



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Delivering Social Change for Children and  
Young People: OFMDFM Officials

10 September 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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

Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People: OFMDFM Officials

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

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)  
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Alex Attwood  
Mr Leslie Cree  
Ms Megan Fearon  
Mr Alex Maskey  
Mr Stephen Moutray  
Mr George Robinson  
Mr Jimmy Spratt

### **Witnesses:**

Ms Margaret Rose McNaughton	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Dave Rogers	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mrs Janet Smyth	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

**The Chairperson:** We welcome officials to the Committee: Margaret Rose McNaughton, Janet Smyth and Dave Rogers. Margaret Rose, I will offer you up to five minutes for opening remarks.

**Ms Margaret Rose McNaughton (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** Thank you very much, Chair, for giving us the opportunity to update you on the consultation. We were here in January to discuss the approach in Delivering Social Change (DSC) for Children and Young People, and we provided the Committee with an interim update on 20 March. In May, we came back to brief you on the initial findings of the consultation. You have the analysis report, which provides a summary of the key views and themes emerging. We are here today to give you a brief overview of that report and the proposed next steps.

It is probably important that I say at the outset that the gathering of views and opinions on the consultation document took a mixed-methods approach. So, data collection was both quantitative and qualitative, and it combined public meetings at which people could air their views. Due to the variety of methods by which people could respond, and to make sure that all responses were given due attention, the analysis document provides an individual section on each method of data collection, whether it was by public meeting or online survey, focus groups, structured interviews with stakeholders, or written submissions. The analysis document brings together all those views, but has not attempted to combine them. Instead, it is an overarching assessment based on the complex variety of methods by which responses were gathered.

In general, while respondents welcomed the document and the outcomes-based approach, there were a number of concerns, of which, I think, everyone was aware, particularly around the integration of the child poverty strategy with the children's strategy. I think that the Committee also had those concerns. In general, our key stakeholders felt that more time and engagement with stakeholders was needed to develop an integrated strategy and that the current document risked diluting the outcomes in the current 10-year strategy for children and young people. As a result of those concerns, it has been decided to lay a separate child poverty strategy for 2014-17, as required by the Child Poverty Act 2010, in the Assembly, and to engage further with stakeholders and Departments in the development of a new strategy to replace the 10-year strategy for children and young people. That was relayed to you in the letter of 11 July, in which we included the analysis document.

The concerns expressed by stakeholders in relation to the child poverty element of DSC for Children and Young People have been taken on board in the development of the new child poverty strategy. We are coming back to you on 1 October to discuss the draft child poverty strategy, and Committee members will receive a copy of the draft strategy in advance of that meeting.

What is the way forward for DSC for Children and Young People? As I said, a separate child poverty strategy will be laid in the Assembly, and we now propose that a co-design process will be used to involve stakeholders directly in the development of a new strategy for children and young people. Co-design has been used previously in work around Together: Building a United Community, and is currently being used to develop the full childcare strategy. The process is working well and has been well received by stakeholders. The co-design will involve children, young people, parents, representatives of community and voluntary organisations, stakeholders and, of course, the Committee. We will begin the process of co-design for the new strategy this month, if possible.

Thank you for your time. We are very happy to take any questions that you have in relation to the analysis document or our proposals for the way forward.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much indeed. To summarise what I think I am hearing, you have had a very good consultation, you have listened, and you have reacted in significant measures, not least by separating out two proposed strategies.

**Ms McNaughton:** That is absolutely right, yes.

**The Chairperson:** When you were here, Margaret Rose, on 14 May, you said that it was impossible at that stage to give us an analysis of the consultation responses because it was a work in progress. However, the document that you have provided us with today is dated May 2014.

**Ms McNaughton:** That is probably just another editing error. We have been working on it continuously over the summer — right up until 11 July, when you got a version. It is still in draft form, but it will, when published and on the website, need to be dated correctly at that point.

**The Chairperson:** On the statutory obligations that the Department faces with regard to the Child Poverty Act, reading your response it seemed that, having granted an extension to the consultation period, which the Committee were very keen to see happen, you suggested that the statutory deadline for laying the annual report was missed because of us.

**Ms McNaughton:** Absolutely not. The general view was that we had attempted to meet the statutory deadline where we could. Clearly, stakeholders were very concerned with the five-week consultation period, as you were. With hindsight, it really was not the right way to do things. We sought legal advice on how that would affect our duty to lay the strategy. The outcome of that was that it was in the best interests of the public that we take more time over the strategy, and that that would serve the public much better doing that than laying a strategy in a rush at the end of March. Under no circumstances are we blaming the Committee for that.

**The Chairperson:** Can I ask you to review that section of the correspondence? Certainly, on first reading, I formed an absolute opinion that it seemed to suggest that the Committee was responsible for your missing the deadline. We certainly felt that it was very important to get as close to a full a consultation process as possible, but I do not think that we wish to take responsibility for your missing that deadline.

When do you intend to lay the third annual report?

**Ms McNaughton:** The third annual report will be laid at the same time as the new child poverty strategy.

**The Chairperson:** Which is?

**Ms McNaughton:** At the moment, the draft child poverty strategy is with Departments so that they can finalise their targets and indicators. We will then come back to the Committee on 1 October. Following that meeting with the Committee and whatever amendments need to be made, we will then need to go to the Executive. So, it is likely to be towards the end of October or into November.

**The Chairperson:** Back to 14 May: you advised that the appointment of a local Northern Ireland representative to the Child Poverty Commission, which is an obligation under the Child Poverty Act, was currently "under consideration" by the Department. Where are we with that now?

**Ms McNaughton:** It is still under consideration by the Department.

**The Chairperson:** It is a statutory obligation that remains unfulfilled.

**Ms McNaughton:** Yes, it remains under consideration in the Department.

**The Chairperson:** Can you give us any clue as to why it is under consideration rather than actioned?

**Ms McNaughton:** I cannot go into it in any further detail at this stage. I can only say that it is still under consideration.

**The Chairperson:** Can I ask what is under consideration? Is it, for example, a list of potential delegates?

**Ms McNaughton:** That would be one of the issues, as would whether there should be a representative on the new commission and who that representative might be.

**The Chairperson:** So, if I understand you correctly, you are saying that one of the issues under consideration is whether there should be a representative from Northern Ireland.

**Ms McNaughton:** That is my understanding. Janet, is that your understanding?

**Mrs Janet Smyth (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** Yes. The Assembly must give its consent for the North to be represented on the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. As Margaret Rose has stated, the matter is currently under consideration.

The Child Poverty Act 2010 created a Child Poverty Commission, but the commission was never established. The Welfare Reform Act 2012 amended the Child Poverty Act to create the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, as we have stated in correspondence. Amendments to that legislation also mean that we are no longer obligated to consult the commission in the development of our child poverty work and the strategy. We continue to report against the targets that are listed against the Child Poverty Act 2010 and are consulted in the development of the UK child poverty strategy.

In May, the Committee highlighted the consultation response from the Commissioner for Children and Young People, which stated that we had a statutory obligation to consult — as you have mentioned — the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission in the development of the new strategy. That is inaccurate. As I have stated, the Welfare Reform Act 2012 amended the Child Poverty Act and removed that obligation. Prior to 2012, a commission had not been created, therefore, we are not required to consult the commission in the development of a draft strategy.

We have been asked by stakeholders and the Committee about how we are progressing and whether we will be represented on the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. As Margaret Rose has stated, that is currently under consideration.

**The Chairperson:** So, to be clear, it is no longer a statutory obligation to appoint a representative to the commission.

**Mrs Smyth:** The Welfare Reform Act 2012 amended the Child Poverty Act 2010 to create the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, which replaced the original commission in the Child Poverty Act.

**The Chairperson:** When did you find out that you no longer had that statutory obligation?

**Mrs Smyth:** Following correspondence from you, we sought advice from our Departmental Solicitor's Office, and we have responded in relation to that advice.

**The Chairperson:** So, some time after the May session.

**Mrs Smyth:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you.

Turning to the summary and analysis of responses, you provided us with a document that is over 100 pages long, yet section 12, the Department's response, is only two pages long. Is that appropriate and proportionate?

**Ms McNaughton:** It seems that it is maybe not proportionate, but the reality is that we took on board the views. As you see when you go through the document, people were very concerned at almost each section. The decision was taken that we would separate the two documents. We are going to have a child poverty one, so we have worked on a new child poverty strategy. That draft child poverty strategy is fairly substantial. I have a copy of it here. That will really be part of the Department's response to the analysis. While that looks quite light, the new child poverty strategy, and then, of course, all the work on the development of the new 10-year strategy, will add to that.

**The Chairperson:** You also make clear that you are going to give additional and separate thought to children and young people in rural areas and with disabilities.

**Ms McNaughton:** Absolutely.

**The Chairperson:** Does that become a third document? Does it become a third consultation? How does that work?

**Ms McNaughton:** Do you mean in terms of the new 10-year strategy?

**The Chairperson:** Yes.

**Ms McNaughton:** That will be part of our co-design process. We will need to include children with disabilities and children from rural areas. We have already had informal conversations with, in particular, the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. I am meeting the Children's Commissioner tomorrow. It is about how we can access children in rural areas, children with disabilities and other children who perhaps are harder to hear. They will all be part of the co-design process.

**Mr Maskey:** I want to go back to the last bit there about our role in terms of the Welfare Reform Act that you referred to, which was passed in Westminster. Did you say that that Act took away our obligation to consult with the forum and the commission? The Welfare Reform Act was passed in London, and it took away our obligation to consult with the very people who it would be crucial for us to consult with to meet our obligations on child poverty.

**Ms McNaughton:** It takes away the obligation for both Northern Ireland and Scotland —

**Mr Maskey:** I am only worried about here.

**Ms McNaughton:** I have a copy of the amendment with me. The original wording for the Child Poverty Commission was — sorry. Section 8 was amended by schedule 13. Basically, it said that the new body is to be called the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. There were new functions for the commission under the Welfare Reform Act. References in the previous section 8 of the Act

were removed. It might be best if I copy this to the Committee, along with a letter that sets out exactly where the amendments were made. It is quite legalistic, and it needs to be set out properly for you.

**The Chairperson:** I think that Alex's point is that, before welfare reform, there was a statutory obligation for us to send a representative to consult with that body, and that, subsequently, that is now an option, not an obligation. Obviously, Mr Maskey is not happy —

**Mr Maskey:** It is silent. It is not an option; it is silent.

**Ms McNaughton:** That appears to be the case. I think that the Child Poverty Act was brought in under the previous Labour Government, and then with the coalition Government and some of the changes that have been made —

**Mr Maskey:** I appreciate that. I know that it is quite technical, but it is quite important that we understand the wider implications of these things because, ultimately, we have to decide how we do our job. We need to keep getting the tools that we require or the obligations imposed on us to do our job effectively. I would appreciate it if you could provide that, Margaret.

**Ms McNaughton:** I will come back to you with a more formal response to that.

**The Chairperson:** Can I bring up the question of the Commissioner for Children and Young People? In May — I do not want to rehearse this — obviously there was not a perfect relationship between the Department and the Commissioner and the Commissioner's view of things. I think one of the focuses the Commissioner has now is the extent to which this is all based in the United Nations guidelines. How do you feel you are with that?

**Ms McNaughton:** In terms of developing the new strategy or in terms of developing the child poverty strategy?

**The Chairperson:** Child poverty, in the first instance.

**Ms McNaughton:** The new child poverty strategy will take on board fully the views that the Commissioner made clear in relation to the UN principles. It is difficult to get into the strategy if you have not seen a copy of it yet, and we will go into it in more detail on 1 October, but certainly we will have a full section on United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) principles within that, and they are in the draft version at the moment.

**The Chairperson:** And the broader strategy?

**Ms McNaughton:** In the broader strategy as well, that will be part of the co-design process. When we go out to initial pre-consultation with all the stakeholders, everything is up for discussion at that point. One of the issues that came through from most of the responses to the consultation was that we needed to set it clearly within the UNCRC principles. So, yes, I suspect that that will be the case.

**The Chairperson:** Would it be right to say that you view the UNCRC as the foundation rock for all your work in this area?

**Ms McNaughton:** Clearly, the view coming from the stakeholders is that that is the way they see it. As you have agreed, we have taken on board what they said. We have included it and will be including it in the child poverty strategy. I imagine that it will be a fundamental part of the new 10-year strategy.

**The Chairperson:** Is there a counterargument to the UNCRC being the foundation stone?

**Ms McNaughton:** No, not that I am aware of.

**The Chairperson:** I think you indicated that in the consultations a majority supported the use of an outcomes-based approach. But then later on, I think one of the conclusions from the Turning the Curve workshops was that it highlighted a lack of real understanding of that approach, in particular the role of outcomes and indicators. Is that not a contradiction?

**Ms McNaughton:** I think there was a bit of confusion with some people. Janet, do you want to say something about the —

**Mrs Smyth:** Yes. The majority of consultees supported the use of the outcomes-based approach. That was based on our survey, the questionnaires and the written responses. We used the Turning the Curve exercise to bring Departments on board to talk to them purely about the methodology. So whilst we talk about the outcomes-based approach being welcomed by the public, the sector and the Commissioner for Children and Young People, they also had sight of the various indicators that were associated with that and the proposed actions, whereas the Turning the Curve event was really training and talking to Departments on how that outcomes-based approach and methodology should work. There was slight confusion in Departments around a real understanding of how that would work, how targets would be developed and how they would report in relation to delivery of targets and actions. That is probably why the confusion maybe appears in the document.

**The Chairperson:** Have you got a clear sense of how you are going to do this and how you are going to monitor it?

**Mrs Smyth:** We have a proposed monitoring framework, and we will talk to you about that in more detail when we come back on 1 October. We have talked to Departments more about the whole outcomes-based accountability and outcomes-based approach. They have seen a copy of the draft strategy, along with the analysis. They have made comments in relation to that, and a high percentage of Departments are keen and are content now in relation to the proposals that have been presented to them. But it is not so much us presenting proposals; it is more around working with Departments in detail and having discussions and further progress in relation to how we are going to achieve these actions and the new targets that they will be signing up to. It is a joined-up approach across Departments, the sector and the children and young people.

**Mr Attwood:** First of all, I certainly welcome what seems to be a quite significant, if not dramatic, change of course based on the consultation, because it seems to me that there was a very strong indictment from the sector in relation to what was being proposed, and the Department is right to reconfigure to deal with child poverty, not least because your own commissioned research — the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) research — confirms what the figures are going to be in terms of absolute and relative levels by 2020. They are going to be three times greater than what the ambition was for child poverty levels by 2020.

In my view, the Department was going down a wrong path. I welcome the fact that you have rectified it and are now going to go down the right path by laying a child poverty strategy as opposed to that wider approach, but it all comes down to what is in that strategy and we are obviously, for now, in the dark, because you are coming back in October and we will be able to draw conclusions then. But, just so that I understand the process, after you have done your consultation and discussed it with Committee, you will lay the child poverty strategy as a work in progress up to the end of 2016, with the intention of publishing a different version of that in 2017, as is required under law?

**Ms McNaughton:** The new strategy that we will lay in October will be for 2014-17, because it is a three-year strategy. The Child Poverty Act then requires us to do another strategy. As we go forward through DSC for Children and Young People, whether people want at that stage to consider putting the child poverty back into the new strategy again from 2017 will be an issue for our stakeholders as we go through the co-design process. Every three years we are required to have a new strategy. What format that strategy takes is up to us and our stakeholders and Committee members to decide.

**Mr Attwood:** I would certainly like to think that, based on the experience of the consultation, you will stick very tightly to the child poverty strategy, given the scale of child poverty that we are now facing in the rundown to 2020 and thereafter. If you fragment your approach, I do not think you are going to have any of the possible outcomes in terms of reducing child poverty. Where are we now in terms of the Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People consultation? Is that abandoned?

**Ms McNaughton:** No, no. The analysis document covers both child poverty and the DSC for Children and Young People consultation. The stakeholders were really concerned about the lack of engagement in developing the document and the dilution of the outcomes in the 10-year strategy, so that is why we decided that we would separate the two again. The new strategy will be developed from now as part of a co-design process. There will be another consultation on that, because it will be —

**Mr Attwood:** On the wider children and young people?

**Ms McNaughton:** Yes, because that will be the new strategy taking over the 10-year strategy from 2016, which is when the current strategy finishes anyway, so we need to be prepared from 2016 to have a new strategy. Whether it is a 10-year strategy or a five-year strategy will be up for discussion.

**Mr Attwood:** For children and young persons.

**Ms McNaughton:** For children and young people, yes.

**Mr Attwood:** So that part of the consultation on DSC for Children and Young People dealt with issues beyond child poverty. What is happening with the issues beyond child poverty now?

**Ms McNaughton:** We cannot do much with those issues that are not currently included in the 10-year strategy until we go through the design process for the new strategy, but they will hopefully be incorporated into the new strategy.

**Mr Attwood:** In 2017?

**Ms McNaughton:** In 2016.

**Mr Attwood:** It is going to be done through 2016, but the strategy will be laid in 2017. Is that not right?

**Ms McNaughton:** The new children's strategy? Yes, because the current one goes up to 2016.

**Mr Attwood:** So, is the situation that, save for the welcome attention on child poverty, we will not have a children's strategy until 2017?

**Ms McNaughton:** We will continue with the current strategy. We have got the current strategy right up to 2016. We need to be in a position to have a new children's strategy for when the current one expires.

**Mr Attwood:** My final question is this: in respect of the child poverty strategy on which you will come back in October, what is the process for consulting with the sector about the content of that, as opposed to the response to the DSC for Children and Young People consultation?

**Mrs Smyth:** The DSC for Children and Young People consultation document, as you are aware, is a document which brought on board those three policy areas: child poverty work, everything that we are doing on that and how we would like to move forward; the 10-year strategy for children and young people; and our UNCRC work. That consultation process was on those three policy areas. What we have done is taken the responses, based on what came from the consultation, and used them to inform a new draft child poverty strategy. That has gone out to Departments for discussion and clearance through their Ministers in relation to actions, targets and proposed indicators. We have very much used the responses from the consultation on that overarching framework, which brought on board the child poverty work, to help us to inform the new strategy.

Now, as we move forward with that draft strategy, and once it is laid in the Assembly, we will work closely with our stakeholders on how we actually deliver on that. We are proposing that we set up various outcomes-focused groups to take forward each of the outcomes. Those focus groups will be made up of representatives from key Departments, the voluntary sector and the children's sector. We are also trying to get representatives of children and young people themselves to work in those outcomes groups to help us to deliver on the various actions that will make a difference.

**Mr Attwood:** That seems to be broadly the right approach. This is a question that I do not think you can really answer and maybe should not even be asked until we come back in October, but is the touchstone against which the child poverty strategy in draft is being judged the IFS review of what child poverty will look like in 2020? Is that the touchstone against which we are judging all of this?

**Mr Dave Rogers (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** It is important to recall what the IFS work is, which is an independent assessment by the Institute for Fiscal Studies of the best estimates of what child poverty levels will look like in 2020, factoring in what we know has happened — in other words, the economy and some legislative changes — and what might happen —



of course, there are a lot of uncertainties there, especially in the legislative field — but not considering what then might happen as a direct result of any additional strategies on top of that. It is a best estimate which shows you what might be, not what will happen. As you may recall, the Institute for Fiscal Studies produced the original document. It revised it last year. One thing that we have asked it to do is a further revision, which we expect shortly and intend to publish in the autumn. As you may know, the last child poverty figures for Northern Ireland declined slightly, whereas the projection was that they might increase. I suspect that you will get some sort of revision of those figures. I cannot speculate on what will be in the new one, but, as you pointed out, the last one clearly showed a projected increase. I suppose that it will lay out whether the increase is as much, the same as or greater in the next one. I would be very surprised if it is revised to show no increase, but that is speculation on my part. I think that it will show the kind of challenge that is before all of us.

**Mr Attwood:** Whatever the figures eventually end up as — it is somewhat informed guesswork, and objective circumstances change — the conclusion nonetheless has to be whether absolute and relative poverty is 30.8% and 34.7% or 29% and 34%. The figures are so catastrophic whatever way you project forward that what is coming forward on 1 October must be as radical as is necessary to respond to that catastrophic outcome.

**Ms McNaughton:** We will take that on board, absolutely. However, what we will bring forward are the things that we hope that we can actually do and that we can influence here to reduce poverty. When you look at what they are doing in Scotland or England, you see that a lot of the proposals that they are putting forward — certainly in England — are around increasing wages, making sure that households have more income and reducing the number of workless families. Where we can, we hope to replicate some of those, but some things will be beyond our control — for example, any tax relief.

**Mr Attwood:** In advance of 1 October, it might be useful to get some briefing about the strategies in England and Scotland and what the projected 2020 figures are for absolute and relative poverty for children so that we have a touchstone for other jurisdictions' response that we can judge against what will be sent on 1 October.

**The Chairperson:** I think that that is another one for research, unless anybody objects.

**Mr Lyttle:** To a certain extent you have touched on this already. There was some criticism in the consultation response about the narrow focus of the Delivering Social Change framework around child poverty. Are you confident that the new approach will allow you to coordinate Departments to achieve better outcomes for children and young people across the board? Can you tell us a bit more about some of the key areas that that is going to cover?

**Ms McNaughton:** Yes, I think that we are confident. We will be working very closely with the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and the Children's Commissioner and a couple of other organisations that are not represented on the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. Part of the co-design process will be to bring Departments along with us from the beginning. Our current strategy has over 300 actions. In working and developing our new strategy, Departments have to be involved from the outset, and they have to sign up to the actions that they are going to take. The beauty of the co-design process is that, because they are involved from the beginning, we can be confident that they will take on board the issues that they need to take on board and do the things that are for their Departments to do.

**The Chairperson:** OK. If members are content, Dave, Janet and Margaret Rose, thank you very much indeed. See you in October.