



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Early Years Manifesto: Early Years
Strategic Alliance**

29 February 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Mike Nesbitt (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Trevor Lunn
Miss Michelle McIlveen

Witnesses:

Mrs Elaine Conway	Early Years Strategic Alliance
Ms Kyra Pauley	Early Years Strategic Alliance
Ms Joy Poots	Early Years Strategic Alliance
Mrs Nora Smith	Early Years Strategic Alliance

The Chairperson: I welcome members of the Early Years Strategic Alliance (EYSA) to the Committee: Elaine Conway; Kyra Pauley; Nora Smith; and Joy Poots. Joy and Elaine, you are very welcome. It is good to see you all, and thank you for coming. I am happy to hear what you have to say. Departmental officials are due to make some comments about early years provision after your evidence session, so you are welcome to stay and hear what is being said. Elaine, are you leading off?

Mrs Elaine Conway (Early Years Strategic Alliance): Chair, I thank you and members for the opportunity to present the Early Years Strategic Alliance manifesto at today's Committee meeting. I will introduce my colleagues and members of the alliance. We have Nora Smith from Employers for Childcare, Joy Poots from Sure Start in inner-city south Belfast, and Kyra Pauley from Footprints Women's Centre.

I appreciate the fact that some of you attended our manifesto launch in late November. I thank you for your attendance and support of the manifesto on the day. By way of an update, since November, we have been intensively engaged in getting the manifesto messages out to your Assembly colleagues, government officials and civil servants across the board. We have been very encouraged by the reaction and response we received to the manifesto.

I will move on to my short input. I will focus on the theme of integration and collaboration, which overarches and informs all that we as an alliance are about and all that the manifesto sets out to achieve. When we talk about integration and collaboration, we are essentially talking about a system of early childhood education and care for Northern Ireland. It is not a new concept, and you will probably be familiar with it from the Department of Education's (DE) evidence paper that supported the

draft 0–6 strategy. Unfortunately, it was not followed through to being mainstreamed in the draft strategy. It is a well-established and well-recognised concept across Europe, and we really need to look at the evidence of how it works in Europe. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it is defined as:

"all services providing education and care to children".

Education and care are combined in that phrase to highlight the fact that services for young children should combine care, developmental and learning opportunities and that education and care should not exist apart. They are inseparable in any approach to young children and early years.

So who loses out when there is a lack of integration, collaboration and coherence in early years policy? Everyone loses out, from government right down to children and families. The Government lose out in that when there are parallel systems for early education and childcare, there is a duplication of administration and a waste of very scarce resources, as you all know. Service providers across the sectors lose out because there is a confusing variety of operational procedures, regulatory frameworks, staff training and qualifications, which is very unhelpful. Children and families lose out because they are between two different systems. In fact, much of the evidence suggests that it is childcare services in particular that suffer from a lack of integration, because, in very many cases, those services are regarded as child-minding while parents go to work. I think that Nora will be able to follow up on some of that in her input. I do not want to dwell too much on my following point. However, I recommend that the Committee perhaps invite an expert from Europe to provide it with more input on early childhood education and care. I am sure that the Department would also support that.

I will now return to the situation in Northern Ireland. We do not have a system of varied childhood education and care in Northern Ireland. We have quite a lot of ongoing separation and a lack of coherence. I suppose that that arises from the parallel development of strategic approaches to early years on one hand and childcare on the other hand. There is little or limited integration. As you will be aware, there has been a failure to establish lead ministerial responsibility in that area. As I highlighted, it is not only childcare services but services for children aged 0 to 3 that lose out when there is that lack of integration.

Therefore, what does EYSA seek in taking forward our manifesto? We have been clear: our aim is to seek to influence the delivery of the Programme for Government in order to prioritise the provision of fully integrated early childhood education and care, as has been recognised throughout Europe and in line with the OECD definition. You will be aware that, at present, the draft Programme for Government refers to the implementation of an integrated and affordable childcare strategy. That is very welcome. However, as is the case across the board with the Programme for Government, it leaves many more questions than it provides answers. One question that arises about that commitment is how it will be integrated and with what.

I want to refer you back to the previous Programme for Government, which recognised the need for co-ordination and integration that would bring early years and childcare together. That was not delivered on in the context of the previous Programme for Government. Therefore, it remains outstanding. We see a case for looking at carrying it forward into the current Programme for Government.

As an alliance, we have also suggested that lead ministerial responsibility in that area be established. Our recommendation is that it should rest with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). However, it is very important that that is underpinned and matched by a commitment from all other Departments. It negates none of the responsibility on other Departments to co-operate and work in partnership on early years and childcare. We suggest that the mechanism for that is the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. Encouragingly, at more local, agency level, there is a mechanism — the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership — that could facilitate the kind of integration, collaboration and cohesive approach to early years that we envisage through the manifesto. Joy will make further reference to the partnership in her input.

I will hand over to Nora.

Mrs Nora Smith (Early Years Strategic Alliance): As Elaine said, early childhood education and care (ECEC) considers a wide range of services that are focused on children's development. In Northern Ireland, a gap exists in a particular area of childcare provision. Childcare needs to be considered in the context of being able not only to facilitate parents to get into and stay in work but, equally, to contribute to children's education and development.

Therefore, as Elaine said, we are calling for a fully integrated approach that ensures high-quality accessible childcare that takes affordability into account and benefits parents and children. We have called on the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive to assume a leadership role in the development of a high-quality childcare strategy. By improving childcare services, a number of different economic and social benefits for children, families and the Northern Ireland economy can be accomplished.

Government have long argued that the best route out of poverty is through paid work. However, in Northern Ireland, there is an absence of a childcare infrastructure to support parents to be able to get into work, education or training. In the context of welfare reform, with increased conditionality, it is important to have a childcare infrastructure to support parents. Until now, the current approach has been piecemeal. Departments work off their own agendas when considering childcare. When the integrated childcare strategy is taken forward, it is important that it is looked at as part and parcel of a range of early childhood and education care services. It has to facilitate parents. Equally, however, it must also have the child's best interests at heart. It should not be looked on as a separate issue. It has to be part of the bigger picture of all provision for children.

In comparison with the other regions of the UK, Northern Ireland is the only region that does not have a legislative remit to ensure that parents have access to childcare services. England and Wales have the Childcare Act 2006, and Scotland has community planning powers. We are the only region in which there are no clear lines of accountability. In every other region, one Department drives childcare policy. However, that Department brings on board other Departments.

In Northern Ireland, childcare has stretched across a number of Departments — rightly so. However, the overall policy remit has fallen between the cracks. DE, the Department for Social Development (DSD), the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), the DHSSPS and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) have all tried to address their own issues about childcare, but they have not worked collectively.

We are also calling for a workforce development plan for early education and care services. Investment in a workforce strategy means an investment in the people who will work directly with children and provide the necessary care. England's transformation fund invested £125 million into the early years workforce, and Scotland invested £37 million into an early years workforce. The Republic of Ireland has recently developed a workforce development plan with the intention of putting a stronger focus into the early years workforce.

Improving affordability is vital. There is no getting away from the fact that childcare costs are extremely expensive for parents in the region. We need to raise awareness of the affordability of childcare. The help available for childcare costs are the childcare element of working tax credit or the childcare voucher scheme. However, only 13% of parents are claiming either the childcare element of working tax credit or the childcare voucher scheme. We are calling on the Government and the Assembly to invest in an awareness campaign to educate parents and employers that help is available for childcare costs. If childcare costs were more affordable, more parents would be able to stay in the workplace, which could only be good for the economy.

Ms Joy Poots (Early Years Strategic Alliance): I want to talk about early intervention and prevention, which covers not only the early years — 0 to 3 years of age — but continues right through a child's life. Early intervention can be from the time a problem starts to arise through to a child's school years, and that intervention should happen as quickly as possible so that a problem does not turn into a crisis.

It has been researched and widely recognised by government in Northern Ireland that early intervention is absolutely crucial, countries benefit economically, and so forth. However, that understanding and awareness has not been turned into a reality. The system in Northern Ireland is that the younger you are, the less money is invested in you; and the older you are, the more money is invested in you. We have continually asked for the school budget to look at at least equalising what a child receives in funding, no matter what age. Local management of schools (LMS) is being reviewed, and we will be asking what steps are being taken to do that.

The resourcing for the 0–3 age group is also very low. Wales, which has roughly twice the population of Northern Ireland, invests around £74 million in the equivalent of Sure Start. Our investment is £22 million. Wales has now put in another £65 million, even in the face of recession. Therefore, Northern Ireland is not investing in early years, although we recognise that it needs investment.

We need to look at what we have for all children in Northern Ireland and how our core services are vital to early intervention and prevention — in other words, picking up things at the earliest stage of a child's life and the earliest stage of a problem. Of those, two services are key: health and education. We must ensure, for example, that the number of visits and contacts in maternity and health-visiting services agreed by government are actually happening, which is not the case across Northern Ireland. Those core services are not being delivered equally. The same requirement applies to preschool education: we must ensure that all children get their promised year-long place. Although a small number of people opt not to have it, a number of children still do not get a preschool place for other reasons. That must be addressed.

If the core services are there for early identification, we need to look at what we can do for children and families who, for whatever reason, do not reach their potential. There may be additional needs, and that is where the collaboration and integration that we talked about, between Departments and bodies — education boards, health trusts, at community level between schools and communities and right through the whole system — is so important. Northern Ireland now has the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. For that to work effectively to improve children's outcomes, it is important that it includes education. It has to be said that there has been some reluctance in local partnerships and collaborations to education playing its fullest role.

Lastly, we need to tailor interventions and support for children with additional needs. There are programmes out there, some of which are valuable and good, which are used by different organisations and schools. However, we need to look at each child and his or her family situation individually to make sure that we have a tailored, pastoral approach — particularly in the education system — to a child's needs. We also need to be aware that even if we had the same level of early intervention and input as there is in other areas, children will slip through the net. From nursery school examples, we know that the levels of speech, language and communications skills in disadvantaged areas are poor. We know that many children have had a very poor start in life, and their behaviour may be challenging. Our education system needs to be able to pick up on that and not, in any sense, reinforce the difficulties of the early start.

Ms Kyra Pauley (Early Years Strategic Alliance): I welcome the opportunity to promote the early years manifesto. It is important to highlight the role of community-based women's centres and community childcare providers in the delivery of services to children and families. In Northern Ireland, there are a total of 4,274 childminders, day nurseries and out-of-school clubs. That figure has increased by only 4% since 2009. In 2009, 1,364 individual children were registered for childcare in women's centres, and a total of 1,145 childcare places were available in community day nurseries, which decreased by 32% to 782 in 2010. That is a cause of huge concern.

That reduction in community childcare provision is reflected in the Colin area, an area of multiple disadvantage where I work. In the past three years, there has been an increase in private day-care provision with higher childcare costs for families, whereas the community-based after-school provision was forced to close due to a lack of funding. That was a direct result of the absence of a childcare strategy and having no infrastructure support.

Child poverty in Northern Ireland continues to grow, and many families are struggling to cope with the pressures of daily life. It is not uncommon to find families in the position of deciding whether to spend their last £5 on food or electricity. The provision of extra activities or play is a faraway aspiration for many who struggle to survive with mounting debts.

Community-based services with a particular family-support focus have been a lifeline to such families. Underlying poverty, compounded by the effects of a recession, is forcing families to make difficult choices. The challenge for families and support agencies is to cope with the accelerated growth in, and volume of, need in communities. That is exacerbated by increasing levels of domestic abuse, which impacts on women and children. We are seeing increased rates of suicide, particularly among young people; mental health issues such as stress and anxiety; increasing levels of alcohol and drug dependency; and child neglect, both physical and emotional. The main reasons for children being placed on the child protection register are drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Over 120,000 children, or 28%, were living in poverty in 2009-2010, making Northern Ireland the only region of the UK in which child poverty figures rose. Some 21% of children live in persistent child poverty, which is more than double the GB rate. Severe child poverty stands at 40,000, or almost 10%.

The Child Poverty Act 2010 commits the Executive to eradicating child poverty by 2020. The legislation highlights education, childcare, health, family support, financial assistance, employment, skills and housing as crucial elements in the battle to end child poverty. The early years manifesto calls on the Executive and the Assembly to keep child poverty as a main priority and to be aware of the impact that welfare reform changes will have on families in need.

There is a need for specific targets relating to early years in the child poverty plan. It has been noted that availability of quality childcare will make a direct contribution to the reduction of child poverty. There is a need for monitoring of availability and access to quality early years childcare and family support services for all families. There is a requirement for the Executive and the Assembly to recognise and take cognisance of the major variables relating to children and family services that may provide challenges in accessing services, and a particular focus needs to be placed on services for children with additional support needs, including children with disabilities, transient children, and black minority ethnic groups. An acknowledgement of rural issues is also required.

The most constant provision for most families in the neighbourhood in which I work is community-based provision. In areas of extreme disadvantage, statutory agencies struggle to sustain staffing levels, and there is a high staff turnover. The impact of the conflict is far from behind us. Indeed, at grass-roots level, we are seeing the impact three generations on. It is frustrating that there is not a lead Department to lobby. With current early years and childcare policy and strategies still sitting in a political vacuum, the lack of financial investment to sustain and grow much-needed services is a growing concern as more community services face closure or a reduction in services. It is essential that the Executive and the Assembly recognise that early years investment will provide a strong foundation for Northern Ireland's future.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. I want to put on record our appreciation for the Early Years Strategic Alliance and the way in which, as an organisation, you have come together and produced the manifesto. Your work is an example of what can be done when a variety of organisations — the alliance comprises a vast variety of organisations from different areas and places — come together.

If there is one area in education that causes me confusion and concern — I have said this previously to the Committee — it is early years provision. It is a patchwork quilt. We only have to look at the Early Years Strategic Alliance to see the vast array of different organisations, in the voluntary, community and statutory sectors, and so on, that are involved in the whole process.

We will make available to you the documentation that we received from the Department today in relation to responses to the early years consultation. It is an absolute mess. I will take up the following point with the officials when they come in later, but the departmental documentation on the initial outcome of the consultation states:

"Initial analysis shows that over 90% of respondents disagree with the aims".

Of the 17 questions with a yes or no answer, the noes were 90%, 92%, 93%, 95%, 93%, 92% — not one of them was below 90%. The Department then goes on to say:

"but when broken down by sector, between 60-70% of organisations agree."

I do not know what statistician was able to come up with that. For the uninitiated, that response would simply say to the Department: you have got it wrong, go away. The Department has been at that process for years.

There are positives in your manifesto, throughout which there is a positive context and comments on beneficial aspects. In your opinion, what is the most pressing current need to try to get a focus? Nora mentioned that it was about one Department taking responsibility. I have previously used a very simple example — it works — and I will test how well it works over the next few days: Rathlin Island. One Department looks after Rathlin Island, but every Department has a responsibility for the island. There is a point of contact in each Department that has responsibility for feeding into the policy and delivering the services in the end. It generally works — perhaps not today because there is a problem. Why? Some early years elements are with the Department of Health, OFMDFM has childcare strategies and all sorts of things. It is a shambles.

Mrs Smith: The Children First childcare strategy came out in 1999, and it highlighted a number of challenges that needed to be addressed. One was the high cost of childcare; others were the number of parents who did not have access to childcare services, childcare services not being appropriate, and insufficient information services for parents. Those issues were identified in 1999, and they are still absolutely relevant today.

The Chairperson: The Committee has received a lot of correspondence from the Department on the consultation. The Department tells us about everything that has happened: the intention of the stages, finalising the summary, and so on. However, it states that the consultation exercise has raised some "fundamental issues". Last week, we asked the Department what those were, and we will be asking again. What are the fundamental issues? From where you sit, do you see them glaringly? Are they the same fundamental issues as the Department sees? Nine times out of 10, that is the problem. What the Department sees as fundamental issues, and what those on the ground who deliver services see as fundamental issues, are two different things.

Ms J Poots: I do not know whether the Department sees the following as a fundamental issue: departmental silos, particularly between Education and Health. Childcare is nowhere, actually, and it just will not work. A fundamental flaw of the 0–6 early years strategy is that it took a departmental attitude. It is exactly that, which is why our manifesto states that we believe that there must be a lead Department. We think that the best place for childcare is in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Chairperson: Joy, you have a background in Sure Start. We may have had a brief discussion in the past when the Early Years Strategic Alliance attended the Committee. This is a 0–6 strategy. Take out of your mind any idea that I might be suspicious or sceptical of anything that the Department does, or that I suspect that there might be some other aim — for example, a later starting age or anything like that. Set all that aside. Sure Start had been in the Department of Health, it then moved, and now it might even come back to the Department of Health. Do you think that we would have been better having a 0–3 strategy and a 3–6 strategy?

Ms J Poots: The current draft strategy does not really say anything about 0-to-3-year-olds other than: we have Sure Start. What it says about Sure Start and how it should be developed is based on groups of children. There is no understanding, for instance, of the entire family support aspect. For integration of care and education, it is understood that 80% of what a child will ever learn is learned outside a school environment. The two elements need to join up, and parents must be supported in their role. Everybody said that it was a 3–6 strategy, more or less, judging by the actions that were suggested in it.

Where do we go from here? We believe that there is a need for a lead Department. I do not know what that means for a 0–6 strategy or whether it can happen. Our stand is that it needs to go to a lead Department and that that should be the Department of Health. That will have implications for the finalised version of the 0–6 early years strategy for the Department of Education.

The Chairperson: Let me stray into another area — I turn to Jo-Anne — special educational needs (SEN). There is an ongoing debate about teachers now being asked to identify educational needs. They are not the professionals who are able to identify health needs. As you say, that is a different silo, organisation or Department. It is sometimes very difficult for a teacher — or, in an early years setting, for someone else — to draw a definitive line between educational and health needs. They are interrelated. Kyra, do you want to make any comment? I was very struck by what you said about your location and about the reduction in numbers but the increase in private provision. Why do you think that that was the case?

Ms Pauley: There has been absolutely no infrastructure support for the development of community childcare since the end of 2004, when the Children First strategy was reviewed, so we have been in a vacuum since then. I know that after-school provision has certainly closed. Ours closed because of the lack of support when Peace funding ended, and there was nowhere for us to turn to for additional financial support. Three private day-care centres are setting up in the Colin area. We keep our costs to a minimum. We have a private community day-care centre that is based on a social economy model. Any money that we generate is gifted back to the centre so that we can support women who experience domestic violence or mental health issues or who require other children's services.

Locally, a new day-care centre charging £190 a week is opening in the next month. It will be such a challenge for families in that area to cover the cost of that. The work that we pioneer in our area is about focusing on early intervention and the development of children. It is about getting the children into a warm, nurturing and caring environment and giving them the early play experiences that their families cannot give them in the home because of financial stress, unemployment or other social issues affecting family life. It is extremely challenging.

We invest hugely in developing the skills of our staff through good training programmes, and I know that other community childcare centres do the same. We have the skills base, therefore, to pick up on early development delays. We can then directly access and link in with speech and language therapists, the local Sure Start or, if mental health issues are involved, the local child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) team. Community childcare provision offers so much more than private day care. However, there is currently no opportunity in the community sector to extend those opportunities because of the lack of investment and strategy.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you so much for your presentation; it was excellent as usual. I want to ask you about a couple of issues. Your manifesto mentions the barriers that may obstruct integration between the childcare sectors. What do you see as the greatest barrier to all the sectors working together? Do you think that there is a desire to identify those obstructions and to work together?

Mrs Smith: Leadership at government level is essential and fundamental to the delivery of all childcare services, be they in a private or community setting. Without that overarching leadership and accountability, it is very difficult. That is why childcare provision, in particular, has fallen and why there has been so little investment in it: no one Department owns and is responsible for it. Individually, Departments are working on areas that they feel are important. However, a collective approach is needed, and that simply is not happening.

Mrs Conway: May I add to that? The key element of leadership concerns the concept of early childhood education and care; it is about that integrated approach. We need leadership that brings together and integrates all the separate agendas under one umbrella concept of early childhood education and care and that recognises that a child's early education and care experiences are inseparable and must go together. One relies on the other.

You may recall that, at the launch of the alliance, we showcased a DVD that had been put together by some childcare partnerships. That is evidence of how community providers at a local level deliver early years education and childcare provision hand in hand. So there is a mismatch somewhere along the line between what happens at government level and what is happening on the ground. That is why leadership is so vital for bringing those agendas together.

Mrs Dobson: So it is at an education level and at an Executive level.

Mrs Conway: Absolutely.

Ms J Poots: That leadership will come down to the ground. For collaboration at a local level, there are disincentives to schools working effectively with communities because of the perspectives of agencies and institutional barriers. There are organisational barriers. Leadership needs to do more to demonstrate that it should and must be done, and more must be done to incentivise that and to maximise our scarce resources as opposed to doing it to benefit an organisation. Communities and schools worked closely together on the extended schools model. They advertised jobs, and people took on the jobs. I think that the rate was £10 an hour for a leader and £5 an hour for a supervisor. The Department then said that, for some reason, leaders had to be paid £20 an hour and assistants £10 an hour. The services had to be cut down, even though the people who applied for the jobs were quite happy to work for the lower rate. That is an organisational barrier. Our resources are scarce, and we need to look at working together to make the best of what we have for those children.

Mrs Smith: I spoke to a teacher who had set up extended school services a few years ago. Initially, the Department of Health told her that she would have to be registered with the local health trust, so she jumped through loads of hoops to make sure that the staff ratios were right, the room was the right size, and so on. The health trust then told her that she did not need to do that and that she was covered under the school and under the Education and Training Inspectorate. She said that she was pulling her hair out. That is another example at a local level —

Mrs Dobson: There are so many examples.

Ms J Poots: I was trying to think of some positive examples of collaboration for today's meeting. There are some examples, but they do not have any great depth. It is difficult to see it happening on the ground. Sure Start is currently in the Department of Education. We cannot make referrals to the education and psychology service in Belfast, and we are still under the same Department.

Mrs Dobson: You said something that concerned me, which is that access to childcare for children with disabilities is problematic. In what ways do you see that? Your manifesto states that 16% of respondents said that childcare providers would not accept a disabled child because of lack of provision. That is very worrying. What would you like to see being done about that? What can be done?

Mrs Smith: We carried out some research, which we launched in the Long Gallery late last year. It paints a really worrying picture of families with children with disabilities and special needs. There is very little provision, particularly specialised provision. Many childminders and other day-care providers to whom we spoke felt that they did not have the capacity to take on some children. Physically, they did not have that support available. Some had stronger support than others through their local trusts. It comes down to personalities and whether the health and social care trust in a particular area is able to support and signpost a parent to specialised provision, or perhaps to work with childminders to upskill them in order to give them the confidence to work with a particular child. There is a lack of provision, and that area really has not been looked at at all.

Mrs Dobson: I have been contacted by parents with children with disabilities, and it is just unbelievable that they cannot avail themselves of the services. It is very concerning. What would you like to see done about that?

Mrs Smith: From a personal perspective, Employers for Childcare is in the process of setting up a new social enterprise, which is approved home childcare. That involves childcare being provided in the family home, and we have the Department of Health's endorsement for it. We are now working with

the health and social care trusts, because a key problem is the approval and registration process for all day-care providers, which is really long. I spoke to a carer yesterday who had had a verification interview with her local trust. She had submitted her application almost a year earlier, but when she got to the interview stage, she found out that her paediatric first aid was not up to date and relevant, but she had put the dates in her application. There must be better co-ordination at trust level. Trusts operate separately in their approach to the registration process. Specific funding should be directed at children with disabilities and special needs, because that area has been completely neglected. However, we feel that there are great opportunities with the new approved home childcare service, but it will depend on the co-operation of the trusts.

Ms Pauley: Many community childcare provisions aim to be as fully inclusive as possible, and we try to seek funding, through whatever remit, to get an additional staff member to give a child one-to-one support. Nora mentioned the idea of a training strategy such as the transformation fund that operates in England. That would be of great benefit. Through the four regional childcare partnerships, training strategies are put in place whereby childcare staff can access some support for working with children with additional support needs. It also depends on the quality of the childcare provider. In our organisation, if a child has an additional support need, we will link in with a partnership's specialist, and bring that specialist in to train our staff so that we can make our organisation as inclusive as possible to meet those needs.

Mrs Dobson: Early needs provision is fragmented, which is so exasperating for parents.

Ms Pauley: Very much so.

Ms J Poots: For very young children, a lot of their special needs are not identified and have not been diagnosed because they are not at that point. I am very concerned about those children who have developmental issues but are viewed as displaying challenging behaviour. We have so many children who are excluded from nursery and primary 1 because their behaviour cannot be managed. That is very concerning indeed and needs to be looked at. We are not at a stage at which those children will be diagnosed; they may have something such as an attachment disorder. Exclusion is having a reverse effect on improving the situation of those children. It is very damaging to the early identification of problems.

My other point is about children getting to nursery school or preschool provision services. Our experience is that, with the rise in the birth rate and demand, there is no such thing in Belfast as two-year-olds in preschool provision. We are into the school year, but we are finding more and more children not getting into preschool provision. Often it is because of late application and that type of thing, but those are often the children who need preschool provision most. I would really like something to happen to address the barriers that cause some children to lose out so badly, especially the most vulnerable children.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you very much. I apologise in advance; I will have to leave soon because I have another Committee meeting this afternoon in Limavady.

The Chair described early years provision as a "patchwork quilt". I accept that that is not ideal, but there is perhaps an advantage in it. I believe in local solutions. We should set a strategic direction and paint our vision of what success looks like, but then allow local groups and communities to say how they can achieve it in their patch. It is just so depressing to hear that people who were prepared to work for £10 an hour were told to take £20 an hour, and we, from the top down, interfered with something that was working perfectly well on the ground. The challenge is so difficult. As you have identified, governments work vertically in silos such as health, education and housing, but you are trying to come in horizontally. I wish you well with that.

I am not sure whether a lead Department, Joy, is the answer. Unless every Department has public service agreements (PSAs) and is held to deliver them, I am not sure that there is a way around it. I found that, when I was a victims' commissioner, we reported to OFMDFM. There were other key Departments — notably, Health, Social Development and Agriculture and Rural Development — but when you went to them with an idea, they did not assess an idea on its merits. They looked at the idea, and then they looked at their PSAs. If you ticked the box for the PSAs, you were in. If you did not

tick the PSA box, it did not matter how good the idea was, its value or obvious merit, the Departments did not want to know.

I wonder whether you are linked into the PSAs of the various Departments, given that you are now lobbying for action plans that will flow from the Programme for Government. I also wonder whether you are linked into all the various pots of money that are out there, such as the social investment fund. Surely some of the £80 million in that fund could be used for developing childcare infrastructure. I am familiar with organisations such as the Ashton Community Trust in north Belfast. It does fantastic work and empowers people who otherwise cannot get to work.

Mrs Smith: I want to make a point about lead responsibility. Employers for Childcare is a social enterprise. We are 100% self-financing and have not received any government funding since 2008. We absolutely believe in what we do. We recognise that there is a real need to invest in childcare services to address issues such as childcare affordability. In fact, we have met four different Departments on that issue. The fact that no Department has the lead responsibility gives them the opportunity to say, "Go to that Department or that other Department." So we end up Department hopping, as I have been doing for the past two years, which is really frustrating. There is no accountability. There needs, therefore, to be an integrated approach with one Department taking the lead. However, that does not let the other Departments off the hook. They cannot say, "Now that it sits with the Health Department, it has nothing to do with me" because it stretches across a range of different Departments.

Mr Nesbitt: You may need legislation or some other way to enforce the PSAs across Departments.

Mrs Smith: We have suggested that.

Mrs Conway: We need to uplift the issue above the Departments. We are looking to locate it within the remit of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. However, as Nora explained, we see the need for a lead body, and our recommendation is that the lead body be the DHSSPS. As I said at the outset, when we spoke to people about the issue, there were some very positive soundings. It is absolutely critical and crucial that that lead responsibility be underpinned by a statutory commitment from all the other Departments to co-operate. In essence, that would mean pooling budgets in support of early years education and childcare. That would be the mechanism, incentive and requirement. It would not let any other Department off the hook or negate any other responsibility.

I want to follow up on your point, Mike. We are greatly encouraged and reassured by the fact that we now have a system in place. You will be aware that the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership has, for the first time ever, brought together round a table senior executive officers of the regional agencies to look at integrated planning and commissioning of services for all children and young people. We should be excited by that, because it is looking at what is happening at a local level. It allows for existing good practice to grow at a local level and to feed that up through the system in order to identify what the priorities should be at a regional level and to feed those into the Programme for Government, and so on. The partnership has been the key to taking the lead on ongoing early intervention and prevention work across the region. We see it as a mechanism for looking at how we can deliver an integrated, joined-up, collaborative approach to early years and childcare services. So there are reasons to be optimistic.

Ms J Poots: It is localised. Under that, there are Belfast outcomes, and so on, the five trust areas, and, below that, there are localities. Mike, you mentioned the social investment fund. Coming at the issue from a community level, I think that, given that there are so many partnerships, bodies and neighbourhood renewal projects, there is a concern that the social investment fund is yet another structure of partnership that is being developed and that people will spend more and more time going to meetings. We have decided on a structure for young people and children, so I want us to invest in it and use it.

Mr Nesbitt: I am becoming increasingly cynical about consultation processes. We have heard about one such process that seems to have caused delays. We will hear later from the Department about the initial outcome of the consultation on the early years strategy. There were nine public consultation events, with a total of 303 attendees, which is 0.015% of the population of Northern Ireland. Is that a

robust basis on which to go forward? Perhaps we have to think differently about how we do this. I accept your point that every time there is an initiative, there is another consultation and, potentially, another network of advisers and stakeholders and that that is too much.

The Chairperson: Elaine, I want to pick up on your point about the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. Who takes the lead on that?

Mrs Conway: At the moment, John Compton from the Health and Social Care Board takes the lead. The other agencies that are represented by senior executive officers are the Housing Executive, the PSNI, the Youth Justice Agency, the Department of Education and the health and social care sector; it goes right across the board. We want that model to be replicated at government level to make sure that we address the mismatch, so that policy matches up with what is happening at agency level and then flows through to locality work on the ground.

Ms Boyle: Thank you, ladies, for your presentation. I will start by commending everybody who works in the voluntary, community and private sectors to provide early years provision. They do a wonderful job, and I know that it can be very difficult in the times that we are in, with constraints, a lack of funding, and so on. I concur with Jo-Anne's comments on children with disabilities and the barriers to childcare provision for those children. I am talking particularly about my own area, and I think of some of the parents who have contacted me. Their children have disabilities, but they are not complex. Some of them are mild, but they still cannot get the provision. I was interested in what Nora said about the red tape and bureaucracy around the trusts. All MLAs meet the trusts on many occasions for different reasons. How can we act as a conduit to ease that process a bit?

Mrs Smith: So far, in my organisation, with approved home childcare, we recognise that one of the key barriers is the approval process. We have met the Department of Health and the Health and Social Care Board, and I hope that we will now be working with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust to set up a pilot scheme. We will do all the work on the approval process for approved home childcare. We will make sure that they have all the necessary training and qualifications and then present them to the trusts so that the approval process can be done efficiently, but without taking any shortcuts, because we want to make sure that quality-assured childcare is being provided.

Ms Boyle: It is, perhaps, just a delay in the process.

Mrs Smith: Yes. We hope to meet the senior social workers to iron out the details of what the pilot project will look at. If you are meeting the South Eastern Trust or the Belfast Trust in the next couple of weeks, you can tell them to get in touch with us. We are trying to arrange that meeting.

Ms Boyle: Up here, we talk a lot about "joined-upness" and collaboration between Departments. I suppose, for you, talk is — I do not want to use the word "cheap", but I am sure that that is what you find frustrating. There is a lot of talking but no real action. You want services to be integrated. As MLAs, we represent our constituencies, and we hear what is happening in those constituencies. The situation is not easy, but I hope that it will change shortly for you. I commend your work. Keep it up, girls.

Mr Lunn: Thanks for your presentation. It is always interesting. To be honest, I do not have any experience or expertise in this area. I should try to learn more about it. Kyra, you are in my area, so I should perhaps come and talk to you on the ground at some stage.

Ms Pauley: You would be very welcome.

Mr Lunn: On the same theme as Mike, I know that it would be an improvement, but do you think that a lead ministerial responsibility would solve the problem in the long term? As Mike said, or perhaps it was the Chairman, government here works vertically. There are still silos, and they are still protecting their own budgets and still, to my mind, have their own agendas, with limited interest in the work of other Departments. It has been suggested up here — not in a very serious way — that what we need is a Department for children. There are so many strands, so many organisations and so many needs. The areas on which you focus — very early years and disadvantaged children — echo right through all

the other Departments, particularly the Department of Education. If you were given the set-up that you want as well as the outcomes and benefits, of course education would be transformed. As usual, I am not really asking you a question. I just have doubts as to whether a lead ministerial approach will really improve things.

Mrs Conway: Obviously, we would go with your idea and jump at having a Department and Minister for children tomorrow morning, if we could. As a first step, as Nora outlined, we view a lead Department as crucial in order to give some leadership and direction.

I keep coming back to, and emphasising, one crucial point that it is not just about that lead Department or role. All other relevant Departments must have a requirement to co-operate and support the lead Ministry in delivering on early years education and care. I cannot emphasise that enough: we would not take away from the responsibility of any other Department in that respect. There has to be a very strong underpinning requirement for co-operation and collaboration in support of early years. Before we get to the stage of a Department and Minister for children, we need to look at what we have, which is a ministerial subcommittee for children and young people. We need to look at making that work as effectively as possible. The previous Administration prioritised early years, but, unfortunately, we saw no outcome from that prioritisation. We need to re-examine how that mechanism works.

Mr Lunn: You are making my point for me.

Ms J Poots: Trevor, in the current climate, we cannot afford not to do this. It is not sustainable to continue with the system that we have, the investment and the way in which it is pitched. The question that I want ask — bear in mind that, in the previous evidence session, you discussed a lack of consultation — is how much consultation there has been with the Committee on the review of school management funding. That has been going on for five years. In the need to skew resources, has the issue been brought to your attention? Is it something that has already been to the Committee?

The Chairperson: I think that the issue of funding always, unfortunately, comes under the Budget rather than under any review. Do you mean specifically the review of the common funding formula?

Ms J Poots: Yes, for schools.

The Chairperson: The Committee has asked many times about where we are at. We get answers such as: it is currently being considered. The Committee has had no definitive paper saying that the Department is looking at those areas. It will have a major impact on the distribution of the current amount of money for education.

Trevor's point is being picked up as a possible way forward. We have had a view on that in the past. I have always felt that we should not have a Department of Education; we should have a Department for children and young people.

There is an irony, in that the Executive have set up a ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. They do not have a Department for children and young people. Those responsibilities are split up over a range of Departments. Given that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee is looking at the reorganisation of Departments, perhaps this Committee should ask it how seriously the issue is being considered. Is it on the radar?

Mr Lunn: *[Inaudible.]*

Mrs Conway: I am aware that OFMDFM is looking at governance structures that would support the delivery of the 10-year strategy, which brings all Departments together. Perhaps this is an opportunity to ask whether the idea of a Department for children and schools has been factored into OFMDFM's consideration, given that it is looking at the ministerial subcommittee.

Mr Lunn: What OFMDFM has done so far is to knock off the fourth biggest-spending Department, without consultation and on a whim. That is what has happened so far. There is no evidence of any real desire to plan, or of a strategic plan to rationalise the number of Departments. All I can say is — I cannot tell you how to vote — when I become First Minister, there will be a Department for children. It

is a bigger priority than people realise, without being facetious about it. As Mike said, we are structured in the wrong way.

The Chairperson: Following on from this discussion, we can write to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and ask it to pass on our letter. We will go through the bureaucracy. Perhaps the Committee Clerk will draw up a letter for us to agree on and send, on the basis of this conversation. It is not making a party political point. It asks a question: what consideration is being given to a Department that would deal with children and young people, given that the Executive have already set up a ministerial subcommittee — not just a working group of civil servants — that will have considerable clout? Let us see where that takes us. I am happy that that is something that we can do.

Miss M McIlveen: I apologise for missing the presentation, but I was at your launch. However, I have been involved in early discussions with Elaine about these issues, so I am aware of them. We need to have a discussion on a Department for children and young people. However, given that that would be a long-term discussion, I do not want it to distract from what is required now. I am not sure of the Chair's position about a lead responsibility and whether he is in agreement, but I would not be on the same page as Trevor, as I think that there needs to be a lead Department. Given the criticisms of the subcommittee, it is timely that someone steps up to the mark and takes the lead on children and young people's issues.

I congratulate you for your work, the papers that you presented and your manifesto. Co-operation and collaboration are vital. I do not intend to go into any further detail as it is coming up to lunchtime, and there are other things that have to be done. The Chair has to get away.

The Chairperson: It would not be the first time that the member and I had differences of opinion on certain issues.

Joy, I apologise for asking you the same question again, but will you clarify that Sure Start is still under the responsibility of the Department of Education?

Ms J Poots: Yes; its resources in Northern Ireland are about £22 million a year. However, the health trusts operationalise it.

The Chairperson: On a personal note, thank you for the manifesto and your continued effort and work. It is appreciated. We look forward to working with you. We will certainly pursue this conversation. Departmental officials were due to give evidence, but because the Senate Chamber is used by the Health Committee on a Wednesday afternoon, we have to vacate it. We have asked the Department to come back on 21 March. We will keep you informed. However, with the Committee's approval, we will be happy to send you the papers that we received from the Department. Thank you very much.