



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Committee for Education**

**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

**Strategy for Children and Young People:  
Proposed Legislation**

**25 April 2012**

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Education

### Strategy for Children and Young People: Proposed Legislation

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

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Michaela Boyle  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mr Phil Flanagan  
Mrs Brenda Hale  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr Daithí McKay  
Mr Sean Rogers

**Witnesses:**

Mr Steven Agnew MLA	Green Party
Mr Ross Brown	Green Party

**The Chairperson:** We are very glad to have Steven here. Also present is Ross Brown, who is a research assistant. You are very welcome to the Committee.

**Mr Steven Agnew MLA (Green Party):** Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson:** Steven, you know the format. You give us a presentation and then the Committee tears it apart — sorry; that is not what we do. There will be questions. Thank you for coming and for your interest in the issue. It is appreciated.

**Mr Agnew:** Thank you very much. I thank the Committee for taking an interest at this early stage of my proposed private Member's Bill.

I will give a sense of the three key elements of the Bill. I propose putting a duty on all Departments to collaborate in working to achieve the six high-level outcomes that are listed in the 10-year strategy for children and young people. I will come back to those later. There would be a second duty on all relevant Departments to collaborate on the planning, commissioning and delivery of services to children. The third element is enabling legislation that would allow Departments to pool budgets. That is vital to making the legislation work.

I have been a member of the all-party group on children and young people since 2007, first as a representative of Brian Wilson and then, since May 2011, when I was elected in my own right as an MLA. The issue has come up repeatedly at the all-party group. We have had a number of meetings with the junior Ministers, at which we proposed this statutory duty. However, it was clear that it was not on the legislative agenda. The proposal came very much from the children's sector. Although I could see the importance of collaboration among Departments in the provision of services and strategies relating to children, I was not sure that legislation was necessarily required. I am sure that the Committee is well aware of the Department of Education's early years strategy, which it presented to the all-party group. I will not go into the importance of early years in too much detail. This week, we debated multi-agency support teams, and the issue of early years was highlighted. I am sure that it has been part of the Committee's work. When we were presented with the draft early years strategy, it was clear that it was very much a Department of Education strategy. When I asked what work had been done with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), I was told that it was consulted but that it was not a collaborative partner.

As you know, early years looks at children's lives from nought to six. Research has highlighted the fact that that is the key time in a child's development. Indeed, it is the key time when social disadvantage can have an impact. If people wish to combat social disadvantage, that is the time to act. When I heard that it was a Department of Education strategy, my concern was that most children do not come into contact with Department of Education services until they are four years of age. Some children will have earlier contact through, for example, Sure Start and preschool, but it is a 0-6 early years strategy. What happens from nought to three is a real concern of mine. So I started to get a sense of the importance of a statutory duty.

The 10-year strategy for children and young people, which sits with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), is another important strategy. It has the full support of the children's non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector and has been commended for its ambition.

In case members do not know the six high-level outcomes of that strategy, I will list them. They are that children are healthy; enjoy learning and achieving; live in safety with stability; experience economic and environmental well-being; contribute positively to community and society; and live in a society that protects their rights. Those outcomes have been agreed by the Executive and are supported by the children's sector. However, the sector believes that, because of the lack of integrated working among Departments, there has been insufficient progress to date on achieving the outcomes. Indeed, OFMDFM has acknowledged that progress was not sufficient in the previous mandate, and part of its plan is to put that right in this mandate.

There have been further calls for more integrated working. In 2008, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's inquiry into child poverty called for the strengthening of a legislative basis for integrated planning and commissioning of children's services. In 2010, the Committee for Finance and Personnel published a report calling for the Executive to bring forward proposals for improving the arrangements for promoting and funding collaborative working. As well as calls from the children's sector, there have been calls, in government itself, and certainly in the Assembly, for a legislative proposal to improve integrated working.

I will give members a brief sense of the context in which Northern Ireland sits in terms of the UK legislation on a statutory duty. In England and Wales, there is a statutory duty to collaborate on children's services. Our proposal is significantly different because our structures are significantly different. The statutory duty in England and Wales sits with local councils, which are responsible for delivering services to children. In Northern Ireland, that would not be the most appropriate place, given that our councils have less responsibility, although they still have some responsibility in delivering children's services. The statutory duty in Scotland is not as strong as it is in England, but the Scottish Parliament is looking at that as part of its children's services Bill.

I will return to the three key elements of the proposal. The first is the statutory duty on all Departments to collaborate in working to achieve the six high-level outcomes. As part of that duty, OFMDFM would be required to lay a report before the Assembly. We are open as to how often that should be, but there is a similar duty, for example, in the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to report every three years, which is a good

working time frame. The frequency of such a report will be a matter for our consultation. There is a reciprocal duty on OFMDFM to produce a report on behalf of all Departments, as there is on the other Departments to work with OFMDFM in producing that report.

The second element is the statutory duty on all relevant Departments, agencies, public bodies and councils to collaborate in the planning, commissioning and delivery of services to children. It is envisaged that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety would take the lead and that the Health Minister would lay a report before the Assembly highlighting what progress has been made and what collaborative working had taken place.

The final aspect, which, as I said, is vital, is the enabling legislation to allow Departments to pool budgets and/or staff resources, and I want to link it to the commissioning of children's services. Investment in early years provision will produce positive education and health outcomes, but it also has the potential to reduce criminal activity in later life, which would help to meet the policy objectives of the Department of Justice. Although it may be desirable for the Department of Justice to invest in early years provision, it would not, in most cases, have a direct relationship in providing services to children and young people. Given that no matter how good our financial situation is, budgets and resources are always stretched and limited, why should the Department of Health put its resources into producing better outcomes for the Department of Justice? I appreciate that it is the right thing to do, but, ultimately, every Department will look to its core policy objectives. If budgets could be pooled, as well as the stick of legislation in the proposed Bill that requires co-operative working, there could arguably be the carrot. The Department of Health could go to the Department of Justice and say that they need to collaborate to produce the outcomes of the policy objectives. Equally, the Health Department could say that it wants a financial input from the Department of Justice to deliver such services. I believe that that would be a positive step forward in the way in which government could and should work.

I will go back briefly to the three elements of planning, commissioning and delivery. Planning is about getting that input into children-related strategies from each Department. I touched on commissioning, but I want to highlight the fact that it is about making the most efficient use of resources. Members will be well used to groups coming and asking for more money. The proposed Bill calls for using the money that we have better rather than asking for more money. I will give an example of how we could use resources better. A number of Departments are working on early intervention strategies: the Department of Justice, through its community safety strategy; the Department for Social Development, through neighbourhood renewal; and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, through public health promotion, and mental health and emotional well-being. Those all include early intervention strategies to try to prevent problems further down the line. Each programme has its own departmental staff. If there were joint commissioning, staff and resources could be pooled to ensure that there is just one stream. An organisation or agency that is seeking funding to deliver such programmes would have one port of call and one line through which to seek funding. That would reduce the administrative burden on agencies and Departments. Therefore, it is about using resources better.

Finally, we have some examples of good practice whereby collaboration is working in the delivery of children's services. The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership sits in the Department of Health. The legislation that created that partnership imposes a statutory duty on health agencies to collaborate, when appropriate, with other Departments' agencies. However, there is no reciprocal duty outside the Department of Health. For example, the Department of Education's agencies have no duty to work with health agencies; that requires goodwill. The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership's experience is that that goodwill has been there. As budgets become increasingly stretched, however, the concern is that Departments and agencies will look to fulfil their core objectives — essentially, their requirements. It is felt that a statutory duty to work collaboratively should be made part of their core duties.

I believe, as, indeed, does the children's sector, that collaborative working needs to be given a statutory footing. The proposed Bill has the potential to improve outcomes for children in Northern Ireland and, as I said, lead to more efficient use of our limited resources. I admit that, for a private Member's Bill, it is quite ambitious. It has not been an easy journey to get it to this stage, but I feel strongly that the effort is worthwhile. I have been working with children in Northern Ireland and staff in the Bill Office to get the Bill right. Indeed, those staff have helped me through the journey from having

an idea of a statutory duty to the stage of having the proposals that I am presenting. I am in the consultation period, which ends on 2 June. It is a genuine consultation; the Bill has evolved significantly since I first started to work on it in September 2011. Obviously, I am looking for members' support, but, at this stage, I am really looking for input into how the Bill can be improved. In that sense, it is a genuine consultation. It would be foolish of me to call for a statutory duty on Departments to work together and then not work with other parties and Members to get the legislation right.

As you will be aware — it comes up often in the Chamber — Northern Ireland has the highest rate of child poverty in the UK. Ultimately, children in Northern Ireland lose out because of the lack of a statutory duty. I am keen to work with as many people as possible to get the legislation right so that it could help to improve those outcomes.

**The Chairperson:** Steven, thank you very much. Would it be easier to create a Department for children and young people than to put a statutory obligation in place? Unfortunately, it seems as though the idea of joined-up government is only an idea, especially when it comes to budgets. There are examples in boards right across the country in which there are collaborative arrangements, and everything goes fine and everybody says that they can do this and that until the money has to be found for delivery. Then, it is inside a budgetary head. You have hit it on the nail: the enabling legislation for the financial aspects is where the problem will arise because budgets are allocated. As a Committee, we have written to OFMDFM on the issue. I also wrote to the Department of Education. The Minister said that he will reserve his position until he sees the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's outcome of its review of Departments. There is a consensus that it might be easier or simpler to have a Department for children and young people.

**Mr Agnew:** It would certainly be another way to tackle the issue. I have looked at what I can do. Unfortunately, I do not have the power to choose which Departments we have and do not have. I would be supportive. It is hard to find a Department that does not have an effect on children's lives in some way, directly or indirectly. I always look at planning. When we plan our towns and cities, we do not consider children. There will never be a way in which Departments' responsibilities could be sufficiently disaggregated so that all responsibilities would rest in one Department for children and the others would have nothing to worry about. There will always be at least an indirect impact on children.

You are right about the pooling of budgets: what gets done is what has been budgeted for. I have tried to ask questions for written answer to the Finance Minister to see what scope there is for the pooling of budgets. It seems pretty clear from the responses that I received that it is not happening. I do not think — Ross will correct me if I am wrong — that anyone has said that it cannot happen, but, equally, there is no evidence of it happening, which is why the enabling legislation would be necessary. It would be a case of saying that Departments "may" pool budgets and staff resources. That is the wording in the English legislation: they "may" pool budgets. That is not a duty, but there is a duty to work together. I believe that the pooling of budgets would naturally follow from that.

**Ms Boyle:** Thank you for your presentation, Steven and Ross. I commend you for your work and your proposals. The Chair has already asked my question; on reading your briefing, I thought that it would be much easier to have a Department for children and young people, in which people would have to stand over their responsibilities.

Further investment is needed for children and young people. Different Departments are doing different things. However, they are working in silos, and collaborative working needs to be publicly seen. Therefore, I can understand the criticisms that the children's sector has levelled at Departments for not moving fast enough and not moving forward.

Your briefing states that you have lobbied both junior Ministers and:

*"there has been a failure of leadership".*

Surely you are not saying that the two junior Ministers have failed in their responsibilities.

**Mr Agnew:** I am not saying that there has been no progress, but insufficient progress has been made. We have had voluntary initiatives such as the children's champions in Departments, which were welcomed at the time. We also have the ministerial subcommittee for children and young people. However, the early experiences of that subcommittee were that it did not meet frequently enough, and, as it is an Executive subcommittee, very little comes out about what it does. The all-party group is not a Statutory Committee, and I appreciate the time that the junior Ministers have taken for meetings with us. To be fair to them, they have always met us and heard our case.

At a Save the Children event last September, Martina Anderson said that the junior Ministers agreed that insufficient progress had been made and that it was their aim to improve progress on the 10-year strategy. The all-party group on children and young people also received a presentation from OFMDFM officials, who told us that they were considering whether to recommend the creation of a statutory duty to the junior Ministers further down the line. I understand that there had been a bit of reshuffle in officers. It had been ruled out before, they are looking at it again, and I can see the issue being opened up again. Whereas previously we were told "no", we are now being told "maybe"; I see that as progress.

As for having a Department for children, for members' interest, the Welsh Assembly has looked at children's budgeting and whether it can disaggregate how much is spent on children by each Department. That is worth keeping an eye on. Many challenges come with that, but the principle is good, and it would allow us to see how much of our resources actually end up in delivering services to children. It is difficult to get a figure of how much we spend on children, particularly when we look at issues such as hospitals, parks or town planning.

**Ms Boyle:** Your briefing states that the Bill would:

*"ensure the most effective use of their limited resources".*

Therefore, again, it will come down to finances. Thank you, Steven.

**Mr Kinahan:** Steven, I very much support this proposal. As you will expect, we all see the problems of Departments not pulling together. However, I want to play devil's advocate a little. First, have you looked at whether a statutory duty would skew other matters that are on the edges of education and young people and what the side effects might be? Secondly, have you looked at where it would fit with the review of Departments, if we have one, and can it be set up in such a way that it works when the number of Departments is reduced? Thirdly, you talked about having a Department for children and young people. Do you feel that it would work better if one person, rather than two junior Ministers, were given the task of pulling it all together while leaving the other Departments as they are? I think that this is a fantastic idea and that it provides a model that we probably need for everything we do. What would you like the Committee to do to help it along?

**Mr Agnew:** We raised the issue of the reconfiguration of Departments or a reduction in their number with the Bill Office. All legislation that mentions the Department of Education — or whatever that Department will be called — will have to be looked at, and the Bill Office seems to think that it would be a simple matter of producing amending legislation to make those changes. I take my guidance from the Bill Office, and it seems to think that there will not be an issue. As for having a single person — a junior Minister for children was in my party's manifesto — we felt that asking for a new Department at this stage would not receive wide support, but we certainly wanted more of a focus on children. The OFMDFM level was seen as being vital to that, given its co-ordination role with other Departments.

I produced the Bill in the current context for the current context. If the context changes, the best way forward may also change, but, as you said, regardless of what our government structures are, we should be seeking to achieve collaborative working across the board. To some extent, if the proposed legislation were to go through and be seen to be successful, perhaps we would see further strengthening of collaboration on other issues and through legislation.

You asked how the Committee could help. Although I have worked in Parliament Buildings for a number of years, I am a relatively new Member of the Assembly. The consultation is genuine, and I am keen to give as much consideration as possible to the responses. I want to get the Bill right and get it

through the Assembly, so I will take direction from others. To date, the work has been largely our own, in consultation with some people in the children's sector. However, we are now open to wider consultation, and all feedback will be gratefully received and genuinely considered.

**Mrs Dobson:** Thank you, Steven, for your briefing. I commend you and fully support what you are trying to do.

We are still waiting for the early years strategy to be published, and the Department of Education is dragging its heels and holding back other Departments. I am sure that you would agree that your proposed Bill proves that things are not working. How do you see your Bill working with the early years strategy when it is published? How will you ensure that none of your proposals will contradict the eventual early years strategy?

**Mr Agnew:** I believe that had the Bill been in place, the early years strategy would not be a Department of Education strategy. There would at least have had to have been collaboration between the Department of Education and the Department of Health. That is the way that it should have been done. The Committee will know better than me why that was not done. I do not in any way see the Bill contradicting an early years strategy. If the strategy is in place before the Bill goes through the Assembly — if it is to go through the Assembly — it would still sit as a Department of Education strategy, but there would be a requirement, through legislation, for the Department of Education to collaborate with other Departments and agencies in delivering the early years strategy. I think that that would be of benefit, ultimately, to the end users — the children.

**Mrs Dobson:** What consultations have you had with other Committees?

**Mr Agnew:** We have appeared before the OFMDFM Committee. We have also written to the Justice Committee and the Health Committee. Along with Education, they are the key Departments. Now that we are out to full consultation, we have written to all of them. We have had feedback from the Health and Justice Committees that they will consider the issue further down the line. I appreciate the Education Committee being proactive on the issue. We have also had feedback from the Health Minister, who pointed to some initiatives that may improve collaborative working, but, in my view, do not go far enough, such as the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. That is an example of how joint working can take place, but it is at agency level, and the proposed Bill is about bringing it up to departmental level. There is other legislation, such as the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and the Safeguarding Board Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which include a duty to co-operate, but, again, they are operating with a single issue. The proposed legislation would be broader in scope. The Justice Minister pointed out that a statutory duty was considered in the drafting of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. I have not looked into the issue in great detail. I do not know whether you have, Ross, with regard to the Justice Act. Although a statutory duty was considered during the drafting of that legislation, for certain reasons, it was rejected. A statutory duty would have improved that legislation. Some evidence states that we need a statutory footing because voluntary approaches have not worked sufficiently well.

**Mrs Dobson:** Has the feedback from other MLAs been mostly supportive?

**Mr Agnew:** The OFMDFM Committee, by and large, was quite supportive. In fact, I have yet to hear anyone say that they will not support the Bill at all. However, some are more supportive than others. I do not want to put any parties on the spot. Colum Eastwood certainly indicated that the SDLP would support it. In the OFMDFM Committee, Sinn Féin was very supportive. At the time, Mike Nesbitt's view was that we are basically saying that public service agreements have not worked. He shared that analysis. Parties as a whole, however, will take their positions as and when appropriate.

**The Chairperson:** I ask Members to be conscious of the time. The Department is coming in to discuss the entitlement framework.

**Miss M McIlveen:** You are very welcome, Steven. I understand where you are because I have been down the road of a private Member's Bill previously. It is role reversal. It is quite strange to come before your peers to discuss a particular issue. The proposed Bill is very welcome. As chair of the all-

party group on children and young people, I understand the frustrations that are being discussed in the sector. They are certainly not new.

You mentioned that you had a response from Edwin Poots. What other discussions have you had with officials in the Department of Health and OFMDFM?

**Mr Agnew:** At this point, I have not had discussions with officials. The purpose of my initial contact with the Health Committee and the Minister was to seek feedback. I have been working at that level. I am happy to receive advice on how best to engage with Departments. The consultation has gone out to each Department. This afternoon, we are holding a consultation event in the Long Gallery, to which Departments and officials have been invited. I am not entirely sure who is on the attendance list. I know that Ann Godfrey from the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership is attending. I am not sure about other officials in the Health Department. Perhaps you know, Ross.

**Mr Ross Brown (Green Party):** The invitation was sent to Ministers rather than to Departments.

**Mr Agnew:** So to some extent, I have approached Departments at ministerial level. It is for Ministers to decide who engages. As I said, I am happy to take advice on how best to engage with Departments.

**Miss M McIlveen:** From my experience, I know that dealing with officials can be a mixed experience. However, it is a beneficial experience from which you can get a steer on where Departments are and whether the legislation will work with where they are. It is easier for us to look at it from a cursory perspective. They know the difficulties and challenges. Perhaps what we see as a straightforward and common-sense approach has implications that are just not so. Obviously, we will discuss the issue again in various forums. Thank you very much.

**Mr Agnew:** Absolutely. Thank you. I am keen to engage with officials as generally and broadly as possible because there is also the issue of the impact of further legislative proposals and how they will play out in reality. To some extent, when you are looking at the legislative basis only, you do not see exactly how it will impact on the ground. As I said, I am keen to consult as widely as possible.

**Mr McKay:** I want to start by congratulating you on getting this far. As someone who brought a private Member's Bill during the previous Assembly mandate, I know that it requires a lot of hard work. You are one hell of a long way from the Final Stage of the Bill, let me tell you. What timescale do you envisage for the Bill coming to the Assembly?

**Mr Agnew:** It will certainly not be before the summer recess; that is for sure. The consultation will take us up to June. We would hope to compile a summary of the consultation responses over the summer. Based on the consultation, we would then have to amend our proposals. Realistically, by the time that the drafting is done, it will probably be early 2013. I am conscious that, on a number of occasions, I said that we would definitely be out to consultation by the end of January and then said that it would be the end of February. It was March before we went out to consultation, so some of our timelines have already slipped. As things currently stand, it will be early 2013 before the Bill comes to the Assembly.

**Mr McKay:** You mentioned the statutory duty in England and Wales. I am trying to get a picture of how this will play out. Some councils in England and Wales have the same size of population as we serve here. You talked about justice. Can you give us some concrete examples of how the amount of money spent on children and young people has changed in those councils?

**Mr Agnew:** It is not about the amount of money that is spent on children. To a large extent, that is an Executive decision. It is more about moving that money from back office to front-line services.

**Mr McKay:** I was referring to judicial agencies starting to contribute to issues affecting children and young people.

**Mr R Brown:** Last year, the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) released a paper on preventative spending, which will have examples of how spending on early intervention strategies leads to long-run outcomes whereby not as much money has to be spent. The paper has a number of case



studies, and it should be available from RaISe online. I can definitely get back to you with some of those examples.

**Mr Rogers:** Thank you very much, Steven, for your presentation. I totally support you and feel very passionately about the subject. Some work has been done, and you mentioned Sure Start. From when a mother arrives home with her baby, her whole life can be turned upside down, and, in some cases, she is on her own. At times, the person who builds up a relationship with her is a health visitor, who can be in a position to point her in the direction of parenting skills and for help in areas such as speech therapy. That may be the only person in whom the mother has confidence. Daithí talked about funding, and spending on a child from a baby to a teenager is all skewed. We know that, initially, this will cost quite a bit of money, but the long-term consequences are that the trends of spending will go the other way on the graph in that spending will reduce on justice and on other areas. We need joined-up thinking, but we also need joined-up action. Daithí more or less stole my thunder too in that —

**Mr Agnew:** He does that to me too.

**Mr Rogers:** How well is this working in certain places?

**Mr Agnew:** As the father of a six-week-old, I know the pressure on mothers. I am here while, I suspect, my little girl might be screaming. I have seen at first hand very recently the interaction that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has in those very early years, and that is a key time. Although it is beyond the scope of this Bill, from some of the examples from Scandinavia of early years working and the universal services that are provided, there is a lot of evidence to show that that works. Ross has examined the English context.

**Mr R Brown:** In 2010, the Children's Workforce Development Council reviewed integrated working in England and Wales, and, in the research document, I summarise the conclusions of that review. It said that, generally, integrated working has been well received and has produced positive gains — for example, in relationships between professionals. It has also led to positive benefits, both perceived and measurable, for children and families. According to its review, there have not been any negative effects, and, generally, parents expressed high levels of satisfaction. The review concluded that integrated working helps to create the conditions that make improved outcomes for children more likely overall. The review compiled as much of the available evidence as could be gathered and brought it into one piece of research, which found that, overall, integrated working leads to an increased likelihood of improved outcomes for children.

**Mr Agnew:** I will follow up on that: The Green Party website has a research document on our proposals that Ross produced. I am not sure whether members received it, because we finalised it only in the past couple of weeks. It also gives a lot of the context of the English and Welsh legislations. We have to be clear that any initiative, including legislative proposals, will not solve all ills. I recently met some occupational therapists who were quite supportive of what we are trying to do. When they gave me a list of the problems that they face, I had to make it very clear that the Bill will not solve all of them. I hope that it will help. The question that we ask at the start of the consultation is whether the respondent believes that the Bill will make collaborative working more likely, which is the key question for me. If the Bill can make it more likely, it will lead to positive outcomes.

**Mr Lunn:** Thanks, Steven and Ross. I am glad that you brought this issue forward because, frankly, it is near time that somebody did. I wish you well with the Bill. I think that you will find, as members said, that the route for a private Member's Bill can be rocky, with more hurdles than the Grand National. At least you have brought it forward at the beginning of a mandate, so we cannot use the excuse that we ran out of time. I hope that it leads to a decision, whether in the form that you have laid out, some adaptation of it or the creation of a Department for children, which we advocate, or whatever. Where do you see the Bill overlapping with existing European conventions? You know that there are ongoing discussions about a bill of rights for Northern Ireland. I do not know whether those discussions will ever come to anything, but they have been going on for aeons. What are your thoughts about that?

**Mr Agnew:** The outcomes in the 10-year strategy include one around living in a society that protects children's rights, so I see the Bill as being complementary. It is also important to note that a report by Queen's University on behalf of the Children's Commissioner recommended the introduction of a statutory duty to co-operate. So the children's rights sector sees the Bill as progressing children's rights. However, as I said, I regard it as complementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**Mr R Brown:** I will add a final thought. We definitely see the benefits of having a Department for children that would focus entirely on children. I suppose that when we go down the route of thematic Departments, it is an issue that gaps between Departments will always remain, no matter —

**The Chairperson:** Should we not see a mechanism that allows Departments to collaborate, otherwise, they can simply say that, given that there is a Department for children and young people, they do not have to interact with any other Department? I think that that is a valid point.

**Mr R Brown:** Departmental strategies are much more of a reality in other jurisdictions. I will return to the point that Daithí raised about examples of research to show that spending money on early intervention leads to future savings. I am sure that everybody knows of James Heckman's research that shows how spending £1 on children aged nought to three could save £7 in their adolescent years. That is a broader research example.

**Mr Flanagan:** Congratulations, Steven and Ross, on getting the proposal this far. There is quite a bit of work ahead of you. Do you envisage the legislation providing any additional remit to councils in the form of further powers or responsibilities?

**Mr Agnew:** It would impose additional responsibilities on councils to act as collaborative partners. In England, councils' responsibilities for children's services are far greater than here. The OFMDFM Committee made the point that input from councils on the legislation will be important. In particular, I am thinking of councils having responsibility for leisure services. A few councils said that they are attending the consultation event today, and we are keen for all councils to respond and take that on board.

**Mr Flanagan:** Reference has been made to the legislation in England and Wales. How does that sit with best practice in other European countries? We always look towards countries such as Finland, which are held up as being the epitome of the best education delivery in Europe. What exists in other European countries on which this legislation could be modelled?

**Mr R Brown:** It is difficult to compare. I can get that information for you because I did find a source that mentioned about a specific duty to co-operate. I know that there is no duty to co-operate in the Republic of Ireland, but there is in other places. The model of governance is different in other places, but, in many ways, England was a pioneer when it first introduced it. However, some European countries have followed suit.

**Mr Flanagan:** So you are not basing the Bill on what happened in England or looking at what happens here in its own right? You are also looking at what has happened in other European countries to see if you can steal some of their ideas.

**Mr R Brown:** Absolutely. That is crucial.

**The Chairperson:** Steven and Ross, thank you very much. That has been useful and valuable to members. Obviously, you have some way to go with the Bill, but we wish you well. Parties will have to take a view and make a considered response. Ultimately, at some stage, we hope that it will come to the Floor of the House.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Committee for its time. If members want to hear even more from me, I extend an invitation to this afternoon's consultation event, so please feel free to come along.