



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Draft Programme for Government 2011-15
and Draft Investment Strategy for
Northern Ireland 2011-2021**

11 January 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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

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Draft Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Alex Maskey
Mr Francie Molloy
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr George Robinson
Ms Caitriona Ruane
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr Brendan McAllister)	Commission for Victims and Survivors
Ms Claire Keatinge)	Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland
Ms Kate McCullough)	Office of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland
Mr Bob Collins)	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Ms Evelyn Collins)	
Mrs Patricia Lewsley-Mooney)	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
Ms Alex Tennant)	Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

The Chairperson:

We move to the main business of today's meeting: a round-table discussion on the draft Programme for Government (PFG) and the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland. I welcome the witnesses. We wish to focus on three areas: gaps in the draft Programme for Government; comments on milestones and outputs; and how best to monitor progress. I am told that it has been agreed that Patricia will lead off what we hope will be a fruitful discussion.

Mrs Patricia Lewsley-Mooney (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):

I will give an overview that is collective of all the bodies, after which others will give their individual inputs from each organisation's point of view. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Executive's draft Programme for Government, and we look forward to the fruitful discussion that you talked about, Chair. We understand that you want us to focus on a number of broad themes: our respective views on gaps in the draft Programme for Government; on milestones and outputs; and on how best to monitor progress. Having held discussions on the draft Programme for Government among the bodies that cohabit in Equality House — ourselves, the Equality Commission, and the Commissioner for Older People — along, of course, with the Victims' Commission, we want to make a number of collective preliminary points, and I have agreed to do that on behalf of us all. We will then outline our individual responses to the draft Programme for Government.

First, we agree that the publication of the draft Programme for Government is to be welcomed. We recognise the challenges of agreeing a policy framework across the Executive and are pleased that a substantive draft has been issued for public consultation. Secondly, we agree that there are many very good aspects to the draft Programme for Government, and, in particular, we welcome its focus on equality and sustainability as underpinning principles for the Executive's plans. We welcome the recognition of the inequalities that exist and the commitment to ensuring that the Programme for Government makes a real difference to people's lives.

Collectively and as individual organisations, we welcome the strategic priorities set out in the programme and many of the individual proposals that it contains, a good number of which we sought to have included. That said, the delivery of the programme's priorities will be what makes

a difference to people's lives in Northern Ireland, and we recognise that the detail on delivery and the work of individual Departments, both separately and collectively, will be the crucial determinant of success. We have many questions about what, how and when aspects of the priorities will be delivered, and we hope that the further detail will be elaborated on at departmental and Executive level so that progress can be effectively monitored. Crucial too is the development of meaningful targets and timetables for delivery of priorities within a clearly integrated approach across all Departments.

We welcome the investment strategy's commitment to continue to promote equality of opportunity so that all our people can fulfil their potential, and the commitment to social clauses, mirroring the commitment in the Programme for Government. We feel that the social clauses have important potential in addressing disadvantage and inequalities. The Committee's initiative in organising this round-table discussion is to be commended, and we look forward to identifying a way in which your engagement can assist the realisation of the crucial proposals that are — and some that are not — in the Programme for Government.

Mr Bob Collins (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland):

From the perspective of the Equality Commission, I will speak initially principally about the Programme for Government, and will come back to the investment strategy at a later stage. The consistent thread throughout the document is one of a strong commitment to equality, and it is built on principles of equality and fairness. The consistent references to equality of opportunity and good relations are very important dimensions, as is, as has already been noted, the document's recognition of persistent inequality. That is an important starting point for any governmental programme. The identification of diversity in the population as an asset is a heartening statement in the context of the changing nature of the composition of the population of Northern Ireland. The Programme for Government sets out a clear sense of what the Executive wish to achieve, and we welcome the ambition that is incorporated in it.

The chronology with which we are presented is not ideal. It would, perhaps, be better if there were a Programme for Government, followed by a Budget to match those priorities, followed by detailed departmental plans that indicate the setting out of those priorities. However, that is not where we are. We have a Programme for Government in, perhaps, the context of a pre-

established Budget and in the absence of much detail on departmental plans. That puts us all at something of a disadvantage, and, while we welcome the ambition, the document is couched in largely aspirational terms, and that also poses some difficulty.

We believe that an opportunity for legislative change was missed. The introduction of protection in respect of goods, facilities and services on the grounds of age is obviously to be welcomed and is a significant change. The commission has been advocating legislative change, including that one, for several years, but we think that a real opportunity was missed to take account of significant differences between the legislative position in Northern Ireland and that in the rest of the UK, particularly in the areas of disability and race. It is not a question of establishing some kind of ideological parity between Northern Ireland and Great Britain; jurisdictional distinctiveness allows and realises benefits in difference. However, in respect of the protections that people enjoy, there is a floor below which nobody in the UK should fall, and, in some respects, Northern Ireland is closer to the basement than to the floor.

The document contains a reliance on strategies without any clear indication of what those are designed to introduce and whether their implementation can be integrated. However, the direction in which the strategies are moving is positive and welcome. As I have been hinting at, there is a real absence of clarity in the document on the consequences that are envisaged for the decisions that are identified at a strategic level, and it is, of course, in the detail that the devil is found. At some stage, it will be necessary to confront that devil to see to what extent the actual decisions that must be made arising from the Programme for Government will have an impact on reducing inequality and, perhaps, an adverse impact on some of the groups that statute recognises.

The commission identified four key issues in respect of the Programme for Government and the Budget. Those were educational attainment, urban and rural regeneration, the creation of an effective childcare strategy, and promoting the independence and well-being of older people. It is heartening that those were referred to and incorporated in the draft equality impact assessment (EQIA), which was published yesterday. The overall response to the EQIA at this early stage — we have had the opportunity to read it only a couple of times — is one of disappointment. The value of an EQIA is not as a procedural exercise. It is an opportunity to clearly and carefully look at the implications and the consequences of the decisions that are under discussion; to identify

whether there are any adverse impacts; and to identify whether any alternative policies would produce more effective access to equality of opportunity. The way in which the EQIA is written focuses, to a considerable extent, on what has been done or what is being done, but gives very little opportunity to identify how the practical implications of what is in the Programme for Government will work out over the next number of years.

There is enduring inequality in education, poverty and health, and those are profound barriers to equality of opportunity. There must be greater clarity on the precise measures that the Programme for Government envisages so that its impact in addressing those abiding inequalities can be more clearly known. Until then, and until we see the detailed departmental plans that will flow from the Programme for Government, we will be at something of a disadvantage.

To recap my earliest point, we welcome the positive focus of the Programme for Government on equality, good relations and fairness. We also welcome the recognition that part of its purpose is to redress persistent inequalities. Thank you.

Mr Brendan McAllister (Commission for Victims and Survivors):

Good afternoon, everyone. It is good to have this opportunity for some creative space to have a good discussion with Committee members. The approach of the Commission for Victims and Survivors to the Programme for Government is to judge it against the key policy framework for victims, which is the Executive's 10-year strategy for victims and survivors. It is worth noting that the three key themes of the 10-year strategy, which is already Government policy, are dealing with the past, developing services to meet assessed need, and building for the future. We do not see sufficient recognition of those three key themes in the draft Programme for Government.

A total of 76 commitments are listed in the document. Perhaps number 77 could be to develop an approach to dealing with the past that strengthens peace and assists with the work of reconciliation. Perhaps number 78 could be to continue to develop services that address the needs of victims. In fairness, there is reference to the new victims' and survivors' service, but it is well into the document; it is not a commitment and it is not given any profile. It comes under priority 2 as a milestone or output, and the setting up of the new service is referenced in about two lines.

Our soundings on the ground with victims are such that they feel a lack of recognition in the document, and we have stressed to them that it is a work in progress. Therefore, our engagement with the Committee and our formal response to the consultation are all part of a process through which we hope to get greater recognition for victims in the final version of the Programme for Government. From our recent work with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, we are satisfied that a range of good developments are being seriously worked on that will bear fruit before long. I know that the Department will be before the Committee in February to talk about those sorts of things. However, a lot of that is not known about or in the public mind yet; it is implicit rather than explicit. The significance of the Programme for Government document is that it is a shop window that shows the priorities of the political establishment over the next four years. I sense that victims and survivors out there at the moment will view the document as insufficient and will take a negative view of political leaders if there is not deeper, more comprehensive treatment of the victim issue.

On page 20, the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in introducing the report, set out their approach to the Programme for Government. They say:

“we are committed to growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future; tackling disadvantage; improving health and wellbeing; protecting our people and the environment; and building a strong and shared community and; developing high quality services.”

Those are obviously the five priority areas. However, they are saying that their approach to the Programme for Government is that everything should connect; that there should be interconnectedness. In that respect, on page 26, they say:

“We recognise that we cannot simply grow the economy at the expense of disregarding our endeavours to transform society and enhance our environment.”

On page 27, they say:

“It is essential to recognise the inter-relationships that exist between our priorities.”

However, reference to victims is contained in only one of those priorities instead of continuing to appear across all five areas.

Therefore, as I said a moment ago, we find only a very brief reference to the new victims’ service under priority 2, which is about creating opportunities, tackling disadvantage and improving health and well-being. That is viewed as insufficient recognition of the significance of the issue. It is interesting that that is also the priority that addresses the issue of health in the Programme for Government. There is some concern that that reflects an attitude among political

leaders of tending to view the past and victims as a pastoral concern, rather than taking a more holistic approach across government to the past and, indeed, the needs of victims. Recently, the Health Department's community development strategy for health and well-being was put out for consultation. However, there was no reference in that to the past and its legacy in respect of victims.

On page 38, again under priority 2, there is a reference to the need to set up an advisory group to consider the implications of welfare reform. Again, we want to highlight the fact that poverty will be a growing problem across this society as the recession continues over the next years, and victims and survivors of the conflict will be to the fore of the harsh end of that. We envisage that as a growing problem area, but, again, it is referred to only briefly. We do not have a big complaint about that. However, I wanted to draw attention to the significance of that commitment under priority 2.

With regard to priority 3, on protecting our people, the environment and creating safer communities, the references to crime do not acknowledge the legacy of sectarianism and the estrangement between neighbourhoods, such as the situation featured in the news in recent days in which an 18-year-old was the victim of a very serious sectarian attack, the kind of which we know too well historically. Therefore, there is insufficient recognition of that enduring problem, which expresses itself through crime.

Under priority 4, on building a strong and shared community, there is list of building blocks, including the following: the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy; the equality and good relations programme; the anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy; and the community relations, equality and diversity in education policy. However, it does not list the victims' strategy or, indeed, dealing with the past as fifth and sixth building blocks. Those should be key commitments and/or milestones regarding the CSI policy of which there is no evidence yet. There is also a reference to the future of peace walls under priority 4. Again, that is all termed very much in the present tense, without any reference to the historical backdrop and the need to help communities to overcome decades of difficulty here. It is as though the situation with peace walls arose only in recent years and they are just dealing with it now.

Briefly, priority 5 is about high-quality and efficient public services. It would be good to see the new victims' service listed there. It is due for commencement in April, and it would be good to see a significant commitment being made to making it a new high-quality service.

Priority 1 is, of course, growing a sustainable economy. We totally agree that the defining issue of our time is economic development and the impact of the recession. This society should certainly not continue to be defined by the past and the victim issue, and that is only likely to happen if we do not deal with it. However, there is insufficient evidence that those matters are being faced up to in the Programme of Government.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much, Brendan. Claire, I think that this is your first appearance before the Committee. You are especially welcome.

Ms Claire Keatinge (Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland):

Thank you, Tom. Every pleasure has its first outing. Thank you, Mr Chairman, for the first opportunity to speak to you and the Committee in response to the draft Programme for Government. I took up the post of Commissioner for Older People in the middle of November last year, and my contribution will focus on older people. I advise the Committee that I have not yet had the opportunity to establish a formalised advisory committee to support my role. Therefore, the views that I will express today are based on the information that was collated and collected through the work of the Older People's Advocate, through existing research and information, and through analysis in my office. I will endeavour to cover the key issues and the significant impact on older people. However, I am also aware of a further opportunity to contribute and to respond in writing.

I would like to start with a short commentary on our ageing society. Most of us now live longer. The life expectancy for babies born in western Europe today is 81 for women, and, I am afraid, gents, 76 for men. Increasing life expectancy is very good news. Indeed, it is the best public-health news of the century. A total of 20% of our population in Northern Ireland, some 340,000 people, are over 60, and 28,700 people are over 85. Those numbers are increasing swiftly.

We have to maximise the opportunities that are presented by a society with increasing numbers of older people living in it. We should not forget that older people make a very significant contribution to communities, faith organisations, family and civic life generally — those are all greatly enriched by the full and active participation of older people. Older people contribute thousands of hours as volunteers to community and voluntary organisations in wider society, and they demonstrate a positive influence on their own lives when they volunteer. However, as many of you will be aware, it is not all good news. Pensioner poverty is on the increase, with fuel poverty at an all-time high; equality legislation does not currently cover the provision of goods, facilities and services to older people; and an increasing number of older people experience frailty, ill health and disability for which they need, deserve and have the right to care, treatment and support. There are currently 19,000 people living with dementia in Northern Ireland. Those numbers are increasing rapidly, and there is no prospect of an immediate stabilisation or reduction in those numbers. Crime against older people and the fear of crime against older people continues to cause fear and distress.

Through the appointment of the Commissioner for Older People, our Executive and wider society have agreed that there is a need to place older people at the heart of decision-making on the issues that affect them, to protect their rights and interests and to highlight their positive contribution to society. All of those issues will need to be addressed effectively through the new strategy for older people, the consultation on which is proposed for the spring of 2012. The active involvement of older people in shaping and reviewing that strategy will be central to its success. The new strategy for older people will need to be reflected as a building block across the entire Programme for Government, and not, as it is at the moment, in some building blocks only. The Commissioner for Older People will need to have a role in supporting and holding to account the delivery of the strategy for older people through monitoring and reporting processes.

I very much welcome the focus in the Programme for Government to introduce legislation that will end discrimination on the grounds of age in the provision of goods, facilities and services. I am aware that legislative matters of that nature will take time to be delivered. However, that commitment is very welcome as it is timetabled in the commitments. I also want to welcome the focus in the Programme for Government to tackle crime against old and vulnerable people by

more effective and appropriate sentencing, and other measures. I particularly welcome the milestones to develop measures to reduce fear and to increase confidence among older and vulnerable people.

As other colleagues have said, the Committee requested a response on the three broad themes: gaps in the Programme for Government, its milestones and outputs, and how best to monitor progress. The first gap to be identified is that the older people's strategy should be a building block across the entire Programme for Government. Older people exist, operate and live in every aspect of our world. The second gap is the absence of older people in the Programme for Government. In the introduction and contextual aspects of the programme, the ageing population is insufficiently addressed. The joint statement of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister refers to the need to appreciate and make the most of our assets. Those are referred to as peace; political stability; a young, skilled and increasingly diverse population; increased tourism potential; a growing creative industry — I hope that that will continue after the incident yesterday that was referred to by my colleague Brendan McAllister — and a strong entrepreneurial tradition. There is no mention of an ageing population and that that is an asset to our society. That really needs some attention.

On the issue of growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future, make no mistake that our workforce is ageing. That priority makes no specific reference to maintaining and supporting an ageing population to remain longer in the workforce. Many older people want or need to continue working. There is no longer a compulsory retirement age, and the Programme for Government commitment to upskill the working population by delivering over 200,000 qualifications makes no specific or underpinning reference to older people being encouraged, enabled or supported to secure the qualifications that they need to secure adequate income in older age or because their preference is to continue working.

Under priority 2, on creating opportunities, tackling disadvantage and improving health and well-being, there is no specific mention of challenging levels of fuel poverty or poverty generally among older people. The proportion of older people who are fuel poor increased in Northern Ireland between 2001 and 2006. That is getting worse. The commitment is to deliver a range of measures to tackle poverty and social exclusion, but all the milestones focus on child poverty,

disability, and victims and survivors. There is no reference to older people, yet in Northern Ireland the proportion of pensioners on low income has started to rise and remains higher than in the other constituent countries of the UK. The family resource survey shows a worrying increase in poverty among people aged over 60, with 23% of older people in Northern Ireland living in poverty, after housing costs. That figure of 23% compares with 16% in the rest of the UK. It is a rising trend and a significant issue.

Priority 3 refers to protecting people and the environment and to the creation of safer communities. Health and social care is of enormous significance to everyone, and particularly to older people. The commitment and the milestones do commit to reforming and modernising health and social care, but make no specific reference to outputs that focus on older people. It is important to note that the quality, availability and cost of health and social care are of great significance to older people. Older people are those who are most affected by having to pay for social care in the residential and nursing home sector.

Priority 4 refers to building a strong and shared community. That is a building block of the volunteering strategy, but there is no reference to promoting and supporting volunteering in the key commitments. You will all have seen and been very familiar with the fact that so much of the portrayal of older people is as dependent, frail and in need of services and support. It is sometimes easy to miss the other realities. Older people's contribution to civic life and communities and the individual potential contribution of older people are often unrecognised. Older people can and do contribute to formalised and informal volunteering, to the ongoing development of our communities, to peace building and to wider society as carers, volunteers, mentors, campaigners, grandparents and in family life, to name but a few.

There is a commitment in priority 5 to improve digital access to government services, and that may inadvertently contribute to older people's exclusion from accessing more affordable services. The proportion of people in all age groups who access the internet in Northern Ireland has risen during the past 10 years. However, individuals aged over 60 remain less likely to access the internet than younger age groups. The commitment could usefully include a statement of milestones that tackle digital exclusion of older people. Those of you from rural backgrounds will also, of course, face the question of whether there is any access to the internet at all, whether

you are an older person or not. We are not unfamiliar with that issue, but the digital exclusion of older people is a particular issue.

It is my view that the milestones would benefit from some reconsideration and, potentially, redrafting in the light of my comments on the Programme for Government. I received the strategic EQIA yesterday, and it is difficult to evaluate the overall impact of the Programme for Government without having had the opportunity to undertake a careful review. Across all of the milestones in the older people's strategy, the actions, budgets and time frames must also reflect the key commitments of the Programme for Government. As well as the older people's strategy being a building block, its timetable, budgets and actions need to match across to the Programme for Government.

As a final comment on milestones, we need robust statistical evidence to inform policy decisions across Departments, and the collection and reporting of data must enable my office in particular to be able to analyse the impact on older people. We have already found, on a number of occasions, that it has been very difficult to find out the position of people aged over 60 or, indeed, any particular age group. That information must be available in a way that is easy to access.

On monitoring progress, my aim is simply to support and assist in holding to account the overarching commitments of the Programme for Government that affect older people. I envisage that a key route for such monitoring will be through the strategy for older people, which is, at present, being prepared for consultation. However, the actions that cascade from the older people's strategy to each of the Departments must include clear evidence, outputs, budgets and a timescale, and be mapped across to the Programme for Government and reported against it.

I thank the Chairman for his good wishes and the Committee for its invitation to provide some supporting information and comment. I am quite happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much, Claire. Patricia, you dealt with the general issues at the start. Do you want a few moments now to talk about your role specifically?

Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:

I will focus my comments largely on the Programme for Government, and less so on the investment strategy. My primary interest is the Executive's commitment in the Programme for Government to deliver more effectively on children's rights and best interests. My overall assessment is that although the programme contains some positive commitments, it is quite limited and lacks coherence.

I would like to start with three general points. First, there is little evidence of a joined-up approach. Of the 76 commitments, 74 are assigned to an individual Department. That was a key finding of the report that I commissioned from Queen's University, 'Barriers to Effective Government Delivery for Children in Northern Ireland', which I presented to the Committee in December 2011. It found a lack of cross-departmental working.

Secondly, there is a lack of coherence in commitments. Some are very high level and others are extremely specific. Many important areas are left out entirely or are not carried through into commitments: for example, mental health, safeguarding and early intervention.

Thirdly, there is no evidence of a clear legislative programme. If you scrutinise the document carefully, you can identify only eight pieces of legislation that are mentioned over three years. However, other important pieces are not included, for example, the Welfare Reform Bill or the Mental Capacity (Health, Welfare and Finance) Bill. There is little specific evidence of a coherent vision for delivery for children. The children's strategy is listed as a building block, but there is no commitment to its delivery. The previous Programme for Government had a cross-departmental commitment to children and young people. However, we have seen a rollback of that in this draft Programme for Government.

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) identified 12 critical areas that, in our assessment, the Executive needed to address in relation to children, and that we raised awareness of those through our Make it Right campaign last year. When we looked at the Programme for Government, we found that only one of those 12 areas was significantly addressed, namely child poverty. Two others were mentioned: community safety,

and youth justice. However, there were no commitments at all on the other nine. We can provide the Committee with more details if it requires information on that. So there are significant gaps around early intervention, family support, mental health, play and leisure, participation, safeguarding children, post-primary transfer, special education needs, children in care, and, not least, children with disabilities.

Our assessment of the targets that are articulated as milestones or outputs is that they are very variable. Some are very specific and will be easy to measure. Others suggest a lack of clarity on what will be delivered and how they will be delivered. There is also little information in regard to monitoring mechanisms. The programme provides a high-level delivery framework and states that there will be effective monitoring and regular quarterly reporting regimes. So I ask that the Chair and the Committee request to be consulted in the development of those regimes and that you, in fact, ask for a specific role in the monitoring and delivering of them.

NICCY is planning to scrutinise delivery for children and to provide annual assessments for four of the Departments: the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Department of Justice. Although we will require more information than was made available in the last Assembly term, we are happy to share any of those annual assessments with the Committee.

Lastly, I want to mention the economic strategy. Although I am not in a position to comment on it in detail, I ask the Executive do not assume that a rising tide lifts all boats. The economy can be developed in such a way that it either benefits our society broadly or increases social inequalities, with only a minority seeing the real benefits. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson:

I thank Patricia and all four of the commissioners for their presentations. We will now have a question and answer session to clarify any issues that Committee members may have, and to tease out some of the issues that have been raised. I will start off.

Poverty was raised by a number of the commissioners, and, at the end of her contribution,

Patricia indicated that one of the aspects that was covered in the Programme for Government was child poverty. Poverty, particularly child poverty, is an issue that this Committee has been involved in quite often. However, in the past few years in particular, we have also dealt with poverty among older people and the cost of heating and fuel. The issue of poverty is relevant to all of the commissioners. Will the commissioners expand on where they think a difference can be made to poverty through the development of the PFG? I will go from left to right as I look you. Brendan, will you begin?

Mr B McAllister:

Chairman, you began your remarks by referring to child poverty and finished with a question about poverty generally. I imagine that my colleague Patricia will have more immediate and explicit concerns about child poverty, but, from the point of view of victims of the Troubles, we see the trans-generational impact of the past on the lives in children and on unborn generations. It is no coincidence that the various studies of people's experience of suffering in the Troubles show that areas of social and economic deprivation were particularly badly hit. We must be concerned about the experience of the rough end of the Troubles crossing generations and impacting on the lives of small children and those that have not yet been born. That is our interest in the issue of child poverty.

On poverty generally, I mentioned earlier that we have begun to get briefings and indications from studies, which show that the Government's likely changes to the welfare system will worsen the impact on victim families. We are in the early days of the collation of that information. As yet, we do not have any specific proposals, other than to say that it is something that will be coming over the horizon at everyone, including the Victims' Commission. We are determined to reflect on our own programme of work over the next year. We will make an effort to bring forward advice that shows our own study and hopefully some insights that we can share with the likes of this Committee about the impact of poverty on the victims sector.

The Chairperson:

Thanks, Brendan. Patricia, if you were to make one recommendation on child poverty in the Programme for Government, what would it be?

Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:

We have three strategies: the child poverty strategy, the childcare strategy and the NEETs strategy. If we could get a commitment to deliver on those and to have cross-departmental working on them, we would very soon see some impact on child poverty. We also need to have our own child poverty target in Northern Ireland, so that we can move towards it and reduce it.

The Chairperson:

Do you believe that the targets in the PFG go far enough?

Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:

There needs to be more delivery targets. We also need to see the detail of that and what it means for Departments. However, for us, the core is having our own child poverty target.

We need a commitment from the Executive on child poverty, and we have seen an initial commitment in the draft document. However, we need to see how that will be delivered and how the Executive can bring all the Departments around the table to sign up to a child poverty reduction target and deliver on it. We also need to find out how they will be held to account to ensure that the work is being done.

Mr B Collins:

Poverty is an antecedent barrier to equality of opportunity. It is a reality. In every area that you may want to consider in equality, the presence of poverty is a significant barrier to allowing people to enjoy or fulfil their own potential. There is no reference to poverty in the equality legislation, but it exists, and it would be a completely inadequate response to any consideration of equality if poverty were not taken into account.

Poverty is not a stand-alone item. It is not simply that poor people become ill; poverty makes you sick. On every issue, whether on the grounds of gender, disability or age, if you are poor, you will inevitably have greater problems.

The Chairperson:

Bob, do you see anything in the PFG that will help to resolve or improve that? Do you believe

that there is nothing in it that will do that? I am trying to get a basis for where you feel the PFG stands on that.

Mr B Collins:

The general statement is welcome, but clear and measurable commitments are needed. A commitment to an unrelenting, long-term strategic approach with identified timetables, measures that can be evaluated, regular monitoring and reporting is needed. That is not in the Programme for Government. That needs to be much more strongly reflected. The introduction to the Compton review on the provision of healthcare lays out starkly the implications of poverty for outcomes. The Programme for Government needs to underpin the general statement of commitment with a much more rigorous statement of what it is intended to do through, as I said, a commitment to a long-term, sustained, unrelenting approach. That is more important in times of economic difficulty than in times of prosperity.

The Chairperson:

Claire, particularly in the past couple of years, the issue of poverty among older people seems to have come further to the fore in the public domain. I am not saying that the issue was not always there; it was. The rising costs of living, including heating, have significantly added to that problem. What could be improved in the PFG that would help older and, indeed, vulnerable people, and get them out of poverty?

Ms Keatinge:

Pensioner poverty is an increasing problem, and it causes people to be increasingly socially isolated, more anxious and more stressed, particularly with the fluctuating costs of fuel and the rising cost of living generally. It also makes people less likely to go out, which increases their fuel costs at home, so the problem can become quite circular.

A considerable stigma is still attached to the take-up of benefits among older people, and there is a considerable reluctance to have the state prying into one's personal business and asking questions. Every week, between £1.18 million and £2.26 million of benefits that are due to older people in Northern Ireland is unclaimed. There are 340,000 people who are over 60 in Northern Ireland, so that is a very considerable amount of money that is unclaimed every week. The single

most useful approach that can be taken at this point to maximise benefit take-up is to trial the automatic payment of pension credit, which, I understand, is being trialled across the water in England. That reduces considerably the stigma that is attached to claiming what is, essentially, a discretionary benefit.

I would also look at implementing benefit take-up campaigns that include face-to-face contact, telephone contact and not just digital access. That would make it quite clear to older people that they can talk to someone, make a claim or take up enquiries with a real person.

The Chairperson:

Claire, is that required to be in the Programme for Government to deliver?

Ms Keatinge:

The whole question of tackling poverty, whether or not it is required specifically in the Programme for Government, is a matter for the Programme for Government's authors. It is my view, however, that that is the most effective method for reducing pensioner poverty at this point. Whether that needs to translate into a Department for Social Development (DSD) target or into a Programme for Government statement will be a matter for the authors. However, the increase in take-up and the automatic trialling of pension credit would have a considerable impact. The question of housing stock generally causes a significant impact on fuel poverty. If you live somewhere that is draughty and badly insulated, it will be harder to heat.

There are wider aspects of community life. The more that free and low-cost activities, including those of libraries, community organisations or faith organisations, are available to older people, the more they are able to engage at little or no cost. Those are ways that I look to the Executive to address pensioner poverty.

The Chairperson:

My last point to Claire was about whether some of those matters should have been included in the Programme for Government in order to be delivered. Bob, you said that opportunities were missed in providing legislative change, particularly for disability and race. How much of that needs to be in the Programme for Government? Do such targets need to be in the Programme for

Government in order for them to be achieved, or can they be achieved without being included in it? We are looking at the PFG from a strategic point of view. I am trying to establish how far you believe the Programme for Government needs to go in that respect or whether some of those targets can be delivered on and achieved outside it?

Mr B Collins:

It is nearly four years since a change in the legislation in relation to age was first proposed. There was a series of regular meetings between the Equality Commission and Ministers and officials in OFMDFM over that period. A commitment has now been made, with the intention that it will be delivered within two or three years. As we said, we welcome that commitment.

The absence of a commitment seems to indicate almost certainly that nothing will happen about disability, race or any other area until the next Programme for Government. It is unlikely that something that was not given sufficient priority to be incorporated into the Programme for Government will suddenly emerge into being. Action may be taken as a consequence of a private Member's Bill. We think that there is a real opportunity, in parallel with the development of legislation on age, to incorporate at least some of the measures that would overcome the most significant difficulties that arise in other areas. If it is not stated, it is unlikely to be delivered. As Polish poet Czesław Miłosz has written:

“What is pronounced strengthens itself;
What is not pronounced tends to non-being.”

I think that what is not in the Programme for Government is likely to be in the category of non-being, unless we focus on it.

The Chairperson:

You are absolutely clear that if it is not in the Programme for Government, there will be no progress or significant progress?

Mr B Collins:

That is my real apprehension. Based on the experience of the past couple of years, that is a safe bet.

The Chairperson:

Patricia and Brendan, before we move on to other colleagues' questions, do you want to respond to my last question?

Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:

It is OK to give a commitment, but we have to see delivery. The worry for us is that the Programme for Government mentions only eight pieces of legislation over three years. The absence of the Welfare Reform Bill will have a huge impact on poverty, not only for adults but for children, and we cannot understand why some other Bills have also been left out.

The Chairperson:

To be fair, a number of pieces of legislation will come forward that have not been directly referred to in the Programme for Government. That has happened in the past, and I think that it will continue to happen. What I am getting from you is that you believe that if something is not in the Programme for Government, there will not be progress on it.

Mr B McAllister:

Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to add to my earlier comments. I should, of course, point out that the Victims' Commission has recently submitted advice to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the matter of direct financial support to victims. We know that that is under active consideration at the moment. Obviously, you will want to ask the Ministers about that before too long. The Victims' Commission will be interested to see a response from Ministers, and we will have to form a view on whether we think that the response sufficiently addresses the needs of victims. However, we will try to address priority of need.

It must be acknowledged, of course, that the welfare system is UK-wide and that the devolved Administration have limited capacity to change that locally. In fact, they have no capacity to do so. You will, therefore, be reliant on Westminster colleagues to make the case on the Floor of the House or wherever. Much will be expected of MLAs in that area, but they will not necessarily have a lot of power to deliver.

The Chairperson:

Before we move on to colleagues' questions, I ask members to try to keep their questions as straightforward and brief as possible so that we can get direct answers. We will try to have a conversation.

Mr Eastwood:

I will do that. There is a lot in it. We have heard a lot today, and I look forward to reading your more detailed responses to the Programme for Government later. It has come across to me and I agree with the view that the Programme for Government contains many noble aims but that there is a lack of detail on how those ideas will be delivered.

Brendan, I agree with you that the issue of victims and of dealing with the past is a glaring omission. Given the bits of news this week on the beginnings of a process developing, what is your feeling on your discussions with OFMDFM and the Secretary of State? Is there a commitment to really get to grips with the issue of victims and dealing with the past? There is nothing in the draft Programme for Government that says that there is.

Mr B McAllister:

The initiative that has been reported in recent days involving bilateral talks with the parties is not quite the response that the Assembly motion called for. It called for round-table talks. However, we recognise the fact that the Secretary of State has taken a view that there is insufficient consensus for dealing with the past. Clearly, that is true. The question is whether consensus can be built, and if the bilateral talks that the Secretary of State is about have with each of the parties are a way of beginning to try to examine what needs to be built so that there would be sufficient strength on the ground for cross-party talks, that is a good thing. In other words, it is clear that it is a fairly intractable problem and that progress is likely to be made not so much in steps but in half-steps. Therefore, if the reports on the Secretary of State's approach are accurate, the slow pace of progress might, on the face of it, be a bit disappointing. On the other hand, if there is a serious intention to work with you to explore the areas of consensus, that is a good thing.

There is a need to approach the past in a way that respects the need to strengthen peace and reconciliation, and it is true that a naive and haphazard approach to the past could destabilise

things politically with no gain for anyone. We recognise that it is a very difficult area of work, so we understand why it does not feature highly in the Programme for Government. However, it needs to feature because, at the moment, the approach is too narrow, and it depends on aspects of the criminal justice system. It does not provide what victims need, and it certainly does not address what this society needs. Therefore, a commitment in the Programme for Government needs to be realistic and incremental about the need for a process to enable parties to try carefully to reach a point of greater consensus with one another.

We think that that is possible, but not if parties feel bounced and not if we continue with a situation in which there is a fear across the parties, if I may say so, that other parties' interest in the matter is more about continuing the conflict and gathering ammunition with which to continue to attack one another. There is a need to work at the issue in order to take it out of the work of the Executive and out of a partisan approach to the past. Obviously, that will not happen quickly, but a commitment to recognise the need to work towards that would be very welcome.

Ms Ruane:

Go raibh maith agaibh. I was interested to hear your comments on the Programme for Government, because those will be very useful as part of the consultation. You have worked in the field of equality and against poverty and discrimination, so it is important that we listen very carefully to what you have to say. For me and our team, today is a listening exercise, and I am sure that it is the same for other members. I will be feeding back everything that is said here. That does not mean that I agree with everything or disagree with everything. I am struck by the fact that everyone talked about the recession, poverty and the economic situation that we find ourselves in. That impacts on every one of your fields and on ours. That will be the challenge over the next four, 10 and 20 years, and the more that we can legislate against that, the better.

I have a couple of brief questions. Bob, looking at England, Scotland, Wales, the South and further afield — we should not always look to the South or across to England, Scotland and Wales — what legislation would you like on race and disability? What would you like if we were to deal with those issues? What timescales should be set for that?

I know that everyone needs an opportunity to speak, so I will go through all my questions and

then stop. Brendan, I was taken by your comments on the trans-generational aspect of poverty, and I agree with that. I am unsure whether it was you or someone else who mentioned the need for a cross-cutting approach to poverty. If we want to remove the barriers, as Bob so eloquently put it, health and education will be some of the key tools. Where do you see that link being made?

The Chairperson will be glad to hear that this is my final point. Claire, first of all, welcome to your new position. I am not sure whether we are getting the message about older people out there. However, that is not your fault; it is, rather, society's stigmatisation of older people. What struck me most about your comments is that when people think about elderly people, or even say the word "elderly", they associate it with someone with a stick who is running to doctors' appointments every week. There is a big challenge for us in that area. On the one hand, there are issues of welfare, entitlement and people receiving the money to which they are entitled, but on the other hand, there is a need to promote a positive and active ageing population that takes power and control. How do we bring that into the Programme for Government and challenge those stereotypes?

The Chairperson:

Bob, will you lead off?

Mr B Collins:

I will not give you the honours course on the legislative change that we have advocated over the past number of years. However, let me refer to two particular points in respect of disability. A number of years ago, the House of Lords radically altered the protection that is available to people with disabilities in a case known as the Malcolm case. That obtains to everyone across the UK, but it was not the intention of the original legislation. The judgement altered the original intention. That was corrected in Great Britain, but not in Northern Ireland, in the Equality Act 2010. That is why, in this respect, the rest of the UK is absolutely the correct comparator to look at. It would be relatively simple to make a similar enactment in Northern Ireland, and that would overcome the disadvantage that those with disabilities in Northern Ireland have been put at, relative to those with disabilities in Great Britain. That is a simple issue.

We have, for a long time, advocated a change in the definition of disability to remove the reference to a list of capacities. That would make it easier for disabilities that were not included in that list to be recognised and for those with such conditions to be protected under the legislation. Neither of those would tax a parliamentary draftsman or draftswoman, as the work in formulating the legislation has already been done in Great Britain. However, those measures would have a real, meaningful and instant impact on people with disabilities in Northern Ireland. We have submitted information on those measures to the Committee previously, but I will resubmit material to identify exactly the points that we have urged.

There are issues with the definition and coverage of race, and there are inconsistencies in the legislation in Northern Ireland and between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

I will confine it to those three things and leave aside the whole range of other areas about which people have advocated for change. They would have an immediate impact. The Malcolm case is a significant source of disadvantage to people with disabilities who live in Northern Ireland. It has been corrected elsewhere, but it still arises here, and there is a genuine unfairness in that people who happen to be in Northern Ireland and who have a disability have less protection and will be treated less fairly than if they were in England, Scotland or Wales. It seems to us that those are the kinds of changes that could be taken together with the very welcome change to the extension of the duty to provide goods, facilities and services (GFS) to include age. We may submit a note to you on that.

The Chairperson:

Bob, you mentioned the removal of the list. Is there any chance that the removal of the list makes it more cumbersome and complicated because any decisions would be made subjectively?

Mr B Collins:

We do not think so, and that has not been the experience in Great Britain, where the specific list was removed. The same cover can be provided, and the descent into endless wrangles about what does and does not constitute a disability by virtue of the way that it is written as it is can be avoided. When a list of capacities is introduced, the interpretation is that, unless someone suffers the absence of one of those specified capacities, irrespective of what his or her condition may be,

that person does not qualify to be regarded or to have the protection as someone with a disability. The idea is not to expand the range of people who have disabilities to incorporate more and more of the population; it is genuinely to find a way to ensure that people whose condition represents what the law identifies as a disability have that protection and that that condition will not be excluded because it is not on the list of capacities.

The Chairperson:

Caitríona's question to Claire is next.

Ms Keatinge:

You are right to note that persistent representation of the challenges that face older people and the vulnerability and frailty of some older people can create quite a negative image of older people as dependent and as a financial drain on society rather than as an asset to society. It is important that, as well as proposing solutions, we recognise the genuine frailty and vulnerability of a number of older residents. We all know them. Every church and faith organisation, GAA club and British Legion club has plenty of older people who are active on committees. They participate actively in mentoring schemes, coaching and in a whole range of ways to support civic life. If we look up any road or around any village, we will see older people minding children for relatives after school. That is informal childcare, and many community and voluntary and faith organisations would be dead in the water without the involvement of older people.

As a cross-cutting theme, all Departments need to look at the images that they use of older people in the material that they produce. They need to look at producing statistics and information that flag up the positive contribution of older people. Too often, in publications and in the media, we see a large amount of information about vulnerability. It is terrible when there is serious crime against older people, and it is terrible when they are afraid of crime. It is quite, quite dreadful and inexcusable in our society. We also need to reduce the fear of crime by commenting positively and noting and representing the positive ways in which older people are engaged across our society. Across our Departments, a look at the kind of imagery that is used would be extraordinarily useful.

It is important to tackle the stigma that older people face in relation to benefits take-up. In the

main, older people do not regard themselves as being as deserving of state benefits and state support as other generations may. Very strong support for tackling that kind of stigma is needed so that older people can be told that they have paid their way and are entitled to that amount of money because the Government have decided that that is the amount of money that is available to them. Government needs to tell them that it is their right and that it is their duty, as the Government and as Departments, to ensure that they secure the income to which they are entitled. That would be a positive step in representing positive images.

Last, but by no means least, it would be an important step forward to involve older people in the development and monitoring of the older people's strategy and in the implementation of all those actions across the wide range of responsible bodies. That would remind people that it is not just about a problem with older people but about engagement and positive living. The other day, a gentleman told me that what he does beats the alternative. We have all heard that phrase, and it certainly does. Positive ageing is available to many of our older population, and those who deserve and need care should get it at the time when they need it without fear or favour.

The European Year for Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity in 2012 will create an opportunity to look at some positive images and programmes of work that link younger people and older people, who, frankly, quite often misunderstand each other. There are degrees of fear and misunderstanding that can usefully be addressed.

I had an early conversation with my colleague Patricia Lewsley, the Children's Commissioner, about that and look forward to working on the issue to promote not a glossy image of older people — it is not all Saga holidays — but a real image of what older people's lives are like. It really is very simple: older people's lives are everything that everybody else's lives are, with the added impact of ageing.

The Chairperson:

Patricia or Brendan, do you want to comment briefly on either of those questions?

Mr B McAllister:

Caitríona Ruane's question was about linkages across the Programme for Government, in

particular, around health and education.

First, I do not yet have a lot to say on education. The Victims' Commission is working, as part of the comprehensive needs assessment, to address the trans-generational impact of the conflict, which we will bring out in the spring. I would like to think that we will develop some proposals and ideas around education. Of course, legacy issues are well developed in the curriculum. However, there is a need to think more widely about education and, indeed, the importance of the Youth Service. The Department for Social Development is, of course, covering voluntary and community work.

With regard to health, we think about physical health and then mental health. A recent study found that over 60% of physical health ailments are psychologically based. That is not to say that it is all in people's heads. People have genuine ailments, but one can often trace a somatic illness to a psychological experience or root. Very little is known about that in our context. That is obviously an area that we need to keep studying.

Mental health is even more complicated. You are probably aware of a recent University of Ulster study that suggests that there is a very high level of post-traumatic stress disorder in Northern Ireland, most of which is latent. The study also suggests that it can take between 18 and 22 years before post-traumatic stress disorders are presented in primary healthcare. In other words, there is a long gestation period. If that study is true, we can expect a continued emergence. Even though the Troubles as such are over, we are living with their legacy, and we can expect people to continue to present with conflict-related mental health issues over these next years.

Indeed, the Bamford review found that the level of psychological morbidity in Northern Ireland was 25% higher than the UK average. So we know that we have mental health issues, but we are not quite sure what they are, and practitioners are not agreed on the best methods of response and treatment. In fact, they disagree on that. So over these next years, the Victims' Commission hopes to convene discussions among experts in mental health so that we can emerge from those discussions and say to Committees such as this one, having conferred with enough of the right people around the table, that a certain path seems to be the agreed way forward on

mental health issues related to the Troubles. So we need greater clarity on the phenomenon of conflict-related mental health issues.

Secondly, there is the whole area of concern around services. At the moment, there is very little bespoke or specialist service provision for mental health issues coming from the Troubles. There is a trauma resource centre in north Belfast and a family trauma centre in south Belfast, both of which are located in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area. Beyond that, there is a specialist worker in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. However, a unit in Omagh that dealt with trauma recently closed down. So there has to be concern about regional provision across Northern Ireland.

Of course, the victims' strategy anticipates greater mainstreaming of mental health provision and health provision generally by 2019. A lot of that is currently done by the community and voluntary sector. However, it is anticipated that that will be increasingly picked up by the health trusts over the years because of the ageing population. So work must be done on health over the coming years to prepare the trusts so that they are sensitised to conflict-related matters. At a time when the trusts are severely stretched and are facing financial difficulties, you have to worry about their capacity to do that. As I mentioned earlier, it is more likely that there will be commitments on alcohol, drug abuse and suicide in public health strategies, and that is absolutely correct. However, there will not be any recognition of the past or its impact on victims. We want to insert those issues over the next few years. Specifically, we need to insert building blocks in the Programme for Government about all the issues that I have spoken about in the areas of public and mental health, youth work and social development.

Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:

We flagged up the issue of cross-departmental working on a number of occasions. In November, the report that we commissioned from Queen's University found that a key barrier to government delivering for children is a lack of joined-up working across Departments. We wanted early intervention to be mentioned in the Programme for Government, because Ministers and others refer to that matter. That would help with some issues such as mental health.

Brendan talked about the victims of the Troubles, but there is often a ripple effect from those

victims to their children. Many mental health issues are not being addressed. We see that in the number of young people who commit suicide but who were not even born during the Troubles. The Troubles have a ripple effect on them and on their communities. There is also the matter of mental health issues in the youth justice system. Children are in that system.

One way to address the issue would be through a commitment to make a statutory duty, so that Departments would have to work together on a statutory basis. The other way is through budget allocation, with priority being given to Departments that demonstrate cross-departmental working. In the long term, that would prove to be a better and more efficient way to spend money. Budgets would be shared, and there would be bigger outcomes.

Mr A Maskey:

I thank everyone for their presentations this afternoon and for speaking so eloquently on a range of issues. I will reiterate Caitriona's point, in that we view today as an important listening exercise. Therefore, we will certainly not take issue with everything that has been said, and we probably have a fair amount of sympathy with much of it.

Some contributions suggest that particular themes were not repeated often enough in the Programme for Government. That could be the result of presentational issues, and we could have a shorter or longer document to address that. However, I was struck by the specific issues that people raised that substantiate some of those arguments. Therefore, one bit could be presentational, but the other issues that have been specifically addressed are important and helpfully made.

Quite frankly, it annoys me to hear Owen Paterson talking about the past in the way in which he does. I will not agree with him about it. I know him well, I like him and I talk to him. However, that is neither here nor there, and a discussion with him will not address my concerns about the past. A singular failure of the past number of years is the fact that we have not managed to get to grips with the past in a better way. My party is keen to do that, and we have made proposals to that effect. I share the general concerns that we have not advanced as far as we should in tackling the past. However, I do not accept that that can be addressed entirely in the Programme for Government. That is unfortunate, but the issue is contentious, and there are many

views on it across all the parties and participants and, probably, among a lot of people around this table. I am struck by some of the practical omissions or gaps that people have tried to identify today. I appreciate that.

I do not want to mischaracterise anyone's representations, but I think that Patricia made a point about the lack of coherence. Will you elaborate a wee bit more on that? I hear your point about not working across Departments and Departments not integrating well enough, and so on and so forth. However, if you do not mind, I would like to understand the lack of coherence a little better.

Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:

Some high-level issues are discussed, as are some general issues. However, there could have been much more reference in the Programme for Government about mental health, safeguarding and early intervention. To be honest, I think that there were missed opportunities on some of the issues that could have been included. Other witnesses might want to add to that. It was more about that. Some high-level issues are there, but we think that there could also have been other matters. That is why it is a missed opportunity.

Ms Alex Tennant (Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):

I would like to add to that. The children's strategy is not included, and nor is safeguarding work. The issue of mental health is not covered at all in a commitment. So many major issues are not covered. The Welfare Reform Bill is not mentioned, but the Lisanelly shared campus is. Those issues are important, but there are different levels. Again, reducing sickness absence in the Civil Service is important. However, the issue concerns the level at which certain issues should appear as commitments in the Programme for Government.

The Chairperson:

Does anybody else want to comment?

Mr B Collins:

I will comment briefly on the question of integrating government activities and achieving a

greater sense of conjoined activity. That is a dilemma with which all Governments have to try to deal. However, it is important in the range of areas for which the four commissions represented here have responsibilities. Very few of the issues that are of significance and substance can be resolved within the remit or legislative competence of any individual Department. However, there are no mechanisms or working structures. There is no evident mechanism beyond a stated aspirational commitment to secure that kind of integrated engagement, shared development of policy and shared implementation of decisions so as to have an impact on, for example, poverty and health issues, which the Compton report identified very significantly. Education, health and accommodation are crucially linked in respect of the capacity of one to influence the other. So here is an area where even the expression of aspiration would be beneficial in the Programme for Government.

I do not think that there are presentational difficulties with the Programme for Government. I think that, in very many respects, it is a well-presented, well-articulated, well-written and coherent document and that the aspiration that lies behind it is clearly expressed. So the issue is not one of presentation but of the substance represented in the programme and of the level of detail unveiled in it. Unless the document in its present form can be read side by side with the detailed plans for individual Departments, it is much more difficult to get a sense of its potential.

The Chairperson:

To be fair, Bob, I think that you made that comment in your opening statement when you said that you wanted more information on the outworking and substance of some of the issues. So that point has been well made.

Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:

As I said in my presentation, it is about how it is monitored. What role does the Committee have in monitoring the delivery of the Programme for Government? That will be important, because it will help with accountability in respect of making sure that things happen and that the commitments in the Programme for Government are delivered on.

The Chairperson:

The Committee has an overall strategic monitoring role. However, we will also specifically

monitor the areas relevant to OFMDFM, hence the reason for your being in front of us today. You represent the bodies for which OFMDFM has direct responsibility. There are two aspects: the overall strategic issues and, more specifically, OFMDFM issues. It is our role to monitor that and to bring forward issues that we feel it is not progressing in the way that it should, as we have done in the past.

Mr Humphrey:

First, on behalf of the DUP, I thank you all very much for your presentations. I thank you as individuals and your organisations for your contribution and expertise in trying to make better the lives of those people in our community with whom you are charged to work. I thank you for that. Thank you for being candid today. The Democratic Unionist Party team is also in listening mode to gather information and to take on board your views and concerns, and, without prejudice, we will feed them back. You have said things with which I am in absolute agreement and others with which I have more difficulty. It is our job to feed them back, and we will do that. Claire, on behalf of the party, I wish you all the very best in your post.

Ms Keatinge:

Thank you very much.

Mr Humphrey:

It is very important that your organisations are in there and lobbying in the consultation process. Brendan, you suggested that, in recent times, your work and liaison with officials in the Department has been better. That is good and to be welcomed, and I hope that that is the case with all the organisations. It is important that each of the four commissioners and your organisations continue in this consultation process to liaise with officials and, when an opportunity presents itself, with Ministers and Members of the Assembly to ensure that your concerns, which have been articulated today, are fed to the highest level.

I am conscious that time is marching on, but are each of the four commissioners involved in an ongoing process of negotiation and — perhaps to use a better word — conversation with the Department?

Mr B Collins:

The Equality Commission has had sustained engagement over a long period on the development of budgets, the Programme for Government and all such areas. That engagement has taken place with every Department, not only with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Last year, we had individual correspondence with every Department on the Budget and the extent to which that reflected the application by the Departments of their responsibilities in respect of section 75. The chief executive and I have had meetings with the permanent secretary of OFMDFM. The junior Ministers came to a meeting of the commission in November 2011. That was a useful opportunity for commissioners and the two junior Ministers to cover a full range of areas of shared interest and engagement between the commission and OFMDFM, including many of the topics to which we have made reference here. During the consultation period, we will continue to engage not only with the Department but with a whole range of others that have an interest in such matters.

In the context of their budget preparations and statements, we raised with all the Departments the ease with which they seemed to be able to say that nothing in their budgets was likely to have an adverse impact on anyone who is mentioned in section 75. They said that in circumstances in which, in many cases, there were going to be significant reductions in budget. Our argument was not against the fact that there were going to be reductions in budget, because we all live in the real world and we know that that is happening. Our concern, which is reflected again in the EQIA on the draft Programme for Government, is that the intention is that everyone in the nine section 75 categories will benefit from the application of the Programme for Government. There is no reference even to the possibility that the necessary application of budget reductions may in some circumstances have an adverse impact, not only by virtue of the reduction of the money but by virtue of the fact that some categories of people may be more significantly impacted and affected than others by a particular policy decision. Intuitively, that does not seem to ring true, and it would be a surprise if no one were so affected. That was one of our disappointments with the EQIA for the Programme for Government. I recognise the difficulty of developing a high-level Programme for Government. It cannot incorporate absolutely everything, and I see how difficult it is to have an EQIA at that level of policy. Nonetheless, there are some areas in which there are specific elements, and there is another reconfiguration of health and social care provision to secure better outcomes.

The devil is undoubtedly lurking in the detail on that one. We will need to see, in the general consultation and later, some teasing out of the extent to which all the Departments, as public authorities, are conscious of their responsibilities under the legislation, so they look at whether there are adverse impacts and how they can be alleviated or set aside by policy variations. So we have been, and will continue to be, extensively engaged throughout this process and into the future.

Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:

Prior to the publication of the draft Programme for Government, we had conversations with various Ministers about what we had hoped they would ensure would be in the Programme for Government. We are disappointed at some of the gaps. We will go back and have those conversations again. We will put our submission into the consultation. Although the template that has been put out is restrictive, we will put in a detailed submission with it.

Mr Humphrey:

Obviously, there is a greater opportunity to talk to civil servants and officials than to Ministers. It is important that you talk to them. Is there an ongoing process by which you are also liaising with officials?

Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:

We liaise with officials in each Department. We are looking in particular at the four Departments that I outlined earlier. We have constant contact with officials in them and, when we get the opportunity, with the Minister as well.

Ms Keatinge:

Your question, Mr Humphrey, is about the importance of ongoing liaison with Ministers and officials to make our concerns obvious at the highest levels. We have ongoing contact with OFMDFM officials and are in conversation with them about how best to conduct the consultation on the older people's strategy so that we do not simply, in the shorthand, have a number of public meetings that some people attend, but we do not hear the hardest to be heard or those who find it most difficult to get out. We want a process of consultation that will increasingly reach the views

of those people who do not tend to come to such public meetings.

We have already had meetings with the junior Ministers. I have been in post only since November. We have very useful minutes of that meeting with the junior Ministers, and such meetings will be routinely scheduled. They have indicated that the door is open for further conversation and discussion on any important issues.

We have also proposed engagement with OFMDFM generally on our governance structures to make sure that we get them right at an early stage, so that the only thing that you will hear from the Commissioner for Older People is about older people. Therefore, that ongoing liaison with the junior Ministers about governance and the older people's strategy is proving fruitful and useful.

Mr B McAllister:

Let me say briefly, Mr Humphrey, that the normal arm's-length body contact with the Department is also followed by the Victims' Commission. At a basic level, there are accountability meetings between civil servants and our officials and liaison meetings with the commissioners. In addition to that, since last September, the Victims' Commission has had monthly meetings with the junior Ministers and, every second month, a meeting with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, who join the meeting for a while. A particular concern is the setting up of the new victims' service. However, our discussions range wider across the victim agenda.

Since then, we have also set up, at the Ministers' suggestion, a transition group that meets frequently. That comprises senior civil servants, the Victims' Commission, the Community Relations Council and the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund. That anticipates the great changes that are about to come about in the victims sector over the next few years that need to be managed in a strategic way. I mentioned that earlier. That is a lot of activity, and we are pleased about it.

As a society, we are probably still on a learning curve about devolved government, and the interaction between Ministers, people such as us, special advisers and civil servants. That is still evolving and at times may get a bit confused. That is not a complaint; it is an observation about

evolution.

More recently, we established direct contact with the Health Minister and are pleased with his commitment on the impact of victim issues on the health programme. We are also, of course, in contact with the Justice Minister. So at this stage we are satisfied with the quality and level of our contact with government.

The Chairperson:

Do any other members have questions? No? Well, that was easy. Thank you very much, commissioners and your support staff, for that briefing. It has been very useful. Obviously, nobody on the Committee believes — or I do not think that they do — that the PFG is perfect. At least we have tried to progress it and give as much information to the Ministers and to the Executive as is reasonably possible. That is our job. Individually, members have their own thoughts, and collectively we may be able to put together a Committee response as well. However, at least your contribution has been very worthwhile and helpful. I accept and thank you for your honesty in putting forward your points of view and for the manner in which you have done so. Thank you all very much for that.

Mr B Collins:

Chairman, this is the last time that I will appear before the Committee with the Equality Commission because my term ends in a couple of weeks' time. I take the opportunity to thank you and your predecessor for the courtesy that has been extended over the past six and a half years that I have been here.

The Chairperson:

I was not aware of that, Bob, but I, on behalf of the Committee, wish you well, wherever the world takes you to now. I am sure that it will be just as interesting as the Equality Commission.

Mr B Collins:

Even though I will miss the occasional joust. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Spratt:

I still wish you very well, Bob. The occasional joust does no harm. *[Laughter.]* Do not worry: I will keep your successor on his or her toes as well.

Mr B Collins:

They will be warned. *[Laughter.]*