



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Childcare Strategy: Employers for Childcare
Briefing

13 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Childcare Strategy: Employers for Childcare Briefing

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Colum Eastwood
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Alex Maskey
Mr John McCallister
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Ms Rachel Dennison	Employers for Childcare
Ms Marie Marin	Employers for Childcare
Ms Nora Smith	Employers for Childcare

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Employers for Childcare to the Committee. We have Nora Smith, director of policy; Marie Marin, CEO; and Rachel Dennison. You are very welcome, ladies. Would you like to introduce yourselves and make a few opening comments?

Ms Nora Smith (Employers for Childcare): Thank you very much, Chair and Committee, for the opportunity to come to talk to you today about the childcare strategy. I am Nora Smith, and with me are Rachel Dennison and Marie Marin, the CEO of Employers for Childcare. We welcome the opportunity to present to the Committee on the current consultation on a childcare strategy. We feel that there are strong moral, social and economic reasons for investing in a sustainable childcare infrastructure in the region. There is general acknowledgement and acceptance that access to affordable and accessible childcare facilitates the reconciliation of work and family life, and plays a key role in the lifelong learning of children's development and the broad educational and social needs of children and families.

It is important to Employers for Childcare that the Committee note our disappointment with the current consultation and our frustration with the lack of progress on the development of a childcare strategy for the region. The current consultation is essentially a consultation on a consultation. We are encouraged that, for the first time, a Programme for Government commitment has been given to develop and implement a childcare strategy. That is historic and, hopefully, it will provide the leverage necessary for us to end up with a fit-for-purpose childcare strategy.

However, we are less pleased with the lack of progress in the development of the childcare strategy. The current consultation, in our opinion, smacks of a delay tactic in the development of a relevant strategy for Northern Ireland. Also, we are alarmed by the lack of structures and parameters that have been set by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) around the £12 million that has been allocated for projects relating to childcare. In our opinion, some of the projects that have received money from that bid sit outside the realms of childcare and do not demonstrate value for money. The current consultation asks very rudimentary questions about childcare. We feel that a more strategic approach would have been appropriate, looking at broadening our knowledge on the approaches adopted by other countries and, alongside that, the successes and challenges that have been encountered. That approach would have been more beneficial than the current consultation.

Rachel will provide a very brief overview of what is happening with our neighbours in England, Scotland and Wales. However, a much wider view needs to be adopted, and I strongly recommend key pieces of research that have already been conducted. These include the 'Starting Strong', I, II, and III reports, which were produced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and provide a comprehensive picture of national policies and models of good practice that exist and from which we could potentially learn.

We feel that there are a number of policy constraints leading to the development of a childcare strategy. Those points were raised and discussed at a round-table meeting that we held at Stormont a few weeks ago. Some of the MLAs here were present at that. Turning to the key policy restraints: number one, which is essential to the forward movement of childcare strategy, is the reluctance of any Department to take ownership of childcare; second is the lack of an integrated approach among a range of different Departments to tackle the issues that exist with childcare; and the third comes down to money and the lack of funding to address the underlying issues that exist in childcare.

To date, there has been a continuation of treating education and care as two separate policy areas, and we feel that that is contrary to what has been recognised as good practice in other countries. A much more integrated approach would involve the addressing of the issue of childcare from an educare approach, which looks at child development needs and facilitates parents by providing access to childcare while they stay in work.

We would argue that the lack of leadership and policy direction has resulted in parents facing multiple problems with the issue of childcare, and the key challenges that we believe exist are around childcare affordability. Parents have real struggles meeting the costs of childcare, especially services for children with disabilities and special needs, for families living in rural areas, for school-age children and older children with particular problems, and childcare that is available outside the conventional hours of work.

We produced our one and only childcare strategy for the region in 1999 and a review was carried out in 2005. The recommendations contained in that review remain relevant today. An economic appraisal was also commissioned by OFMDFM and published in 2010. In addition, OFMDFM has recently commissioned further research into the area of childcare. That is in addition to other research that organisations, including Employers for Childcare, have commissioned in the area. That raises questions about how much money government has spent on commissioning research, whether it has been in duplication of other research that has been carried out, and how much of an evidence base OFMDFM needs before it produces a draft childcare strategy. We feel that childcare is a policy stalemate and has been for more than 10 years. For our neighbours in England, Wales and Scotland, the picture is very different, and Rachel will give a brief overview of that.

Ms Rachel Dennison (Employers for Childcare): I want to look at good practice and the lessons that we can learn from the other three regions. I will point out what we think are the strong points of what is happening in England, Scotland and Wales.

First, they recognise the need not only to have in place a childcare strategy but to continually review and renew their policies to ensure that key issues are addressed. England is a particularly good example of that. The latest developments were the Elizabeth Truss reforms that were announced recently. Although her proposals have met some criticism, there is a strong focus on taking measures to take forward and deal with the problems associated with childcare. The Childcare Act 2006 imposes a statutory obligation in England and Wales to ensure that there is sufficient childcare provision in each local authority area, and Scotland has a similar obligation. Under the Act, local authorities also have a responsibility to provide information to parents about their childcare options, which is a great place for families to start looking for available childcare because there is always easy access to information.

Nora mentioned the importance of integrating childcare and education. In England, that is referred to as educate, and it is central to the childcare strategies in the other regions of the UK. Its emphasis is on making sure that every child has the best possible start in life. Scotland, in particular, has invested in a lot of research exploring the value of early investment, and that research underpins its strategies; for example the early years framework and the more recent Children and Young People Bill, which recently closed consultation. In conjunction with educate, there is an emphasis on investing in the childcare workforce. England is consulting on the qualifications that child carers should have, and that, again, is grounded in ensuring that there is a high-quality childcare service.

Finally, I point to Wales as a good example of a country that falls under the English childcare strategy, yet has put in place its own strategy to meet particular childcare needs in the Welsh nation. For example, it places an emphasis on the particular problem of rural childcare. The latest Welsh strategy also imposes a duty to produce biannual progress reports to make sure that the measures that it sets out are achieved, and those are separate from the overarching English strategies.

Northern Ireland can learn from the approaches taken by the other regions, which have been progressively addressing childcare since the late 1990s. Many developments have taken place in that time. Childcare is viewed very much as a social and an economic issue, and the strategies in place drive that view forward. I hand back to Nora for our conclusions.

Ms Smith: Childcare policy does not sit in isolation. I am sure that members are aware that it is linked to child poverty and welfare reform and the looming universal credit. Also, the focus of our Programme for Government and economic strategy is, rightly, on economic recovery. We have long argued that childcare is an issue for both the labour market and the economy. Until the issues associated with our weak childcare infrastructure are addressed, parents will continue to be unable to reconcile their work and family life. We feel that pertinent questions must be focused on and addressed. How can Departments organise policies and provision to better benefit children and parents here? How can we ensure transparency, and how will that be achieved? The statutory powers that exist in the other three UK regions add substantial weight and ensure that there is sufficient provision. Is OFMDFM considering a similar approach and if not, why not? Finally, if or when we see a childcare strategy developed, it needs to be fit for purpose. It cannot be tokenistic; it has to be a living document that is reviewed and monitored, and accompanied by a series of outcomes that are time bound and measured.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thanks very much for your presentation. Childcare is an issue that the Committee takes very seriously. I had the pleasure of attending for a short time the forum that you put together in the Assembly last week, and we also looked at the issue during yesterday's useful meeting of the Assembly all-party group on children and young people. How big a problem for Northern Ireland families is the lack of affordable and accessible childcare at the moment?

Ms Smith: We conducted the first childcare cost survey for the region in 2010 and undertook to carry that out annually. We released last year's survey findings at the Assembly in November, when it was launched by the two junior Ministers. Childcare presents huge problems for families. The survey statistics show that parents pay £156 a week on average for a childcare place. Given that the average family size here is two children, that cost is doubled. In the survey, 50% of parents stated that they struggled to meet their childcare costs, and over half stated that they had to make some accommodations with their work, either leaving the labour market completely or having to compromise and go to part-time hours in order to bring down the cost of childcare. It is a massive issue for parents in the region.

As part of our response to the consultation, we again put out a survey to parents, and nearly 1,000 of them came back, sharing their costs and the troubles they have in trying to balance work with caring responsibilities.

The Deputy Chairperson: I know that there is a degree of frustration with the content and substance of the consultation paper published by OFMDFM. Are there particular outputs and outcomes in other regions — I know that you mentioned some already — that you would have liked to see at this stage or that you would strongly recommend that we support in any childcare strategy, going forward?

Ms Smith: I am really disappointed that we are consulting on a document, rather than on a draft strategy. That raises the question of why it is taking so long to produce a draft strategy. That goes

back to my point that no Department wants to take responsibility for it, that it needs an integrated approach across Departments, and that it always comes down to money.

First and foremost, we should be consulting on a draft childcare strategy. That is the position that we would like to be in. The consultation at the minute is asking very fundamental questions that we already know the answers to; for example, do parents struggle with their childcare costs; and is that a barrier to work? Those questions have been long answered. We are now in the position where we need to see the content of a draft strategy and consult on that.

The statutory powers that exist in the other three regions have not been mentioned in the current consultation. That presents some concerns to us. We feel that if you do not have the weight of a statutory duty to co-operate, we do not know how childcare will develop beyond where it sits at the minute.

The Deputy Chairperson: I note from the programme delivery plan for the childcare strategy that the target for delivery of a finalised strategy was December last year. So we are behind schedule again. I want to give members an opportunity to come in with questions at this point.

Mr Eastwood: Thanks very much for your presentation. It is a very damning briefing of where things are at. We all know and have all talked about the issues around the lack of affordable childcare. This cuts across all our constituencies. It is a massive issue and is very worrying. I share your frustration and even your anger — I think that I sense some anger — that we have not come very far at all in the past 10 years.

I have two questions. First, when you say these things to officials or Ministers, do you get any positive feedback? Secondly, you talked about the fact that a lot of the £12 million has not been allocated properly. One of the examples in your written briefing is that a large amount of the fund has been allocated to a film club. Will you expand on that a bit, please?

Ms Smith: Part of our frustration with the £12 million is that, to date, no parameters have been set for the criteria attached to it. So, essentially, what has happened to date is that a Department can bid for and receive money for a particular project. It comes down to whether the junior Ministers like or dislike the project.

Film clubs, in our opinion, are not childcare. A substantial amount of money, just under £500,000, has been allocated. Our questions centre on why some parameters for that pot of money have not been set. It is a reasonably small pot of money for what is needed, but it is a precious sum of money, and it has to be invested in building our childcare infrastructure. That money came from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Film clubs, as worthy as they are, are not childcare, and, in our opinion, that money should not have gone there.

Mr Eastwood: As a Committee, we obviously need to deal the overarching difficulties around this. I would like officials to come here and tell us why £500,000 out of a childcare fund has gone to film clubs, as laudable as they can be in the good work that they do, and everything else. I would like to have that answered as soon as possible.

The Deputy Chairperson: Yes, we can immediately request a briefing from the lead official in OFMDFM about the childcare strategy and the childcare fund. If members agree, we will do that, Colum.

Ms Smith: An official at our round-table event said that the Department was considering changing the format and looking at the potential for organisations other than Departments to bid for that money. Wherever the money is spent, it has to be spent on developing our childcare infrastructure.

The Deputy Chairperson: My understanding is that the departmental bids were a first stage, and there will be a second stage of open application from outside bodies. However, from reading the list of Departments and projects that have been funded, I support your calls for an integrated approach to the childcare strategy and application of the funding. So it is clear that we, as a Committee, need to interact with other Committees to make sure that they are aware of how their respective Department is availing itself of the money and that it is being used in the best way possible.

Mr McCallister: I declare an interest as I am having difficulty getting childcare, and my wife is going back to work in the middle of March. I find it quite interesting that the rest of the country has a Childcare Act, but we do not. Should we be looking at that? I am concerned that, sometimes, when a Department gets a strategy, everybody congratulates themselves for the great work they have done. The strategy is published in a lovely glossy booklet and all is good, but nothing actually happens with it. We see that across Departments. You pointed out in your presentation that, when you have a statutory duty, there is no getting away from it.

I support the Chair's point about opening the funding up to other groups. I hope that the Chair is right and that it will happen because the fact that £12 million was not drawn down and is just sitting there is ridiculous. Should we be looking at moving towards an Act rather than a strategy alone?

Ms Smith: In an ideal world, yes, but that is not even part of the consultation being considered, so it is not on OFMDFM's table.

The Deputy Chairperson: Would you like statutory responsibility to be included?

Ms Smith: Yes. Responsibility under the Childcare Act in England, Wales and Scotland sits with the local authorities, so that framework could not automatically be translated over here because we operate differently. However, a statutory duty to co-operate, which would force Departments to co-operate with one another, and identifying a lead Department are key to developing and building on our weak childcare infrastructure.

Mr McCallister: Do you identify as part of our problem that almost too many Departments are involved, with disputes over which is the lead Department? Even in nursery provision, some nurseries are inspected by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), some have the Department of Education (DE) involved and OFMDFM is involved in others. Is there too much involvement from those Departments with no proper co-ordination? Even the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), when Michelle Gildernew was Minister, put quite a lot of resources in through rural development. That was another avenue through which another Department was involved.

Ms Smith: Michelle Gildernew did sterling work on rural childcare provision. It is a policy area that stretches across a number of Departments, and rightly so. However, rather than Departments working on their own interests, we would like them to have a shared interest in addressing childcare.

The Deputy Chairperson: Do you have an opinion on which Department is best placed to act as the lead?

Ms Smith: I do not mind who takes ownership, as long as somebody does. Currently, childcare sits with OFMDFM. However, before that it sat with DE, before that the Health Department and before that the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). Whoever owns it needs to make sure that it provides the necessary strategic direction, but that does not let other Departments off the hook. You need an integrated approach. So, if OFMDFM ultimately still holds responsibility, that does not mean that DHSSPS, DE, DARD, the Department for Social Development (DSD) or any other Departments that are involved can wash their hands and say, "Right, that is not our problem any more." It cuts across so many different Departments.

Ms Marie Marin (Employers for Childcare): You gave the example of schools, John. We have done a lot of work to help schools to set up preschool breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and summer schemes, which are very beneficial to parents because schools are in the hub of most communities. Yet, school principals who try very hard to provide those services for families struggle with two different sets of regulations: one from the Department of Education, which they are used to, and another through the Department of Health because it regulates childcare. So, when 2.00 pm or 3.00 pm comes, there is the bizarre situation in which teachers are no longer deemed fit to look after children in the afternoon because they fall under a different set of regulations. That is a classic example of two Departments having different sets of rules. If you are the principal of a school and face those obstacles, no matter how determined you are to try to set something up, it is a big challenge to be able to provide a service for which most families would be very grateful.

Mr McCallister: It is a good example, and I have come across principals who would dearly have loved to get involved in providing these services, but ended up saying, "Look, hang on, we cannot do this. It is not going to happen." You are quite right about that.

Mr Moutray: You are very welcome. Despite the lack of affordable childcare, your organisation tells us that many families fail to take up the financial help that is available to them. You have reservations about moving towards a strategy and the time that that will take. What can be tried in the shorter term? Money is there that is not being utilised.

Ms Marin: We have been calling on government for a number of years. We have gone round various Departments. We have put forward proposals to raise awareness because very many parents in Northern Ireland could avail themselves of financial help. Everyone talks about childcare being so expensive. However, there are two forms of financial assistance, neither of which comes from the Northern Ireland block grant. All of it comes directly from the Treasury. Therefore, any uptake of that money is good for Northern Ireland parents and good for Northern Ireland plc. The first form of financial assistance is the childcare element of the working tax credit; the other is childcare vouchers. Both are UK-wide forms of financial assistance for childcare. We meet parents daily, and many simply do not know about or understand it. For the past number of years — two at least — we have been asking different Departments for an awareness-raising campaign. I am not sure whether money from that £12 million could be used to do that. Any increase in uptake would benefit Northern Ireland.

Mr Moutray: We would like that to happen.

Ms Smith: The latest figures from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) show that just under 15,000 parents use the childcare element of working tax credits and about 10,000 parents use childcare vouchers. There are 238,000 families in the region. Not all are eligible, but only a small proportion avail themselves of financial help.

The Deputy Chairperson: Put into context for us, Nora, the number of families who avail themselves of financial assistance versus the number of families who could and the amount of money that we are, effectively, missing out on from HMRC. I know that you have done a lot of work on that. Take your time and go into the detail of some of that for us, please.

Ms Smith: Well, 14,900 parents use the childcare element of working tax credit, and 10,000 parents use the childcare voucher scheme. There are 238,000 families in the region. So that leaves about 213,000-odd families who are not availing themselves of the financial help. That works out at something like 13% of parents who are availing themselves of help. Although we recognise that not all of them use registered childcare, there is still a sizeable proportion of families who do but are not availing themselves of the financial help available. So we have called for —

Mr Lyttle: On average, how much could families availing themselves of those schemes save?

Ms Smith: With the childcare element of working tax credits, families can save up to 70% of their childcare costs. With the childcare voucher scheme, it works out at a saving of just under £1,000 a year. It is a saving of £2,000 a year for a two-parent household. With the childcare voucher scheme, the employer also saves. The employer does not pay on the national insurance contributions that each employee who is signed up to the vouchers utilises. So there is a saving to the employer and the employee. We did a calculation for a public sector organisation that had been using the voucher scheme since 2007. It had 600 staff utilising the childcare voucher scheme. The collective saving worked out at £1.6 million to the employer and employees. That is £1.6 million that stayed in our economy and is being spent in our economy. In many instances, it has enabled parents to stay in their job because it makes childcare more affordable.

The Deputy Chairperson: How much would your proposal for an awareness-raising campaign cost?

Ms Smith: It can be as big or small as you want it to be.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK, but you have yet to receive a response from any Department on that.

Ms Marin: You could spend £2,000, £5,000 or £10,000. We included a range of measures in our proposal. You could run a full television campaign, radio or other media.

The Deputy Chairperson: Has no one done that up to now?

Ms Marin: A number of years ago, our organisation ran separate television and radio campaigns at its own expense. We have limited resources, which limits what we are able to provide.

The Deputy Chairperson: Has government taken out an awareness campaign?

Ms Smith: No. The Scottish Government ran a big awareness-raising campaign a few years ago. As well as encouraging parents, it encouraged employers to implement the childcare voucher. Unless an employer offers it, staff cannot access it.

Mr McCallister: Do childminders have to be registered?

Ms Marin: Yes. It is only for registered or approved childminders.

Mr McCallister: Is that the case for vouchers and tax credits?

Ms Marin: Yes.

Mr Moutray: There is a lot of information. Would it be possible for us to be copied in on some of the work that you have done on that?

Ms Smith: I think that I have shared that with the Committee before, but I am happy to do so again. It is a proposal that we presented to a number of Departments. Although they agree that it is an area that needs investment, we have not yet moved beyond that. I certainly can share the information with you again.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. I apologise for not getting to your round-table discussion, but I had a Committee meeting in Enniskillen. It was my first, so I could not miss it. You state in your presentation that many of the problems associated with accessing affordable childcare can be met by the new approved home childcare service. I live in a rural area, so I am interested to know what engagement you have had in the rural areas that makes you feel that you are best placed to deliver childcare services. Who have you engaged with in County Tyrone, for example?

Ms Smith: I have worked as a policy officer for the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, so I am well aware of the key rural policy issues with access to rural childcare provision. As a direct result of our contact with parents from across the region, we set up a scheme because parents had told us that they had particular problems accessing rural childcare. Rural access is an issue that also came across in our childcare cost survey. The approved home childcare scheme could be beneficial for rural families because the carer comes into the family home to provide the childcare service, so it does away with the issue of transport, which is a massive problem for rural families.

Ms McGahan: Surely the same problem would arise for the childminder travelling to the family home. During the winter, we regularly hear about this from registered childminders. Parents give off because they cannot access their childminder because the roads are not gritted. That is a problem in rural areas because of the lack of traffic volume. I share that frustration because I still feel that people are not getting it. We probably need to look at inviting grass-roots childcare service deliverers to the Committee — we have a couple of models in south Armagh and Eskragh — to get their views. I appreciate all the work that you are doing.

Ms Smith: Nora Ní Raghallaí from the South Armagh Childcare Consortium spoke at our round-table meeting. We asked her to give a presentation specifically from the rural perspective. That consortium is a great example of trying to deliver solutions on the ground as well as raising the problems.

Ms McGahan: Do you see my point? It will work the same way if somebody comes into the home. They will not be able to access the home, especially —

Ms Smith: On occasions of really bad weather when the roads are not accessible, the care will not get into the home. However, although such occasions arise, they are exceptional.

Ms McGahan: Not really, no. I live in a rural area.

Ms Smith: So do I.

Ms McGahan: I live in a rural area, so I really and truly know the problems. Such occasions are not exceptional.

Ms Smith: OK, I stand corrected. In the majority of cases, this service would mean the carer coming into the family home, which would, if the roads were accessible, help to address transport issues. There are also issues with childcare outside the conventional hours of work. We feel that improved home childcare would be beneficial, in that the service is tailored to the family's hours and not to those of the childminder or day nursery. So we believe that the service has great potential for rural families. I would welcome the opportunity to talk to you in more detail about the service.

Ms McGahan: Thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson: There is broad agreement that the issues in rural areas are particularly complex and need a much more holistic response. The suggested engagement with organisations that are directly effective is positive, and I know that you have been doing that through your round-table meeting. However, it would be good for the Committee to develop that. We have a short timescale, as the consultation's deadline is 5 March, but the Committee needs to take this issue very seriously.

Mr G Robinson: Most of my points have been covered. Several members spoke about awareness, which I think is critical. Has anything been pushed through to local councils about the need for awareness? Local councils are usually the hub of all activities throughout Northern Ireland. I am not sure whether you can give me an answer on that.

Ms Smith: We work with a number of local councils. The majority of them utilise the childcare voucher scheme. We have also developed a family benefit advisory service, through which we go and work in different urban and rural areas across the region to try to reach hard-to-reach parents. The service raises awareness and carries out "better off" calculations for parents thinking about going back into work. The calculation tells them whether they would be £10 better off, £20 worse off, or whatever, which is information that empowers them. So we work with a number of councils through the childcare voucher scheme and the family benefit advisory service. However, we would like councils and all employers to play a much more active role in circulating information on the voucher scheme. Although employers, particularly big employers, may offer the vouchers, many of their employees will not know that the scheme is available to them. I have a friend who found out in her staff kitchen that the childcare voucher scheme was available. After it was explained to her, she started to use it. We would like employers to be more proactive in signing up to and promoting the voucher scheme.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is it the case that the scheme is less difficult to apply for and administer than some people may think?

Ms Marin: It is completely electronic and very simple. We know from experience, because we get feedback, that a mental shutter comes down for most people when you talk to them about tax, exemptions and suchlike because they see it as confusing. One HR manager said to me that the form sat on her desk for six months, and she kept thinking that she did not have time to do it. However, when she lifted it, she sorted it out within a couple of hours. The benefits of that can really make a difference between a person being able to afford to go back to work or not. So it is a very simple system to use, albeit we understand that when you start talking about tax and exemptions, an awful lot of people automatically shut themselves out.

Also, a lot of people shut themselves out because they think that it must be a benefit-related scheme. They think: "I am earning slightly more than that, so I am not entitled." There has been so much confusion about the Welfare Reform Bill and the many changes connected to that. If ever there was a time for an awareness-raising campaign on the financial help that is available, now is it, when parents are being faced with what seem like very complicated cuts.

Mr G Robinson: Do you find it more difficult to raise awareness in the public sector or the private sector?

Ms Marin: It depends very much on the individuals in the organisation. Nora's team have what we call the family benefits advisory service. When we explain what it is, most employers are very keen for our staff to come in and deliver the service. It is completely free of charge, and the team do what are called "better off" calculations. As Nora said, they sit down and work out individually with people exactly what they are on now and what they would be entitled to if they increased or decreased their hours of work. So it is a very holistic approach.

Last month, we were in a very large well-known IT company in the private sector. Within a couple of hours, we had talked to someone on a six-figure salary and someone on a salary of £12,000 to £15,000. They both sat down, and we tried to work out what was best for them. So this is really just about making people aware that the service is available.

Mr Maskey: Thank you, Nora, Rachel and Marie for your presentation. You mentioned welfare reform, and the Bill is going through the Assembly as we speak. It never ceases to amaze me that there has never been an initiative on benefits uptake that did not result in an increase in the uptake of entitlements that had not been claimed previously. Never has any campaign, whether run informally by a local community organisation or by the Department, not achieved a significant increase in the uptake of benefits.

We have discussed with the Social Security Agency a programme of awareness, education, information and advice. Some campaigns ran recently. We are trying to build into the system something that means that people are checked automatically. That will be particularly relevant when we move to universal credit because that will automatically mean people making new claims. Universal credit is supposed to be a simpler way of doing things. I have not bought into that idea, but it should provide an ideal opportunity for a structured approach to benefits entitlement, which it will include, or so I would like to think.

I have taken note of that and will try to feed it into the deliberations of the Social Development Committee. I am only the Chair of that Committee; I am not drawing up the Bill, but I want to factor that in. We have discussed this with the Social Security Agency. As I understand it, the Executive Departments have agreed not to advertise, with the probable exception of Roads Service, which runs ads on road safety. So I think that OFMDFM and other Departments do not advertise because they have agreed not to. It is all about cost, expenditure, and so on. Obviously, the Social Security Agency is the ideal organisation to highlight this type of thing. Have you spoken to the Social Security Agency?

Ms Marin: Yes

Mr Maskey: I thought you might have, but I was just wondering.

Ms Marin: We met Tommy O'Reilly just before Christmas. Previously, he had not, perhaps, been fully aware of what our work involved, but he was certainly very interested after our conversation. He talked about some developments. I think that the agency will consult on a benefits uptake programme.

Mr Maskey: We are trying to get the agency to agree a structured and formal way of doing that. For the life of me, I cannot see why, when people make claims, the officers dealing with them should not be able to adopt a holistic approach and provide advice. There is also an argument that people making claims under the new universal credit, because of the kind of dramatic change that it will bring, might have statutory access to independent advice. For your information, the Committee for Social Development is looking at all of that. If you are looking for an awareness campaign, the Social Security Agency is probably the best place. It would be there or DSD. I will certainly, for what it is worth, take that back to the Committee.

You made a number of points quite forcefully — fair play. I understand your frustration and cynicism about whether this is a delaying tactic. Leaving that to one side, and the question of whether that is true, the consultation states that the Department has a vision for childcare, but that it cannot do that on its own. It has to do it with the community and voluntary sector, the private sector, and so on. Do we know what you would include in the strategy if you had the opportunity to write it? This Committee's consideration of the strategy and consultation is important, but I would like some key points that we could focus Departments' minds on. The minds of Departments — plural — because you were right to say that this involves many Departments.

I go back to welfare reform. There are no statutory childcare facilities here, whereas in England, for example, local government has that authority. Local government here does not have the jurisdiction so cannot get that authority. Local government in England provides schools, education, and so on. Here, it does not, which is why it does not have that authority. I am trying to think of how we can incorporate what you have said into what we say that we want to be included in a childcare strategy. The complication is that there will have to be a childcare strategy, and this Committee is indicating that it will be very focused on that. I would like to ensure that we have specific recommendations on what we want in the childcare strategy.

Ms Smith: The three issues recognised in the 1999 strategy, the 2005 review and the economic appraisal were affordability, accessibility and quality.

Affordability tries to ensure that all parents maximise the support available to them to make childcare as affordable as possible. It also looks at the potential for Departments to consider subsidising childcare costs even further for particular vulnerable groups.

Accessibility looks at rural childcare provision, childcare for children in the older age bracket — a real problem for families here — and school-age childcare.

The quality of childcare is inconsistent. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety issues minimum standards, but there are problems with their implementation. In our opinion, the statutory duty to co-operate and the need for more transparency must be cross-cutting. Currently, Departments are off doing their own bits and pieces on childcare. However, when each project finishes, that is that. A more co-ordinated approach would be beneficial.

In our response to the consultation, which, if you like, we will share with the Committee, our key recommendations very much centre on those three themes.

The Deputy Chairperson: I am conscious that you have done a huge amount of work on the issue. By way of rounding up our session today, perhaps you would, as Alex said, crystallise some of the key recommendations for us. We can certainly ensure that any Committee submission to the consultation process will show that we support those recommendations on your behalf. There seems to be some agreement on the merit of an awareness campaign. It must be hugely frustrating for you to see cross-party support for something that you made a proposal to carry out —

Ms Smith: Everybody agrees.

The Deputy Chairperson: — and yet you have not had a substantive response to your proposal. When I sought a fuller response, I was advised that an awareness campaign was being considered within the wider research being undertaken and the consultation process. I do not know what level of research will tell OFMDFM any clearer that this is a good idea, but we are where we are.

I think that it is positive the Committee heard from you on this issue and that it is generally supportive of the point that this is a crucial time to make people aware of all the assistance that they are completely entitled to. It has been very helpful to hear that from you today, and I am very grateful for the time you have taken to come to speak to us.

Consultation events are taking place as well, and I seek to publicise the fact that information on those is available on the OFMDFM website. In fairness to the Department, it is going out and holding a number of consultation events across Northern Ireland. So I direct people to the website. If you want to extend that information among your networks and publicise those events as well, that would be good.

Ms Smith: We most certainly will. We are doing our own consultation events as well. We are jointly holding one in Derry tomorrow with the Women's Resource and Development Agency and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action.

The Deputy Chairperson: That's great. OK. Thanks very much indeed.

Ms Marin: Thank you very much for your time; we appreciate it.