



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Inquiry into Young People not in
Employment, Education or Training
(NEETs)**

10 March 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Sue Ramsey (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Bell
Mr Paul Butler
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr William Irwin
Ms Anna Lo
Mr David McClarty
Mrs Claire McGill
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Ross McCrea) Action for Children
Mr Paul Moore)

The Chairperson (Ms S Ramsey):

As part of the Committee's inquiry into young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), we will receive a briefing from representatives of Action for Children. The meeting will be recorded for Hansard. I thank the staff from the Assembly, including Hansard, for making the journey with us today. It makes our work a lot easier when these evidence

sessions are recorded by Hansard.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank Ross and Paul for coming. I will hand straight over to you so that you can get on with your presentation, after which members may have questions or comments.

Mr Ross McCrea (Action for Children):

I thank the Committee for the invitation to appear. I work as a policy and public affairs manager with Action for Children.

Mr Paul Moore (Action for Children):

My role is as strategic director for the UK on young people's issues.

Mr R McCrea:

We provided members with information packs, which we will refer to throughout the presentation. Those packs comprise some information on Action for Children and a number of research reports and briefings.

Action for Children works across the UK. We provide around 420 different types of services to almost 160,000 children, young people and families. We speak out for and support the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people in the UK and, in doing so, we provide a range of services. Some of the developments in Northern Ireland include the Sure Start projects, early intervention services for children and young people, and mentoring services. We work through family centres and provide a regional young carer's service in partnership with Barnardo's. We also have a regional fostering service. That provides a sense of the services that we provide for young people from nought-to-18. That also includes floating support services for young people who are at risk of homelessness and for young carers.

The Committee is conducting an inquiry into reducing the numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training, which is also a strategic objective of ours. We focus a lot of work on that through the young people's services that we provide and in working with parents and younger children. We are conscious of the terms of reference of the inquiry and will try to address those as we go through our presentation.

I will address the first point about the characteristics, experiences and barriers that are faced by young people. I draw members' attention to the 'Growing Up' report that is included in the pack. The report is based on research and it details some of the issues around supporting young people to help them to make a successful transition to adulthood. That is the context in how we help young people aged 16 and over with that work. Some of the issues that young people are faced with are detailed in that report. I know that the Committee has taken evidence on some of those issues previously.

The report deals with issues such as low educational attainment and disengagement, what happens to young people of school age and the fact that young people often disengage at quite an early age. We completed a research report entitled 'Stuck in the Middle', which looked at what is sometimes referred to as the middle years age groups, namely, seven- to 13-year-olds, and how often the transition between school and other transition points for vulnerable young people can be particularly testing times. That is when they need additional support.

Other issues include those to do with aspirations and low self-esteem for young people who are looked after; instability of placement; young people at risk of offending or antisocial behaviour; housing problems; mental health issues; and those who may have disabilities of different types. Such issues and barriers can be faced by young people because of disengagement with school or disengagement at an older age. Paul will talk about the concept.

Mr Moore:

One of the key issues for Action for Children around employability projects and in response to all our projects is the social return on investment. We are keen to ensure that, in any project, we build in that research element to ensure that there is a return on the investment that is put in. Evidence of that can be seen in our early intervention work, particularly the family intervention programmes, which have been highly successful in dealing with antisocial behaviour. One benefit of that is increased employability, not just among young people, which is important, but among parents, which enables a work habit to be modelled through the generations.

Mr R McCrea:

As regards areas of best practice that would help young people, I refer members to our 'Growing Up' report, which deals with some of the issues that I identified, including disengagement at an early age and mental health issues. Action for Children has developed a range of models and

services to try to meet the needs of young people who are experiencing such issues. Throughout the report, examples and case illustrations of the various employability schemes are given. For example, the Youthbuild scheme, which was developed in Scotland and is linked to the construction industry, works with young people who are at risk of offending. It engages with young people on key issues, such as the degree of support that they need in order to develop routines. Before we got here, Paul and I were talking about the difference that services such as the Youthbuild scheme can make to how young people are seen in their communities.

Mr Moore:

I came across an interesting story when I was in Port Glasgow in the Inverclyde area of Scotland. I was talking to a young lad who had been engaged in an employability programme, and I asked him whether it had made a difference for him. He said that it had, and he went on to tell me that when he used to hang around street corners wearing a hoody and a cap, an old lady used to give him grief. She was always at her gate shouting at him, and what she said was not very polite. When he started work — he was a painter — he was walking down the street in his overalls when she suddenly appeared in front of him. He thought “Here we go again, I’m going to get a real laldy now.”, but she stuck a Kit Kat in his hand and said, “Son, that’s for your piece” — for his break time — “because it’s a real pleasure to see a working man walking down there, rather than some wee thug.” I told Ross that story because it is not about what programmes do for young people; it is about what they do for the community. That women’s perspective on that young person changed. Her aggression came from her fear of what young people might do, and that feeling changed to one of pride in her community. I was particularly touched by that anecdote.

Mr R McCrea:

That was an illustration of working with young people with whom it is often not easy to work. We work with some of the most vulnerable people whose communities may see them very negatively. Things can change, not just for young people but for those who have had to deal with them, and I stress that positive aspect of working with young people.

Rather than using the term “not in education, employment or training”, we prefer to use the language of creating positive opportunities, because, in our experience, children and young people, at various stages, from early intervention at school through to dealing with older age groups, often need second, third or fourth chances.

The Committee's terms of reference cover people up to the age of 24. Young people who left school having not invested in and shown little commitment to it often begin to show an interest in returning when they are 18, 19 or 20, or, sometimes, in their mid-20s. Those are all points at which people may need a second, third or fourth chance, and they need those additional forms of support. Through the report, we are trying to give the Committee some examples of how we have worked and how effective that work has been. Many examples have been evaluated as well.

Through our chance for change initiative, we work with children of primary-school age. We work with children, parents and teachers in all the primary schools in the north-west in the Derry/Londonderry area. The work focuses on emotional and behavioural issues, and young people are referred by schools, educational welfare or parents. We engage in intensive work with young people and parents, and we support teaching staff. That initiative has been independently evaluated and has proven an effective intervention. It is making a significant contribution to keeping children in school. However, those children face issues when making the transition to the next stage, and we do other work on early intervention and prevention of offending elsewhere, which makes a contribution.

Mr Moore:

A programme outline for the step ahead programme is included in the submission. That stems from work that we undertook with a number of large companies, such as Hays, Ernst and Young, and the Volkswagen Group. From talking to those companies, we began to understand that a range of aspects contribute to a person's employability, and our projects provide young people with much experience. If this session had been longer, we would have brought a young person with us today. It is a big deal for a young person to make a presentation to a government body, and the step ahead programme seeks to capture that and recognise qualification for experience. If a young person could take that experience to Tesco or Sainsbury's, it would give them a sense of value and provide value for the employer.

Work still needs to be done, and we are still working on the initiative. We referenced the English, Welsh and Scottish qualifications, and we still need to overlay the Northern Irish qualifications. As Ross said, the idea is to give a second, third, fourth or fifth chance, because not all young people are ready to go into employment. It starts with a taster day, progresses to external opportunities and, ultimately, leads to apprenticeships. It gives young people, often from families with no history of employment, an opportunity to make a staged entry into employment.

Mr R McCrea:

In a way, the diagram in the pyramid model in the information that we provided for the Committee represents the different levels of need or stages that young people can pass through. That is a useful model.

Mr Moore:

That applies to all our projects. The Sperrin Lakeland Trust's floating support service is primarily a leaving-care service, and the responsibility might be one of a social care nurturing function. Employability offers young people a way out of despair and out of mental health issues. Employability is a generation breaker that will break some cycles of deprivation that arise as a result of disrupted relationships and when children are not cared for properly.

Mr R McCrea:

Paul cited the example of so-called floating support services. Staff consider stability as one of the most important issues. It is a recurring theme in the evidence that the Committee has received. Stability is important in the lives of young people who are at risk of leaving the family home or who are coming out of the care system. Our project staff believe that the first priority is to achieve stability in young people's tenancies before they start to address issues such as employment, training, and so on. Incidentally, that is often a care experience of looked-after children. I know that the Committee received a presentation from the Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC). Stability is important for looked-after children. There are a lot of issues for looked-after children, but there are also some very good examples of what works.

Although we are talking about an issue that is difficult for many young people, there are very good examples that we should recognise and highlight. We should also recognise the work that is done between the sectors and in and across Departments. Good work is taking place, and part of the issue is publicising that. Hopefully, you will find that out that during the inquiry.

For school-age children who are at risk of disengaging, the school register is the obvious monitoring system. Children of school age should be registered as they come into school. A key indicator that there will be problems down the line is when a child misses significant periods of school, which is confirmed by all the evidence.

However, we recognise that there is only so much that teachers can do. They have to teach classes; manage classes; develop lessons; try to tailor their teaching in a classroom situation; and provide a nurturing situation to children. Teachers cannot do individual work with families, and we know that a lot of the issues for children who disengage are about family, school and home/school relationships. That is where organisations in the voluntary and community sectors come into their own. The education and welfare sectors play key roles in diverting young people to other forms of provision where necessary.

A teacher may see that a child is starting to miss school, but there may be legitimate reasons, such as illness, for his or her absence. The young person may be a young carer and have additional duties. As an organisation that runs a young carer's service, we have some questions about those young people who are not attending school fully due to caring duties that they have undertaken at home.

The evidence from America shows that a principal or a teacher should phone a pupil's house to ask why he or she has not been in for two or three days, rather than waiting for an absence note to come in after several days. That link should be made, or, if necessary, an organisation such as Action for Children should be contacted to see whether it can offer any support. That is for children who are of school age. Paul will talk about learning from the connexions programme in England.

Mr Moore:

The connexions programme was never used in Northern Ireland, which, given the experience in England, may be an advantage. There are some disadvantages with that model, because it eventually focuses purely on the young people who were most likely not be in employment. It could be said that that is a good thing, but the problem is that a whole generation of children have been denied effective careers advice as a result.

One of the strengths of the connexions service was its ability to target young people and track them, so there may be something to learn from it. We cannot speak with great expertise on the connexions service, but we thought that we would highlight it to the Committee as a possible area of interest that it may pursue at another time.

Mr R McCrea:

One of the issues that our research points to is that, unfortunately, as young people miss out on the latter stages of school, not only are they missing out on their formal lessons and teaching, they are missing out on careers advice. Therefore, there is a question about who should provide that advice for young people who have missed out on it. I do not want to speak for the alternative education sector, but it may be worth thinking about how to help those young people.

We have found that there is perhaps too much focus on educational attainment and not enough on achievement and on building the confidence and self-esteem of vulnerable children and young people, particularly those who are missing out. I know that that is a reoccurring issue in the inquiry. It is so important that those children are able to build their confidence.

I will outline the most useful elements of other strategies. We included our recent report on deprivation and risk in the information pack to give the Committee a sense of the children and young people who are missing out and who will eventually be NEETs, because they come from families who have experienced severe forms of deprivation. The report includes a number of aspects. It starts with expert pieces on the thinking behind certain issues. Then, there are 12 life stories that focus on the experiences of children and parents who have lived through deprivation and some of which touch on the issue of disengagement in education, training and employment. One of the case studies is about the north-west. The report also has a section at the end that deals with what works in practice. I say all that because I genuinely believe that we must think about where a preventative NEETs strategy sits with the work on addressing poverty and child poverty. The strategy must find its place within that.

As the Committee knows, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's inquiry into child poverty did not really focus on young people who become disengaged at an older age. That that issue could be addressed through this inquiry. In addition, any strategy will need to fit around a number of other strategies, such as Every School a Good School and special educational needs strategies. Paul will now speak about the approach that has been taken to the integrated youth service in England.

Mr Moore:

We recently successfully bid for a contract with Halton Borough Council, which is a smallish unitary council in the north of England, to provide an integrated youth service. We did that by

effectively forming a coalition with a number of charities and voluntary organisations, which Action for Children led, to provide an integrated youth service to the young people of Halton. The service will provide youth clubs, outreach workers and services to young carers. The service will help to address unemployment, because our workers will now be able to more easily identify young people in the community who are at risk of being unemployed or of not taking up education and training opportunities. The outreach workers will meet young people in a range of settings and will set up signposting for them to assist in their making positive life choices.

That is a unique service, because it is the first to be awarded to a group of voluntary sector organisations that is outside a local authority. That work has demonstrated the maturity of organisations in the voluntary sector, because, rather than competing with one another, they are working in collaboration. The major charities are, therefore, working together effectively to meet need.

Mr R McCrea:

I also want to highlight the importance of positive structural activities and how those support and benefit young people, particularly the most vulnerable. For example, outdoor activities that are run by youth clubs engage young people and help them to build confidence in working with one another. There is scope for that to be developed further by encouraging young people to contribute to society through a volunteering role. A social enterprise approach could also be used in that respect.

Finally, I will make a few points about the kind of funding that would be required for a cross-departmental strategy, which I am sure the Committee wants. To make it an important driver, it needs to find its way into the Programme for Government as a key goal. If it cannot be a key goal in that document, it must be included in one of the public service agreements in some form. There is some reference to that, but it needs to be focused around a prevention and needs strategy. To be a driver, it needs that focus, attention and priority.

Paul referred to the importance of a social return on investment. We included a briefing in the members' pack entitled 'Backing the Future'. It makes the case for investing in children, who are the future, because it makes economic sense. The human costs and the benefits are all there. However, if we continue to have to deal with preventable social problems, we will end up paying high costs. The Committee has taken evidence and received examples of that. Placing children

in a looked-after, secure situation costs a phenomenal amount — let alone all the costs of social security and benefits. That briefing highlights two aspects: it provides a UK-wide analysis; and it looks at particular approaches in working in early years and how we can get a much better return for social investment in that way.

Mr Moore:

A useful example is provided by Youthbuild in Scotland, which works with young people who are most at risk of being incarcerated for serious criminal activity. It has an 80% success rate. No institution for young offenders or prison can rival that. The Youthbuild programme is not cheap, but it delivers success where so often we see failure.

Mr R McCrea:

That concludes our presentation. I hope that we remained within the allotted time.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for your presentation and for the documentation that you provided. Members will take it away and read it more fully.

Paul mentioned aspects connected with juvenile justice. Everyone is chasing pounds at the moment. We talk about the lack of a joined-up approach or strategy across Departments. Has there been any discussion in the community and voluntary sector or among alternative education institutions or colleges to get together and take a joined-up approach to the issue of young people who are NEET? We received presentations and documentation from a number of charities, which do good work. However, if we call on government to show a joined-up approach, should that conversation also be taking place in the community and voluntary sector?

I just glanced at the projects that are referred to in the documentation, and some of them seem very good. Have you discussed the issue with the Department for Employment and Learning or other Departments?

Mr R McCrea:

One of the huge benefits of holding an inquiry is that it provides a scoping opportunity for the Committee to provide a focal point for organisations such as Action for Children and others to come together and to tell it what they do and what their views are. It also offers the opportunity

for us to focus on this issue in a strategic way. You asked whether there is a strategic response to this. A lot of work is going on with and between certain organisations. We work with the Prince's Trust, for example. Young people who are involved in Sperrin Lakeland Trust's floating support service are linked into Prince's Trust courses etc. A lot of that is happening in local areas and are built around and linked to services on the ground on behalf of individual people. Your question is perhaps a bit more about strategic response, and maybe the inquiry is an opportunity for that to start to be considered.

You asked about discussions with the Department. We, like other organisations, contributed to the scoping study and are waiting for the outcome of that. I know that the Committee had a closed-session briefing from departmental officials last week, and I hope that that went well. We are looking forward to the publication of the study and the next stage.

We see supporting young people in getting into employment, education and training as a strategic focus, but we also support work that is going on alongside other types of work. The floating support service often involves the important work of tenancy support and stabilising young people's lives. I do not want to say that education, training and employment is entirely a by-product of that, but it is part of that, and I sense that other organisations are also doing that. There is further work to do and further discussions to be had, and hopefully what comes out of the inquiry will facilitate that and bring great benefit.

Mr Butler:

Some of the information that has been provided is not necessarily Action for Children's policy.

Mr R McCrea:

We deliberately engaged external people to put those pieces together.

Mr Butler:

This inquiry is, obviously, about young people who are NEET, but you are saying that it will be more fundamental, looking at child-centred policy and particularly the family, on which very little work has been done. You also make a fair point about the welfare system and benefits traps. The issue of young people who are NEET is ongoing, and is probably worse in the past three or four years given the economic downturn. The issue is challenging no matter what policies are in place. What do we need to get right with regard to policy change and legislation? There seems

not to have been much policy change in Britain with regard to the family, but more a question of addressing the economic downturn by putting a plaster over it, so to speak.

Mr R McCrea:

We do not necessarily need to follow initiatives in England, although at the same time, they could be of huge benefit to us. I think about the future jobs fund and the significant investment or money set aside from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and what that could provide.

Mr Butler:

Is that the jobs fund that Barnardo's and other organisations are linked into?

Mr R McCrea:

No, that was a Government initiative.

Mr Butler:

Yes, but are Barnardo's not tapping into it?

Mr R McCrea:

Yes, they are.

Mr Moore:

Those are moneys coming down from DWP, which we tapped into in England and Scotland to ensure that young people are employed in our charity. We decided that we should not only address some of those issues but be part of the solution.

Your broader point about policy is the classic situation: Government can always do more. Although developing extended children's centres may seem distant from the young people who are NEET, it is an early prevention of it, because we see mothers going into employment as a result of gaining self-confidence through the experience of the children's centre. Their children then see a working household, and we get that modelled into the family.

Mr Butler:

Does the jobs fund apply to here or to just England and Wales?

Mr Moore:

We do not know. According to Jim Knight, it applies to Northern Ireland. We are doing some research on that.

Mr R McCrea:

I sense that the Committee may want to explore that further. I understand that the current Minister for Employment and Learning said that there would be a pilot of some sort, which would be rolled out here. I do not yet know what that means, and perhaps we need further information.

As Paul said, government can set aside a significant fund and have a central driver around which all sectors, including the one in which we work, can do something. They can take on what, in some cases, amounts to corporate social responsibility and benefit from it by having an employed workforce that may also be subsidised to some extent. That can act as a strong lever.

The linkage of taking a lifetime approach and breaking the cycle of poverty in early years' investment, to which Paul referred, is critical. If young people are not engaged through their school and by being supported at home, the cycle will, unfortunately, continue. Those inter-generational issues are very strong.

Mr Butler:

Thanks.

Mr P Ramsey:

I welcome the witnesses and acknowledge and commend their organisation for all its work with children and young people. I want to follow up on a point that was raised by Paul. We have seen and heard that families of low-educational achievement have historically low levels of motivation and morale that extend to their children. Our inquiry is looking at best practice and models, and the Scottish model was referred to earlier. The Committee would like a wee bit more detail on that.

However, when talking about value for money and social return, we are also looking at other organisations —

The Chairperson:

Sorry, Pat. Somebody must have their mobile phone on silent and it is interfering with the recording equipment to the extent it can actually be heard. It is not mine this time; my phone is off.

Mr P Ramsey:

My phone is also off.

The Chairperson:

Please switch off phones, because the witness session is being recorded. Sorry about that.

Mr P Ramsey:

No bother, Chairperson. Ross, you said that your organisation provided services to 5,000 children, not necessarily all of them NEETs. Tracking and monitoring is crucial to any inquiry. Do you have statistics and information about how many of the children with whom your group has worked have progressed into employment or education? Does Action for Children track them itself?

Mr Moore:

Yes. Are we doing it well? The answer is no. I have been looking at that recently. Part of the reason is that we have not been collecting the statistical information effectively. We have got that matter in hand and we are monitoring it. That said, as an organisation, we can give the information that we must provide to other funding bodies. For example, that is where I get my Youthbuild statistics — 80% do not reoffend within the specified period — because that is what we must report on. I am being very honest. Could we, as an organisation, do better? The answer is yes. Do we track results? Yes.

Mr R McCrea:

I will respond slightly differently. Our organisation and others are used to being contracted to provide services, usually on a three-year cycle but sometimes longer. That can pose difficulties for organisations, because we are, in a sense, contracted to work with young people for only a certain length of time. Consequently, we cannot consider the outcomes beyond the involvement of a young person or family in our service unless a mechanism is in place to continue to have contact with them, and even then it is quite difficult. To some extent, the same applies to other

sectors. That is not to say that often our young people will be linked into other types of provision and services, but it is about building up that picture over time. Research tends to do that, but it does it on a collective basis. For instance, people may or may not complete training and employment programmes, and we need to have a mechanism in place to find out what is happening six months or a year down the line, because we need to know whether that investment is worthwhile. I do not think that there is an easy answer to that, but I think that we need to have a mechanism in place for it.

Mr P Ramsey:

I would like to have an opportunity to visit the Clooney Family Centre to see how things are developing, particularly with regard to breaking the cycle, and to see the family involvement, particularly with parents.

Mr R McCrea:

On behalf of our organisation, I extend that invitation to all members of the Committee. You are very welcome, Pat, because I know that the centre is in your area. We would be more than happy to try to make arrangements so that you can visit and talk to the parents and young people who are involved in the process.

Mr Moore:

We would like to extend that invitation outwith Northern Ireland. If you would like to visit any projects in Scotland, England or Wales, we can arrange that.

Mrs McGill:

You are both welcome. Pat mentioned the Clooney Family Centre. Obviously, that is in the Western Trust area and in the Western Education and Library Board area. Does your organisation operate in Omagh or Strabane, which are in my constituency of West Tyrone?

Ross referred to the Sperrin Lakeland Trust, which is now part of the Western Health and Social Care Trust. What kind of engagement do you have with the education board or with the Western Trust? Do they contact you or do you speak with them?

Mr R McCrea:

All our work has developed out of working closely within the children's services planning

processes. Committee members who are familiar with that will know that that is an opportunity for inter-agency working. It is largely led by the health and social care sector boards, and it allows agencies and multi-agencies and sectors to come together to look at planning for children. That is one mechanism through which we have all sorts of connections. One of my colleagues who oversees the management of services in the west has very close connections with that.

We have a couple of initiatives around Omagh, Enniskillen and Fermanagh. I will need to check what services extend as far as Strabane, but there is a strengthening families project, which is similar to the Clooney Family Centre. We are developing it around the notion of a service hub. The Committee may not be familiar with that, but it is trying to link a range of different services into a hub setting, so that families can access a universal hub and then be linked if need be through outreach or some sort of specialist or targeted support. Therefore, those developments are starting to take place, and there is work in that area. As far as I know, a colleague is involved with the extended schools programme through the education and library board. However, unfortunately, the funding for that programme is under threat at the moment, but there is a linkage there.

Mrs McGill:

Does someone in your organisation have direct contact with somebody in the Western Education and Library Board? Do you know each other?

Mr R McCrea:

Yes, absolutely. I cannot speak about all the forums on which that colleague sits, but I can come back to you on that.

Mrs McGill:

I know quite a number of the officers on the education and library board. Thank you.

Mr Bell:

I could ask a lot of questions, but they would only reaffirm what we have already heard, which was an excellent presentation. I agree with it, so I am not going to ask those questions. I feel a bit old, because I left here 16 years ago after doing a masters degree in social work. However, I saw Ross, and do not feel so old, because he was a research lecturer at the time.

Mr R McCrea:

Thank you very much, Jonathan. See what I mean about cycles?

Mr Bell:

I run a youth club in Newtownards, and I am also involved with the Boys' Brigade and Girls' Brigade. We get a lot of kids, some of whom display very aggressive behaviour against other young children. I am talking about children under the age of 10. The minute juice and biscuits are provided, however, their behaviour changes. That is mentioned in your report.

The call is for one healthy meal a day. I work with a lot of children with chaotic lifestyles, and it is hard to believe but they do not get one healthy meal a day. Is there any way to track the research on this issue, locally or wider afield? In Scotland, one healthy meal a day is provided to see whether that affects educational attainment. Is there a link between one healthy meal a day and children's educational outcomes?

Mr Moore:

My wife is a foundation stage teacher working with three- and four-year-olds. Speaking anecdotally, she sees that until they have had something to eat, their behaviour is fragmented and they lack concentration. Mind you, I always wonder how much concentration you want from a three-year-old, but she tells me that it should be at a certain level. However, until they are fed, and given water, which is one of the key issues, their concentration deteriorates. We are certainly calling for children to be given one healthy meal a day. We will track the Scottish experience to ensure that it validates what we all intrinsically know, namely, without an effective nutrient base, kids' behaviour deteriorates massively.

Mr R McCrea:

The issue also harks back to tackling deprivation. A breakfast is the one thing that most benefits children. School breakfast clubs have been so successful, not least because that may be the only proper meal for some children. It also sets them up for the day. We all intuitively know that going anywhere on an empty stomach is not great. However, when people are settled, particularly with healthy food, they are set up for at least the first part of the day.

The Chairperson:

The Committee will look at that. The cross-departmental Investing for Health strategy is being

reviewed, and included the school meals issue.

Mr Bell:

If children are coming into school with chaotic behaviour as a result of a chaotic lifestyle, and then not fulfilling their education and getting qualifications, it is almost like tracing the steps back to try to find the point at which something real can be done for them.

Ms Lo:

Thank you for the presentation. A lot of research and evidence shows that fizzy and coloured drinks also cause hyperactivity.

The Committee hosted a seminar a few weeks ago to which a number of voluntary organisations working in this field were invited to come to talk to us and among themselves in discussion groups. At my table, the point about fragmentation in the voluntary sector in working piecemeal with projects was mentioned again and again. I was interested to hear that a number of organisations in Glasgow work together. Who instigated that and how did it happen?

Mr Moore:

It was instigated by Action for Children in Halton, in the north of England, which we identified as an area in which we wanted to work. We met a number of local charities, such as the Canal Boat Trust, which provides canal holidays for children. We worked positively with them.

No charity can be strong in every area, and we knew that we were not strong on the more universal services, so we partnered with the Brathay Hall Trust, which provides more universal services to young people. That was the starting point. It links strongly to our charity's view that, if we are to be relevant, we have to start to become community leaders; and, to be a community leader, we have to work in partnership. If we do not, we do not have a community. It stemmed from a clear understanding that we could not be all things to all people. We took the mature approach of asking who we needed to talk to, who we should partner and deciding what we did not have and what others did have that could be melded to provide a strong service.

Ms Lo:

Is that what is behind your instigation and leadership?

Mr Moore:

Yes.

Ms Lo:

How many projects came together?

Mr Moore:

There are a lot, because they are integrated. I am being vague, because I found out only yesterday that I have inherited two larger buses. They were not within the remit of the tender. We have brought together something in the region of 12 to 15 project areas and we have pooled them to give a cogent response to young people.

Ms Lo:

Does that come under a different name or under the umbrella of Action for Children?

Mr Moore:

It is under the umbrella of Action for Children. I will provide Ross with further information about that.

Mr R McCrea:

Interesting work is ongoing on the preventative strategy, in particular, around NEETs in Wales that is linked to regeneration work at community level. Through the regeneration process and, at a different level, around the future jobs fund where economic and community regeneration is happening, it provides an opportunity for children and young people to engage in that process. It is also providing opportunities for sectors to come together to engage in that.

That does not entirely address the question of fragmentation in the sector. I recollect that some of those issues related to the nature of the funding of certain projects or project staffing for individual sessions, for instance. The hourly rate for teachers or the alternative provision of one-to-one mentoring support will always pose a problem, because they are getting paid for only the hours worked, and it raises workforce development issues, etc, which go with that. That was part of the issues that went with that. That is the difficulty, but a more strategic and leadership approach can address some of those issues.

Mr Irwin:

You are welcome to this morning's Committee meeting. There is no doubting the importance of Action for Children's identifying children when they are young. Statistics show that children are impressionable from a younger age than what we used to think. They are impressionable before they are 7 or 8. You say that early identification is important. How do you go about identifying them at a young age?

Mr R McCrea:

The nature of our services, which are for early years and beyond, offers that through a number of ways. For example, the Clooney Family Centre links with the Sure Start programme in its area. There are a range of services for age nought to 18 in its geographical location. Hopefully, health visiting and referrals that are being made to services from Sure Start will result in early identification. Although some of that is centre-based and people go to the centre, it also has an outreach element. People will often go out and visit families and try to break down some of the barriers. Some of the children might be as young as babies.

There is a linkage at preschool age and, after the Sure Start stage, provision is made through the family centre up to the age of 12. You may wish to address the suggestion that Sure Start provision be extended to an older age group. In any case, the opportunity is available at a young age to identify children and to meet their needs.

That point links to the question of how that is done through the common assessment model that has been introduced and led by the Health Department. It is supposed to be a common assessment that all practitioners, not just social workers, should use. It is at an early stage of being rolled out and, in time, hopefully, it will help.

All sorts of people and professionals are involved with children and families, and they sometimes need a point of contact. They need to know who to contact, and that is the reason for the neglect appeal campaign that we launched recently. We have taken evidence from people who are not social workers but are likely to be the professionals who are in early contact with families on the issue. They raise questions about who the best people to contact are.

The Chairperson:

That was a useful presentation. It is useful for the Committee to get its head around the issues to

do with NEETs. You mentioned the Department's scoping facility, on which the Committee received a briefing last week. Our terms of reference are available. We wrote to all the stakeholders to let them know that the inquiry is taking place. We hope to go to Scotland and, possibly, Wales in May or June to look at models of good practice. If you have any suggestions on that, feel free to let us know.

Mr R McCrea:

We hope to have a longer process of engagement with the Committee, and I should have prefaced my comments by saying that. Please let us know when you firm up your travel plans. We have some initiatives in which you may be interested in looking at, and we would be happy to facilitate that.

The Chairperson:

You have been very helpful to the Committee. On behalf of the Committee, thank you for your presentation and the documentation that you provided.

Mr R McCrea:

Thank you for the opportunity.