



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Briefing from the Northern Ireland
Commissioner for Children and Young
People on Child Poverty**

3 February 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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

**Briefing from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and
Young People on Child Poverty**

3 February 2010

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Naomi Long (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Martina Anderson

Mr Alex Attwood

Mr Tom Elliott

Mr Danny Kennedy

Mr Francie Molloy

Mr Stephen Moutray

Mr George Robinson

Mr Jim Shannon

Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Ms Patricia Lewsley) Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

Ms Alex Tennant)

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and
deputy First Minister (Mrs Long):**

We will now have a briefing from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) on child poverty. A written paper has been tabled and is included in members' folders. I invite Patricia Lewsley, the Children's Commissioner, and Alex Tennant, the head of policy and research, to make a presentation to the Committee.

Ms Patricia Lewsley (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):

I thank the Deputy Chairperson and the Committee for inviting us here today. The Committee will be aware that we were very supportive of its inquiry into child poverty, which was conducted some time ago. At that point, we hoped that the Committee's report and recommendations would be implemented.

Last year, we carried out a huge piece of work on the state of children's rights in Northern Ireland. It was a review of the original work that was conducted by the office in 2004. One of the key aspects of the review was child poverty and how issues around child poverty can impact on children and young people in other ways. Indeed, as I have said to the Committee before, very often it is not financial poverty that makes the greatest impact; it is the poverty of opportunity. To illustrate that, I will give the Committee two examples.

Just a few months ago, I met a young woman who, at the age of 17, was trying to live on £40 a week. She was living in a two-bedroom house, received a £20 food voucher each week, spent £10 on heating and electricity and £10 on topping up her mobile phone, as that was her only method of communicating with others. The food voucher had to be spent in one go, and the only shop that would accept the voucher was Tesco, although there was some talk that Iceland was also considering accepting it. She told me that the £5 she spent on heating lasted her all week, if she remembered to switch everything off, and she said that she was very fastidious about doing so: the other £5 went on electricity.

During the recent cold spell, the £5 she spent on heating lasted only from Friday evening to Sunday evening. Therefore, she rang her social worker and asked if she could get more money for heating, and she received another £5. When I met her, she was going to change her £20 food voucher to a £10 voucher in order to get an extra £10 to heat her home, as she preferred to have electricity and heating than food. That is just one of the issues facing young people.

She asked her social worker where to get help, and she was directed to her local social security office. There, she was told to return when she either reached the age of 18 or when she became pregnant. I have a lot of respect for young people of that age who have not become involved in other types of activities to help supplement their incomes.

The other example was the young boy I met in the Flax Trust who had done some training in

catering and wanted to be a chef. He had completed a Micheal Deane training course, which promised an interview and job, but, unfortunately he did not get it. He decided that he wanted to go back to college and do the next level of catering exams, but discovered that if he did so he would lose his housing benefit and end up living on the street. Those are the types of poverty, and poverty of opportunity, that our young people are facing.

In November 2009, NICCY celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In the lead up to the twenty-first anniversary this year, we have decided to pick an issue each month and raise its profile. The first policy briefing was conducted in January, and it was on child poverty: I assume that members have received copies of that briefing. After each briefing that we have conducted so far, NICCY has called on the Government to raise three specific issues. The first two issues in our child poverty briefing reflect some of the recommendations in the Committee's report, and the third deals with the need to tackle the particular disadvantages that are being experienced by 16- and 17-year-olds. Part of the briefing deals with benefits uptake for adults, which has an obvious effect on households and, therefore, on children. However, there is also the issue of how 16- and 17-year-olds here earn the minimum wage and receive minimum benefits, but are expected to pay the same for everything as everyone else.

The Lifetime Opportunities strategy is important. The 10-year children's strategy is also important, but it does not specifically mention poverty. However, in February, the Child Poverty Bill will be passed at Westminster and it will impact on Northern Ireland. One thing that I must say to the Committee is that we must find out how all of those strategies and legislation will dovetail together: they cannot be viewed in isolation. We must see how Lifetime Opportunities, the overarching anti-poverty strategy, will be reflected in the 10-year children's strategy, and how the Child Poverty Bill will impact on us and on both strategies. The Child Poverty Bill, if passed, will ensure that the Government will put together a child poverty action plan, which may strengthen the two strategies, but will also need to encompass them.

We also know that the child poverty targets for 2010, which we all talked about, will not be met. The economic downturn has impacted on those in some way, but NICCY wants to see specific action plans that will reduce the number of children who are living in poverty in Northern Ireland.

I am a member of the OFMDFM sectoral forum, which has several groups. One group is looking at poverty and debt. I have asked that group to look at what the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people has been doing on its priority regarding poverty and children. Each needs to connect with the other. We understand that the group is looking at that.

Previously, there was a ministerial-led poverty and social inclusion stakeholder forum, but since devolution, that has not been reconstituted. That must happen, if the Assembly is committed to reaching those most in need — particularly children — and reducing the numbers of children living in poverty.

I have mentioned some of the issues around the 10-year children’s strategy and the Lifetime Opportunities strategy. However, there must be some measure that will tap into those children who are living in severe poverty. There are about 32,000 such children in Northern Ireland, and we have to try to lift them out of such poverty.

Westminster legislation very often impacts on Northern Ireland. Therefore, the other big issue for us is the Welfare Reform Bill. I know that in our call on poverty, and in the Committee’s inquiry, there has been concern expressed about childcare and the need for a childcare strategy. When the Welfare Reform Bill is applied to Northern Ireland, it will have a huge impact, because we do not have the childcare infrastructure that exists in England, Scotland and Wales. Therefore, more single-parents and families will be pushed further into poverty unless we have proper childcare arrangements in Northern Ireland.

We also support early-years provision. However, I have said before that this is about the three “Es”: early-years; early intervention; and early investment. One can give children the best possible early-years start, but if they then hit a trauma or stage in life where they cannot cope around the age of nine or 10, and there is no early intervention, children can be taken down a road that they would not otherwise take. The ministerial subcommittee, which is looking at child poverty, has made that one of its priorities.

We also wish to see additional investment in services for children with disabilities. We feel that they are often treated as the poor relations. We know that the ministerial subcommittee has made that one of its priorities with respect to transition. Children can come out of the education system and enter the health system, and there is no clear line of transition. Young people can

access services because they are 18, but no longer have such access on the day that they turn 19.

In the round, we would say that there has been a lot of talk. However, we want to see actions and outcomes, and we want to see a requirement for agencies to co-operate when they are planning children's services. The Committee's report made the following recommendation:

"strengthen the legislation, or statutory guidance, so that relevant organisations are required to co-operate, rather than participate, in children's services planning".

We think that it is much better for young people if there is joined-up co-operation among all agencies involved in a child or young person's life.

That is a quick overview of some of our concerns. The core issue is this: if we are really going to tackle child poverty, we need an action plan that will be delivered. The recommendations of the Committee's inquiry could go towards that.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you, Patricia. We appreciate you coming before the Committee, and the fact that you appeared earlier than anticipated given the change in our arrangements. Also, I should have pointed out at the beginning that the meeting is being reported by Hansard as it is an evidence session.

Mr Spratt:

Thank you for your presentation, Patricia. The story of the 17-year-old is a heart-rending one. That is an issue with which we all grapple in our constituency offices, because we are not able to help someone effectively in such a situation. It says it all, when someone goes to a social security office only to be told to come back when they are 18 years old, or pregnant, and that they would only be given money under those circumstances.

You said that you sit on the sectoral forum, and you talked about the work of the ministerial subcommittee: what points have been raised at the subcommittee, and are actions being taken? Have issues been raised by the forum? What sort of response are you getting, and has there been any movement on any of those issues?

Ms Lewsley:

I have attended the ministerial subcommittee once. I understand that it has not met for some

time, although it would claim that it is still dealing with the issues. However, no actions on child poverty have come from the ministerial subcommittee. A report on childcare was to have been brought forward, but I am not sure whether that has happened. There has been a lot of talk, but we have not seen much action.

The sectoral forum was different, because it was set up with the purpose of gathering people around the table from the business community, the Departments, NICCY, CAB, credit unions and so on. The forum split into subgroups; and I sat on the employment and learning subgroup and the poverty and debt subgroup. Many of the issues that I raised there are ones that I have raised here today.

The gas regulators and electricity providers stated that they were trying to ease hardship. One important issue that the subgroup examined was the impact of money lenders on families, which, in effect, was driving them further into poverty. However, they are looking at what they can do as a short-term fix. My understanding is that recommendations from all the subgroups are to be brought together to see how they can be dovetailed across the board.

The core issues for me on the poverty and debt subgroup are benefits uptake and the minimum wage for young people — the amount of income that they would have. Some of that has been addressed. The employment and learning subgroup examined the issue of graduates not being able to find jobs, and the difficulty that many young people without qualifications have in finding jobs. Those issues have been highlighted in order to bring the voice of young people to the table.

Mr Shannon:

I am sorry that I was not here for the beginning of the presentation. I am sure that you are aware of the rural White Paper. Francie Molloy, Tom Elliott and I are members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and we have made our concerns about childcare, which is a child poverty issue, known there. Did your organisation make a contribution to that White Paper?

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

Not yet. We made a submission on the rural childcare policy and the rural poverty strategy.

Mr Shannon:

It might be a good idea to draft a paper as you still have an opportunity to make a submission.

I agree with Jimmy Spratt, with respect to the story of that young woman. I know that the name given is not her real name, but, as an elected representative, I can relate to her story as far as Strangford is concerned; and I am sure that every other member could do so to. I feel frustrated with a system that does not give, or is, perhaps, unable to give, help to someone who is really trying to get themselves out of where they are. What can we do to make life better for Jenna, and all the other Jennas, in the Province?

Ms Lewsley:

The best thing to do is to talk to some of those young people and ask them what they think will make a difference to them in their lives. That young girl was not asking for an extra £100 or £150 a week. All she wanted was an extra £10 a week.

One has to respect someone who has that burden at the age of 17. She lived in a two-bedroom house. However, due to some of the issues she had, she and social services felt that she could not bring someone in to share the house. She spent a year with two other young people at the Simon Community, and they had £20 each, which meant that there was £60 in the kitty. Therefore, they did not have to spend the money all at once. They could buy fresh food and vegetables because they were sharing, unlike being left on your own with £20. She said that it meant the difference between buying a bag of apples for £1.99 or one apple for 40p. When you are trying to feed yourself, and pay for toiletries, cleaning products such as soap powder, and pay for electricity, £20 does not go very far.

Ms Tennant:

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned research recently into minimum incomes and the minimum amount of money that people needed in order to survive. It was found that a working-age female in Northern Ireland needed £166 a week to live. Details of that research are in the members' information packs. Nothing costs less just because a person is 16 or 17 years old.

It is also a question of seeing whether costs can be reduced. For example, the age limit for receiving a free bus pass was reduced from 65 to 60, yet our 16- and 17-year-olds still have to pay full fares on the buses. Obviously, benefits levels are an issue for Westminster, but there needs to

be a strategy for that age group in particular. The Lifetime Opportunities strategy includes children up to age 16, and we know that the Child Poverty Bill requires there to be a child poverty and action plan here. We are going to have a round table discussion to look at the specific things that need to go into an action plan for 16- and 17-year-olds. It is a frustrating situation, and it is very difficult for young people to break out of that.

Mr Shannon:

The Committee, through its inquiry into child poverty, made recommendations that were put to Ministers for ratification and endorsement. Have you seen anything happening as a result of that? I ask this question because we all feel a sense of frustration.

Ms Tennant:

It would have been interesting to hear from the junior Ministers, who were to give evidence first today, because, as you can see from our submission, there are a lot of questions about the adoption of the Lifetime Opportunities strategy. The Committee's report, and a number of groups, suggested that there needed to be amendments. As far as we can see, nothing has come out of that. The junior Ministers said, in their evidence to the ministerial forum on poverty, which was linked in with Lifetime Opportunities, that that would be established without delay. That was a year ago. The Committee will see, in our submission, that there has been a lot of talk about different structures being set up and things being progressed.

Ms Lewsley:

However, we have not seen any evidence of action.

Ms Tennant:

We are at a loss to see what actions have been taken. There is a lot of processing, and there seems to be very little action.

Ms Anderson:

We received information from a number of stakeholders, one of which was the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It sent some figures that compared child poverty levels in the North to those in areas of Britain. The figure was 21% here compared to 9% across Britain. I live in Derry, which has a 44% level of child poverty.

The case of the 17-year-old has been mentioned. We deal with similar situations regularly, and we have found that, even up to the age of 25, there is a difference in the amount of money and amount of benefits that people can claim. A person who is a day or two over 25 will receive about £50 less a week in housing benefits and jobseeker's allowance.

You mentioned loan sharks. We have dealt with cases in which 16- and 17-year-olds, and even people under 25, cannot get a bank account because they do not have a passport or driving licence, which are expensive to obtain. Could the banking institutions relax some of their criteria, because people are missing out on the ability to use direct debit and the other benefits of paying through a bank, such as buying furniture on credit? Has any work been done on that?

You mentioned benefits uptake. Even though that is not yet a transferred matter, we have been considering measures that could be put in place to change the situation, particularly given the circumstances in the North and the statistics on child poverty. Moreover, we are considering how we can provide some relief to people through simple measures such as enabling them to get access to a bank account without the need for a passport or driving licence. Young people cannot afford to get those items in order to get access to money.

Ms Lewsley:

I have raised that issue with the banks and others who were present in the sectoral forum. In some cases, some banks have been a bit more relaxed and have accepted letters from people who vouched for a young person who does not have a driving licence or a passport. That often happens in order to enable their wages to be paid into a bank account. Most organisations now use the method of paying wages into a bank account. That is still an issue for some young people in some areas, and we will continue to argue for that.

Ms Anderson is right; in the early days when Gordon Brown talked about driving down child poverty levels, we were very keen to ensure that each jurisdiction had its own target. This is because we become statistically insignificant in the context of Gordon Brown's overall target, and he can meet his target without taking one child out of poverty in Northern Ireland. Therefore, we were very keen to have our own child poverty target. We need to consider how to reduce that number.

I remember meeting the Committee when it was conducting its inquiry. I understand,

particularly given the efficiency savings and cuts in all Departments, that we need to consider innovative ways to get money. On that occasion, I talked about dormant bank accounts. England is spending that money on children and young people, and Wales is spending it on young people and climate change. In Northern Ireland, our Minister of Finance and Personnel has decided to spend it on the community, and he wants ideas on that.

We are somewhat disappointed that that money was not ring-fenced for young people, as was the intention in the first place. We have lost an opportunity to ring-fence some of that money. We had already lost the children and young people's fund and the subsequent children and young people's package, which provided ring-fenced money to target young people. We hoped that the Assembly would restore that package in some guise. However, the Executive have decided not to do so. That pot of money could have helped young people, particularly those in poverty.

Ms Anderson:

That package provided ring-fenced money to target young people, but we still have the worst levels of child poverty. The programmes and projects that the money was funding were not making a difference to the outcomes. We may have been spending the money, but we were not tackling the problems. Have you looked at ways of ensuring that money is used effectively? We are under-resourced, so the way in which money is spent is especially important. Are you able to identify that the effect of money not being spent on a particular area is that the situation is made worse? We have been calling for a tracking system to be put in place, because we cannot see that the programmes and projects that exist are tackling the issues and bringing about the required outcomes.

Ms Tennant:

It is my understanding that the children and young people's unit is funding a series of evaluations aimed at determining the outcomes of the various services being delivered. The funding that there has been has tended to be piecemeal and short term. We are disappointed that actions are not flowing from the targets that were committed to. The actions that we see often seem to be things that are being done anyway, which are pulled together into an action plan, rather than things that are being derived from the strategic objectives.

Ms Lewsley:

The voluntary sector sometimes fills the gap that is left when money for a service is cut. We did

a comparative expenditure report on the personal social services for children across the UK. In England, £408 is spent on each child on personal social services; the figure is £429 in Wales, £513 in Scotland, and £287 in Northern Ireland. Therefore, we already underspend dramatically on children and young people.

Mr Kennedy:

I apologise for being late; I meant no discourtesy at all. Thank you very much for the policy briefing and overview that you have provided.

I have a lingering concern about the overall issue of child poverty. The issue has been highlighted consistently: for example, in your policy briefing, the report that was commissioned by the Committee, data from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and papers from PlayBoard. My concern is that this wheel has been reinvented so many times by so many different people and that the money that has been spent on duplication could have been better used to try to make a difference to the lives of children such as Jenna from Dungannon. Given that so much information on the issues has been churned out by the various bodies and agencies, is there a sense that action is urgently required? We cannot continue with a multiplicity of documents that say the same thing. That does not make economic sense nor is it a sensible way of tackling the subject. Having successfully identified the issues, how do we focus the minds of the government, the Executive and the relevant agencies on dealing with them?

Ms Lewsley:

Ultimately, the Executive will have to commit themselves to make tackling child poverty a priority and to put the necessary resources in place. They could start by acting on the recommendations of the Committee's inquiry. You are right that the various documents all say the same thing. The Executive could take account of those commonalities and make a commitment to reducing them.

Mr Kennedy:

You said that today's evidence is the first in a series of 12 policy briefings. Those policy briefings will, presumably, highlight the same issue.

Ms Tennant:

The briefings will highlight different issues; there will be one on disability —

Mr Kennedy:

Yes, but they will add to the volume of work that has been produced on the subject. What is the point of that?

Ms Lewsley:

The more that we send out the message, the more chance there is that somebody will take it on board and act on it. We have looked at child poverty from a young person's perspective, and we are trying to create campaigns on each of the issues that we raise each month so that young people have a voice. Children and young people affected by poverty very often do not have a voice, for example, because they are not old enough to vote.

Ms Tennant:

We have enough evidence to know that child poverty is a major issue and that there is a need for action. We are heartened that the Committee's interest did not stop after it published its report; instead, you required a response and have returned to the issue. It is not that we are reinventing the wheel; we are persisting in pushing for action on child poverty, and we will not be satisfied until we see actions that actually deliver change to the lives of children here.

Mr Kennedy:

I am not being critical about the policy briefings or the need for them. However, some people, particularly those who are affected by child poverty on a daily basis, will view policy briefings and yet more publications with great cynicism and will say that organisations are manufacturing them to justify their own positions instead of tackling the circumstances that those people find themselves in.

Ms Lewsley:

At the beginning of my presentation, I talked about the Child Poverty Bill that is coming from Westminster, which will force our Government to put an action plan in place. The issue is holding that action plan to account. A job of work needs to be done to connect the action plan with the Lifetime Opportunities strategy and the children's strategy. In addition, the big issue for us is ensuring that the concluding observations of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child are tied in so that we are delivering for children and young people.

Ms Tennant:

There are different roles. NICCY does not have a role in delivering services directly to children; our role is to hold government to account, and the policy briefings are the mechanisms that we can use to do that and to challenge government to do more for children. I used to work for a charity, which could deliver services as opposed to doing policy work. However, our position in NICCY is that tackling child poverty is about justice, not charity. We will not solve the problem by participating in activities such as Children in Need and asking people to put their hands in their pockets. We need to see government doing something about child poverty, investing money to tackle the problem, and we need to hold them to account. It is an issue of justice, not charity. It is not acceptable for a 16-year-old to be living on such small amounts of money; we need to be drawing attention to that and challenging government to do more.

Mr Molloy:

Thank you for your presentation. You mentioned the ways in which other groups in society that are affected by poverty are looked after and the parity of the legislation from Westminster. The Government have made interventions through the heating allowance and various other means in order to support pensioners and people on benefits. Have you made any proposals to the Department for Social Development to use other funding to augment the effects of the parity legislation that will be coming from Westminster, particularly for the categories of young people that we are talking about?

It was mentioned that many young people who suffer from poverty do not have a voice, because they cannot vote. One of the problems is that many cannot even get on the electoral register to vote, because they do not have the necessary documentation, such as a utility bill. Is there some way to bring in legislation that recognises that young people have their own rights? Is there a facility to increase the inclusion of young people so that they have a say?

Ms Lewsley:

We created a participation forum and, through the ministerial subgroup, we have children's champions in each of the Departments, which we did not have before. The children's champions have taken part in the participation forum, and some of them have been participating with young people and listening to them. Others will put their hands up and say that, although they have never taken on such a role before, they are willing to learn. Therefore, at least Departments and the Government are looking to ensure that they increase the participation of young people. Only

last week, we launched the youth assembly, which, hopefully, will have some impact on the Assembly in respect of issues that are pertinent to the daily lives of many young people. There are, therefore, a number of avenues.

Mr Molloy:

How soon is the Westminster legislation, which will impose action, likely to come in? Would there be a benefit in the Committee tabling a motion to the Assembly to implement the legislation here?

Ms Lewsley:

We are not sure. We were hoping that the junior Ministers could have answered some of those questions today. We know that the legislation should be finalised by the end of February, but we do not know when it will come into effect in Northern Ireland. We are assuming that it will be rolled out across the UK at the same time, which will mean that the Executive will have to put an action plan in place in order to facilitate that legislation. As we said earlier, that will help towards making the commitment and holding them accountable to deliver on the child poverty issue. However, we have to be clear about how that fits in with Northern Ireland's children's strategy and the Lifetime Opportunities strategy, so that we are not duplicating what someone else is doing, but that we are actually adding value to it.

Ms Tennant:

There is a lot to be gained from the Child Poverty Bill, and, particularly, from the child poverty strategy and action plan. A couple of paragraphs in the Committee's inquiry report really resonated with us in respect of our strategies and action plans. The recommendations state:

“The Executive must quickly distance itself from the approach of direct rule Ministers to the production of ambitious strategy documents which are then supported by unambitious action plans, which act more as a statement of existing departmental action than as a real plan for change.”

They state further that:

“We call on OFMDFM to ensure that the inclusion of narrative and descriptions of existing departmental activity is minimised within Implementation Plans”.

There is an opportunity now to move forward, and we hope that when the legislation goes through, hopefully in February, there will be more impetus to drive things forward here. However, it needs to be a different type of strategy and action plan.

Ms Lewsley:

It also needs to be resourced.

Ms Anderson:

In Derry, we are involved in a regeneration process with Ilex, and it involves a lot of people in the city. We have discovered that Departments — all of them — have not been collecting, collating and analysing section 75 data, despite the fact that they have a duty to do so. We have been able to get bits of information and data from Departments, and we can see that, for instance, in Caw, which is an area in the Waterside, young men are leaving school at the age of 16 without any qualifications, and we are trying to target proposals to address that. However, across the Departments, there are lots of Xs across the section 75 categories to show that they have not been collecting and collating the information that will enable us to target proposals in a way that will make a difference.

There is a massive problem in the system across all the Departments. Some Departments have collected information: for instance, claimants filling in a form for jobseeker's allowance might have 50 questions to answer and that information is collected. However, Departments have not collated information in a way that enables them to provide data on the section 75 categories to the public bodies that need it, such as NISRA. That is an absolute indictment of the entire system and what it has done for the past 10 years in respect of collecting data that would enable people to target proposals and programmes that will make a difference. There is a need for an organisation such as NICCY to focus on that to ensure that we get the collection, collation and analysis of the section 75 data, because that will enable the programmes and targets of each Department to target what you are trying to do to make a difference.

Ms Lewsley:

That has been an issue for us for a long time. The problem with section 75 is that children come in under the age category and, when people talk about age, they tend to think not of children and young people but of older people. That is why, the last time we gave evidence to the Committee, we said that some kind of child impact assessment was needed that would add value to the requirements of section 75 and would bring children in under the radar.

We have had problems with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety about the collection of data on the number of children with disabilities. Unless it is known how

many children are in the system, proper planning cannot be made for the future and for the needs of those young people. Again, that also raises issues to do with joined-up government. A certain piece of information from the Department for Social Development could be vital to some of the issues that concern the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), for instance, so some kind of central database is needed into which all that information can be fed and pulled out when needed.

Ms Tennant:

One of the responses of the Executive to the Committee's report stated that the impact on the Programme for Government and the Lifetime Opportunities strategy would be assessed through the equality impact assessment (EQIA) process. Poverty and its impact on the people who experience it cannot be assessed by EQIAs, because poverty is not a category that is covered by section 75.

I agree that collecting and collating data and making it useful will always be a challenge. We have been meeting the children and young people's unit of OFMDFM and children's services planners, who are considering how they can collate data to make it as useful as possible and how to break it down into different groups of children. For instance, although the figures on education might show overall improvement, some groups of children might be doing better than others. The challenge is to disaggregate the data in a way that is useful. It is possible to end up with an overload of data, which makes it less useful. The children and young people's unit of OFMDFM and children's services planners have been engaging with the challenge of trying to find a way of producing usefully disaggregated data.

Ms Lewsley:

Some models of good practice are being used. DARD's equality unit has been considering how it can include young people as part of its provision under section 75. The models of good practice could be duplicated by other Departments to make it easier.

Mr Attwood:

I apologise for being a little late. You correctly pointed out that sometimes action plans are a statement of what Departments do rather than what they should be doing. The Committee has experience of the fact that some Departments do not have action plans on, for example, European issues. We found out from our work on children with disabilities that the Department is

preparing its action plan for 2008-2011 in 2010. I share your concerns about action plans.

A senior official in OFMDFM admitted bluntly and honestly that the poverty targets that will emerge from the legislation in February are ambitious in the context of issues arising from the recession, such as that of less money being available and of what future Budgets will include. He did not go as far as saying that the targets are too ambitious, but that was the only conclusion that could be drawn from his comments.

Given that poverty targets are to be introduced that might stretch government beyond what they think they are fit for, why did the Minister of Finance and Personnel not direct the money to children that you spoke about being directed to children in Wales? Given that child poverty is a priority in the Programme for Government, that the Bill is to be introduced and that public finances will be squeezed, how did he rationalise his decision that that money would not go to children?

Ms Lewsley:

He did not rationalise it. He simply made that decision; it was up to individual jurisdictions to decide. My original understanding was that the money that Gordon Brown talked about coming from dormant bank accounts would be earmarked for children and young people. However, it was put into the block grant, as is often the case when the Westminster Government decide to set aside money, such as the underspend in personal social service.

On the day that I gave evidence to the Committee on its inquiry into child poverty, Alistair Darling talked about setting aside an amount of money for the targets to reduce child poverty, and I asked the Committee to ensure that that money was ring-fenced for child poverty rather than be put into the block grant. When money is given to be spent on children, in other jurisdictions it is ring-fenced for that purpose, but in Northern Ireland it goes into the block grant and is spent on other things. The Committee may want to ask the Finance Minister why he made that decision. We wrote to tell him how disappointed we were, considering that other jurisdictions were using the ring-fenced money to target children, as originally intended.

Ms Tennant:

In the research that Patricia referred to earlier, we looked at spend in different areas, such as education and health. Across the board, spending on children is lower — sometimes slightly

lower and sometimes significantly lower — in Northern Ireland than elsewhere. There is particularly low spend on early years, personal social services and children with disabilities. The question of why we do not see the same investment here may be a philosophical one. Despite all the criticisms of the Westminster Government, they have put their money where their mouth is; perhaps not to the extent that they should have done, but they have invested considerable resources in tackling child poverty. We have not seen that here.

Ms Lewsley:

One of the most startling figures is contained in research that tells us that investing £2,000 to £4,000 in a child aged four or five will save the criminal justice system £750,000 by the time that child is aged 12 or 13.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Those are all of the questions from members. I thank you for answering them. The Committee appreciates the briefing and thanks you for your time.