



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Delivering Social Change for Children and Young
People Consultation:
Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

14 May 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Leslie Cree
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Alex Maskey
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Ms Patricia Carey	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Ms Margaret Rose McNaughton	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mrs Janet Smyth	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Chairperson: We welcome to the Committee Janet Smyth, Patricia Carey and Margaret Rose McNaughton. Margaret, I will offer you up to five minutes to make opening remarks.

Ms Margaret Rose McNaughton (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Thank you very much, Chair. I thank the Committee for putting back this meeting to allow Janet and others to attend the disability round-table discussion. I am aware that the Committee may well have been expecting a final analysis today. That document is not yet complete, but we felt that it would be very useful to come along and discuss the emerging themes and listen to any further comments that you may want to make so that we can include them in the final document. We will come back to the Committee when the document has been finalised and will be happy to go through it in more detail then.

We had a very significant response to the consultation document. There was widespread engagement, even though it was over only a 10-week period. I can talk a bit more about the events that we had, but you will see in the paper sent to you the main themes that came through. I am not sure how you want to handle this: I can go through each of the themes and talk a bit more about them, if that would be useful, or we can have a general conversation about them now.

The Chairperson: In the absence of your having a prepared statement, we will just opt for a chat. What is the reason for the delay? As I was saying to the Committee, it was scheduled in our forward work programme for some time that you would come with the analysis, which is not yet ready. What happened? Why are we in this position and not where we want to be?

Ms McNaughton: There was a significant response to the consultation. Our Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) colleagues have done a full analysis, and we have a draft document that is almost finalised. The only other information that we want to include are any further comments that the Committee might have so that they can be fully reflected in it. I expect that, after the meeting today, we can finalise the document, and it will then go for onward transmission to Ministers.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that we are part of the formalisation and finalisation?

Ms McNaughton: No, not at all.

The Chairperson: You said twice that there was a significant response. How do you justify that? What is the definition of significant?

Ms McNaughton: We had over 200 written responses, and over 300 people attended the main consultation events. We also went to various events, including the poverty event at Belfast City Council, to discuss the document. There were numerous people at those events. In total, we were able to communicate the document to about 700 people, and the responses were fairly significant. A large number of people were involved, and there was really good engagement with the sector.

The Chairperson: The Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) responded, and, significantly, I concur with that assessment, but why was she not consulted during the preparation of the document?

Ms McNaughton: We had informal discussions but no significant pre-consultation with the commissioner. With hindsight, that was not the right approach. One of the main issues that came through in the consultation was the lack of stakeholder engagement. We want to take that forward as we go into the future and decide what way the document will pan out. Stakeholder engagement will be crucial throughout.

The Chairperson: You are being candid, and I respect that, but how does it happen that you are talking about designing a consultation process, you know that there is a commissioner who is employed and paid to be the champion for children and young people, and you ignore her?

Ms McNaughton: It was certainly not our intention to ignore her.

The Chairperson: OK. You did not fully utilise and respect her position.

Ms McNaughton: Yes. I accept that we did not fully utilise the services of the commissioner.

The Chairperson: Why not?

Ms McNaughton: That might be my fault: I was not long in the Department at the time and accept full responsibility. However, from here on, I want to make sure that I have full engagement with the sector. I have met representatives of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership. It is one part of the sector that will bring significant expertise to the development of any further strategy, so I want to involve it. Whether it is a co-designed process, whatever main options emerge from the consultation and however we take forward this document, it is crucial that they are involved.

The Chairperson: The Children's Commissioner has a statutory duty in this area.

Ms McNaughton: She has, yes.

The Chairperson: The commissioner, commenting on what you have done, said:

"The Commissioner does not consider that the proposed vision or outcomes are an improvement on those contained in the current 10 year Children's Strategy."

Ms McNaughton: That is right. She said that. I have since spoken to her —

The Chairperson: Is she right?

Ms McNaughton: Yes, I think that that is a fair criticism of the document. There are a couple of areas in the vision that we probably need to reflect on and reconsider. Someone said to me that there might also be an issue with the idea of a citizen. Some children were not quite sure what citizen meant, so we want to look at that, too.

Ms Patricia Carey (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): It is very reassuring to know that there is such regard from the Children's Commissioner and others for the outcomes set out in the children and young people's strategy. In the child poverty strategy, we tried to ensure that we continued to take into account emerging issues for children's rights and poverty in the initiatives and policies developed since the children and young people's strategy was created. In many ways, it allowed us to test those, and we are taking full account of the feedback from that. As I said, it is reassuring to know that, in the view of the commissioner and many others, the outcomes have stood the test of the time and are robust, because that gives us a very sound basis on which to proceed. However, in any consultation, there will be a wide range of views. When the full analysis is available, others might say that some adjustment needs to be made and that we need to focus more on certain areas. As part of the full consultation, we have the commissioner's views, and we are very grateful for and value those. It gives us the opportunity to say that what we had in the children and young people's strategy was not too far away from the ideal.

The Chairperson: What weight do you give to the commissioner's views, given that she is the statutory champion, compared with those of others who take a contrary view?

Ms McNaughton: Well, I think —

The Chairperson: The question is for Patricia because she made the comment.

Ms Carey: I think that we give weight to her views. She has a statutory role.

The Chairperson: Yes, but what weight?

Ms Carey: I do not think that there is an easy scientific way to answer that. A range of views will be expressed on different aspects of the policy. We had thought about bringing together three main areas: children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); child poverty; and children and young people's issues. Comments were made about that, and the commissioner will have a view as well. It is not as though only one view was expressed or the same view was expressed on every aspect of the policy. In the final analysis, regard must, of course, be given to the commissioner's views, but we will also have to look at the whole outcome of the consultation document and consider that in the round.

The Chairperson: Patricia, I am not picking on you, but that does not make sense to me. Let us start again. The paper says:

"The Commissioner does not consider that the proposed vision or outcomes are an improvement on those contained in the current 10 year Children's Strategy."

She is saying, as I see it, that you are trying to reinvent the wheel. You are saying that that is one comment among many. I am saying that that is true but that she is the commissioner with the statutory role to champion children and young people's rights. What weight does that comment have against the comments of others who responded?

Ms Carey: We have a responsibility to consult widely: to consult children, their representatives and families. If we were going to take only the view of the commissioner, we would not have a reason to consult anyone else.

The Chairperson: That is not what I am asking you. What weight do you give to the commissioner's view compared with that of the others whom you are, quite rightly and properly, consulting?

Ms Carey: As I said, the commissioner is saying that the outcomes are strong and robust, as are others. Some are asking whether they need to be developed. The final analysis has not been done and final proposals have not been made, but the commissioner's views will be given significant weight given her statutory role.

The Chairperson: Significant weight. OK.

There were 47 people at four public consultation events held outside Belfast. Are you satisfied that that was a good return?

Ms McNaughton: Within the timescale, I think that that was a fair representation. Janet has details of all the consultation events. We recognise that some people were not able to attend, but we tried to make ourselves available as far as possible. Although we did not have any events in Omagh, we went to Irvinestown. We tried to get around the country as much as possible.

The Chairperson: I think that you set aside two hours for the public consultations. Did they all last two hours?

Ms McNaughton: It depended. Some probably lasted longer.

Mrs Janet Smyth (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): We were happy to stay as long as the conversation lasted at each of the events. On some occasions, we stayed for three hours. Irvinestown was one of those cases. We stayed quite late and were happy to do that. I stress that we advertised the six public consultation events in local papers across the board. We also used the children's stakeholders to help us to advertise in order to try to get as many attendees as possible.

At the event at which only seven people turned up, which you mentioned, those people were quite surprised to be the only seven there. The individual involved in helping us to organise that said that the message of where the event would be held could not have been communicated any more widely. They advertised and really tried to give people the opportunity to attend. One suggestion at that event was that, given today's digital improvements and changes in how people communicate, we look at advertising beyond the papers. Nowadays, people do not always read the local paper, so we may look at other forms of advertising. We have taken the suggestion to our Executive Information Service and asked it to consider how we can improve and reach out further to try to encourage as many people as possible to attend consultation events.

The Chairperson: For the record, I did not mention seven people being at one meeting.

Mrs Smyth: Sorry.

The Chairperson: However, that was clearly the case, which means that a total of 40 attended the other three. Was 10 weeks long enough?

Ms McNaughton: If we were doing this again, we would probably aim to go for the full 12 weeks at least. I appreciate that 10 weeks was pretty tight for most people, but I have to say that my team did its utmost to get around as many people as possible.

The Chairperson: In fairness, you were under pressure because you had a statutory duty to lay a report.

Ms McNaughton: At that time, the intention was to lay the report before the Assembly.

The Chairperson: Did you get it in on time?

Ms McNaughton: No, the report has not yet been laid. Indeed, I do not think that the UK report has been laid yet either.

The Chairperson: So you have missed a statutory deadline.

Ms McNaughton: Yes.

The Chairperson: So you could have had a 12-week consultation.

Ms McNaughton: With hindsight, yes.

The Chairperson: What involvement did children and young people have in drafting the consultation and the strategy?

Ms McNaughton: Children and young people were not involved directly in the drafting of the strategy.

The Chairperson: The same as the Commissioner for Children and Young People. Why not involve the people most impacted by the strategy?

Ms McNaughton: I take that on board absolutely. We now need to put forward our options for how we take forward the document as a result of the consultation. One option will probably be engagement with the sector on how we develop the 10-year strategy. It was never our intention to dilute the 10-year strategy, the child poverty strategy or the UNCRC obligations. Some people are probably concerned that that was what the document did, and I can see that the document was not clear enough in that regard. So one option may well be to keep the 10-year strategy going for the next two years. It expires in 2016 anyhow. Then, we can work with our stakeholders and the children to develop something that will come into being in 2016.

The Chairperson: One of the concerns expressed was about the lack of concrete measurables and specific indicators. How do you respond to that?

Ms McNaughton: That is another fair comment. The UK Government have now issued their document for consultation, which finishes, I think, on 22 May. They are also looking at new measures. They are planning two additional measures for the future: one on entrenched poverty; and another on improving life chances. I think that this is an opportunity, following the consultation and the responses, for us to look again at the indicators and the measures that we have in place. We absolutely will do that. My NISRA colleagues are looking at that.

The Chairperson: I am afraid that I have to go back to what the Commissioner for Children and Young People said. She proposed:

"a thorough, inclusive review be conducted over the next 12-18 months to determine which aspects of the current strategy and its delivery were successful, and which were not, to inform the development of the new strategy".

Will that be done?

Ms McNaughton: The commissioner's proposals or comments will be put forward. We will take on board what the commissioner said when looking at the options for taking forward our document. You will appreciate that I have not yet put forward those options to my Ministers. They will want to take the decision on the way in which the document is taken forward. Doing a thorough review of the current strategy is certainly one option. It finishes in 2016 in any case. We will work with the sector to develop a new 10-year strategy from 2016. We have carried out a review of the child poverty strategy, and that should be ready for publication fairly shortly. I am not quite sure of the timescale.

The Chairperson: I hear what you say about the commissioner's proposal being one option. Fine, that is factually accurate. However, that one option is from the person who, under the legislation that sets up the office, has a statutory duty to advise Ministers on the effectiveness of policy. So is it not more than just one option? Is it not the case that, if you do not take the commissioner's advice, you would need to make an argument for why you do not accept de facto what she says?

Ms McNaughton: Of course, there is a very strong case for looking at her view on how we take this forward. It would be remiss of us not to put that forward as a strong case for taking account of her views. At this stage, I cannot say that we will completely take on board every one of the commissioner's comments.

Ms Carey: I think that the commissioner would say to the Department that we should consult widely with children and young people and their families. I think that she would be very clear that, as part of

the consultation, we should ensure that the voices of all children are heard and that we reflect on those. That will be part of the consultation process. I do not think that the commissioner would say that her view, and her view alone, is the one that we should always follow. I think that she would want that to be informed by the responses to our wide consultation.

The Chairperson: Let me requote what she said:

"a thorough, inclusive review be conducted".

Ms McNaughton: I think that that is the way in which most strategies are prepared. Most new strategies take account of the previous strategy and what happened and include all the stakeholders, including children and young people.

The Chairperson: I think that I am right in saying that, the last time you were with us, you were going out into the consultation process. I think that you mentioned eight weeks, which we thought was short, and, in fairness, it became 10 weeks. I think that I am also right in saying that, at that point, you were preparing a child-friendly version of the consultation document. At what point within the 10-week consultation period was it ready and distributed? Was it on day one?

Ms McNaughton: No, it was not on day one.

Mrs Smyth: The main document was launched on a Monday and the child-friendly version was available the following Wednesday, so it was approximately seven to eight working days after the launch of the consultation.

The Chairperson: How many responses did you get to the child-friendly version?

Mrs Smyth: We went out to consultation with the children and young people themselves, and that document was used as part of the process. I should say that the child-friendly version was also produced by Participation Network and QA'd by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

The Chairperson: That means quality assured, just for the record.

Mrs Smyth: Yes. The children and young person's version was used, along with other materials, in nine focus groups comprising approximately 120 children and young people between the ages of seven and 19. Those were facilitated by an organisation called NI Youth Forum. The document was also used by PlayBoard at our event specifically for children in W5. The document was circulated to all of the children at that event and PlayBoard discussed it with them.

We also used the document when we went to other children's groups. We met, for example, representatives of Barnardo's disabled children and young people's participation project, the Sixth Sense advocacy group. We went up to the Derry city forum in the Guildhall to take on board the views of teenagers and young people and used the document for that. Some adults asked whether they could have sight of the children and young people's document because they liked the design and the way it was laid out. They felt that reading it initially would also help them to understand the main consultation document. So the answer to your question is that the document was used quite widely, specifically for the children's focus groups and the groups that we went out to visit as and when we were required to do so.

The Chairperson: Thank you. I just want to be clear on this: at the focus groups, was each child given a copy or was the document used by the facilitator as a guide?

Mrs Smyth: Each child was given a copy but it was also used by the facilitator. The facilitator also produced a package of other materials to assist them in taking the children through the process of the document.

Mr Maskey: Thank you for your presentation. I am a wee bit uncertain about how far we can go on this because you have not yet done the analysis. You are giving us a report on the consultation, and it is, therefore, difficult to get into the detail that some of us want to. You have detailed in your paper the numbers who attended meetings and made submissions, but I cannot really second-guess the quality

of some of those. I presume that the list of organisations is quite substantive, but, if only a small number attended events, others might have a different view. You have to make an assessment, ultimately, and, having been to the Department, come back to the Committee. Our role is to quantify in our mind whether a good enough job has been done on the consultation.

I am looking at some of the emerging findings. You say that the majority of the consultees support an outcomes-based approach, but there are concerns that there are not enough indicators or specific actions, so that is a bit of a contradiction. I do not know what weight to put on either of those. I presume that you will have to come back to us with your analysis of that.

I am just trying to get my mind settled on this. We are into the eighth year or whatever of the 10-year strategy, so you would think that there would not be that much left in the two years before it comes to an end. We do not want to waste any time at the end of the 10 years; we want to hit the ground running. I would have thought that a lot of lessons would have been learned over the past eight years, and some of the evidence that the Department has got continually in recent times will let you know whether the proposals in the consultation document are anywhere near good enough to address the shortcomings from the past lot of years, because we are not meeting their needs and not meeting the targets. In some cases, we know that child poverty levels are likely to increase, maybe significantly. So I would have thought that, on that basis, we need to up our game in the proposals that will be consulted on. I accept that you have not done an analysis, but is the Department concerned about any of the concerns that have been identified? You have identified them, so I presume that there is some concern, but, to go back to the question that the Chair asked, what weight are you putting on the more negative responses?

Ms McNaughton: It is a fair point. Some people have said that they agree with the outcomes-based approach, but the concern is that they need to see the indicators more clearly and need to see more clearly what the targets are likely to be. In many cases, we have targets in the Programme for Government. We were not shying away, but we were not including specific targets in the original document because we did not want to confuse targets and indicators. We did not want people to concentrate on meeting a target for the sake of meeting a target. We wanted to concentrate people's minds on the outcome rather than on the target.

We need to look at the indicators and then the targets when we move forward in whatever format the document takes, whether it goes forward as a child poverty strategy in its own right and we develop a 10-year children's strategy on foot of that. If it goes forward as a child poverty strategy, we may need to look at the targets coming out of England as well because some of those measures will be relevant here. Although we have not done the analysis, we are concerned to ensure that we fully reflect people's comments and take on board the new measures from England such as those around children's life chances, how we get an indicator for that and how we can work on a target for that. I accept that there are concerns about the lack of targets.

Mr Maskey: There was one concern about whether the proposals will dilute the impact of each of the three separate strands. I do not know whether they will or not, but they are all interlinked. Even the figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies give us cause for concern, and other indicators suggest that there are problems. I do not want to diminish the very good work being done or the challenges, considering how the economy has fared in recent years, but I am looking for comfort that we will take a more radical approach to preparing to end the 10-year strategy by looking forward to the new one. I want to be satisfied that, whether or not we are giving people specific targets and whether they are focusing on targets or not, they have to focus on the outcome; and the only way to get an outcome is to give yourself a target to reach it. I am looking for satisfaction that we will take a radical approach.

Ms McNaughton: We will take that back. We want to make sure that it is reflected in the analysis document.

Mr Lyttle: Thanks for your presentation. I will build on the questions about the Commissioner for Children and Young People. In correspondence, the commissioner said that she had hoped that, as the 10-year strategy came to a close, there would be an opportunity for the development of a new strategy rooted in the UN Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), that it is disappointing to see that that is not in the current plan, and that the proposed strategy is merely a slight rewrite of six high-level outcomes. The concern about UNCRC comes through in a number of consultation responses. How would you respond to that?

Ms McNaughton: Absolutely; that is a fair point. That is why the best approach may be to make the child poverty strategy separate at this stage and begin the review and development of a new 10-year strategy. The 10-year strategy would sit at the top of these strategies and out of that would flow the child poverty strategy and ensuring that we deliver on our obligations under UNCRC. There is already a commitment from the Executive to the progressive implementation of UNCRC. Laura Lundy and Bronagh Byrne from Queen's University have done work on children's rights, and we are considering that. We will want to consider all of this in taking forward any new 10-year strategy that links in with what the commission is saying in respect of UNCRC.

Mr Lyttle: UNCRC is not just about child poverty. One of the other pieces of feedback appears to be that the children and young people's strategy was very much about achieving outcomes for all children and young people but that the proposed Delivering Social Change framework seems to be moving towards a narrow focus on child poverty to the exclusion of all other children. Why were the three strands brought together? What was the thinking behind that? Are you giving serious consideration to not taking that proposed approach?

Ms McNaughton: One of the options that we will put forward is that we do not take that proposed approach now. The initial intention was good because there were so many documents the outcomes of which all appeared to be fairly similar. The work of the child poverty outcomes model that the National Children's Bureau carried out for us identified four outcomes that were very specific to child poverty. Delivering Social Change for Children focused primarily on children in poverty. There was a view that, if you tackle one end by focusing on children in poverty and putting in place measures to alleviate that poverty, that would have a general effect and would flow out across all children's groups and not just to children in poverty.

However, the concern is that we will lose something in the 10-year strategy if we continue to include it as part of Delivering Social Change for Children. If we complete what we need to complete on a child poverty strategy now and start developing a new 10-year strategy, when we have about 18 months to have a new one in place, that is our opportunity to ensure that these concerns are taken on board and ensure that the new strategy reflects what people need to see.

Mr Lyttle: I will try to cut my questions short, as many have already been asked, and I am trying to be fair. A huge number of organisations share the common goal of achieving positive outcomes for children and young people. It does not look as if the consultation process has gone as well as it could have in engaging with that wealth of expertise. Is there some way of engaging better with that expertise to ensure that you utilise it in the work that is being done?

Lastly, how much cooperation on this approach has there been across the Executive? This has to be cross-departmental. One of the UNCRC aims is:

"The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential".

One of the criticisms is that the vision in your document is a bit industrial. From a quick glance at UNCRC, you can see that there are many wide-ranging positive aims for all children. Is there a way of utilising those organisations to feed that in to generate more cross-departmental cooperation? Work is being done, but it does not feel as if it is being collected together.

Ms McNaughton: You are right about stakeholder engagement. I recently met the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP), which represents most of the stakeholders. It is the group that I want to work with in developing any new 10-year strategy; it is the group that I hope will be able to help in co-designing a new strategy. It will be able to advise on UNCRC, for example. It is vital that we engage with that group.

We have been engaging with Departments throughout the development of this; they are also represented on the programme boards. Nevertheless, there is always more that we can do to engage with Departments. We will engage with them as we go forward, although we probably need to be more proactive.

Mr Lyttle: It is becoming confusing for experts to understand these issues, so dear knows how easy they are for laypeople to understand. My hope is that progress will be made very quickly, because it is an important issue.

The Chairperson: Is there anything to be learned from the victims' side of things, Margaret? You have specialists in the Department looking at victims' issues and providing the funding. You have a Victims' Commission, as you have a Commissioner for Children and Young People. However, supporting the Victims' Commission is a forum made up of stakeholders with considerable knowledge. You then have a Victims and Survivors Service. So you have four key points: the Department, the commission, the forum and the service. To me, that seems a virtuous circle that works, certainly in theory.

Ms McNaughton: I am not that familiar with the victims' area, but it is something that we could look at. Are you thinking along the lines of a stakeholder forum?

The Chairperson: You are talking to Chris about the body that you want to engage with further. That could be a mirror of what the forum might be. The service provides for perhaps 100 groups as well as for individuals. It is just a thought.

The Child Poverty Act 2010 set up a Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. I understand that the intention was that there would be a Northern Ireland representative on that commission. Why do we not have a representative?

Ms McNaughton: My understanding is that it is still under consideration in the Department.

The Chairperson: Why?

Ms McNaughton: I am not sure of the details, to be perfectly honest, but I know that it is being considered.

The Chairperson: It is now 2014, and the Child Poverty Act 2010 envisages that Northern Ireland will be represented at the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, which sounds like a relatively important body.

Ms McNaughton: That is right, but amendments have also been made to the Child Poverty Act through the Welfare Reform Act in England.

Ms Carey: Amendments were made. A commission was to be set up, and, indeed, the first strategies were to be given to the commission for comment. The devolved Administrations and the UK Government were supposed to take account of what the commission said. The commission was not set up in the form originally envisaged by the legislation; it was some time before it was. I am not absolutely sure of the detail. However, the legislation did change, as did the role of the commission.

So, although it is four years on, the commission was not in place for those four years. However, we can get some information on it. I know that, initially, there was quite a bit of discussion about what the commission would do. However, the view of the coalition Government was different from that of the Government that brought the Child Poverty Act into being. The commission's role changed, and, therefore, any role for representatives from the devolved Administrations changed as well.

The Chairperson: I suppose that you could argue that, if it took a while to set up this commission, it gave you more time to pick the right person to represent you. Let me quote from the Children's Commissioner's letter:

"This Commission is set up to advise the UK and devolved governments on meeting their responsibilities under the Child Poverty Act 2010 to develop and implement Child Poverty Strategies. Under Section 13 of the Child Poverty Act there is a legal requirement for the devolved administration to request the advice of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, and a responsibility on the Commission to respond. NICCY is not aware of this engagement having occurred."

Is she right?

Mrs Smyth: It is under consideration.

The Chairperson: What is under consideration?

Mrs Smyth: Representation on the commission.

The Chairperson: Let me repeat:

"there is a legal requirement for the devolved administration to request the advice of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission".

Has that been done? Have you sought its advice?

Mrs Smyth: Not that I am aware of.

The Chairperson: So, you are in breach of a statutory duty.

Mrs Smyth: Advice might have been sought last year or the year before. I will need to look at that when we go back to the Department, but not that I am aware of.

Ms McNaughton: We need to be clear about when the commission was established and the amendments to it through the Child Poverty Act.

The Chairperson: According to the Children's Commissioner, it looks pretty clear. She says:

"Under Section 13 of the Child Poverty Act there is a legal requirement for the devolved administration to request the advice of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission".

It is disturbing that you cannot even say definitively whether or not you have met that obligation.

Ms McNaughton: Can I come back to the Committee on that, Chair?

The Chairperson: Please do. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta suggests the inclusion of a separate outcome specifically identifying and addressing the linguistic needs of children. Is that under consideration?

Ms McNaughton: Sorry, can you repeat that?

The Chairperson: Yes. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta suggests the inclusion of a separate outcome specifically identifying and addressing the linguistic needs of children. Is that under consideration?

Ms McNaughton: As part of the analysis of the responses, it is one area that we will look at along with many others.

Mr G Robinson: I am looking at your consultation venues. I know that the time frame is very short, and I noticed that no events took place in Coleraine, for example. Coleraine is a fairly big catchment area when you take into consideration Portrush, Portstewart, Castlerock etc. Is there any reason for that? It is not a criticism.

Mrs Smyth: No, there was no specific reason for not going to Coleraine. We went to Ballymena and had good discussions; we also went to Derry/Londonderry. There was no specific reason why we did not choose Coleraine. We just went to Ballymena and Derry/Londonderry.

Mr G Robinson: As I said, it takes in a fairly big catchment area when you consider Limavady as well. It was disappointing that a stakeholder event did not take place in that area.

Mrs Smyth: We will certainly note that for any future consultation events and consider Coleraine and Limavady.

Mr G Robinson: I would like to think that you would do that. It would be very much appreciated.

The Chairperson: Members, this is an interim briefing, and we await the full analysis. In the meantime, Patricia, Janet and Margaret Rose, thank you very much.