not even mentioned in the draft strategy. The strategy needs to incentivise the sharing of premises or collocation, and work to reduce and not increase organisational or bureaucratic barriers to that.

Local Sure Start programmes are partnerships of the community, voluntary and statutory sectors working collaboratively to create a synergy that will result in real change at a local level. Genuine partnership working at the local level is challenging, but it must be supported at a policy level by joined-up working that involves all the relevant Departments. Most of all, we need clear leadership from the lead Department for early years, which, although not responsible for all early years and some of the funding, needs to drive forward the agenda for a comprehensive and integrated early years services.

Ms Bryans:

Joy, sorry to interrupt, but I must ask you to conclude please.

Ms J Poots:

I just have one final point. We expected that the consultation with children and parents and the process of equality impact assessments would have started already. The Department also needs to consider children's rights in the strategy, especially for those young children with no voice of their own. If equality impact assessments were carried out at the outset, as required by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, perhaps we would have seen the glaring omissions in the draft strategy in relation to children with disabilities, Traveller children and children who cannot yet communicate in English.

Ms Bryans:

Joy Poots and Kyra Pauley thank you very much. Linda and/or Marie, will you please respond briefly to the points that were raised?

Ms L Wilson:

On the issue of childcare, OFMDFM, together with a range of Departments, has been working on a policy and an economic appraisal for the development of strategy for childcare as part of its strategic work on tackling poverty and disadvantage. It is expected that that work will be brought to the Executive in due course. One of the key issues was the identification of a lead Department for that work. However, regardless of what the lead Department is, our strategy needs to take account of the OFMDFM childcare work.

On the issue of funding, we have lodged bids in the current budgetary exercise, but do not yet know the outcome. Funding will present a significant challenge as many of the programmes are fairly expensive and will require significant investment if they are to be extended in the way that people want.

Ms Abbott:

We are aware that Sure Start provides support for parents and prospective parents, and, although it may be more strongly developed in some areas than in others, that is a key part of the services

provided. The purpose of the Sure Start children's centres in England was to integrate service provision with health, education and family support teams working in a collaborative way. The ethos of Sure Start in the North of Ireland has been to build on and co-ordinate existing services and good practice, rather than the displacement or duplication of services. The Sure Start partnerships offer a range of services across a wide geographical area, which utilise local venues as appropriate.

This promotes integrated working, but is also necessary, because Sure Start partnerships can cover anything from two to eight electoral wards. Therefore, the idea of everything being located in one setting or centre is not always the most appropriate in Northern Ireland.

Ms Bryans:

Thank you very much.

I will go off-script a little to ask whether everyone can hear OK. It is quite difficult to hear up here. Perhaps the departmental officials can speak up a little in their next response, because it is difficult to catch what is being said. Hopefully, that will help.

I remind the audience that if anyone wants to follow up on any issue that has been raised so far, or on the Department's responses, make a note as we go through the evening and you can raise it later. At the end of the evening we will have a roving mic, and I will talk you through how we are going to do the question and answer session.

The third panel discussion looks at the draft strategy from the perspective of the nursery and primary school sector. To highlight the major issues on that, we welcome Claire Majury and Ray Cromie, who now have five minutes in which to speak.

Ms Clare Majury (National Association of Head Teachers):

Thank you. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) considers the strategy not to be a strategy of innovation and forward thinking but one of missed opportunities. It is not a nought-to-six strategy. We were promised a strategy that would be universal and bring together all services for young people. This does not do that. It disregards children from birth to three years

old, makes scant mention of Sure Start, places its main emphasis on the preschool sector, and makes brief comments on and proposed changes to the primary school sector, which it then fails to elaborate on.

The use of research in the strategy is questionable, and it is our opinion that children are not at the heart of this. The strategy wastes the opportunity to look at what is best quality and at what best meets the needs of our children, our families and our communities, in favour of redefining the preschool workforce. It is an exercise in equity of employment, rather than in providing the best education for our young children. The terms and conditions of employment for adults should not be the focus of this strategy.

The strategy also shows a complete lack of awareness of what happens in the preschool sector. What it puts forward as new ideas, such as family support, liaison with other professionals, special educational needs intervention and support, is good practice in many nursery schools, nursery classes and other settings. The nought-to-six strategy should have looked at what is best practice and found ways to build upon that. We have already put forward models to ESA and the Committee for Education discussing ways in which that could be done.

It is time that the Department of Education was asked whether it really thinks that this strategy is good enough for our children. Unfortunately, we do not.

In addition to the quality of the strategy, the consultation process is completely invalid due to the total absence of any cost projections or funding models. The Department has also failed in its promise to re-consult the working groups prior to the release of the strategy. We in the NAHT ask that the Department of Education extend the consultation period and, in light of the current economic climate, publish additional information giving full details of all expected costs and financial projections relating to the strategy.

We also ask that the Department of Education highlight which areas of the strategy, in its current form, it would implement first and how it proposes to fund and roll-out the strategy over a five-year period. Only when we have that level of information, and only when that level of detail is made available to parents and stakeholders, can the consultation be truly regarded as valid and

informed.

I look forward to your comments.

[Applause.]

Mr Ray Cromie (National Association of Head Teachers):

I am not too sure whether I got that applause for being the only male here. *[Laughter.]*

Ladies and gentlemen, the evidence-based document states that starting school can be described as one of the major challenges that a child can face at a young age. The experience can set the tone of a child's time at school. That statement highlights just how important the issue of quality preschool provision is for the life chances of our young people. However, for too long, the area has been given little priority by government.

As the principal of a primary school and nursery unit, I recognise that challenge and the importance of setting the right scene for our children at the very start of their educational experiences. The Northern Ireland curriculum directly links into and builds on the curriculum offered in the preschool setting, which makes the transition from nursery to primary education as seamless as possible. However, as educators of young people, we face many challenges in the pursuit of providing excellence in curriculum provision and care.

The special needs and inclusion policy has resulted in a much higher level of need being identified within the mainstream sector. As such, that places particular demands on schools and staff.

Early identification of need is seen as a vital component of the nought to 6 strategy. However, that has long been recognised within the special needs code of practice, under which all nursery and primary schools have to operate. There has also been much development in integrating services.

However, above all else, the system of early identification of need and the provision of

appropriate intervention in those sectors has only been possible due to the professionalism and knowledge of the teaching staff involved. That is one reason why there is a real need for professionally trained teachers to be at the forefront of all preschool education.

Now is the time to move from statements of good intent and to leave aside political affiliations in the interests of our young people. The reorganisation of education and health under the review of public administration (RPA) offers a tremendous opportunity to do things differently. Although I recognise the important work that voluntary groups have done in preschool provision to date, it is time to bring the preschool year into the foundation stage.

This is the time to act; there is no need for further consultation. The evidence is in the Education and Training Inspectorate's studies and the chief inspector's report from 2009. Quality preschool provision is to be found in the statutory sector's nursery schools and nursery units. We see that as a major challenge for the Executive, but we also see it as a tremendous opportunity to get our early years provision right.

That may well require a change to the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2009, but surely that is what a consultation should be asking and exploring.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a challenge. Are we in Northern Ireland up to it? *[Applause.]*

Ms Bryans:

Thank you very much to Clare and Ray.

Linda, Clare ended her presentation by saying that she looked forward to your response, so we will hear either your response or Marie's to the points that were raised.

Ms L Wilson:

I will answer the last points first, which touched on the fact that we have a mixed economy of statutory and voluntary provision. The Department acknowledges the contribution and quality provided by teachers in statutory nursery schools and nursery units that are attached to primary schools. However, we also take the view that there is high-quality provision in voluntary and

private preschool settings. *[Applause.]*

The chief inspector's report commented encouragingly about the development of preschool provision generally. He said that, while the highest percentage of good-to-outstanding practice remained in the statutory nursery school sector, it was encouraging to note the improvement in the number of statutory nursery units and voluntary private settings that fell into that category. The fact that standards are rising generally in preschool provision is to be welcomed, but we should not forget that there are areas for improvement in all types of settings.

It is not normal practice for a strategy of this nature to provide detailed financial costings and financial projections. We cannot provide financial projections, given the uncertainty of the current budgetary position. We will go away and look at the request for that.

Similarly, the request to extend the consultation is something that we would need to take back to our Minister.

Mrs Abbott:

As Linda said, the workforce comments were that we have a very good service provision in both sectors. However, the strategy seeks to focus on improving quality and strengthening capacity where those are required. This is not a deficit model, as we do have great strengths.

However, there is a gap. Quality is linked to the skills and qualification of staff, and the strategy seeks to increase the minimum level of standards that are in some early years provision, so that everyone who provides early years care and education can be qualified appropriately, and can access continuous professional development opportunities.

Ms Bryans:

OK. Thank you very much for that response. The last panel discussion will look at the Department's draft strategy from the viewpoint of the Early Years organisation.

Ms Pauline Walmsley (Early Years):

I thank Mervyn Storey and the Education Committee. We know that early child and brain

development sets trajectories in health, learning and behaviour for life. That understanding is shared across political parties, and the sectors represented here. How we apply that knowledge in Northern Ireland will determine whether we as a society and an economy will be successful in the twenty-first century.

Early Years, representing 1,200 local early care and education providers, 30,000 parents, a workforce of 10,000, and a further volunteer network of 10,000, sees the development of a coherent, integrated nought to six strategy as imperative. Our views are informed by the recent consultation sessions that we held with over 1,000 providers and parents across Northern Ireland, including preschool playgroups, independent day care, statutory nursery schools and units, Sure Start projects, and representatives from other voluntary sector organisations.

The nought to six strategy provides a solid vision statement outlining the commitment to enabling every child to reach his or her potential by giving each the best start in life. However, the general direction of the document does not bear out that vision. Rather, it concentrates on only provision funded by the Department of Education. The vision needs to reaffirm early childhood care and education as the right of all children, and the basis of human development.

Over the next five years, short- to medium-term goals must clearly articulate how education and care services for children from birth to three years old will be enhanced and developed, urgently outline how services for children aged three-plus can be delivered in an equitable and accessible fashion to ensure that every child, regardless of the setting they he or she in, is afforded the same opportunities, and, as other panellists said, be aligned with other key policies and strategies: parental leave, childcare, play and leisure, cohesion, integration and sharing, and integrated into all regional and rural development plans and poverty reduction strategies.

Specifically, use the evidence of what is working well in Sure Start to roll the Sure Start model out across Northern Ireland. Roll out the programme for two-year-olds incrementally, using the diverse economy of providers. Expand the two-year-olds programme to 15 hours, and the preschool programme to 20 hours. Create a curriculum that links learning and care from birth to three-years-old with that for three- to six-year-olds. Allow parents to pay for wraparound childcare in funded provision. Develop a training qualification and a professional development

strategy for the entire workforce working with 0-3 and 3-6 that recognises the experience that all staff bring, regardless of sector.

Provide clear, accessible information for parents about their entitlements, and the availability of services. Create a streamlined, efficient approach to planning, registration, inspection and quality improvement. Create a level playing field for all preschool providers by creating a single funding formula, ending two-year-olds occupying preschool places, and ending reception provision where there is adequate preschool provision; and creating a consistent approach to part-time and full-time provision in the voluntary, statutory and independent sectors, including staff ratios, and support for children with special needs.

The longer-term goals are to develop an early education and care act that provides a legislative basis for the financing, supervision and co-ordination of all education and care services for young children; to work towards a graduate pedagogy in the workforce for all who care for and educate young children; and to raise the school starting age to six.

The solutions and the evidence are available. We have no time to waste. We must start work on the establishment of an early care and education system that builds on what is working well. To do that, we need political will, robust early childhood programmes and policies and consensus among us all. In the words of the Nobel prize-winning economist, James Heckman:

“We cannot wait until they are adults, or until they start school, a time when it is already too late. We must invest now in early childhood care and education. Young children cannot wait. Their time is now. Now is our time to build the foundations for the wealth of nations.”

[Applause.]

Ms Bryans:

Thank you. I invite Linda or Marie to respond to the points that Pauline raised.

Ms L Wilson:

I will comment on the range of the strategy, because a number of panellists have raised that issue. The strategy focuses on strengthening the early years provision that is funded and administered by DE. It reflects the fact that, under devolution, DE has developed a clear focus on raising

educational attainment and addressing equity and access to quality educational services. I am encouraged by the desire to roll out proposals such as the Sure Start model and the programme for two-year-olds. That is the very much the direction in which we would like to go. However, significant resources are required to do that. To some extent, it is funding dependent.

On a separate note: the Department is working to address underage children's occupation of preschool places, particularly where that displaces correct-age children.

Mrs Abbott:

The aspirations of early years clearly go beyond our scope or resource level. That is just a general comment in response to the points raised.

Ms Bryans:

I am sorry: I really cannot hear you terribly well. Would you mind repeating that?

Mrs Abbott:

Clearly, the aspirations of the early years organisation, and the statements about universal and free services for all children, go beyond the scope and resources that the DE strategy can offer.

Ms Bryans:

Fair enough. Thank you for your responses, and thank you to all the panellists for their contributions. However, your work is by no means done, because we are about to move to our roving microphone session. I hope that you were able to hear a little more clearly than I was; the acoustic up here is not the best. We move now to the contributions from you, our guests. If you want to raise an issue, please raise your hand. I am sure that that you will want to follow up on many of the issues that have been raised this evening. If you raise your hand, the Committee staff will make their way to you with a microphone.

I will set out some basic guidelines for this session. First of all, we will try to remain polite and courteous; hopefully, I do not need to remind you about that. Secondly — this is a very important issue — we cannot raise any specific or individual cases. Apart from any issues of privacy, we are here to discuss the draft strategy proposals and nothing more. Thirdly, we will try

to let as many guests contribute as possible. For that reason, I ask you to make your point as briefly and as concisely as you can. You will have maximum of one minute so that we can hear as many points of view as possible.

The bonus for those who are concise is that, if time permits, I may be able to give them a very short right of reply to the officials or panellists. Therefore, you should be as succinct as possible. As the Chairman said, Hansard is here, and, therefore, all the views and comments can be accurately recorded.

For reasons of fairness, I will try to ensure comments and questions from across different organisations that are represented this evening. Therefore, if your organisation has had a chance to comment, please give others a chance to do so. I ask you to speak clearly into the microphone and state your name and the organisation that you represent. I am told that the microphones work best if you hold them to your chin, like a sports commentator. I will remind you of those guidelines as we go along.

Ms Eleanor Jordan:

I work at the Windsor Women's Centre, and I want to ask a question to the Department of Education. What happened to the Children First strategy, which at least mentioned affordable childcare? To me, this is not an update of the Children First strategy. Therefore, where has that policy gone? We have now diverted, and childcare is not mentioned. I commend the panellist who asked about the inclusion of the women's sector and the community sector. Moreover, how on earth can Sure Start deliver if it cannot work in the good partnership that it has with community premises?

Ms L Wilson:

As I said, OFMDFM is working on a policy and an economic appraisal for childcare, and the strategy focuses on the DE educational provision. I do not quite understand the point about the women's sector.

Ms Jordan:

Kyra mentioned earlier — neither of the Department of Education representatives responded —

that the women's sector and the community sector, and, indeed, the disability sector, barely appear in the document. Why is that not a big issue?

Mrs Abbott:

The women's sector is not named separately, but we are aware that some women's centres and women's organisations are part of the broader Sure Start partnership and play an important role in that. However, we do not have direct funding responsibility for childcare and, therefore, have limited engagement with the women's centres.

Ms Jordan:

I appreciate that you do not have funding responsibility; maybe that is the crux of that problem. Who has responsibility for childcare? Which lead body should take that forward?

Mrs Abbott:

It is not appropriate for me to name a Department or a lead body. However, that is one of the exercises that OFMDFM is carrying out in looking at childcare, and, in a sense, it is picking up some of the unresolved points from the Children First strategy. Many Departments, including the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), DE, DHSSPS, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department for Social Development (DSD), have supported childcare for different agendas to tackle disadvantage or to promote training and education. There are different involvements within limited support for childcare.

Ms Pauley:

I find it very disappointing and almost insulting that there is no recognition of what the community sector and women's sector provide on early years education for children. It is much more than childcare. We work with children and families on the front line, and, when women walk through the door, we get right down there and provide one-to-one parenting support in the day care facility. Yes, that involves childcare, but there are very focused models of excellence such as the Birth to Three Matters model and the HighScope model. It is very short-sighted of the Department of Education to not note those facilities in the strategy, and I would appreciate if the Department reflects on that. I thank Eleanor for bringing that point up.

Ms J Poots:

Sure Start used to be under the Department of Health. When it was transferred to the Department of Education, we were told that that was because the Department of Education was now the lead Department for early years. Is the Department of Education the lead Department for early years?

Ms L Wilson:

No, it is not.

Ms J Poots:

It is not?

Ms L Wilson:

Obviously, we are a key player, but we are not designated as the lead Department for early years.

Ms J Poots:

So, there is no lead Department for early years?

Mrs Abbott:

It is a shared responsibility in that one Department owns policy lead, and the other deals with the regulation and operational side of early years.

Ms J Poots:

So, the Department has the policy lead for early years.

Mrs Abbott:

The policy lead for some early years.

Ms J Poots:

For some early years?

Ms Bryans:

OK, I thank you. Maybe that is another issue that will come, because joined-up thinking was

mentioned in many of your presentations.

Ms Mary Black (Public Health Agency):

I want to continue the discussion about who has the lead for early years. There is a tremendous opportunity in front of us. We will be having a new Programme for Government. Can we not here in Northern Ireland, based on all the evidence that everybody here will agree to, and based on the models that we have and know are effective, not put our heads together and say that this is an issue that is so important, and the evidence so strong, that it should go across several Government Departments? It could well be that the Department of Education leads that fight on behalf of everyone, but should this not be central in the next Programme for Government?

Ms Bryans:

OK, thanks, Mary. Did you make the point earlier that it is maybe not in your remit to answer that question, or would you like to comment?

Ms L Wilson:

I am not writing the Programme for Government. It is a very fair point. It is the Executive's Programme for Government, and that will be an Executive issue.

Mr Stuart McKenzie:

I do not represent an organisation. I am a parent, and I am disappointed to see that more parents are not on the schedule of stakeholders.

I echo the concerns of the National Association of Head Teachers. I would not have known about this consultation but for them, nor would many other parents. The association's efforts made me aware, and a lot of my ilk do not know about this public consultation. With that in mind, I strongly recommend that the consultation period is extended. The consultation began at the end of June/July, at the end of the school term. Parents did not have the opportunity to find out about the consultation until their children started at nursery. If it was not for some head teachers and some nursery education providers, we would not have known.

Ms Bryans:

Did you want a response to that? It was really a statement on the role of parents.

Mr McKenzie:

It was more a statement, but also a request to have the consultation period extended. It is not at all long enough. I believe that the paper took seven years to develop, and five months for a consultation is a good reflection of what I am saying.

Ms Pip Jaffa (Parents' Advice Centre):

Following on from what the gentleman said, as far back as August or September, we approached the Department of Education to ask whether we could consult widely and regionally with parents about the strategy. We have had some discussions but no definitive answer on whether we could or not. We are well used to doing such consultations with parents, and, even at this late hour, we are very keen to carry out consultations with parents, whose voices are extremely important as are the voices of children and young people.

Ms Áine McCabe:

I work in the greater Falls area in a community setting, delivering childcare. We are also the leading accountable body for Sure Start. I will give two stark statistics: 27·9% of school leavers in the Falls area and 34·9% in the Shankill achieved at least five of more GCSEs against a figure of 66·9% in the whole of the North.

When talking about integration in government and looking at working across Departments, it is important to say that we need to get right the objective of working together between health and education. However, it is also incumbent on the Department to realise that it is required that the underpinning community infrastructure that Marie mentioned is not displaced and that centres such as ours are utilised for programmes such as Sure Start. We are at risk of losing DSD funding for neighbourhood renewal in areas of disadvantage. We need to look at all of that, because, unless that is rolled out beyond March 2011, the community infrastructure that underpins that support will not be there.

[Applause.]

Ms Leigh-Anne McGilton:

I am a parent. What provisions are there for children with special educational needs prior to school placement? There do not seem to be any nurseries that can take children with special educational needs.

Ms Bryans:

We shall start with the officials from the Department. Linda or Marie, where is the provision for SEN children prior to school?

Mrs Abbott:

There are a number of options, but those tend to be in the field of health provision. I know that MENCAP has its own services for children with learning difficulties. The assessment of need of young children is carried out by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. DE's role comes in when children enter education services and receive educational provision.

Dr McKeown:

The MENCAP service provides a facility for around 50 children in the greater Belfast area. We do not have any research that looks at whether all children who have disabilities find local preschool provision fully accessible for them. We are aware of parents coming to us and facing a number of barriers. Perhaps their children are still in nappies or perhaps they do not find the place to be very welcoming. There is an issue around places being welcoming and accessible to all disabled children.

Ms McGilton:

I feel that there is definitely a lack of provision, and there seems to be a lot of barriers to getting a placement anywhere. I am keen to find out about that.

Ms Bryans:

That is exactly what you have highlighted.

Mr Charlie Simpson:

My name is Charlie Simpson. I am a teacher and a SENCO in a post-primary school. I am also the parent of a fully statemented child who attends a nursery school. I have concerns as to where the nought-to-six strategy is going when it comes to children with additional needs. I am very aware of the incredibly complex nature of the code of practice and the high level of training and expertise that is required to initially assess a child, liaise with other agencies and set and monitor a child's process, as well as all the documentation and time spent with other agencies to put an appropriate individualised programme in place for a child.

Is it fair to expect a person with an NVQ to take on that level of responsibility and accountability? Is there a real danger that the quality of experiences for children with additional needs and their families will be diluted as a result of this strategy?

Mrs Abbott:

As I understand it, the education and library boards can nominate a place in which children with a statement of special needs can receive appropriate support and care. That is usually in a statutory sector setting. The SEN proposal broadens the training and support from the ESA or the education and library boards to ensure that voluntary sector settings would start to be included and that people working in that sector could draw on that support. It does not mean that people would be unsupported. The proposal brings the voluntary sector under the umbrella of the services and support that the education sector offers. The responsibility would be with the special educational needs review within the Department.

Ms Majury:

We really appreciate those comments from the audience. Both parents have made the point that it is incredibly difficult to get any provision put in place for a child with special educational or additional needs in the preschool sector. That is down to the reluctance to statement very young children, which means that children with additional needs come into the nursery sector, at which stage we perform the statementing process. Those children do not always get the additional levels of support that they need. It is depressing that the strategy did not see that as a major issue and address it.

[Applause.]

Ms Walmsley:

I concur with Clare's comments. Regardless of where children are placed, whether that is in the voluntary or statutory sector, it is very important that appropriate support is in place for children and their parents. We should remember that, in many cases, parents will choose to send their child with special needs to a voluntary sector provision, or, particularly in rural areas, that may be the only provision available. Therefore, I agree with Clare, but think that it is very important that support for that process is made available within the voluntary sector as well as the statutory sector.

[Applause.]

Mr C Simpson:

We live in a rural area and applied through the normal process.

Ms Bryans:

I outlined at the beginning why we cannot discuss individual cases or issues. Thank you very much for your question.

Ms Pauley:

Within the community sector the majority of projects are fully inclusive. We have put huge investment into upskilling the childcare staff teams. Many of those girls have NVQ level 3 qualifications and are very gifted in working with children with additional support needs. It would be a very big step for a child to be excluded. The child is always put first. You should go to your local community organisation, because it will try its best to accommodate the parent and the child.

[Applause.]

Ms Bryans:

Mr Simpson, I will give you the right of reply if you want to speak in general terms. If not, we

will move on.

Ms Tish Holland:

My name is Tish Holland and I am from the Upper Andersonstown Community Forum. I am looking at Marie, because she is one of the people who helped start our group.

I want to take you all back. Around 15 or more years ago, a number of community groups conducted door-to-door surveys throughout the west Belfast area generally. Subsequently, depending on need, we established community-based, social-economy, day care projects. That involved linking crèche provision to jobs, education and training. With regard to the draft strategy for nought- to six-year-olds, you might talk about Sure Start. However, its remit is limited. There is a place for the social economy and, indeed, for playgroups and mother-and-toddler groups. Where do we sit in that?

Ms Bryans:

Do you want to hear from Department officials or Joy Poots from Sure Start? Perhaps, Joy Poots could respond first.

Ms J Poots:

One reason why I mentioned that pregnancy is not referred to in the draft strategy is because there is a tendency for people to develop policy on the hoof, and to say suddenly that you can or cannot do something, without any consultation. Sure Start's work does not have to be limited. The menu of services and things that it can do is actually wide. The difficulty, as with everything else, is funding, Tish. However, not everything has to be funded through Sure Start. Groups and agencies need to maximise resources from Government or other funding that is available in order to achieve the best outcomes, particularly in disadvantaged areas where there has been no investment.

You referred to your centre, as a place and premises, being built. It is extremely worrying that that type of investment, which was, possibly, available under Peace, has totally dried up. I repeat the question: what happened to all of the money that came to Northern Ireland? Marie, it does not necessarily have to be a children's centre. We need physical resource investment in early

years. We know that the capital budget is a big problem for the entire Executive. However, money that came for early years services has disappeared into other circles. Therefore, the Department and the Minister must make the argument for capital investment in that area.

[Applause.]

Ms Bryans:

Marie, Tish mentioned that you helped to start the group in upper Andersonstown. Perhaps, you have a response to Joy's comments.

Mrs Abbott:

That was in another life, a previous post. I recognise and greatly appreciate that so much infrastructure at community level has developed because of local people's drive, imagination and vision. Many organisations still work in that area.

To return to the point that was made earlier, the entire question of childcare really is one that is shared across different Departments. They have invested in it at different times and for different purposes. There is a clear requirement on the Executive to try to see how best all of those interests can be brought together in a future strategy for childcare.

Ms Bryans:

OK. Would anyone else like to respond before I go back to the floor?

Ms Pauley:

I want to pick up on Tish's point about the social economy. I agree that the community sector has been forward-thinking in taking that opportunity on board. Money that is self-generated for community organisations through the social economy model actually pays for projects that should be funded by various Departments. Certainly, any money that my organisation generates goes into supporting vulnerable parents and women. It focuses on early brain development, which Joy discussed earlier. It is extremely important that the social economy model is recognised and supported, so that it can develop further, particularly in the community sector.

Ms Walmsley:

I concur with the panellists. The social economy has made a tremendous contribution and will continue to do so. We all need to be creative in looking at how we use settings and services and ensure that there is the ability and opportunity for parents and communities to pay for wrap-around care that is linked to other funded services.

Ms Bryans:

Thank you, Pauline. Tish would like a right of reply.

Ms Holland:

Sure Start is a brilliant programme that we fought for long and hard in the west Belfast area. At the end of the day, every organisation, be it in the community, voluntary or statutory sector, has its own expertise in its own right. I just wish to reflect what Áine said: let us get it straight this time. Marie, you said that there are other Government Departments. We have to work with seven of those Departments, and yet we are not Government-funded. Everybody in this room has needs. However, if you are going to talk about a nought-to-six strategy, you need to get real about it. I think that everybody should take a good look at themselves and at what they do, reflect on that and then try to respect what other people put into a lifetime's work, particularly for children.

[Applause.]

Ms Bryans:

Tish, your point is well made.

Ms Karen McConkey:

I am a nursery teacher, and I am greatly concerned about the strategy's approach to the skills and qualifications regarded as appropriate to provide high-quality early years education. I am fortunate enough to have an in-depth insight and experience of the wide range of early years qualifications available from my work in the private sector, nursery schools and units. Over 15 years ago, I began working my way up by completing NVQ levels 2 and 3, a HNC, a BA (Hons) degree, and, finally, a PGCE. It was only then that I realised that I was capable of teaching and

providing a high-quality education for children.

I am totally distraught at the strategy's proposal to invest millions of pounds in retraining childcare workers to be upskilled, when so many teachers like me have not got permanent posts and are willing to be teachers and provide a high-quality education. All this money is being invested in that when so many of us are already willing to do it.

The only people to benefit from the proposal are the childcare workers who would be retrained. However, who is to say that they even want to be retrained? Surely that entire workforce is not capable of getting a degree. Many of us already have those qualifications. I am, therefore, asking the Department whether it can justify taking money away from children and reducing services, resources and the quality of education to fund unnecessary training when there are already plenty of dedicated, highly qualified teachers out there.

[Applause.]

Ms L Wilson:

First of all, no one wants teachers to be unemployed. We are investing in training teachers. I know that a part of the Department is developing a teachers' workforce strategy and that it is trying to match them up. We, therefore, do not want unemployed teachers looking for jobs.

In answer to your question about developing skills for others, it is about enabling them to improve their skills and qualifications, because the wider research suggests that one of the drivers of a strong economy is a well-trained and educated workforce. There is, therefore, an argument for training people to raise qualifications generally. The point about teachers, however, is an important one, and we will take that back to the Department and talk to colleagues about it.

Ms Bryans:

We will move on to the National Association of Head Teachers on the point about spending money upskilling people who are already in work.

Ms Majury:

We wish to make a brief point about upskilling. We asked that the Department to extend the consultation period and to give us additional financial information, because the strategy is invalid without that.

We need to know how much upskilling will cost and who will fund it. Will private and voluntary sector workers be expected to fund it? Will that become mandatory? Once they are upskilled, what will the additional salary costs be? We cannot upskill a workforce to graduate level and not introduce a graduate pay structure. To respond honestly to the strategy, we need financial information and costings, especially in light of the tough economy.

Ms Bryans:

Thank you, Clare. Am I right in thinking that no costings have been attributed to any of this?

Ms Majury:

Absolutely no costings. Although I appreciate that we do not know how much will be made available to implement the strategy, we should be able to find out how much it will cost to implement it in its current form in one-year, two-year and five-year periods.

Ms Bryans:

That information is not available at the moment. Is that right, Linda?

Ms L Wilson:

No, it is not available. That is partly because a significant amount of detail needs to be worked through in some areas. Obviously, we have rough costings, but a lot of it will depend on how fast the proposals are rolled out. The Department values the workforce in that area enormously, whether in the statutory sector or in the voluntary sector, and any proposals that are introduced will certainly not freeze people out or remove opportunities. An enormous amount of good work is done out there. I want to make that very clear.

Ms J Poots:

There seems to be a lot of talk about this issue. It is a bit of a moot point, because the strategy

seems to say that upskilling will only be for people who work in nurseries, playgroups or in Sure Start. Therefore, a limited number of people will be upskilled. Those people who do not have it will get a minimum of a NVQ level 3 or, if they are supervisors, an NVQ level 4 in leadership. Those courses are available through DEL's Modern Apprenticeship scheme, and our staff have gone through that for the past couple of years. Therefore, that scheme is accessible to a small, limited number of people who work in the early years sector and to other people who are not DE-funded. There seems to be an awful lot of emphasis on that.

Ms Pauley:

I am a bit disappointed by that comment. As I say, I work in the community childcare sector and am surrounded by committed and passionate workers who work extremely hard and work extremely long hours. They have very little opportunity to be released from their placement to attend training, whereas teachers get professional development days. Therefore, a big disparity exists. The skills that are in place are certainly very relevant to the work that they do at the minute. There is a huge want for some sort of a transformational fund to support the ongoing professional development of early years staff. Teachers have their place; they are very skilled and do a wonderful job. However, early years childcare workers do likewise. It is very important for me to make that point.

[Applause.]

Ms Cavanagh:

At the beginning of my input, I mentioned the issue of integrating care and education. There is a good deal of research to indicate that upskilling provides some of the best outcomes. That is not to say that one sector is advantaged or disadvantaged, but the early years strategy should improve the outcomes for children generally. The benefits of upskilling the entire statutory and voluntary and community sector will contribute to that. However, with upskilling comes the integration of care and education. Research has shown that, when those two aspects are tied together, we will achieve the best outcomes for children.

[Applause.]

Ms Bryans:

I will move to the lady in the second row who has had her hand up for a while.

Ms Susan Campbell:

I am a teacher, and I agree with Trish. I have given a lifetime's service of 30 years to teaching in nursery schools and nursery units, and I agree with the other teacher Karen, who spoke about feeling very disillusioned. The nought to six strategy does not recognise some important issues.

I know that there is good practice everywhere, but the strategy has not teased out the differences in practice, the reasons why those differences exist and how those differences can be addressed.

The presentation from DE mentioned that findings from the Education and Training Inspectorate were "very very good". That is not what was stated in the most recent chief inspector's report, which was issued last month. That report showed that in percentage gradings for overall effectiveness — which are what we are looking for when we are reading inspection reports, because that is what has an impact on children — over 60% of nursery schools achieved, just under 55% of nursery units in primary schools and just under 35% of nurseries in the private and voluntary sector were "outstanding" or "very good", which are the levels that we aspire to for our young children. So, the range is from under 35% to above 60%.

Similar figures have been issued since 2004, covering 2004 to 2006 and 2006 to 2008. My concern is that such evidence, along with Government-funded research, is largely absent from the draft policy and the evidence papers. It really is important to look at the rationale for that and ask why it is happening.

Ms Bryans:

Why is that not in the draft strategy?

Ms L Wilson:

It is reflected in the draft strategy. At the core of the draft strategy are issues around improving quality. That recognises the need to improve quality across all settings, because, although some

of the figures highlight the best, there are settings that are not so effective.

Mrs Abbott:

The chief inspector's reports in 2006 and 2008 noted that there were clear disparities in access to resources across the preschool provision, which adversely affected the overall quality of the educational experience available to children in the voluntary and private sectors. There are differentials in the funding formula that relate to part-time and full-time provision, and there are differentials within the statutory sector, so the difference is not only between the voluntary and statutory sectors.

That is why DE has had to address those differentials and seek additional resources to look at issues of qualifications and funding. All preschool providers work to provide the same curriculum, they are open to inspection by ETI, and the voluntary and private sectors providers have to have the support of early years specialists. All of that has helped to raise the level of provision, and the voluntary and private sectors now account for roughly one third of all provision. It was through the roll-out across the statutory, voluntary and private sectors, which was driven from 1998 by central Government, that that became the model. Linda said that it was "mixed provision", and we therefore work within that framework.

Ms Walmsley:

We have tremendous respect for the teaching profession and for the very high quality of provision that is provided in nursery units and nursery schools. We are delighted to have so many opportunities to share with the voluntary sector and nursery sector.

The chief inspector's report clearly shows that "outstanding" and "very good" provision is being delivered in the voluntary and independent sectors as well as in the other sectors. If there was a level playing field, we could deliver at the level in even greater proportions.

[Applause.]

Ms S Campbell:

Part of my question was about why that was not addressed in the nought to six strategy.

Sometimes, it comes across as though this issue is something new; it is not. The Welsh Government have already been through this. The first evaluations of the Welsh foundation phase are out and look at overall quality. Again, they were looking at the mixed economy and the mix of skills that we already have in the statutory sector. They found that the quality of children's learning was not sustained in the settings that used solely nursery-assistant staff as opposed to qualified teachers.

Therefore, it appears that there is a direct link between qualified teachers and the quality of provision and pedagogy. It is not just about upskilling and providing more resources. It is about how you use resources and your skill as a professional to adapt your approach in the ever-changing environment of an early years classroom.

The Welsh study also concluded —

Ms Bryans:

Briefly, if you will.

Ms S Campbell:

Yes; I will just finish. The Welsh study found that ratios alone do not raise standards or enhance children's learning potential. We need to get to the nitty-gritty. We need to find out why there is a 30% difference between some sectors in the achievement of "outstanding" and "very good" levels. I do not think that the nought to six strategy has teased that out.

[Applause.]

Ms Bryans:

If the Department does not have anything to add to the original statement, I will bring in Kyra Pauley.

Ms Pauley:

One of the issues for the community and voluntary sector, Susan, is that there is no sustained funding. Staff wait, year after year, to hear whether their contract of employment will be

continued. People get anxious, and they move on. If we had security that the funding will continue and be put into the core, improvements would be made. It is about continued and sustained resources and investment.

Ms Sue Pentel:

Go raibh maith agat. I am with the Belfast District Childcare Partnership, and I also work in the community childcare sector.

I will refer back to a point that Joy Poots made at the beginning. When responsibility for early years shifted to DE, many of us said that that may be the beginning of some co-ordination, integration and real understanding at departmental level. Tish Holland was very articulate in explaining the level of integration that we, as community providers, need at ground level to support the parents and children who come through our doors. We provide education, care, learning and family support. There is a holistic provision to support the child. Someone commented that the strategy does not appear to be based on the needs of the child. If it was based on the needs of the child, it would take account of the extensive evidence that care, learning, environment, health, well-being and social and economic status all contribute to children's ability to develop and learn.

This debate about the quality of preschool education is important, and I support the call to extend the consultation period so that issues around what is required to increase the quality of provision in all sectors can be debated adequately. Unfortunately, however, I have to conclude that the strategy is divisive rather than inclusive; that is what we have seen from tonight's debate. We do not see learning between sectors. One of the key elements that we wanted to see in the early years strategy is learning from the education sector across and vice versa.

Ms Bryans:

OK.

Ms Pentel:

May I make one more point?

Ms Bryans:

Briefly, if you will, please.

Ms Pentel:

We have to look at the needs of the child as he or she presents in the community. It feels as though both the community sector and the early years, 0-3, are not included. The fact that seven Departments have to be dealt with must be addressed. Otherwise, this is not a strategy but simply a discussion about existing DE-funded provision. That is not strategic vision.

[Applause.]

Ms Bryans:

That point about joined-up thinking came up in many of your presentations. Would anyone from the panel like to start, or shall we go straight to the Department's response?

Ms J Poots:

That point has been made at a number of events that I have been at. The answer is yes, but that this is a Department of Education strategy. Therefore, it is up to the politicians on the Committee to ask whether that is good enough. The vision of the strategy is to give every child the best start in life, and yet we are told tonight that it is not really for every child in the nought-to-six age group. It is up to politicians to ask whether that is sufficient for what we want for our society in Northern Ireland. Investment in early years is so important for the lifelong sustainability of our communities. That decision is, in a sense, out of our hands. However, it cannot be made just to suit an organisational or departmental agenda.

Ms Bryans:

Linda and Marie, do you accept the frustrations felt by a lot of people about the need to liaise with so many Departments, given that they are all here in this Building? Perhaps you can answer that on behalf of the Department of Education.

Ms L Wilson:

There are fundamental issues around how Departments can work together. In an area such as

this, it is important that the Executive take a collective lead and bring all Departments together under one agenda. That is something for our Ministers and our political leaders, some of whom are here tonight, to do.

Mr Cromie:

The fact is that 27% of school leavers last year had no GCSEs. There is a great debate as to where the inability to pass those exams or get that level of qualification starts. I totally agree with the view that it starts at nought and grows, and that the inequality gap widens and widens and widens. I understand that that is a political nightmare. However, it is a thorn that has to be grasped.

The whole education system is geared towards small classes at O level and A level. The funny thing about that is, when students do their A levels and go on to university, they find themselves in theatres of 100 or 150 pupils. If I can see that, our educationalists and politicians need to see that.

Funding has to be placed where it is needed most and that is in the preschool sector. Difficulties start there and get only worse as they go on.

[Applause.]

Ms Louise Warde Hunter (Action for Children):

I feel I am a poacher turned gamekeeper, or is it the other way around. I used to sit where Linda and Marie now sit, and was heavily involved in the early development of the strategy and evidence paper.

In response to what Roy said about investment in the preschool sector, I hope that he is referring to everything that comes before children go to school.

Mr Cromie:

Yes; absolutely.

Ms Warde Hunter:

Thank you for that.

The terminology is incredibly important, because we have a mixture of programmes, such as those for nought to three-year-olds, Sure Start and so on. We are branding programmes and stages rather than developing the language. Perhaps, in its next incarnation, the strategy can take forward a unified language that truly hits all the bases to benefit our children and young people. I am most interested in our most vulnerable children and young people.

My question is perhaps more of a statement. When devolution was restored, the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people was reconstituted and agreed six outcomes. Early years was a critical part of that and something that all Ministers signed up to at that time. Picking up on what Joy said, I want to pose the question: where is that joined-up vision now? A number of years ago, we did have a joined-up vision and our Ministers did step up to the plate. Will Linda or Marie tell me, from an official's point of view and from the departmental children's champion point of view, how much interest has the ministerial subcommittee shown in this? Having set early years as one of those six outcomes, the subcommittee was the custodian of ensuring that something effective happened in a cross-departmental and joined-up way. Perhaps someone can enlighten me on that.

Ms L Wilson:

The subcommittee continues to work. It has been working on a range of things. The early years issue is certainly on the agenda, dating back a little bit, but I am not sure that it is awfully current at the moment. However, it would not be fair of me give a definitive answer to that question without going back and doing some checking.

Ms Sharon Beattie:

I have been a teacher for 21 years. However, I am also an active researcher across the UK through the Early Education organisation. So, I have worked across sectors in compiling research, and that is my problem with this. I have concerns about the foundations of the strategy and the evidence research base.

The literacy review is very good. However, it does not prioritise what makes a difference. Although the educational aspects, as many on the panel said, are strong from 2-4 years, from 0-3 years it is health, with a little bit tagged on at the end, and after four years it appears to disappear. Yet the Department is asking us to accept that as a nought to six strategy. It is not a strategy; it is a string of suggestions.

When we come to the review and the arguments, some are very good, but again the problem is with the conclusions. I agree with many on the panel, and not just those from the statutory sector, that there are glaring gaps. The result is not progressive. It will progress into loss of quality in all sectors, and will be a step backwards.

Why is there so little information in that research document on issues such as the millennium cohort study, EYPNI, the Welsh foundation stage phase evaluation, neighbourhood nurseries evaluation, and I am sure that there are many more. It took seven years for the Department to produce that strategy. Surely we are entitled to know its foundations in more detail.

Ms Bryans:

OK, that is a comprehensive question. Thank you very much. Linda or Marie, perhaps you will talk us through your evidence research base.

Mrs Abbott:

The evidence paper was one of the pieces of work started several years ago, certainly before Linda or I came to the Department. It was an attempt to take an overview of what was being promoted across Europe and in the UK, and looking at the evidence base that early years mattered. With regard to detail, different countries and societies place a greater or lesser emphasis on children's needs, particularly the early years and early stages of development. The evidence base paper tries to capture some of that.

Ms Heather Russell:

I am here as a parent. I have two daughters at a nursery school on the lower Shankill who have just turned three. I moved them out of day care. I wanted them to have qualified teachers, which they have. They have a relaxed environment to learn in. They are learning through play, and

learning social skills, as they should. There is support for them, and support for me.

The strategy talks about wanting the best for our children, yet it talks about moving P1 primary school age to six, and also has a problem with two-year-olds being put into nursery school. My girls are in for two years, and I am very grateful for that. Maybe the Department of Education should look at giving that opportunity to more two-year-olds, rather than taking it away from them and having nursery school for just three-year-olds.

Ms Bryans:

Thank you very much for that comment.

Mr Robert Irvine:

I am from Rosetta primary school. The discussion so far has concentrated on 0-3 years, but the strategy is nought to six years.

Is it the Department's long-term aim to take P1 and P2 out of the primary school format and combine them with the voluntary sector or some other early years sector? If so, apart from the cost, has it thought through the ramifications, such as staffing?

Ms Bryans:

Thank you, Robert. Is that a consideration, Linda?

Ms L Wilson:

No. There is a reference in the document to looking at the school starting age. However, that would obviously be a major piece of work that would require the agreement of Ministers. It would clearly have huge structural implications for the entire sector. The question may be a veiled one about the school leaving age, but that is a separate subject for consideration.

Mr Cromie:

I have one concern. The document states that there was a brief consultation about raising the school starting age. However, there was no mention of that in the response document. We obviously put down our concerns in one section, but there was no specific section to put down

comments about raising the school starting age.

[Applause.]

Ms L Wilson:

Obviously, the forms are purely to help people. This is such a big issue, and I think that we are doing it a disservice by simply saying that we are either for or against it. If it comes back on to the agenda for debate, there needs to be a focused consultation around it and it alone.

Ms Bryans:

Ray, are you happy with that?

Mr Cromie:

I just do not understand why it was mentioned.

[Applause.]

Ms Bryans:

Do you want to expand on that, Linda? Was that an oversight?

Ms L Wilson:

I would not say that it was an oversight. There has been a discussion around what the most appropriate school starting age is, and that is why there was a reference to that in the document. However, it is such an enormous issue. It has been flagged up so that Minister can consider it in the future, if they so wish.

Ms Walmsley:

We should remember that Northern Ireland has one of the lowest school starting ages. Our view is that it is certainly a longer-term issue. A lot of infrastructure would need to be in place before we even consider lowering the school starting age. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that we have one of the lowest schools starting ages in Europe.

Dr Roisin McCooey:

I am from PlayBoard. I refer to a point that Marie made earlier in her presentation about the lack of focus in the strategy on play and the foundation stage. The strategy clearly focuses on literacy and numeracy rather than the holistic overall development of children and young people. Evidence, nationally and internationally, has shown that children aged nought to six learn best through play. Therefore, how do we avoid the downwards pressure of education on our nought-to six-year-olds, and how do we ensure that we provide playful environments for the benefit of the overall health and well-being of our children and young people?

Ms Bryans:

Who would you like an answer from, Roisin?

Dr McCooey:

Marie.

Mrs Abbott:

It was said that the foundation stage was a transformation of P1 and P2 to an age-appropriate way of working, and it was welcomed by many early years teachers. I am sure that there are early years teachers in this room who concur with the view that it is very much focused on play, on developing creativity and imagination and on a recognition of the need to support the child's whole development. I think that the foundation stage was a move towards that. It was piloted and evaluated before it was rolled out as part of the revised curriculum.

Mr Gerry McDonald:

I am from Dungannon Sure Start. There have been some comment about scarce resources, and a comment was made a few weeks ago about "benign apartheid". Given the cost, and arguably the impact, of segregation in education, should the strategy not add some sense of vision for integrated or shared education for the future?

Ms Bryans:

Who do you want to respond, Gerry?

Mr McDonald:

The panel in general but, obviously, the Department.

Ms Bryans:

Who wants to respond? That refers to the First Minister's comment a few weeks ago.

Ms Majury:

The preschool sector, both the statutory and the private and voluntary divisions, is one of the truly integrated sectors in education, and it is a shame that that does not continue throughout the system. I am sure that Pauline will agree with you. Our children integrate completely in a cultural sense and when they have special educational needs. The full remit is met.

Ms Walmsley:

The preschool and the non-formal sectors tend to operate on a fully integrated and cross-community basis. Indeed, that continues into many nursery schools. We see no reason why that should not continue, and we expect the strategy to address that.

Ms Bryans:

You are nodding your head, Joy. Are you in general agreement?

Ms J Poots:

I am in general agreement that it is much better to address that through early years services, and it is a pity that that was not mentioned as a positive contribution that the Department could make to the overall programme. Although not always, we still deal with some very divided communities, and Sure Start has to have services that are within pram-pushing distance. A lot of fear still exists in a lot of communities, and the Department could do a bit more — early years services, particularly childcare, are at a bit of a premium — to incentivise sharing space instead of just acknowledging that it is nice when that happens. It needs to find ways to encourage people across communities and cultures to share at that very early stage.

Mrs Abbott:

We agree that preschool provision is regarded as non-sectoral. When looking at the allocation of

places, the preschool education advisory groups and the education and library boards look at that on an area basis. It is very clear from the information on where children go after preschool that they often go to various schools and centres.

Ms Jill Hunter:

I am a teacher and the Ulster Teachers' Union representative on the inter-union nursery committee. However, most importantly, I am a mummy to a three-year-old daughter. We have heard tonight about the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's child poverty strategy. Why does the nought to six strategy do so little to support parents who work? As the strategy does not make reference to full-time provision, the Department must not support it.

Mrs Abbott:

Do you mean full-time provision in nursery settings?

Ms J Hunter:

I mean full-time places.

Mrs Abbott:

The expansion of the preschool programme was based on a part-time place, and that is the norm for settings that have been funded, particularly in the voluntary and private sector. Thereafter, it is roughly two-and-a-half hours a day. The EPPNI report found that two-and-a-half hours a day of part-time provision delivers cognitive benefits to children and that full-time provision is no better than part-time provision in delivering opportunities and improvements for children. It said that the length of time that a child attends a preschool setting is more important than the number of hours that a child attends on a particular day. The Department's role is to provide education for children. It is not unsympathetic to the needs of parents, but it does not provide childcare.

Ms Majury:

I now work in an affluent area, but I used to work in an area of extreme deprivation. The full-time nursery place first allowed single parents to return to work to bring some money into the family and to improve outcomes for their children. We need to look at it like that and recognise that it supports the whole family because, if the family is in extreme poverty and is unable to

work and afford childcare, the child starting nursery school or playgroup offers the first option to the parent to go back into the workforce. That is vital.

Ms Cavanagh:

That question pulls together a number of the problems with the strategy. We have talked this evening about the strategy as a nought to six educational strategy. However, the strategy's title is Early Years (0-6), which does not imply education, care or anything else. The questioner has hit the nail on the head: we need joined-up thinking that pulls together all that is needed in respect of early years. Frankly, you cannot talk about early years and not talk about childcare provision, even if that is part-time childcare provision. The comment that most parents need childcare if they want to work outside the home is absolutely right. Lone parents — I can speak authoritatively on them — definitely need childcare if they want to work outside the home.

Unless we get a rounded strategy — whether you want to call it early years, childcare or care in education — in which everyone sings from the same hymn sheet, we will miss out on what Tish Holland mentioned about the integration of services and parents being allowed to use early years provision to get out to work, which, as has just been mentioned, benefits children in their future educational attainment. A joined-up approach is desperately needed.

Ms Bryans:

That point that has been raised a few times tonight. Thank you for that.

Elizabeth:

I am a day-care practitioner in the community sector. DE talks about training for practitioners in the nursery and school setting, but I do not see much in the strategy about childminders in the community. It is a nought to six strategy, and the majority of our pre-nursery children are aged between 0 and 3. If DE is including all children from nought to six in the strategy, all organisations should be entitled to the same training. Our aim is the same: to give children the best possibilities in life from birth and to help families to help their children grow and develop. Why are childminders in the community sector not given the same training because we are not funded by DE?

Mrs Abbott:

There is some provision for childminder training through the Sure Start programme. There are childminder networks attached to some of the Sure Start programmes. Those support childminders in the job that they do within the designated areas. DE also provides funding to the Northern Ireland Childminding Association to support the work that it does with individual childminders.

Elizabeth:

The Department's strategy talks about giving the best possible training. I work in a place that has limited funding. We take any training that is going and do it in our own time. The Department needs to put more into practitioners to give children the best opportunities. I do not see that in the strategy; what the strategy says about that is minimal.

Ms Pauley:

What Marie said is wonderful if you are in a Sure Start area, but Sure Start does not cover all areas of Northern Ireland. The lady who has just spoken has highlighted the compassion among childcare workers who go out and retrain in their own time. If we want to improve the quality of care for children in the nought to six age range across Northern Ireland, that training should be open to all practitioners. If the funding is not there, it should be sourced.

Ms J Poots:

It shows the lack of joined-up thinking in the strategy. I have Sure Start workers in a particular setting who do exactly the same job and work with exactly the same children as the Women's Centre, for example, which is funded via other routes. In the same setting, one set of workers has access to further training and another one does not: that is a clear example of a lack of joined-up thinking. The Department needs to look at the whole sector.

Ms Walmsley:

For those who work with nought-to-threes, that whole area needs to be addressed more rigorously in the strategy.

Ms J Poots:

I made the point earlier that there is nothing in the strategy about family support work and other types of services. The workforce development strand seems to be focused on people who work in childcare or in group settings. There is not mention of the development of staff who work, for example, on a one-to-one basis or solely with parents.

Ms Emma Cory:

I am a nursery school principal and I have two points to make. First, I feel that everybody here is very committed to and wants the best for children from nought-to-six. The only issue that I have is that this evening there has been a bit of a debate about preschool education and where that should take place. Many nursery schools have two-year-olds in their care, and there has been a lot of talk about taking that age group out of nursery schools. It is a two-way street. If we are looking at preschool education in various settings, we should do the same with provision with provision for two-year-olds, and not look just at the private and voluntary sectors.

The private, voluntary and statutory sectors, along with Sure Start and a range of other agencies all work cohesively. The Department must go back and look at the existing strengths, because some fantastic work is going on among the sectors. We work in our own communities with a range of professionals, with parents with families and with other community members. At a time in which we are seeking to save money, we need to build on what we are already doing and share best practice. Let us do what we do best and not waste money on trying to change what people do. Let us just do the best for our children and use what we already have, because I do not think that, given the lack of money, trying to change everything overnight will get us anywhere.

[Applause.]

Ms Bryans:

Thank you very much. With that, I am afraid that I must wrap up proceedings, because it has gone 9.20 pm and we were supposed to finish five minutes ago. Thanks so much to everyone who contributed, and apologies to those who might have had a question or comment but did not get a chance to put them. But you now have the opportunity to speak, albeit informally, to the panellists and departmental officials over tea and coffee. Please join me in thanking the panel;

Pauline Walmsley, Paschal McKeown, Marie Cavanagh, Joy Poots, Kyra Pauley, Ray Cromie, Clare Majury, and, from the Department, Linda Wilson and Marie Abbot. Thank you all.

[Applause.]

The Chairperson:

May we show our appreciation to Lynda Bryans for coming here tonight.

[Applause.]

We wanted to maximise the time that people had in which to comment, and I think that our time has been well spent. However, people may feel that a particular issue was not raised. In that case, please ensure that you write it down and send it or e-mail it to the Committee or the Department before 30 November. We are glad to have with us the Department's permanent secretary, Paul Sweeney. His presence shows his commitment to the issue.

I do not think that I am being unfair to the permanent secretary by asking him to convey to the Minister the feeling of this meeting on one issue in particular, and that is that extending the consultation period should be considered. Not long into our deliberations, a parent made the valid point that people in general and parents in particular did not know about the consultation. If we are serious about resolving the multitude of complex and interrelated issues raised tonight, we must get this right. I respectfully ask Paul to convey that message. The Committee will probably do so formally next Wednesday.

I thank you all for coming and making an effort. I heard someone say that people have a passion for this issue. There are tensions and there are different views, different emphases and different concerns. Tonight has been extremely useful, but will only be so if those who have the responsibility take away the genuine concerns that have been raised here tonight.

On behalf of the Committee for Education, I thank the panellists for coming and contributing to our deliberations on this issue. I thank the Committee Clerk and his staff who have done an excellent job alongside all the staff in Parliament Buildings. That is what this Building is about.

I hope that you have been encouraged by this event, and, perhaps, when you see ‘The Folks on the Hill’ again, you will think that we are not as bad as the boys that appear on that show. I thank the members of the Committee — Dominic Bradley, Basil McCrea, Trevor Lunn, Michelle McIlveen and Jonathan Craig — who attended tonight. Other members were, unfortunately, unable to be with us. Thank you very much, and have a safe journey home.