



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Children and Young People: Delivering
Social Change Framework

23 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Alex Maskey
Mr George Robinson
Ms Caitríona Ruane

Witnesses:

Ms Martina Anderson	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Jonathan Bell	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Dr Denis McMahon	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Ms Maggie Smith	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Chairperson: We welcome junior Ministers Jonathan Bell and Martina Anderson and officials Denis McMahon and Maggie Smith. Thank you for your time. Ministers, will you make a presentation and stay to answer questions?

Ms M Anderson (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to apprise colleagues on the Committee of the work that we are doing on behalf of children and young people. I want to focus on the new delivery framework that we will be utilising to drive forward much of this work. The framework is an important development that was established as a result of input from a range of people, including the Committee, during consultation on the Programme for Government. To date, our work on children and young people has been guided by a range of strategies, action plans and conventions, such as the children and young people strategy, the play and leisure implementation plan, the Child Poverty Act 2010 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is vital that future interventions are guided by a sound understanding of how our actions impact on children and young people.

The last time that we were here, we told you that we would develop a child poverty outcomes model. Since then, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has commissioned the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO) to provide, in conjunction with the National Children's Bureau (NCB), guidance and support to all Departments to

help them to measure the impact of their actions on child poverty. Training for Departments will begin in the summer. It will include support for the development of a child poverty outcomes model for each Department and the production of user guides and other material to support that model. This work is highly complex. Nonetheless, we anticipate that Departments will have developed their models by March 2013 and that they will assist them thereafter.

Our absolute commitment to each of these policy initiatives remains strong. However, there is a significant crossover between these areas of work, and, to make a difference, we need to find new ways to implement the initiatives that involve the key Departments that hold the levers for delivery. Delivering Social Change aims to achieve a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all ages, as well as an improvement in children and young people's health, well-being and life opportunities. Thus, it will break the long-term cycle of intergenerational problems, much of which has been discussed by the Committee in this and its previous terms. The framework complements much larger social and economic policies and programmes that are already in place and provides a cross-departmental structure, clear lines of accountability, a focus on additional actions and added value and achievable, measurable outcomes — we have to demonstrate that we are making a difference.

Accountability structures and cross-departmental membership are crucial components of the framework. It will focus on a small number of flagship projects, as we believe that we need to identify a small number of priority issues on which to focus our efforts. Jonathan and I lead on the delivery of the programme through our chairing of the Executive's ministerial subcommittee on children and young people and the subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion respectively. Those are to meet quarterly, and once a year the subcommittees will hold a joint meeting chaired by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

The framework is supported by a programme board, which we, as junior Ministers, also chair. That board oversees the delivery of the various programmes and projects within the framework. Importantly, our special advisers, senior civil servants and officials from all the relevant Departments sit on the board. The Committee may also be interested to know that the programme board has so far had one formal meeting, but officials and special advisers followed that up with a series of informal meetings, including one with the chair of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. In other words, we are seeing real engagement in a way that has not happened before.

It is important to highlight that the Delivering Social Change framework complements and supports the economic strategy with a broad and integrated approach to tackle poverty that will ensure that more people join and/or remain in the workforce. Through the investment strategy, we are providing a £5 billion stimulus to the construction and related sectors of our economy over the next four years — money that will flow across the region and into the wider economy. That will keep people in productive employment and put money into wage packets, and we know the importance of disposable income. The retail sector was here yesterday, and we are listening to what people have to say. At a time of understandable concern about job security, we will seek to bring forward investment in those public works that are labour intensive, and we will use social clauses to ensure that communities receive the benefits of those investments.

At our last meeting, we spoke about the need to be challenging and innovative in our approach and to develop effective target policies that will bring people out of poverty. Hopefully, we have shown how we intend to do that through the Delivering Social Change framework.

A key programme in the framework is the social investment fund, which was announced by the Executive in March 2011. It is a key driver for reducing poverty, unemployment and physical deterioration through area-based interventions delivered in partnership with communities. It provides up to £80 million to help regenerate deprived areas in communities through physical and structural improvements and improvements in the levels of health, education and employment within those areas. That will require collaboration across sectors and, in particular, will engage with those working within deprived communities. The Department will support the establishment of steering groups in each area to deliver against comprehensive objective evidenced needs-based strategic area plans.

Having taken time to consider the views from the extensive consultation, we are pleased that the Executive have now agreed our proposals for the final operation of the fund. Although a copy of the proposals focusing on the geography of the zones, the process for establishing the steering groups and the basis on which areas will be eligible for an intervention was issued to the Committee, we appreciate that members were not afforded the opportunity to comment on the final proposals prior to Executive approval being sought. I apologise for that and assure you that our focus was on ensuring agreement as early as possible so that we could move quickly into the delivery stage and begin to

make a difference on the ground. I think, and we think, that we all want this fund to make a real difference to communities as quickly as possible. We stress that we are keen to keep the Committee informed during the roll-out of the fund, and we look forward to the input as we develop the area plans and projects.

The next step is to ensure that financial assistance is made available to all social investment zones as quickly as possible, and I am sure that the Committee will support us in that aim.

I will now hand over to my colleague Jonathan Bell.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank Martina for setting out our approach. I feel that Delivering Social Change gives us all a very exciting opportunity to create a framework that can deliver an actual outcome in a cross-departmental and a cross-agency collaborative way. We are enthusiastic about the proposal — more than that, we can see its potential. I will update members on some of the other key matters relating to our efforts to improve the lives of children and young people through the Delivering Social Change framework.

The child poverty strategy that the Executive agreed last year was aided by consideration of the report that the Committee published during the previous mandate. Again, we thank the Committee for that useful, comprehensive and very important piece of work. We are further reassured by the Committee's support for the approach that we set out in our strategy. We understand that the Committee has expressed its concern at the delay in publishing the first annual progress report, so I will begin by addressing that issue.

I reassure the Committee that the report is in an advanced stage. It presents the work of all the Departments on the Executive, and it will need to be approved by the Executive. We are hopeful of sending a consolidated paper to the Executive in the next week. In it, we will consider how our children are faring relative to the targets in the Child Poverty Act. We will describe the progress that is being made in delivering for children and young people, their families and communities. We will describe how we will move ahead and make a real difference over the coming years through the Programme for Government, which is heavily orientated towards addressing intergenerational poverty. The first annual report reflects the direction of travel as much as what has been achieved so far, but there have been notable initiatives, which I will come to in a few moments.

I am sure that you will understand our wish to focus our attention, as this work has continued, on making a real difference through the Delivering Social Change framework. Specifically, as Minister Anderson indicated, we have been engaged in a series of bilateral meetings with all the other Executive Ministers to press them to confirm the actions they were each taking to deliver on the collective goal. These meetings will continue as we work towards the next meeting of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. We invite you, as Committee members, to write to other statutory Committees to ascertain how their parent Departments are fulfilling their statutory duties under the Child Poverty Act 2010 and to encourage them to become actively involved in reducing child poverty.

The real challenge is twofold. First, we need to reduce in the short term the number of children living in poverty, but we also need to tackle the underlying, deep-seated issues that are giving rise to intergenerational poverty. We need to promote better health outcomes, better education and better environments for children to grow up in and flourish. Our plans that were developed within the Delivering Social Change framework will focus on improving the co-ordination of government action across Departments to ensure that we achieve those goals. Our aim is that it will do two things: first, increase quality, collaborative policy development on policies that will tackle the deep-rooted social challenges and bring about social change; and secondly, increase the effectiveness of delivery of those collaborative policies and actions.

Where the Executive have control of our policy-making that influences poverty, there is some good news. For example, our educational outcomes are improving. Reoffending figures are reducing and risk-taking behaviours — smoking, alcohol abuse and drug-taking — among our young people are on the decrease. The Executive have taken a number of key actions to mitigate the effects of the economic downturn and its additional impacts on poverty. I refer to initiatives such as the £22 million that is used for the winter fuel payments; holding the domestic rate at the level of inflation; the removal of prescription charges; free school meals for 58,000 of our children; and continuing to push back the possible introduction of water charges.

A business case has recently been approved for an innovative child poverty reduction pilot study, which OFMDFM will progress. The study will help around 300 low-income families to find and remain in part-time work. It will provide Departments with information to help them co-ordinate their actions in support of these families. It will also help in the assessment of the impact of an earnings disregard on child poverty levels. This is crucial work if we are to provide families with the opportunity to become more economically active and to improve their children's opportunities and life outcomes.

The development of an integrated childcare strategy to deliver affordable, accessible and quality childcare is a key commitment in the Programme for Government. The Executive have allocated £12 million over the current comprehensive spending review (CSR) period to deliver the strategy. It will make an important difference to the lives of children and those seeking childcare.

Answers to the 2011 Northern Ireland Young Life and Times survey questions, which explored the attitudes of 16-year-olds on a wide range of social issues, have shown us encouraging signs of improving community relations. The survey shows that there has been a blurring of the traditional "us and them" categories; that young people recognise that they should not stereotype someone based on their community background; that there has been an increase in cross-community contact through socialising or playing sport; and that cross-community friendships are more common now than they have been in the past.

In closing, I re-emphasise our commitment to this area of work. It is critical that we make a difference in our decisions, actions and funding allocations to ensure that they all make a real and positive difference to our young people and, ultimately, to the future of our society. I hope that we have given you a flavour of the efforts we are making to work more effectively across the Executive to address the needs of children through Delivering Social Change. I hope that you will assist us in taking this major programme of work forward. We are happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that. Thank you both. Jonathan, I will start with you. On the question of the laying of the annual report on the Child Poverty Act 2010, it was my impression — maybe I am wrong — that that report was ready but that the Executive did not consider it its past three meetings. We have a letter from your Department dated 24 April that states:

"I understand that a draft report is due to be considered by the Executive at its meeting on 26 April."

It goes on to suggest that this Committee might schedule a briefing for officials at our meeting on 2 May, but you seem to be saying that the report is not actually ready, so it has never gone near the Executive.

Mr Bell: I have said to you that the report is in its final stages. We concentrated on the idea that, if you are going to reduce child poverty, in our view, you have to do two things. You have to maximise the household income that a family gets, and you have to try to minimise household costs.

The Chairperson: I am sorry; I am just trying to clarify whether the paper has gone to the Executive at all.

Mr Bell: For the third time, I will tell you that we are about to bring the paper to next week's Executive meeting.

The Chairperson: So, it has not previously been before the Executive. OK.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh, agus tá fáilte romhaibh. You are very welcome. I have two questions, the first one to junior Minister Anderson. Ar dtús, comhghairdeas leat. First of all, congratulations. I very much look forward to working with you in your new role as MEP, and I am sure that the rest of the Committee does, too.

I want to ask you about child poverty targets. A number of groups that are involved in addressing child poverty contacted us, and they voiced concern about an answer that was given in the Assembly. That answer tended to suggest that OFMDFM is moving away from what are recognised measurements. The first question is for you, Martina, and the second question is for both of you. What engagement has taken place to date with stakeholders in the children's sector on delivering social change? Will you also outline any future engagement proposal?

Ms M Anderson: I am aware of the answer that you are referring to, but we would both like to assure you that, in addressing child poverty, there are no plans whatsoever to change the definition or targets that have been set out in the legislation. We are not seeking to set a lower target. I can offer some further reassurance on that and suggest that you get hold of the response from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and we can pass over the information on the relevant question for written answer to the Committee Clerk to be shared with the members. We are very aware of the scale and nature of the problem that we are facing, and we are focusing on developing a joined-up approach. A lot of the work that we have been doing this year has been on addressing not only child poverty but intergenerational poverty.

Your second question was about the stakeholders. Jonathan and I, as well as our senior officials, have been liaising with a number of key stakeholders in the sector about how we aim to go forward in delivering on children and young people, child poverty and the strategy. In addition, we have met Patricia Lewsley-Mooney, the Children's Commissioner. Forgive me, Chair, I have been bunged up with the cold for the past couple of days, but I am doing my best. We have discussed with her the opportunities, as we see them, for the new framework and how we need to take that forward. Officials had meetings more recently with Fionnuala McAndrew and John Compton of the newly established Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, and they have met the Delivering Social Change board. It is important to note that we have scheduled a Delivering Social Change stakeholders' workshop, which will be crucial. It will be on Monday 25 June 2012. I do not know whether I will be in attendance, but it is in the Mount conference centre and is planned to run that day from 1.30 pm to 5.00 pm. It will seek contributions and views on the proposals to date and the associated key priorities. We encourage as many people as possible, particularly those from the stakeholder groups, to attend that workshop, because we aim to ensure that we can get as broad a representation as we can from the children's sector, including the voluntary and community sector. All are invited to take part. So, I appreciate that, in response to that question, you gave us an opportunity to get that information out to members.

Mr Bell: You made an important point, Caitríona, about wealth inequality. We know that wealth inequality leads to negative outcomes, which are clearly measurable, particularly in health and education. There will be no moving away from the standard definition, which is 60% of the UK median income. We measure poverty against the 60% average UK median, and those are the figures that we have been using.

We know that income will be measured by employment and by how much of it you can create, the tax regime and benefits and benefit levels. Some of those are out of our hands because of factors such as Westminster and the global economic climate. However, we set ourselves the target of doing two things. First, we aim to allow households to keep as much of their income as possible, so we are minimising the cost of household rates by linking them to inflation and by holding back water charges. That aims to give households in Northern Ireland the maximum chance to keep their income. Secondly, our aim of seeking to create additional employment and looking at earnings disregard schemes will help a family that is trying to move out of poverty but is often penalised.

If you live in Portavogie or Ballyhalbert in my constituency, for example, and you get a job in Newtownards, you have an 18-mile round trip. You have to consider the cost of public transport and childcare. We want to try to tackle all those boundaries and give those families that take the opportunity to do additional part-time work the ability to keep more of their income. So, instead of just stripping them off pound for pound for benefits, let us show that work pays and gives people a real opportunity to keep more of their income. That is ready to go, and, hopefully, we will deliver a good research report from that and be able to roll it out across Northern Ireland.

Ms Ruane: I am reassured that there will not be a change. I believe that poverty is unfortunately on the increase, precisely for the reasons that you are talking about. I know from going around doors that poverty levels and what is happening to families now are just incredible. So, I welcome the earnings disregard and the fact that how they are measured remains focused on targeting social need, because that is an important objective. Equally, I welcome the focus on health and education. Although we can celebrate that increasing numbers of pupils are getting five GCSEs, there are still far too many who are not getting that number.

Mr Bell: Absolutely.

Ms Ruane: So, we have to keep crunching down. We have gone up a good few percentages, which is great, but the more you increase, the harder it gets to keep increasing. We have to really focus in on that. This is very important work, and we look forward to working with you on it.

Mr Eastwood: Thank you both for your presentation. There was £80 million in the social investment fund pot, and £7 million of that, I think, was given back last year — maybe even more. There has been a significant delay in getting to the point where we can spend some of it. Is there still £80 million in the pot? When will that begin to be spent?

The Chair talked about the annual report on the Child Poverty Act. I do not have the information on that in front of me, but I am still slightly confused, because the Committee was told that that report had gone to the Executive and for some reason or other did not get discussed or considered, but now you are saying that it is about to be considered.

Mr Bell: That is the final report. If I can clarify, we had additional queries throughout the report, and we concentrated on looking at how we could be more effective in delivering social change and in developing something that is related to the report, rather than just sending a list of where we were. Rather than developing a list, we went for the delivering social change model. All the Departments contributed the relevant inputs to the final report. As I was saying to the Chair, it is important to stress that its going to the Executive is the final stage for the final consolidated document.

Mr Eastwood: So, can you guarantee that the final report will be with the Executive this week?

Mr Bell: In as far as I can. It is our intention to deliver it, yes.

Mr Eastwood: What went to the Executive before? I know that it was not considered, but what documentation was with the Executive the previous time? Was it the draft report?

Mr Bell: What Executive meeting are you talking about?

Mr Eastwood: We were told a number of times that it was going.

Mr Bell: What Executive meeting were you told about?

Mr Eastwood: Maybe three or four different Executive meetings.

The Chairperson: We were told 26 April and the two weekly Executive meetings thereafter.

Mr Bell: What were you told happened on 26 April?

The Chairperson: We were given the clear impression that the Executive were going to consider a draft report at their meeting on 26 April. That is in a letter from your Department.

Mr Bell: Draft reports are in circulation constantly. We are constantly amending and updating and looking at the influence from other Departments.

Mr Eastwood: But those were not considered.

The Chairperson: I will quote again. The letter says that it is:

"due to be considered by the Executive at its meeting of 26 April."

Ms M Anderson: That may have been the intention.

The Chairperson: But it did not happen.

Ms M Anderson: It did not happen

The Chairperson: Did it not happen because there —

Mr Bell: Chair, you are aware, as I am, of Standing Orders and of the work that we do in this House and this Committee. You are aware, as I am, that the Executive's business is confidential. We cannot breach the confidentiality of the Executive, nor am I going to.

The Chairperson: We are not asking you to breach confidentiality.

Mr Bell: You are asking me what happened in individual meetings.

The Chairperson: Let me rephrase it: was there a paper that the Executive could have considered but, for whatever reason, did not?

Mr Bell: I will refer you to the answer that I gave. The paper that is going to the Executive will be the finalised paper. That is the paper that we intend to bring next week.

Mr Eastwood: Did a draft paper ever go but was not considered?

Mr Bell: I cannot breach the confidentiality of the Executive.

Mr Eastwood: It is hardly a state secret.

Mr Bell: The business of the Executive is confidential; you are as aware of that as I am. I do not make the rules, but I have to work within them.

Mr Eastwood: You can tell us whether a report went in or not. You do not even have to tell us what was in the report.

Mr Bell: I cannot tell you confidential details of the Executive.

Mr Eastwood: OK, that says a lot.

Given that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that there are 120,000 children here in poverty —

Mr Bell: It said that there are more than that.

Mr Eastwood: Well, whatever it said, it is a lot. If it is even more than that, can you tell us why we do not have an independent target for reducing child poverty here in Northern Ireland?

Mr Bell: The target that we have been asked to deal with, and the target that the House and the legislation have been asked to deal with, is the UK median target. The answer to the earlier question and to those in the House is that we have been asked not to move away from that target. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation referred to 28% of children — or 122,000-plus — being in poverty. The reality is that, if we were to take the Northern Ireland income and move away from the target of 60% of the UK median, we could reduce the child poverty figures significantly to something like 19%. The reason that we are not doing that is because we want to target the wealth inequality that exists.

Mr Eastwood: I am not asking you to change the measurement of child poverty; I am asking you to have an independent target for what to reduce child poverty to in this region.

Mr Bell: How will you measure whether you have achieved that target?

Mr Eastwood: You can use the existing definitions. My concern is that you could reduce child poverty significantly in what is called the UK but not really scratch the surface in Northern Ireland.

Mr Bell: The target that we have set ourselves is to eradicate child poverty. The definition of that target that we have set ourselves is to eradicate child poverty to less than 10%, which is 10% of our young people living in households where the income is less than 60% of the UK median income. Are you suggesting that we make it less than 10%?

Mr Eastwood: Can you tell us by when that will be done?

Mr Bell: I cannot predict the future global economic conditions.

Mr Eastwood: I am not asking you to do that, Jonathan.

Mr Bell: All this is dependent on a lot of things. The Executive set their priority to create 25,000 new jobs. We have set ourselves aims for boiler replacement schemes, double glazing schemes, and improving the environment in which our children live, which is critical.

Mr Eastwood: The double glazing scheme has stopped.

Mr Bell: No, it has not stopped. You heard the question very clearly, so it is important that people are not misinformed. It has not stopped, and all the money allocated will be used. We are trying to make sure that the public get the best value for their money in the operation of the double glazing scheme. We are going to try to create the best early years outcomes, the best health outcomes in early years and the best social housing outcomes, and we are going to try to get our young people to attain five good GCSEs. Research is telling us that those measures will lead us to reducing child poverty to less than the 10% target. As you know from the legislation, the aim is to achieve that target by 2020.

Mr Eastwood: Without breaching Executive confidentiality, can you tell us how far you have got with that? Will that be in the report this week?

Ms M Anderson: We are developing programmes, and I thought that I gave you a clear indication about the unprecedented work that we have been doing over the past year to address the needs of the 122,000 children who are in poverty. A wide range of work and projects are being discussed, and, as we move forward with five flagship projects, we are going to have to demonstrate that we are making a difference. We will monitor and evaluate that 10% with the assistance of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and others. That will not happen at the end of the programme, Colum, as has been done in the past. We will see how we have, or have not, made an impact. The evaluation will monitor the project throughout its lifetime to ensure that we deliver on the 10% target, as Jonathan outlined.

You asked about the £80 million. I want to be clear, because there has been confusion about this. There is a total of £80 million. That £80 million is ring-fenced. It is in the pot, and no money has been lost from the social investment fund. I want you to be clear about that, because I know that you have a genuine concern about it. It is likely that the capital funding of that will be spent in the latter years. It is not as though £80 million has been reprofiled and lost; it is still there and is still ring-fenced for that benefit.

We have been working across the Departments in a way that has not happened before. Jonathan and I chair a programme board that comprises grade 3s from all the Departments. They are working with us on a new approach and a new way of doing business. We have been working very hard and taking that work very seriously, as you would expect us to. We have been putting measures in place and putting an architect in place so that it is not going to have to be reinvented. As I said about the work that we are doing to try to assist Departments to develop their own child poverty measurements, as the years roll on, all that will assist the Departments year on year. They are not going to have to reinvent that wheel once they have done it.

So, we have put a lot of effort into this, and we are applying ourselves to it. If we were to give you an outline of the number of meetings that Jonathan and I and our officials have had over the past year, which, I am sure, we could do, I would hope that it would give you some comfort and confidence and let you know that we take the issue very seriously. We are applying ourselves to it. Whatever about the document not arriving on the Executive table on the intended date, it is our intention to get it right. Therefore, our officials and advisers are working to try to ensure that we get the report to the next Executive meeting, as Jonathan said.

Mr Bell: I should have said that a reduction to less than the 10% target by 2020 would be a reduction of 44,000. The global recession is going to have a serious impact on us in Northern Ireland. That is what we are hearing from across the children's sector and everywhere else. Progress is going to be slow, but it should not stop us from trying to make progress. The target measures are going to be income related, so the Executive are trying to ensure that there is more income in people's homes. They want to do that by reducing fuel poverty and by keeping the rates and prescription charges

down. The target is for homes to retain more of their income. If we do that, the figures should come down. There are measures that we could use to provide something like an extra £10 a week to families. For £100,000 to £200,000, we could lift so many children out of poverty. However, that is only playing with statistics. We know that real change can be made through good early years education, five good GCSEs, a good environment and a good home. All the measures that the Executive are taking are coupled to break long-term intergenerational poverty.

The Chairperson: Martina, I do not think that anyone is accusing you of not putting the effort in, but I am sure that you would accept that you had a statutory obligation to lay that report in March. It is now late May. What view does OFMDFM take on the fact that that has not happened? Your stakeholders, such as Save the Children, have been very vocal about this matter. What message does the fact that the report is not there yet send to the people who you are trying to serve, that is, the families and children in poverty?

Ms M Anderson: It is absolutely regrettable that we have not delivered on that target within that time frame. I could be wrong, and somebody may stand up and say otherwise, but the effort that we have put in, the kind of stakeholder engagements that have taken place throughout this year, and the work that we have done across the Departments to make sure that collaborative and co-operative work is going on, will all combine to show the people working in that sector that, hand on heart, we are working to get this done and to get it done right.

There are issues that have yet to be resolved, and we hope that we will get them resolved. Our advisers are still working on it, and so are we. Hopefully, it will be agreed by the Executive next week. That said, it is more important than just having a document. I imagine that you, as Chair of the Committee, and the members of this Committee are looking to see outcomes. We need to look at complying with and delivering on our statutory obligations around a time frame, but we also have to get it done right.

I hope that Jonathan and I have at least given you an outline of the work that we have taken on board. The levels of engagement have been unprecedented, and we have very genuinely worked together across Departments in a very collaborative way not just to challenge a notion but to demonstrate to you that this is not about a silo mentality. It is about general collaboration and co-operation, which will make a difference to the people who need it most, that is, the children.

The Chairperson: Some of us were confused about where we are in the process, and we came into the meeting thinking that the report was finished and that the Executive had simply not seen it. However, you just said that there are unresolved issues, which is much clearer. Can you tell us what those issues are?

Ms M Anderson: I want those unresolved issues to be resolved. As Jonathan said, the time frame for bringing this document to the Executive is next week, and people are working very hard. The issues are not unsurmountable.

The Chairperson: Can you tell us which Departments the issues lie with?

Ms M Anderson: At this stage, I think that the Committee will want to see this brought before the Executive and moved forward. That is the basis upon which we are going to continue with this conversation. We are not going to delve into the who, what, where and why. I will tell you that it is happening, and our aim is to bring it forward next week. We hope that we will get the document as right as you want it to be.

The Chairperson: I note what you are saying, junior Minister, but the who, what, when and why are scrutiny, and that is our job.

Mr Eastwood: We cannot guess what those issues are, so it may be useful to write to all the Departments and ask that they work with the junior Ministers to ensure that any unresolved issues are resolved.

The Chairperson: I think that we will have a discussion about it after this session.

Mr Kinahan: It all sounds quite fantastic, and so it should, because we are dealing with some of the most important issues. However, in my time here in the Assembly, we have had grand strategies, and

they have been grandly put today, but we do not have targets and timescales, and, most importantly, actions. I know that you cannot control the global economy, but the whole point of having a target is that you put a date by which to try to achieve it, and, if you do not achieve it, you work out why you have not. We never have actions, so I am really asking whether we can have a copy of the report? Can we even see a draft report that is halfway complete so that we can get an honest opinion of where we are? Behind asking about the timescales and dates, I am trying to find out whether you have the controls. Is there someone in charge who can pull all the Departments together, because that is where we always fail?

Mr Bell: You are absolutely correct about the actions that we know that we have to take. As the Chair said, those have been informed by the hours of work that we have spent with Save the Children, Barnardo's, Include Youth and Opportunity Youth. Right across the children and young persons sector, we have addressed and listened. Along with the Justice Minister, we are looking at figures that show us that the re-offending rates from children are coming down. That has been achieved through a number of initiatives, such as family group conferences and support that is better targeted to young children at an earlier stage. That is a direct action. Educational outcomes are improving, and we have seen that through the numbers of children who are achieving five good GCSEs. I fully accept Caitriona's point that we have to raise everyone up, and it will be harder and harder to continue to do that. The increase in the numbers of children achieving five good GCSEs is an action that we are achieving.

Antisocial behaviour, drugs, alcohol abuse and smoking deprives many of our young people of getting to their opportunities. The research that we are getting back shows that alcohol abuse, drug abuse and smoking is on the decrease among young people. That is another action that is coming through.

We are seeking to address joblessness, lack of skills and lack of ambition. We know about the better outcomes that we provide, particularly in the nought-to-six years group. That is why there has been investment in that group. We co-ordinate bilateral meetings between the Departments of Health and Education, and we will do that in the ministerial subcommittee. No one is quite sure which is the one that delivers the better outcome, but we know that health and education matters are linked. We are trying to look at where we can put our joint investment in so that children get a good opportunity at early years and more achieve the standard of five good GCSEs.

The third thing that we were told is that the environment that children grow up in is a factor. There is a commitment through the green new deal for energy efficiency, and, as the Minister for Social Development announced in the House yesterday, there will be a double glazing scheme. All that money will be spent on those new improvements. Funding will be provided for co-ownership homes. We have actions in each of the three areas that we get informed in — housing, education and health — going through as we speak, and that will make a real difference in the long term.

Mr Kinahan: I think that we have different ideas of actions. Until you got to the windows scheme and the others, it was almost a list of symptoms that you were dealing with.

Mr Bell: Better educational outcomes is an action.

Mr Kinahan: The outcome is fine. That is the statistics telling me about some of the things that are going on, but I want to know what things are going on and about all the different little bits that make it happen.

Ms M Anderson: Danny, when we started to analyse this, we found that the problem was that, previously, you had actions summarising what had already been done.

Mr Kinahan: That is what we have just been given.

Ms M Anderson: You can look at the progress that has been made against the children and young people's strategy and the performance indicators. I know that the Committee was keen to take a look at that. In 2003, 11% of post-primary children were smoking. By 2010, that figure had been reduced significantly to 7%. The proportion of post-primary pupils who had taken illegal drugs at least a few times in the past year had reduced by three quarters from 8% to 2%. The number of households here with one or more children under 18 in homes that fail the decent homes standard has decreased from 32,000 to 19,000. All that is still too many. I am not trying to flag this up, but I am talking about the direction of travel and the work that we have taken on board. You asked about a silo mentality and the work that had been going on previously, where policy leads were working in Departments and

talking to each other in Departments. Jonathan and I, as junior Ministers, have responsibility for co-ordinating that work, and we do so through the programme board, which I talked to you about. There are two ministerial subcommittees. One deals with children and young people, and the other deals with poverty and social inclusion. We meet quarterly.

Mr Kinahan: I do not doubt the work, but —

Ms M Anderson: In the programme board, all the senior officials at grade 3 from all the Departments are around the table talking to us about how we add value. They are not there to talk about what Departments are doing but about how we add value. Hence the reason for the need to have five, six or seven — whatever the outcome is — flagship projects that we need to demonstrate that we will make a difference to the 122,000 children that we talked about.

Mr Bell: I know that I answered your question, Danny, more in terms of good outcomes. However, our specific actions relate to the parenting support that we have funded, such as the parents' advice centre, and the parenting advice that we are giving out through the Department and through the funding that we give to a range of Departments. It is the parenting classes. It is the parental literacy and helping parents to increase their literacy. The reading of the children delivers the better educational outcome, but the parental literacy is the action that we are taking.

We have established and funded a number of homework clubs, so that children can get support even when they are going home to parents who may not be at a stage where they can give them support. The action is in mentoring those parents to give them support. Additional funding is going into actions on English and maths to deliver better outcomes in those areas. We have taken a specific action on alternative learning centres to help our young people who are learning in a different way and for whom the classroom is not working. There are actions in family centres.

Mr Kinahan: That is exactly the sort of thing that I was looking for, but I would love to see those sorts of things coming through in front of this Committee as part of a report with dates and times and, preferably, with no delays.

Mr Bell: We will try to get those to you.

The Chairperson: There was an action plan for 2008-2011, was there not, under the 10-year strategy?

Ms M Anderson: Yes, the 10-year strategy.

The Chairperson: Is there one covering this period?

Ms M Anderson: We evaluated, and that was some of the information that I have given to you regarding progress against the targets. We discovered that, for programmes and projects that are run throughout a period of a lifetime — it is a 10-year strategy for children and young people — you do not want to wait until you come to the end of that programme and evaluate it to then discover what is or is not working. We presented the figures in the evaluation that we have been doing for the first five years, and those figures are on the website so that you can see what progress has been made. That will turn into a four-year strategy for the end of that term.

We have put infrastructure in place around the two ministerial subcommittees, and we want to ensure that the progress that has been made in the first five years of the projects that fall under the programme board will be built on. Again, I am assuming that the Committee Clerk has given you that information.

The Chairperson: To be clear: you do not have an action plan, but you are going to have an action plan?

Ms M Anderson: An action plan is required for the end of that 10-year strategy.

Mr Buchanan: Listening to the presentation and the questions, we have heard of a number of initiatives that you believe will have a positive impact on the reduction of child poverty by 2020. Will you enlighten the Committee on what measures are in place to measure that on a year-on-year basis so that you know and so that there is evidence that those initiatives are effective and that they are

working? We were talking about child poverty being reduced to under 10% by 2020. Are we hoping that the initiatives that are in place will bring us to that figure by that time, or have we targets set year on year for what percentage we want it reduced to each year so that we are sure that what is put in place will work effectively?

Ms M Anderson: OFMDFM is working with UNESCO to establish a children's rights framework. That will look at progress to be made against the children and young people's strategy and against the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which, as you know, is another obligation. The programme board that I spoke about has been working with NISRA and others around continuing evaluation and assessment so that we do not leave it to the end and so that we can identify, throughout the lifetime of a programme or a project, that we are reaching our targets or not as the case may be. We can give you a guarantee that we will be assessing that throughout the lifetime of a programme or project to ensure that it is doing what it is supposed to be doing. If it is not doing that, we will have to alter it accordingly.

Mr Bell: The Delivering Social Change model is built upon listening to stakeholders in the children's sector. It is listening to Save the Children, Barnardo's, Opportunity Youth and Include Youth. It is listening to Children in Northern Ireland and the network of groups that we fund to get back the views from children and families on what will deliver the change for them. Across the board, we are being told that it is not just about one Department. It is not just about setting an action in children's health or education or the environment that they live and grow up in. The actions we need to take have to be co-ordinated across each of the Departments with responsibility for those areas. We have a crucial role in co-ordination across health, environment, education and housing. The Delivering Social Change model is aimed at taking strategic collaborative actions. We can have a range of priorities, but, if everything becomes a priority, nothing is a priority. You can come and provide lists of what there is.

Reducing child poverty levels is going to be difficult, because many of our actions are not short term but long term. For example, if more children get five good GCSEs, that will not, at that time, affect the household income of that family. Even though the child gets five good GCSEs, that will not show up as a reduction in our poverty figures. However, we know that, five or 10 years in the future, when that child may have a family of their own, those five good GCSEs will help them to get a higher value job and break the link with poverty. In the short term, the actions that we are taking may not show up as having an effect on household income. We have to think strategically and long term. For many of the actions we are taking, it could be some 10 to 15 years before they come to fruition. There may not be short-term wins.

Mr Buchanan: I agree that we have to look at the long term and that some of the issues are 15 years away. We are eight years away from 2020. If we are setting out with a target to reduce child poverty to under 10% by 2020, we need to be doing that. We cannot say in public that we are going to do this, then set things on a long-term basis of 15 years, when we have only eight years to achieve the target we have set.

Mr Bell: We have to do both. It is not only about five GCSEs. More of the overall Health budget has been redirected to public health, which should have an impact. A strategy reducing economic inactivity and for job creation, job incentives and training should give us outcomes in the eight-year period. The £12 million allocated to the childcare strategy to allow people to have affordable childcare should give us an outcome in the next eight years. The £40 million to address dereliction and promote investment in physical regeneration should give us an outcome in the next eight years. The £40 million investment to improve pathways to employment, tackle issues linked to deprivation and increase community services through the social investment fund should give us an outcome over the next eight years. The social protection fund has already delivered some £22 million to the most vulnerable groups in our society via our Department. That will give us an outcome over the next eight years. All those things are the most effective measures that we can take, across Departments, over the next eight years.

I am encouraging people to think long term. We are not only trying to bring down the numbers, which you could do with a simple £10 a week for some families, because that is not going to address the real issues of poverty. We have to take those short-term measures, and we will see what the results are, but we also have to take longer-term measures to raise children out of intergenerational poverty, where many families in Northern Ireland have been stuck for many years.

Mr Humphrey: Since the issue has been raised, as Assembly Private Secretary to the Minister for Social Development, I will clarify the position. The Minister was very clear yesterday that the windows scheme has not been halted. The decision made relates to quality and value for money. The scheme has not been halted, and the money will be spent in the time.

I say to the Ministers, in welcoming them, that — as I said to some of your officials who were here a number of weeks ago — the establishment of the steering groups will be vital in all this, but they have to be representative and reflective of the community, if the community is to have confidence in the groups and the delivery of the moneys.

I was pleased to hear that the £80 million is still there, because I think that the old adage that a rising tide lifts all boats applies here. As regards intergenerational poverty and the social challenges that we face, as a representative for a Belfast constituency, I genuinely believe that those are huge issues that require a joined-up, collaborative approach across government, and I am pleased to hear that you have been involved in some co-ordination around that. I think — I am just throwing it out as an idea — that consideration should be given. I represent north Belfast and the greater Shankill area, and I can speak with some authority on these issues. Others who represent East Belfast and West Belfast will have similar issues as well. It is absolutely the case that in respect of education and early years provision, educational attainment, antisocial behaviour, drugs and drink, and vocational training — all those things — a joined-up approach is required. That has to be a joined-up approach working across all the Departments that are involved here at Stormont, including the Health Department, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the Department of Education, the Department for Social Development (DSD) and your own Department, and Belfast City Council. We have to reach the kids in the hard-to-reach communities and the NEETs category that perhaps we have not maxed out yet.

In relation to that, has consideration been given to setting up action zones — if you take education and vocational training as being part of it — in areas such as north Belfast, the greater Shankill, west Belfast and inner-east Belfast, to address those issues? Those are the issues that will unlock the potential that is there, with our young people particularly and with older people who have lost their job and have to be retrained to find new, meaningful and lasting employment. Has consideration been given along those lines?

Mr Bell: With the social investment fund, we are seeking to do exactly what you said. You have vividly described some of the outcomes in terms of children who are caught up with no education and caught up in drink, drug and chemical dependency cycles. The social investment fund will be specifically targeted at multi-generational poverty.

As regards zones, it will be the wider social investment fund zones, which will have targeted programmes within them, that will look specifically at skills and education and at providing additional jobs. We want to make sure that the steering groups are aware of the successful practice and best practice that exists, and we want to support those steering groups in developing a robust area plan. Those robust area plans will have to target a co-ordinated approach between health, education and the environment.

Ms M Anderson: William, I will give you some reassurance. A majority of the respondents to the consultation — some 600 people responded — wished to see a form of community nomination process for the community and voluntary representatives on the steering group. The key recommendation was that it would be a fair and equitable process, so we believe that it should be some kind of self-nomination process, through a publicly advertised meeting that will be open for all to attend. At that meeting, they will select the voluntary and community sector representatives to sit on the steering groups. As you said, people in the hard-to-reach areas and those who work on the ground and advocate on their behalf need to be included in developing the area-based plans.

Some of the other work that is going on around the new programmes, particularly in your constituency, mirrors what we would like to see in our own, around early intervention, family nurse partnerships, family support community initiatives and family support hubs. All those initiatives will make a difference to the lives of people in the most deprived communities. The Programme for Government included a range of OFMDFM-led cross-cutting initiatives. £40 million was put into the social investment fund for capital expenditure to address dereliction and promote investment in the physical regeneration of deprived areas such as your own. £40 million of the social investment fund resource expenditure will improve pathways to employment and tackle systemic issues linked to deprivation and will increase community services. I talked about the establishment of the steering groups. You can

see why it is absolutely important that those steering groups have representation from the voluntary and community sector.

Mr Humphrey: I welcome that answer. £80 million sounds a lot, but it is over a period of years and it will be divided over nine zones. There absolutely has to be a collective and collaborative approach across Departments. If we do not work across Departments and do not work with local councils, we will not get the outcomes and outputs or maximise the delivery on the ground that we need and want.

Mr Bell: I know that you know about this in Belfast, but it is also happening in my Strangford constituency: there are loan sharks out there who are illegally, and legally it would appear on some occasions, offering families a payday loan starting from £75 and then charging them 2,000% interest to get the money back.

Chairman, I make no apology for saying that you were wrong to advertise those payday loans on your website, because it is absolutely disgusting that anybody would loan money to a family in poverty and then charge them 2,000% interest on the money —

The Chairperson: Let me make it very clear that I was unaware. I have never seen it on the website —

Mr Bell: Did you never look at your website?

The Chairperson: It was buried, apparently.

Mr Bell: Did you never look at your website?

The Chairperson: I had not looked at it for several weeks, and, as you will know —

Mr Bell: Did you ever see it on your website? You do not even know what is on your own website.

The Chairperson: I have never seen it. I have never seen it on my website.

Mr Bell: Absolutely disgusting: 2,000% for £75.

The Chairperson: I did not endorse it —

Mr Bell: Absolutely disgusting.

The Chairperson: I think that it is a bit of a red herring to bring that up —

Mr Bell: No, we know, and certainly the police in my constituency — in our constituency — are aware, of people out there who are attempting to loan shark and prey on poverty, and I think that it is wrong, Chairman —

The Chairperson: And that is wrong. And I am very clear —

Mr Bell: It is wrong, Chairman, for you to advertise a payday loan —

The Chairperson: I did not —

Mr Bell: — on your website at something like 2,000%.

The Chairperson: You are implying that I put that advert on.

Mr Bell: Who put the advert on your website?

The Chairperson: WordPress.

Mr Bell: WordPress?

The Chairperson: If it was on.

Mr Bell: Are you happy that it was, because I can give you a photocopy of it on your website?

The Chairperson: No, of course I was not. But you cannot show me —

Mr Bell: Do you think that it is wrong —

The Chairperson: I am not happy that it was on, and I took steps —

Mr Bell: Do you apologise for the fact that it was on your website?

The Chairperson: I regret that it was on the website, and I took urgent steps —

Mr Bell: Do you apologise for it? Do you not apologise for the fact that you were advertising £75 at 2,000%? Is that not a simple "sorry"?

The Chairperson: I did not put that on.

Mr Bell: But it was on your website.

The Chairperson: Apparently, and when it was —

Mr Bell: Have you spoken to the people who put it on your website?

The Chairperson: When it was brought forward to me, I took urgent steps to make sure that it was removed and that it could not go back on.

Mr Bell: So you took it off your website.

The Chairperson: I did. I took it off the website.

Mr Bell: So you were aware that it was on your website. Two thousand percent. It is wrong, isn't it, Michael?

The Chairperson: I did not put it on the website.

Mr Bell: Is there a chance for a sorry?

The Chairperson: I regret it being on.

Mr Bell: But he cannot even say sorry for advertising £75 to poor families at 2,000% interest.

The Chairperson: Chris Lyttle, Deputy Chair.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your presentations, junior Ministers. I obviously welcome the commitment that you have given to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people. I share your call for us to get excited about the opportunity to do that. If we cannot get animated about the future of our children and young people, we should not be here. I have a concern, however, about the pace and transparency of delivery. I would like to ask a couple of questions in that regard. What is the current rate of child poverty?

Mr Bell: If we take it as 60% of UK median income, the figures that I have received suggest that 122,000 of our children are living in poverty. That seems to be the figure that is shared with the likes of Save the Children, Include Youth and many others. That seems to be the universally agreed figure.

Ms M Anderson: Chris, we answered that. I know that you were not here and probably had a good reason —

Mr Lyttle: I apologise for that.

Ms M Anderson: Caitríona asked us about that earlier.

Mr Lyttle: The targets are obviously in percentages. What is the current rate, in percentage terms, and what targets are you aiming for?

Mr Bell: The current rate, based on what the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and others inform us, is 28%. The target that we are aiming for is the 2020 target that was set down in the Child Poverty Act. It is to eradicate child poverty, but I do not like using the word "eradicate", because, to me, it means that you take completely away. Its definition of eradicate is for less than 10% of children to be living in poverty, and the definition of that is children in Northern Ireland who live in a household with an income less than 60% of the UK median. Meeting that criteria would reduce our number down to somewhere in the region of 44,000 children. People take that definition, they take a combined income model and they take an absolute poverty model. The absolute poverty model shows us that 16% of our young people are in poverty, and that is a reduction.

Mr Lyttle: Are they realistic targets? To build on what Tom said, I think that it will be extremely difficult at this stage to deliver against those targets. What other ways will we use to measure our performance? You raised aims around educational achievement, for example. If they were displayed in an action plan, we could see, monitor and evaluate how we were doing against those types of measures. Is the absence of an action plan hindering us in this task, and when can we expect to have available a tool to monitor where we are going?

Mr Bell: The actions include homework clubs, parenting advice, parenting support and the funding of the likes of Children in Northern Ireland and other bodies to give direct advice to parents on how they can support their children. There are homework clubs, after-school clubs and play centres — I know that you are involved in those in your East Belfast constituency. All those actions are ongoing. Actions in education are ongoing to bring children up to the level of having five good GCSEs. Actions in developing the childcare strategy are ongoing. I am not sure whether you were here when we talked about the action regarding the earnings disregard. It really grieves me that, when parents do their level best to get some part-time work to raise their children's living standards, costs from public transport and even from anything that they earn are stripped off them pound for pound so that there is no real benefit. We have a scheme that is at the stage of going to tender under which we will seek to bring somewhere in the region of 300 families to be allowed an earnings disregard, allowing them to keep around £50 extra to show that work actually pays and so that children grow up knowing that there is a better outcome.

Through Delivering Social Change, we have sought to get somewhere. We are working on that with a grade 3 from every Department. There is no silo mentality. We are looking at having three to five flagship projects that we know can make a difference, and we will co-ordinate those across the Departments. That is the action plan that will be the most successful, as opposed to just giving a list of what everyone is doing anyway.

Ms M Anderson: One of the first tasks of the Delivering Social Change programme board will be to deliver a plan. That is why we gave the information out about a workshop that is taking place next month. We are asking all of the stakeholders to attend that meeting, and your colleagues will be able to share that information with you. We encourage you and others to participate if you have the time to do so. One of the first tasks of the Delivering Social Change programme board will be to develop such a plan.

Mr Lyttle: To build on what Danny Kinahan said, it is clear that a lot of actions are taking place and that there is a target to reduce child poverty from the current level of 28% to 10% by 2020. We know that there are actions, but, as Tom said, it is difficult for us to review year on year or periodically what exactly is being achieved or to compare year on year whether we are getting closer to that target, notwithstanding what will be included in the forthcoming report. What is the status of the childcare strategy?

Ms M Anderson: I will try to answer some of those questions.

You said that you have a concern about monitoring. We will publicise statistics, which will enable the Committee and others to monitor this. I apologise, Chris — you were not here earlier, but you were at the previous meeting when we talked about outcomes modelling. Earlier, we gave an update on where we had got to in that process since the previous meeting. That is being developed at the moment. Work is going on with each Department to assist them in aligning their policies with their budgets, so that we can get more effective and efficient outcome modelling. We are going to link actions to child poverty and deprivation reduction. All Ministers have a statutory duty to ensure that they deliver on the Child Poverty Act and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. There are obligations there. We will measure the impact of these actions.

The one thing that we did not want to do was to reinvent and produce for you an action plan that just regurgitated what was happening in each Department. This has to be something additional. Your own Minister has been very keen on additionality, as have all the Ministers. Therefore, when we talk about five flagship projects, it is in the context that they are going to be truly additional. It is not going to be about identifying projects on the necessary work being done across Departments, but projects that we can demonstrate to be additional and can monitor. Monitoring will be continued and ongoing. Those reports will come to the Committee for you to assess whether we are meeting targets and making a difference, and, if we are not, to recommend how we should move forward and change. We are not going to run a programme that will deliver for a lifetime without having it reviewed and monitored throughout its life to ensure that it is delivering on those targets.

Mr Bell: You mentioned the childcare strategy specifically, Chris. We hope to launch the draft strategy in the summer. Over the summer, we will invite all the interested parties to give us their views. From that point, we hope to have a strategic framework and key action. The aim is to have that agreed and published before the end of 2012. In advance of the launch of the strategy, all Departments are able to bid to the £12 million that we have set aside for the childcare fund. That £12 million has been earmarked to address identified need or to improve provision. It is important to stress that that is additional funding for the development of the childcare strategy. It is not a replacement of the existing baseline provision. It is additional funding. The childcare strategy project board is established. The draft will go out in the summer. We will listen carefully to the views that come back to us, and we aim to have that agreed and published by the end of this year.

Ms M Anderson: The programme board is meeting to develop this. We have met stakeholders. Without doubt, it will, as Jonathan said, go out for consultation later in the year.

Mr Lyttle: Are there any plans for an awareness raising campaign around the uptake of the like of child tax credits or childcare vouchers? I know that Employers for Childcare raised a proposal in that regard.

Mr Bell: We will liaise with DSD. We have a co-ordinating role in that. Awareness raising is under active consideration. The pensioners issue is similar to this. There is an awareness, but you raise the very valid point, Chris, that we need to raise that awareness in our communities so that people get the benefit uptake they are entitled to. The uptake of benefits they are entitled to will, through income, directly affect our child poverty figures.

Mr Lyttle: Last question, Chair. As far as I am aware, the Scottish approach to tackling child poverty includes a task force that has enrolled the voluntary and community sector directly in the delivery of the plan. Is the inclusion of the voluntary and community sector under consideration?

Ms M Anderson: We have met with the Children's Commissioner, and she has talked to us about the models in Scotland and Wales. We have committed to going over there to explore with them what is happening there, as well as to having further conversations with her.

Mr Bell: Chris, you should also know that we have met roughly 30 different voluntary and community sector representatives working in the childcare sector. To be fair to them, they have told us that they do not want a series of lists. We could provide hundreds of actions that are being taken across Departments in a list that describes the approach to child poverty. You raised a good point about the voluntary and the community sector. They have a valuable role to play. In a series of ongoing meetings, we spent three or four hours in that meeting listening directly to their views.

I do not want to call it a task force, but the delivering social change model will effectively be what we will use. I assure you that, in addition, we will involve the community and voluntary sector to get

agreed actions and the three to five key priorities that we need to take forward to address child poverty.

Mr Lyttle: It is helpful that the event is lined up as well.

Ms M Anderson: Yes, that is very helpful.

Mr Lyttle: I have a final, final question. How will the update report on the Child Poverty Act be presented? Will it be presented to the Assembly once it is cleared by the Executive?

The Chairperson: In fairness, Chris, we have had quite a run on this, so if you do not mind.

Mr Lyttle: Will it be presented to the Assembly?

Ms M Anderson: Yes, the report will go to the Executive first and then to the Assembly.

Mr Clarke: Some of the questions that I wanted to ask have been asked already; there have been a fair few questions. It is interesting to note that, when talking about child poverty, Jonathan twice commented that giving families an extra £10 to bring them out of poverty would be easy. Given that you know that, have you looked at any initiatives that would affect household incomes?

Mr Bell: The Executive's collaborative approach is to freeze the domestic rate of inflation, the idea of which is to keep more money in people's houses. Holding back water charges is also about the retention of money and keeping more money in people's houses. Off the top of my head, I can say that I think that around 10,000 of our families live within £10 a week of the threshold. Therefore, with £100,000 a week, I could lift 10,000 families out of child poverty. However, are we really doing that? We might lift 10,000 out of the figures, but would we be tackling the intergenerational poverty that exists? I am loathe to do it that way, and I believe that there is a better way.

I set out for Tom some of the initiatives that we are taking directly with the social investment fund and the social protection fund to try to meet our 10% target, which is 44,000 children or fewer living in poverty, over the eight-year period. We may not see the benefit of it immediately, but I am absolutely convinced that we also have to improve the educational, health and social environmental outcomes for our young people. All the research points to education, health and the social environment as the key areas.

It goes back to the old saying:

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

We could provide £10 to each of those 10,000 families to lift them out of poverty for a week and get the figures down. However, we are trying to tackle some of the more strategic and underlying causes of child poverty, which are the health, educational, housing or environmental issues.

Ms M Anderson: To develop that, Trevor, a pilot study will be done on earnings disregard. The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) has already approved the business case, and it will go out for tender. The research that Jonathan talked about has shown us that, if you were to allow a number of people to work extra hours without it impacting on their benefits, and depending on the amount of money that people are allowed to keep before their benefits are affected, you could lift 10,000 families — up to 50,000 children — out of poverty. We hope that the pilot project will add to that research. We will hopefully then bring it to the Executive, and a programme will be rolled out across the North to benefit those who need it most. To answer your question directly, research has been done and a business case has been developed and approved. It is going out for tender, and the Committee will want to have first sight of the results of that to get a sense of it. Hopefully, we will work together to see how we can roll this out.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the junior Ministers and their officials. Correspondence from Save the Children states:

"We note with concern a recent AQO where the Junior Minister Bell stated that the child poverty figure is 19% if using the NI median figures. According to 2009/10 UK-wide official statistics, 28%

of children are living in poverty with Northern Ireland the only part of UK where child poverty is increasing — and the gap is widening with the rest of UK."

Is that fact?

Mr Bell: When I addressed the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children and everything else, I said that the major figure that we look at is 60% of the UK median income. That is what the Act stipulates. It shows us that 122,000 of our children are living in poverty, and we have to reduce that to 44,000. Four targets are actually used, and, if you take an additional measure, which is the concept of relative poverty, the target is to have fewer than 10% of households in relative poverty by 2020. There is no single means of measuring child poverty, so the figure of 19% was looking at a different measure. No single measure is used to assess child poverty; in fact, four different targets are used. One of those targets is absolute poverty, which, off the top of my head is, I think, sitting at 19%. However, let me reiterate: we are committed to the 60% of the UK median average. Those figures are available. We have shared them today, and we will do everything that we can to achieve that. However, it depends which of the four targets that you are referring to.

Mr G Robinson: I am just wondering why —

Ms M Anderson: There is a correlation between that question and that which Caitríona asked about that specific response. We reassure members that there are no plans whatsoever to change the definition or targets that are set in the legislation. In fact, the First Minister and deputy First Minister answered a question for written answer on that — AQW 11379/11-15. That should probably be shared with members so that you can be reassured that there are no plans whatsoever to change the definition or targets that are set out in legislation.

Mr Bell: I have not seen the correspondence that you are referring to, George, but I would be grateful if you could forward it to me. You asked me to look towards the 19% figure. Income and equality in Northern Ireland are less here, and that brings the figure down to 19%.

Mr G Robinson: I was just wondering why there is more child poverty here than in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Bell: Income in the rest of the UK is higher than it is here. If I compare the household income of someone in my constituency of Strangford with the household income of someone in what is called the stockbroker belt in England, there is a significant difference. That is what I said at the beginning of the meeting. Income and equality in Northern Ireland is less, so we could say that the figure is 19%. That is where that is coming from. It is the difference in income, in many cases, between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr G Robinson: The startling fact is that the gap is widening in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Ms M Anderson: We do not control taxes here. There may be different political opinions about whether we should or would, and I may have one view and Jonathan may have another, but we do not control taxes, and we do not control the median wage. There are discussions on parity in benefits levels. By using the levers that we have, we will look to try to maximise income and minimise expenditure. Initiatives and measures, such as the social investment fund and the decisions on student fees and water charges, are all the right things to do, but they do not contribute to the statistical measurement of poverty.

Mr G Robinson: William Humphrey mentioned action zones. The north-west of the Province, which includes Limavady, has some of the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland. I may be being too parochial, but that really needs to be looked at.

Ms M Anderson: The responses to the consultation were very helpful to us. Taking those into account, George, we looked at the north-west. Four zones will cover the four Belfast Assembly constituency areas, and four zones will cover the Health and Social Care Trust areas, one of which is the Western Trust. There will be a zone to cover Derry, so there will be nine zones altogether.

Mr Bell: Specifically, George, if you were to compare household income in the south-east of England with that in Limavady or Newtownards, you would find a substantial difference in favour. Therefore, if

we compare ourselves against that average, it would go some way to explaining the position. In Northern Ireland, as much in Limavady as in Newtownards or the west and the east, we have to ensure that more households keep their income. How do you do that? We did it with the fuel poverty payment when £22 million went out, and we did it with the domestic rates freeze. We did it when we introduced the policy of having no prescription charges. We did it by continuing to delay water charges. As a result of the Executive having taken those measures, there is a difference of hundreds of pounds between the bills of the average household in Northern Ireland and those in parts of England. You take measures to allow families to keep more of their income, and you try to create more and better jobs. You try to ensure that families who need childcare can get it and that barriers such as disability are overcome. Indeed, we have launched a strategy on that. We need our young people to develop a better educational aspiration, and, as someone mentioned, we need to maximise the take-up of benefits. That is an issue with pensioners, and, as Chris said in reference to east Belfast, it is an issue for childcare.

Ms M Anderson: To reassure George about the north-west, we are looking at the entire North, particularly areas of deprivation. Based on the evidence on objective need, the area that you spoke about will be able to come forward.

The Chairperson: Ministers and officials, thank you very much.