



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Child Poverty Strategy and Childcare
Strategy**

24 November 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Chairperson)
Dr Stephen Farry (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Allan Bresland
Mr William Humphrey
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Junior Minister Kelly
Junior Minister Newton

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

On behalf of the Committee, I give a warm welcome to junior Ministers Robin Newton and Gerry Kelly and departmental officials Tim Losty and Stephen Donnelly, to this afternoon's Committee meeting. I invite you to make your opening remarks, following which I will throw the floor open to questions.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly):

Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Tráthnóna maith. Thank you for inviting junior Minister Robin Newton and me to meet you today to discuss our work on child poverty and childcare. I will begin by updating you on the child poverty strategy, and Robin will update you on the work that is being taken forward on childcare. We will be happy to take questions afterwards.

As you are aware, Robin and I were scheduled to brief you last week, and we appreciate the fact that you rescheduled the meeting so that we could provide you with a copy of the draft child poverty strategy in advance of today's discussion. I understand that our officials met the Committee on 6 October 2010 to outline the plans for the development of the strategy and were due to brief you again on 20 October 2010, by which time we envisaged that a draft document would be available. Unfortunately, as it took longer than expected to obtain departmental input, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) officials have only recently produced the draft strategy, which we are currently considering. We were in a position to provide the Committee with the first draft of the child poverty strategy only last week.

Having had an opportunity to consider the draft document, members will, I am sure, have comments and questions. Before that, I will give the Committee an overview of the development of the strategy and highlight how we envisage taking it forward. As you will appreciate, this is a cross-departmental strategy, which OFMDFM co-ordinates. However, all Departments have a statutory obligation to input to the strategy and to outline how they are contributing to tackling child poverty here.

Although the legislation does not require councils here to be consulted, we appreciate that tackling child poverty goes much wider than Departments and will require collaboration with local government structures and partner organisations. Understandably, given the current financial uncertainties, that is a difficult task, as Departments will have to review their commitments when the Budget allocations are finalised. We cannot ignore the fact that any final strategy will be dependent on the Budget outcome, and we hope that position will become clear very soon.

Under the legislation, we are obliged to lay a child poverty strategy before the Assembly by 25 March 2011, and, therefore, we must continue to progress it, regardless of the financial

uncertainty. We have an obligation to our young people to take the work forward. In light of that, the draft strategy is a high-level document, which sets the strategic direction and is not intended to replicate or replace other strategies or policies that may impact on child poverty. Rather, the strategy intends to focus our efforts and begin to identify priorities for tackling such a wide-ranging issue.

In getting to this stage, our officials have held extensive pre-consultation discussions with key stakeholders. Those discussions culminated in a pre-consultation workshop event in September, which Robin and I attended. The workshop provided an opportunity for key stakeholders to tell us what they viewed as the barriers to ending child poverty and what key measures they would like to be implemented to reduce the levels of child poverty here. Those events have been extremely useful in informing the development of the draft strategy.

We fully appreciate that we cannot do everything over the next few years to deal with such an incredibly complex and difficult issue. There are no quick fixes, as I know members will appreciate. We feel that it is best to set the strategic direction and to identify a small number of areas on which we can focus action and, thereby, have a real impact.

Although the draft strategy is high level and has been informed by departmental contributions, we recognise that a robust implementation plan setting out our immediate priorities, key initiatives and signature projects within them must be developed to implement the strategy in full. That will require close collaboration across Departments.

We also intend to utilise fully the Committee's inquiry into child poverty, given the significant amount of work that went into providing the evidence base and identifying recommendations. It will be a key source of information to help us and our ministerial colleagues to develop the delivery plan. We hope to seek Executive agreement shortly for our plan to issue the draft strategy for consultation on the week commencing 6 December and, of course, we welcome the Committee's views to inform the final strategy.

As we outlined in our letter to the Committee, we understand that it will want to circulate the draft strategy to other departmental Committees for comment prior to providing a composite response. Unfortunately, if we are to meet our legislative obligation, we will not be in a position to provide the time that is required to accommodate that. We will welcome a copy of the Hansard

report from today's meeting by way of immediate feedback. That can be followed up by a composite response, and we apologise for the delay to date and for the limited time that is available for an initial response.

We look forward to the creation of a child poverty commission, which is a requirement of the Child Poverty Act 2010, to oversee the development and implementation of the child poverty strategies. The First Minister and deputy First Minister will appoint one of the commissioners, who will be able to contribute knowledge, expertise and skills on issues that are of particular relevance here. I will now hand over to junior Minister Newton, who will update the Committee on the childcare strategy.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton):

I thank the Committee for its invitation to come here today. You are aware that a child poverty subgroup was established in August 2008 under the auspices of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. That cross-departmental group identified childcare as a priority issue and agreed that a policy and economic appraisal should be carried on a range of strategic options for the future delivery of childcare in Northern Ireland. That appraisal has now been completed. It contains a timetable of actions and estimates of the financial implications of the actions. A paper has been prepared that outlines its key findings, which we will bring to our Executive colleagues shortly for their consideration. That was always envisaged to be the first phase of the work, and it was, and still is, intended that it will form part of an evidence base for the development of a childcare strategy.

Given that one quarter of our children are in poverty, no one in this room will question the importance of making sure that childcare policy is given sufficient priority. Indeed, that has the double benefit of enabling parents to take up jobs and improving the life chances of children in the much longer term. By helping people most in need to access affordable quality childcare, we can go some way to meeting our wider economic aims as well as helping to tackle child poverty.

We are all aware of the difficulties that exist because of the fractured way in which childcare has been managed in the past and because no single Department has responsibility for it. Indeed, no Department currently accepts policy responsibility for school-age childcare. That, in itself, has created a gap. A number of options are outlined in the economic and policy appraisal report,

but, until the Executive have had an opportunity to consider those, we are not in a position to determine which Department should take lead responsibility for childcare or, indeed, whether a single Department should do that. My personal preference is for a single Department to take responsibility. Once a Department or Departments have been identified, it or they will be required to submit a bid to OFMDFM and other Departments.

The whole Executive must take that decision, and, now that the appraisal is complete, we will bring the matter to our Executive colleagues to help to identify an agreed way forward as early as possible. No matter what decision is taken, the child poverty subgroup will continue its ongoing discussion on the options and begin its consideration of the key issues that any childcare strategy should begin to address, including how it might link to or impact on other departmental strategies and policies, such as the easily identifiable early years strategy.

It is an important issue. We can continue to update the Committee on what has happened to date and on the next steps, but we cannot discuss issues that have not yet been considered by the Executive. I am happy to hear from the Deputy Chairperson and members of the Committee and to answer any questions that you may have.

The Deputy Chairperson:

On behalf of the Committee, I thank the junior Ministers for their opening remarks. We appreciate the information on the childcare strategy. The Committee was going to write to OFMDFM about the strategy as a result of last week's Committee meeting, and the Northern Ireland Childminding Association also expressed concerns. Therefore, it is encouraging to see progress being made.

We appreciate the progress thus far, but there are concerns about the process that we will adopt to lead us through to the formal adoption of a strategy next March, in line with the wider UK target. How do you envisage the timescale for the strategy unfolding? It is due to go out for consultation in mid-December, and the best practice is for consultations to last for 12 weeks. We must also allow time for officials to review the responses from the public and organisations, and for the Assembly to adopt the strategy during what might be a difficult and busy last few weeks before the election. Can the March target definitely be met?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

We must meet the March target. The Committee will appreciate that the strategy deals with a complex area; indeed, the Deputy Chairperson said that himself. There were significant discussions between the steering group, Departments and consultants to ensure that the necessary data was included and that the evidence base was as robust as possible. We are up for getting the strategy out on time, we have an obligation to get it out on time, and I think that we will get it out on time. As I said, there are some problems with squeezing the processes within that time frame, but we are determined to get the strategy out on time.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

It is a tight timescale but, as junior Minister Kelly said, there is a strong willingness to get it done on time. We need the co-operation of others to meet the target deadline, and we hope for that co-operation across the piece.

The Deputy Chairperson:

The tenor of the remarks so far is that it will be a challenge to deliver the strategy in the context of the current difficult financial situation. In some respects, do you regard that as an opportunity to do things differently and better in the context of that financial squeeze, particularly bearing in mind the concepts of early intervention, prevention and better joined-up government? Could it be an opportunity to save money and to use money more efficiently, particularly if we front-load interventions?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

First, you asked for a date, and I omitted that information from my previous response. We hope and intend to launch the consultation on the strategy during the week beginning 6 December. Secondly, as to whether the strategy will mark a new beginning, we are, to state the obvious, in difficult circumstances. The Budget has yet to be brought forward, Departments do not yet know what their budgets will be, and we are in the midst of an economic downturn. All those factors will have an impact, but there is an opportunity to create something out of difficult circumstances.

There is an argument about what are efficiency savings as opposed to cuts. All of us around the table want more efficiency and value for money, and we want to have an impact on the lives of the children and young people who are our future. There is an opportunity to do that, and we can work together to realise it. We rely heavily, as all Ministers should, on reports and on the

great deal of hard work that has been done by this and other Committees. Therefore, the easy answer is yes; we regard it as an opportunity.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

I am not sure that I want to identify the economic downturn as an opportunity. I made the point earlier about identifying a responsible Department or Departments. I hope that it will be one Department, and a Budget application will then have to be made and considered. We regard the strategy as a priority. We regard intervention at an early stage not as a cost, but as an investment, and that is how it should be viewed. However, there will be the budgetary process to go through.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I should stress that I meant that the child poverty strategy was the opportunity rather than the crisis. If we focus on early intervention and save costs later in the process, that may provide a solution to our problems. Finally, can you assure me that the strategy has been guided by the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

Absolutely. That is embedded in our thought processes and in our approach to the strategy.

Mr McElduff:

Why has the economic policy appraisal for the childcare strategy taken so long? Why has there been a delay in developing the implementation plan for play and leisure?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

Are members allowed to ask two questions, Deputy Chairperson? *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Chairperson:

He is not usually that aggressive.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

As junior Minister Kelly mentioned in his opening remarks to the Committee, the economic policy appraisal for childcare has taken so long because it is an extremely complex area. There were significant discussions with the steering group and across Departments, and you will be aware that consultants were appointed as well. Previously, there was no real focus on that as a

single issue, and we were of the opinion that it was better to take time to get the issues right. Everything that we did and all the work that we do is aimed at underpinning a future strategy. It might seem that it has taken a long time, but it is better to build on strong foundations and take the time to get those foundations right rather than proceeding with something that might be questionable at a later stage.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

Was the second question about play and leisure?

Mr McElduff:

Yes.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

In certain ways, that question raises the same point. The actions to promote and provide affordable, accessible play and leisure facilities relate to the work of a number of Departments, local councils and agencies. As you will be aware, the implementation group is cross-sectoral, and we have spent significant time working with that group to ensure that the plan addresses the key issues. They are going through a long-winded process, as is the case with some processes, such as the plan for tackling poverty, which must be sent to all Departments for feedback. All Departments agree that it is urgent, and that is why the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people and the connected subgroups are in place.

Ms M Anderson:

Go raibh maith agat. Thank you for that presentation. You may be aware that this Committee, as well as others, I am sure, has been lobbied by groups such as Barnardo's and other organisations to protect the most vulnerable children in society. In the child poverty strategy, you identified groups at risk of poverty. Therefore, in your drive to eliminate that poverty, will you target resources at those most vulnerable groups? Will the implementation plan be funded and monitored and, if so, how?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

You are right to point out that we identified vulnerable groups based on those with high levels of poverty risk compared with other children, as described in the recent 'Households Below Average Income' report. Given that our objective is to eliminate child poverty, we will make the argument

to Executive colleagues that, if we want to make a difference, we must target resources at those vulnerable groups. Speaking personally, I recognise that, if we do not target resources to tackle the problem of child poverty in a way that seeks to eliminate it, we will not be doing our job.

I think that the second question related to the implementation plan and whether that was funded.

Ms M Anderson:

Is the plan funded and monitored?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

They are rolling plans. We recognise that we cannot tackle everything in the first year, or, indeed, in a three-year period. Therefore, we want to focus on and have a greater impact on a smaller number of key priorities. The specific initiatives and signature projects will be identified in the plan. The responsible Department for each of those will be identified, and that lead Department will have responsibility for funding. Monitoring arrangements will be through the ministerial subcommittee, as I mentioned earlier, and through other mechanisms as outlined in the strategy's governance framework.

Members will also be aware of the reporting mechanism. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will report to the Assembly annually. Therefore, all MLAs will have an input into the debate on how the Executive are delivering the targets. An important factor of the monitoring process will be the work, not just of this Committee, but of all Statutory Committees, in monitoring the relevant Departments. Those issues apply across the board.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

It was a valuable question, particularly in the current economic situation. In relation to the specific initiatives and signature projects to be undertaken, having identified those in the plan, we will place them against a lead Department. It is to be hoped that the lead Department will have identified the most vulnerable sections in our community and that those signature projects and plans will evolve from those discussions. It is an OFMDFM issue and one that we regard as a priority. If all Departments can identify the most vulnerable and adopt the ethos of wanting to address the problems of vulnerable children in our community, we will be on to a winner. However, it is an initiative that cannot be successful without a cross-departmental approach.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

A legislative imperative requires Departments to identify actions and their impact on poverty. That applies not only to OFMDFM, but to all Departments.

Mr Spratt:

I thank the junior Ministers for their presentation. There are now 50,000 young people who are not in education, employment or training, which represents a significant increase in the last number of years. Given that parental income is the single most important factor in child poverty, what actions do the Executive propose to take to address that issue? Will that be a priority of the new strategy?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

The group that Mr Spratt mentioned, which is those who are not in education, employment or training, is commonly referred to by its acronym “NEETs”. In many ways, that is an issue for DEL to tackle as part of its strategy, but, again, failure to address it will have implications for all of us. In OFMDFM, we seek to build a better and brighter future for everyone. The quoted figures for young people in the NEETs category are extremely worrying. In fact, I said to Mrs Kelly outside the room before the meeting, that, if we do not address the NEETs category, it will become a ticking time bomb, and we will reap the negative impact of that in the longer term.

Research has been done by DEL to try to identify the types of young people in that category. It may be that they do not have even the basic skills to gain employment, or they may have social or other problems that make gaining employment difficult.

As helping young people is a priority in OFMDFM, we will put NEETS on the agenda of the next ministerial subcommittee meeting to determine what urgent action can be taken to start the programme, while recognising also that DEL continues to develop its strategy.

Mr Bresland:

The lack of affordable childcare has been identified as a significant barrier to employment. Will that become a priority issue under the strategy, and, if so, how quickly could a strategy and a programme be rolled out?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

We possibly addressed that point earlier, when we talked about the strategy roll-out. Consultation will commence on 6 December, and it is imperative that it is completed by 25 March 2010. We will stick to that time frame; we are, in fact, required to do so.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Will you give us an idea of the timescale for the childcare strategy, as opposed to the child poverty strategy?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

The ministerial subcommittee on the childcare strategy identified that as a priority and agreed that a policy is required and, indeed, that an economic appraisal should be carried out on a range of strategic options. A paper on the appraisal report is being prepared for the Executive. The paper will outline key findings, and, when the Executive have had an opportunity to consider it, the next phase will be to develop a childcare strategy. Work on the strategy will begin with the public consultation, which will, we hope, last for 12 weeks.

Mr G Robinson:

What is the latest research on educational aspiration and achievement? Furthermore, which particular groups underperform, and what plans are in place to address that?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

All research on educational underachievement indicates that the worst performing group is young Protestant males, particularly those from a working-class background. Obviously, much work is being done in that area, which should be regarded as critical, and the issues definitely need to be addressed.

The Programme for Government recognised that employment is the single most significant factor in moving people out of poverty. Consequently, educational aspiration is critical in helping that group of young males to achieve further long-term success. Young people need the basics to equip them for employment. I speak regularly to employers, many of whom tell me that they are appalled when young people turn up to job interviews without a baldy notion of how to be successful.

Child poverty is influenced directly by parental income from employment, but simply being in work does not always resolve the problems of disadvantage. It is estimated that approximately 50% of households living in poverty have at least one person in work. Therefore, the level of remuneration is also important. We talked already about the NEETs group. Skills and training, along with the essential education qualifications, are crucial to addressing the issue.

If we are fundamentally to tackle the roots of disadvantage and poverty, gaining basic skills, including interviewing skills and gaining the qualifications that are associated with those skills will take us a long way towards addressing the group that the member rightly identified as being at a disadvantage.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

That is another example of how this is a cross-departmental issue. Although Robin gave a comprehensive response, you may get more information from the Department of Education (DE). As an example, children who are entitled to free school meals tend to perform less well. That is supported by recent studies of nought-to-seven-year-olds. The anti-poverty strategy recognises the importance of education and promotes early years intervention and family support. It contains a wide range of measures. The Committee for Education or the Department of Education could provide more information.

Mr G Robinson:

Will you expand a wee bit on your plans to address the problem?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

We went through that a wee bit earlier. It is a cross-departmental endeavour. Our job in OFMDFM is to co-ordinate the response to taking children and others out of poverty, and we have milestones to meet in that regard. The Minister of Education will have to deal with education and the resources in her Department, and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) will have to deal with NEETs. In fairness, it is, at the moment, quite difficult for Departments to give a comprehensive answer to your question because everyone is wrestling with the Budget, what allocations they will receive and what they can prioritise. As was stated earlier, we, even in the present circumstances, are clearly stating that this is a priority area.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

The member is pushing for highly specific details. There are four key strategic priorities in the strategy. The first is to ensure that, as far as possible, poverty and disadvantage to childhood does not lead to poorer outcomes. The second is to support more parents to be in work, and it must be work that pays. The third is to ensure that children's environment supports them and enables them to thrive. The fourth, which is perhaps the most important, is to target financial support to be responsive to family situations. Junior Minister Kelly said that it is a cross-departmental issue. It is certainly an area that the Executive subcommittee on poverty and social exclusion will pick up, and I hope that it will hold each Department to account. An initiative will be developed under an extensive strategy to address the important issues that you identified.

Mrs D Kelly:

I thank the junior Ministers for their presentation. I am disappointed that the childcare strategy has taken so long, but I respect the view that it is important to get it right. I am interested in the signature projects. I wonder whether you would expand a little on what those might be. During the Committee's inquiry, we found out how valuable Sure Start is. The theme of both of your responses thus far has been not just children and young people but supporting families, particularly in respect of childcare.

You may wish to take up that matter with the Health Minister. The health and social care agencies in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust region insist on increased accommodation space for each child, which will have implications for the cost of the delivery of childcare. Businesses will have to reduce the number of places that are available in the space that is currently provided, which will drive up childcare costs. That may be a point of principle, but whether it is a necessity has yet to be determined.

I want to pick up on Barry McElduff's point on the play and leisure policy. One of the strategic aims that Minister Newton referred to was the environment. Flagship projects were to be funded under the play and leisure policy, which, I think, was a draft policy that was presented to the Committee in 2008 or 2009, and there was a budget attached to that. I wonder whether that money was ever spent or whether the budget was reallocated. If it was not spent, why not?

I want to plug the issue of NEETs and the Committee for Employment and Learning inquiry that will be launched in early December. We hope that the two junior Ministers will be available

for that, given their commitment to children and young people.

In last week's presentation, we heard that a number of targets under the child poverty strategy were not going to be met. How will those targets be reconsidered, with a view to a revised child poverty strategy, to ensure that they will be achievable in the medium to longer term?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

I will respond to Mrs Kelly's point about NEETs and our lending support to that initiative. Mrs Kelly, when you raised that issue with junior Minister Kelly and me outside the door of the Committee room, I said that I would be keen to be there. In my earlier answer, I said that NEETS is a priority area that should and must be addressed. Consultations are taking place. I hope that we can address the issue of identifying a lead Department.

All that we can address today are the categories within the signature projects. Those are childcare, NEETs and educational underachievement. Parenting support and parenting skills are also extremely important, and we must develop initiatives on those. I hope that, when each Department identifies its projects and the priorities that are attached to them, those types of issues will be to the fore.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

You asked several questions, Dolores, which is not at all like you. You asked a question about the budget for a particular policy, but we do not have that information to hand. We will write to you and the Committee with that information if that is OK.

We recognise the challenge that the poverty targets present and have presented for some time, because that is a question that comes up time and time again. We are still committed to working towards that. To meet the 2020 target, we will be required to reduce the current level of child poverty, which is 107,000, to about 35,000. As you will appreciate, that is a reduction of more than 70,000. In theory, that could be achieved if the labour market improved and if additional support and training services were put in place. However, it would require the provision of well over 20,000 jobs, which would be extremely difficult to achieve.

Some of the welfare reform changes proposed by the Department for Work and Pensions will have the potential to help to address poverty. I find myself emphasising "some" reforms as

opposed to all. They will ensure that people will be better off in work by allowing families to retain more of their income from work, as they seek to move away from benefits. We will make the position on that clear, as opposed to the situation with some of the other issues that we have had to deal with recently.

It should be noted that child poverty is not simply about providing work for poor families. I know that you have said that as well, Dolores. It is also about parenting, education, health and aspiration. The child poverty strategy recognises all of that. In theory, the target could be achieved, but it will require substantial job creation efforts to be targeted at the most vulnerable families. At present, we are unable to predict the labour market outcome for those families, but the introduction of a higher earnings disregard, for example, could help in that respect. We are considering how that new policy should be employed to best effect.

Mr Humphrey:

Thank you for your presentation. I strongly support the Executive's emphasis on growing the economy. There are many hard-to-reach communities in my North Belfast constituency. As someone who is involved in youth work, I am concerned about the huge difficulties that are faced by many young people, and, as junior Minister Newton said, particularly by young, working-class Protestant males. The Equality Commission has also raised those issues.

Last week, I attended an event in the Long Gallery, at which young people from West Belfast and North Belfast were given the opportunity, through training centres in those constituencies, to become involved in working in the Health Service. I listened to the people who spoke at the event relate how the training that they received allowed them to obtain meaningful and gainful employment, which has raised their self-esteem and their morale and has energised them. They have been completely transformed as people.

The key issue in the community that I represent is that of upskilling the current workforce and the potential workforce. Access to meaningful training to enable people to enter the world of work is hugely important. Belfast Metropolitan College and other training deliverers have a key role to play in that. I am concerned about access for young Protestant males, and, indeed all young people, in North Belfast. Apprenticeships and vocational training are essential. Not everyone is academically bright. Tony Blair would have had everyone going to university, but for some people it is about having the choice not to go to university. We need young people and

parents to be skilled so that they can enter meaningful employment at a reasonable wage. That will allow our communities to raise their capacity and their confidence, so that we can deliver the workforce that is required to support a growing economy.

However, the number of low-skilled and long-term unemployed people remains a significant problem, particularly in working-class areas. Will the issue be addressed in the final documentation, given, in particular, the influence of trans-generational unemployment and the knock-on effect that that will have on the next generation? Some families are now third-generation unemployed.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

I will start, as I come from North Belfast.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

There is a world outside North Belfast.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

I will stand up for Derry as well. Many of the problems that William outlined are also present in other working-class areas. Religion has been mentioned a few times, and it is true, as the statistics show, that young Protestant males leaving school are the worst off. However, the proportion of children who live in poverty varies according to the religion of the head of the household. In 2008-09, 32% of children who lived in households headed by a Roman Catholic were living in poverty compared with 18% of children who lived in households headed by a Protestant. The only reason that I say that is to acknowledge that, right across working-class areas, we have a difficulty. Although elements of that difficulty have a religious aspect, it comes down to the issue of poverty. That, and trying to make a difference, is what this discussion is all about.

William also mentioned upskilling. As a Department, we deal with and co-ordinate those issues on a cross-cutting basis. Upskilling is dealt with by DEL and the Department of Education. From memory, I know that there are some issues concerning apprenticeships. Last year, DEL moved to allow apprenticeships to continue even when the firms could not afford it. Therefore, actions are being taken. The overall question was whether we will deal with those issues, and the answer is yes. However, although the actions will be co-ordinated by OFMDFM,

they will be taken on by the relevant Departments.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton):

The member's question is a good one in the sense that it demonstrates the need to work across Departments. If I picked him up right — he may have mentioned other Departments — he gave the example of training centres that interface with the Health Service. The Health Department will, obviously, have an interest in that.

The Education Department has primary responsibility for the education of our children. Through its skills strategy for Northern Ireland, DEL is responsible for provisions that address the gaps in skills. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has a working relationship with DEL in identifying what skill gaps need to be addressed. However, if the training that is provided does not lead to a job opportunity, it serves only to a young person's expectation of getting a job, and, when he or she is not successful, it creates frustration.

As to where we are going, the strategy tries to address all those issues. We will work across the agreed Departments to provide a holistic approach. As the questioner mentioned, we need to address collectively all the contributing factors that lead to situations such as that described by Mr Humphrey. We regard the strategy as helping to address those factors. We will hold the Departments to account as they sit round the table at our regular meetings.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

We have to deal with this issue on the basis of objective need. That is what trying to deal with poverty is about. We came here today to talk specifically about child poverty. However, the member may be interested to know that 60 out of 100 pensioners in poverty are Protestant, but 60 out of 100 children in poverty are Catholic. Therefore, there are issues that must be addressed across the generations.

Mr Kinahan:

Thank you for your presentation. I am the new boy at the Committee. Junior Minister Newton, you said that your preference is for a single lead Department. Will you tell me how that would work? It is becoming evident that, because there are so many key matters in all the different Departments, somebody really strong will have to pull those together to get the strategy to happen on time.

The junior Minister (Mr Newtown):

Yes, I did say that. I feel that there are only two Departments that could take responsibility: the Education Department or the Health Department. The strategy has a natural home in either Department.

Mr Kinahan is right to say, as has been said a number of times, that we will work across Departments to ensure that the strategy is delivered and that the Departments are prioritising tackling child poverty. However, I hope that the decision will be that either the Education Department or the Health Department will pick up the responsibility. An application for the required budget will be made accordingly.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly):

It has been said all along that OFMDFM, as part of its cross-cutting duty, is specifically there to co-ordinate. We want a different Department to deal with childcare. Never let it be said that one junior Minister is more cautious than the other. However, the issue must be discussed, and the Executive will make a decision. At the moment, no Department or Departments have been selected.

The Deputy Chairperson:

On behalf of the Committee, I once again thank the junior Ministers and officials for their useful briefing. There was good value in our hearing that. No doubt we will be back in touch on the issue in the near future, and we look forward to another visit soon.