



Committee for Health

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Children's Social Care Services: Department
of Health

21 March 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Health

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Liz Kimmins (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Donnelly (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Alan Chambers
Mrs Linda Dillon
Mrs Diane Dodds
Miss Órlaithí Flynn
Miss Nuala McAllister
Mr Alan Robinson

Witnesses:

Ms Eilís McDaniel	Department of Health
Ms Aine Morrison	Department of Health
Ms Máire Redmond	Department of Health

The Chairperson (Ms Kimmins): I welcome from the Department Eilís McDaniel, director of family and children's policy; Máire Redmond, head of the children's services review unit; and Aine Morrison, Chief Social Worker. We also have a great attendance from VOYPIC (Voice of Young People in Care) and Include Youth. You are all very welcome. Thank you for coming and for your patience. We had quite a long session before. I open it up to the officials.

Ms Eilís McDaniel (Department of Health): Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon. You invited us along to discuss children's social care services, with emphasis on the independent review of children's social care services undertaken by Professor Ray Jones. I want to take a brief moment to introduce children's social care services. They fall within the remit of the five health and social care trusts and include services for children in need, children in need of protection, looked-after children, adopted children or children in the process of being adopted, children leaving care and children who have left care.

Looked-after children are accommodated in one of 52 children's homes or in foster care, while a small number are cared for at home by their parents. The vast majority of looked-after children are in foster care, including kinship foster care. Some children spend short periods in secure care, and we have one secure care facility in Northern Ireland. Older teenagers may be placed in supported accommodation or supported lodgings to enable them to make the transition to independent living. The aim is to ensure that children are both safe and supported to stay well and healthy, and that their families are enabled and supported to keep their children safe, well and healthy.

Children's social care services have experienced significant pressures over the past number of years. While many pressures predate the pandemic, they were also exacerbated by it. A number of the

pressures are workforce related, including high levels of staff vacancy, high rates of staff turnover and associated waiting lists. However, they are also related to pressures on families, including the increasing complexity of need, leading to a greater number of referrals to statutory children's services, more children being on the child protection register and more children being looked after or in care. That, in turn, has created pressures on care placements across our children's homes and in foster care.

As reported by Professor Jones in his review report, over a five-year period between 2016-17 and 2021-22, the number of children in need grew by 7%, the number on the child protection register by 10% and the number of children in care by 21%. Over a ten-year period up to 2021-22, the number of children in care grew by 37%, and that number has continued to increase. At the end of January 2024, the number of children in care was nearly 4,000.

At the same time, the number of staff vacancies and absent staff remains high — it is higher in some trust areas than in others — although it has decreased overall. At the end of January 2024, across all five trusts and excluding management posts, there was a combined vacancy/absence rate of 358 social workers. In addition, and as a consequence, trusts have unallocated cases or waiting lists — that is, cases waiting to be allocated to a social worker. The total number of unallocated cases across all the trusts in January 2024 was 1,479, although that was a decrease of 34 cases from December 2023.

Professor Jones did a comparison with the rest of the UK and Ireland and found that children's services in Northern Ireland were dealing with higher rates of referrals; higher rates of children in need and children with child protection plans; and the rate of children in care increasing more rapidly in the 10 years between 2012 and 2022. He also compared the number of children's social workers across the jurisdictions of the UK. He found that Northern Ireland had more social workers per child population, but that, when taking into account the number of children in need in Northern Ireland, that gap closes quite significantly.

As a result of the pressures on services and the scale of challenges within families, the Health Minister commissioned an independent review of children's social care in 2022. The terms of reference for the review were broad, and we included those in the paper that was sent to the Committee in advance of today's meeting. The review was intended to be a fundamental examination of children's services, with a focus on quality, equity, resilience and sustainability. The review took place over 16 months: it started in February 2022 and ended in June 2023 with the publication of the review report.

Engagement under the review was extensive. Professor Jones spent the first 13 months meeting and listening to children and young people — some of whom are in the room today — parents, carers, leaders, managers and practitioners from the statutory and community and voluntary sectors to understand the issues facing services in Northern Ireland. It also extended to engagement in other jurisdictions.

Some of the headlines from Professor Jones's findings are that there are many examples of good practice, care and commitment; long-serving and experienced social workers and managers; the need for time and continuity; the value of practical help to families; a skew towards and fear of child protection; well-integrated services but also fragmented and siloed services; variation and inequity across the region; services under pressure and associated delays; insecure and, in some cases, inadequate funding; and increasing complexity.

Professor Jones identified the need to create stability and continuity in the workforce, for a greater skills mix and for alternative routes into the workforce. He also commented on education and training, recruitment and retention challenges, grading, recognition and reward measures and continuing professional development. His assessment was that senior managers were "distracted and disempowered". He expressed concerns about the emphasis on risk assessment and risk management and the often short-term, target-setting interventions. He commented on the organisation of services, with a focus on specialist teams and the associated handover of children between those teams.

Professor Jones commented on how statutory children's services engaged the voluntary and community sector on a competitive, contractual basis. One of his key recommendations was a reset, away from protection activity and towards greater family support. By that, he meant not that we do not need to protect children — absolutely, some children need to be protected — but that we also need to better support families. He described family support as "the golden thread." He advocated for more practical help and "longer-term befriending" alongside skilled, short-term, time-limited, targeted

professional interventions. He also advocated for families with similar experiences supporting each other and for services to be more embedded within communities.

In concluding his report, Professor Jones said that his "clear and firm" view was:

"the children's social care crisis in Northern Ireland is systemic and endemic. It spans all of Northern Ireland and ... is long standing. It is not caused by individual failings but by the current children's social care structures, systems and processes across the region. It needs to be addressed by changes in governance, organisational arrangements, and a re-set of the focus to deliver on the requirements of the Children Order ... It does not need a fundamental change in the primary statutory"

framework. He also emphasised the need for the crisis to:

"be tackled with pace and not allowed to drift."

He set a fairly ambitious timetable, culminating in the delivery of one of his key recommendations, which is a new children and families arm's-length body (ALB) by April 2026.

The review report, published on 21 June 2023, makes 53 recommendations. For consultation purposes, the Department placed each of the 53 recommendations into one of five categories. We categorised the first group of recommendations as guiding principles. They include recommendations relating to proceeding at pace and without drift or delay; the need to consult, engage and involve children and families in decision-making; the need to provide more help for families; the need to avoid privatisation of children's social care; and the need to recognise the value of the contribution made by foster carers in Northern Ireland.

The second group of recommendations relates to service improvement. They are recommendations relating to the development of new services; to providing better and different services; to the need for a service reset towards family support; and to the Sure Start programme and a number of regional facilities in Northern Ireland.

The third group relates to how services are organised and the governance around them. A family and children's ALB and a Minister for children are in this group. They relate to how the Department is organised, the relationship between the Department and statutory children's services, and the relationship between statutory children's services and the voluntary and community sector. They also include a recommendation around budgets, multi-professional agency front-line teams and internal team structures, and a recommendation relating to the Encompass computer system.

The fourth group is workforce related. There are recommendations relating to grading and banding structures, post-qualifying development programmes, the skills mix within teams, recruitment processes, the focus on retention, and a trainee social work role and qualification route. The fifth and final group includes an annual conference and a recommendation to make decisions and have actions initiated within six months.

Before I turn to what happened next with the review report and its recommendations, given Professor Jones's emphasis on acting at pace and without drift and delay, I will give the Committee a bit more information on the children's services reform programme, which Peter Toogood referred to when he met the Committee a number of weeks ago. The programme was established by the Department in April 2023, a few months before the review report was published. At that stage, we knew what Professor Jones was finding and thinking, as he, very helpfully, kept both the Minister and the permanent secretary informed throughout the review.

The reform programme is overseen by a programme board that includes among its membership senior leaders in social care from the Department, the trusts and departmental ALBs including the Public Health Agency, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), the Northern Ireland Social Care Council and the Children's Court Guardian Agency. The Departments of Education and Justice are also represented on the programme, as is trade union side.

We are in the process of expanding the membership of the voluntary and community sector on the programme. We have just gone through a process that was led by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) on our behalf. The Department is also in discussion with the Reimagine Children's Collective, which is a group of leading voluntary and community sector organisations that

have shown leadership by responding to the challenge from the review that all of us need to work together and collaborate around implementation of the review.

There are nine work streams in the programme. I can give members more information about that. The Reimagine Children's Collective has agreed to the establishment of a further work stream, which will focus on the relationship between the voluntary and community sector and statutory children's services, and on working in partnership with the Department, in line with a partnership agreement, on an agreed action plan.

As referenced, some of the challenges faced by children's social care services are workforce related, with some teams experiencing high levels of vacancy. A significant programme of work relating to workforce is ongoing, some of it under the children's social care services strategic reform programme and some led by the social work workforce review implementation board. The Chief Social Worker can take members through the progress and achievements that have been made to date and what more is planned in workforce terms.

Work is progressing on the development and implementation of policy, both to support strands of reform work and wider Government strategy, like the childcare strategy, and in response to pressing child protection needs. That includes implementation of the Adoption and Children Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, implementation of the looked-after children strategy, a planned review of minimum standards for childminding and day care, and a programme of work relating to child criminal exploitation.

I will now return to the review. We consulted on the review recommendations between September and December 2023. We received 134 responses. I will outline some of the headlines from the consultation. There was overwhelming support for a reset and for greater focus and attention to be placed on family support. Eighty-three per cent of respondents also agreed with a recommendation to expand Sure Start geographically, although a much smaller majority of around 57% supported an expansion in age range.

There was significant support for multi-agency, multi-professional front-line teams, with more than two thirds of respondents supporting the rearranging of team structures in children's services. Sixty-nine per cent agreed that a Minister for children and families would help to give political leadership and focus to the intentions of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and to champion children and families within government in Northern Ireland. Sixty per cent of respondents were supportive of the ALB, with that rising to around 66% in the responses from organisations.

A significant number, around 77%, agreed that action needs to be taken to stabilise the workforce. An equally significant number, around 75%, agreed that there would be advantages to reintroducing a trainee scheme for social work. There was strong support for recommendations categorised by the Department as "guiding principles", and also for the recommendation on an annual conference.

More limited support was given to recommendations relating to specific service models — like the Mockingbird family model, which is a model of operating in foster care — and highly specialist services. Large numbers of respondents were either undecided or did not answer the question. Based on some of the comments that we received in the consultation, it is our assessment that respondents did not feel able to respond on issues that they were unfamiliar with or about which they knew little.

There was strong disagreement with the Department's position on the Encompass computer system. The Department rejected that recommendation, although, as members may be aware, since the consultation, it has made the decision to delay implementation of Encompass in children's services by around two years to enable additional functionality to be added to that system.

With regards to what will happen next and by when, we are in the process of developing advice for the Minister, which is based on our consideration of the consultation responses. We hope to get that advice to the Minister within a number of weeks. We are engaging with other Departments on recommendations and responses that are relevant to those Departments. We are also working with professional officers across our Department, including from the strategic planning and performance group (SPPG). When the Minister has decided on the way forward, we will publish the consultation report, which will set out what will happen next. We will, of course, keep the Committee and the Assembly fully informed when decisions are made, and in advance of publication of the consultation report.

That is my opening statement. I will be happy to take questions from members. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Ms Kimmins): Thank you, Eilís. We will have a lot of questions, although some may have been answered in your opening statement.

Professor Jones's review is excellent, and it was really good to see that happen. However, as he and you have said, we need to see the resulting work happening at pace. The key point is that, for many children and young people who engage with services, it will be too late, which is disappointing. We have to make sure that we get to the greatest number of children and young people that we can, as quickly as we can. However, it is obviously so important that we do it right.

You may not be able to answer this. You mentioned the consultation report. Is there a time frame within which we can expect that report? That will inform where we go next.

Ms McDaniel: The intention is to try to get advice to the Minister within the next couple of weeks. The analysis has been done, and we are formulating advice based on that analysis. The advice will take account of what people said in response to the consultation and the extent to which the recommendations will address the problems that exist in the current system. It will also need to take account of things such as cost and funding. The Department was very clear, in the consultation paper, that the decision on whether a recommendation is accepted will not be determined by the availability of funding, however funding may determine how quickly we can do some of what absolutely needs to be done. If we get advice to the Minister within the next couple of weeks and then allow, perhaps, a few weeks for the Minister to make his final decisions, that will enable us to publish the consultation report and begin the process of implementation.

The Chairperson (Ms Kimmins): I will come back on some of the points that you raised. We have talked about workforce across every element. Whether we are talking about health or education, workforce is an issue, but that is particularly the case in children's services. A number of weeks ago, the chief executives of the trusts gave evidence to the Committee. One of the really frightening statistics that the Committee heard at that meeting was that some social work teams and children's services are working at less than 50% of the level that they should be.

As you said in your briefing, Eilís, the number of referrals is increasing, and we do not have the capacity to meet those referrals. The number of unallocated cases is stark. We need to remember that each of those cases is a child, a young person or a family. They are not just numbers on a page; they represent people's lives. The impact of that will carry on throughout their life, if we do not get to it at the right time. Workforce is one of the key issues, if we want to try to tackle all the things that the report identified.

Is there ongoing work between all Departments to discuss how to tackle gaps, where you see them? We are aware that lack of childcare is a barrier to work for many. The workforce in many of these roles is predominantly female. Childcare is an Executive priority. Are discussions being had, on a cross-departmental basis, about how to tackle those workforce issues?

Ms McDaniel: A significant programme of work is ongoing. A lot of that is led by Aine, as Chief Social Worker. We have brought the Departments of Education and Justice into the reform programme so that cross-departmental discussions can take place. Aine, do you want to set out some of what you are doing on workforce issues?

Ms Aine Morrison (Department of Health): Yes, certainly. As you said, workforce pressure is the single most important issue facing social work and social care services for children. Both workforces are under enormous strain. That is to do with vacancy rates but also, as Eilís mentioned, increased demand. We see various drivers of increased social care demand in relation to poverty, complexity of need and, indeed, stresses and strains elsewhere in the system. There is no doubt that a lack of early intervention preventive services is a factor as well, driving referrals to children's services.

We do have an extensive programme of workforce reform under way, which includes a range of issues that we are tackling. There are short-term, medium-term and long-term actions. We did a comprehensive social work workforce review, which was completed in 2022. Following that, in order to implement its recommendations, we established a social work workforce implementation board. That board has representation from professional bodies for social work, trade union side, all the trusts and the other major social work employers in Northern Ireland, which are Education and Justice.

The aim of the board is to provide leadership and accountability for the development and stabilisation of the social work workforce. Despite the fact that the picture is still very concerning, there have been

some significant achievements, and we need to build on those further. We recognise that there are no immediate fixes for workforce issues, and the programme will be one of incremental improvement. To date, however, we were successful in ending all agency social work use in June 2023. That programme ran for over a year in order to prepare for that. That has been very successful in stabilising the workforce. We now need to grow the workforce on top of that, but that stabilisation provided a really important base.

We were very pleased that we recruited almost 200 agency social workers into either trust permanent or trust bank contracts during that exercise. We also created a fast-track route into trusts for June 2023's newly qualified social workers. We intend to repeat that in 2024 and 2025. We have just launched the fast-track platform for this year's students coming out. We were successful in getting about 220 of the newly qualified cohort into social work in the trusts over July, August and September, which was much faster than we have achieved previously. Having taken the agency factor out, it meant that the newly qualified social workers were committing to permanent posts and, in particular, committing to building those relationships that are at the core of social work.

Other achievements include putting in place and implementing a learning and improvement strategy for social work from 2019 to 2027. We established an Open University work-based route into social work, which is targeting experienced social care workers in trusts to allow them the opportunity to go into social work. We also have a newly launched social work supervision policy to support practitioners in their role. We see that as key to our retention efforts for social work and for addressing the issues that we know exist around social work well-being.

Those are the reforms that we have achieved to date. As part of our plans for this year, we have conducted a review of the various pathways into social work training. Arising from that, we are mapping out a five- to 10-year plan for pathways, what the particular routes are, and where we should concentrate our efforts. We hope to grow the number of social work training places as funding allows. We have identified a clear need for an increase in the number of training places. Social work training places were reduced from 300 to 260 in 2011 as an austerity measure, and there is no doubt that we are seeing the impact of that now.

We are working on an evidence base to understand what best supports social workers and are looking at those factors in particular. We hope to issue comprehensive guidance about the right sort of targeted support for social work. We will be working on that this year, and we hope to have that in place in nine to 12 months' time.

Drawing on some of the recommendations that Professor Jones made in his report, we will be building those into career pathway guidance within social work, which will look at a range of training qualifications and where those fit in, particularly how we support people in key jobs. I am thinking, in particular, about first-line managers, who have a difficult and challenging role. Apart from the guidance, we are developing a range of practical supports in and around coaching and mentoring — initiatives that are targeted towards social work well-being and promoting resilience, although we always need to be careful that, yes, individual staff resilience is an important factor but that needs to be supported by the organisational supports as well.

The other big piece of work that we are working on is about establishing an evidence base for safer staffing in social work. That is in preparation for forthcoming legislation and is about developing the tools and the models now. We are working with social work academics to build that evidence base. It is not about just the numbers; it is also about the range of systems that support safer staffing. That is another key area for this year's work plan.

The Chairperson (Ms Kimmins): Thank you, Aine. I declare an interest as somebody who came through the fast-track social work course. I graduated in 2011, and I know how difficult it is even to get on that course. It is good to see that you are expanding pathways, because so many people would want to go down that route and it is not always the easiest to get onto, so that is encouraging.

The Reimagine Children's Collective has been excellent, and that collaborative working has shown the potential of the community and voluntary sector and how important that is, even in the sharing of the workload. Given capacity issues with social work teams and others, there is often an overspill, and the community and voluntary sector picks that up. Regardless of whether they have the capacity or not, or whether it is in their remit, I feel that they always go above and beyond, and that is across the board with the community and voluntary sector.

I meet a lot of community and voluntary sector groups, not just in children's service but across the sector, and the procurement model at the minute is making it really challenging for where groups could be coming together, working collaboratively, and complementing each other and the statutory frameworks. However, they are nearly competing with each other for funding.

We have seen how that works really well. It is all about ensuring that we are getting the best outcomes for children, young people and families. The early intervention that you talked about is so important, because that is how we ensure that children are not ending up on child protection registers or in care. There were 4,000 children in care in January, which is a shocking figure.

Is there any discussion around how funding is allocated and procurement is done? That probably involves engagement with the Department of Finance. How can we ensure that it is not one or the other? There is a place for everybody; that is how I see it. Every organisation brings something different to the table. We should utilise that as best we can, because that will, indeed, support services and, ultimately, achieve the best outcomes for our children and young people.

Ms McDaniel: Like you, I really welcome what has been done by the Reimagine Children's Collective. It is a good example of leadership. It is rising to the challenge that Ray Jones set for us all. He said that we need to work together and not in a competitive way.

Peter Toogood and I have met the collective a number of times. One of the last discussions that we had was around how we work in partnership. The collective put together a very good paper, setting out how that might happen. It has developed a draft partnership agreement, for example, and, associated with that, it has put in place a draft action plan, which we discussed when we last met.

We have agreed to establish another work stream of the reform programme that will specifically look at recommendation 47. Ray Jones said that we need to work in partnership and move away from the purchasing/contractual relationship that we have with the voluntary and community sector. That work stream of the reform programme will be the vehicle for us to do that. One of the actions in the action plan that was drafted by the collective is about us starting the process of looking at how we fund the voluntary and community sector. Is procurement the best, the only, the necessary route to purchase services from the voluntary and community sector? We will look at all that through that work stream. We will meet the collective again at the end of April to agree the work stream's terms of reference.

The Chairperson (Ms Kimmins): OK. Thank you, Eilís.

Mrs Dillon: First, I am glad that you are here, but we will obviously want to hear more when we know what is happening next. I am conscious that we have young people and their representatives in the room. That is so important. Finally, through the Ray Jones report, that is happening. For almost 10 years now, I have been trying to say, through the Policing Board and the Assembly, that young people are the ones who can tell us how they will get the best outcomes. Finally, we are getting to that point. I am not saying that nothing ever happened in that space, but not enough happened. It is difficult to know how you get good outcomes for people without asking them.

On the back of the Chair's question around the different pathways, one of the other things that I have serious concerns about is — this feeds into the point about mixed skills as well — how far are we going to widen that out. The people who will best — I was going to use the word "engage", but, while you were talking, I was thinking that no young person says, "I'm going to engage with somebody". They say, "I'm going to talk to them. I'm going to tell them". It is even about changing our language. The people who work with them know their language. They get and understand them much better than I do. I am not going to say, "Better than you do", because some of you have probably worked in that sphere and worked with young people very successfully.

I know that there are outstanding social workers out there. I was at the event in Dungannon a number of months ago. It was brilliant. It was the best example of how to do this and do it right. How do we do more of that? How do we get more of the people who work with young people — those in youth services and in the community and voluntary sector — into roles where they are working directly with them and their families? We need people with whom young people and their families can identify. Very often, the outcome depends on who goes into a home. That is the truth of it. We all know that. Could I go into a home and get the best outcome? Absolutely not. I would not understand the complexities of what was going on with the family in that house. How do we get better? How do we do that better?

Ms McDaniel: We have already done some of it. We have, for example, peripatetic teams that work with our children's homes. Peripatetic teams are multidisciplinary and include some youth workers, for example, who work with young people in homes. We need to do more of that. Ray Jones made that point in the review. We need to introduce a greater skills mix not only in our children's homes but in the team structures. That will partly be necessary because I do not think that we will be able to recruit all the social workers that we need to recruit to meet the needs that we have to meet. Some of that has already started. Aine, at the minute, you are going through a process of scoping out what exists. Do you want to say something about that?

Ms Morrison: I will say a couple of things. I absolutely agree with the emphasis on engagement, although it is not to be called engagement. The workings are very clearly directed by young people and by what they tell us that they need and want. The Office of Social Services, which I lead, recently published a document on co-production in social work. The emphasis in that is very much on how we work with a variety of people who use the services to truly let them lead us and guide us on what is needed. We are very conscious of the need for that practice emphasis in social work, and I encourage that in general in social work practice.

We are looking at the skills mix, and there is no doubt that some of the impetus for that comes from our difficulties with social work vacancies. The greater emphasis, though, is on seeing what skills young people need. It is about looking very much at whether there are other skills and knowledge sets or experiences that would be helpful in providing a high-quality service to children and young people. We have our project under way that looks at safer staffing in children's homes in particular. That is not just about safer staffing. It looks very closely at the skills and experiences that staff need to give the children the best outcomes and life experiences that they can have. It is really the first time that we have tackled trying to come up with definite recommendations on staffing a children's home.

As Eilís mentioned, we perhaps know less about the children's social care workforce than the adult social care workforce, and we are aware of that. Children's social care roles have seen growth, but they also vary quite considerably. We have, I think, just received our last returns into a children's social care scoping exercise, which looks at the range of roles that we have, what training and qualifications people have and what they bring to that. That will inform a 10-year social care workforce strategy. That work is very much in this year's work plan. We are very alive to those issues and are bringing them into all the workforce reform that we are doing.

Mrs Dillon: I have two other questions. I will be as brief as possible. The first is about allowances for foster carers. It is not about money. I am thinking particularly about kinship care, because if children are in a home where poverty is an issue, the chances of kinship care not being a situation in which poverty is also an issue are pretty slim. Currently, our foster care allowances are well behind those in other parts. Are any reviews of that happening, or is there any notion that we could improve that? I hate the idea that children in foster care are suffering in poverty. They have already left difficult circumstances and are going into equally, if not more, difficult circumstances because someone is taking them in, knowing that they cannot afford to do it but that they have to.

Ms McDaniel: One of the nine reform work streams to which I referred in my opening remarks is the fostering work stream. It will look at a fostering payment model as a priority. The work stream plans to undertake work on that this year, alongside putting in other supports for foster carers. We can provide the Committee with more information about that work as it develops, but I assure you that a fostering work stream exists and that a payment model that will take account of how foster carers are paid in other parts of the UK will be a priority for that work stream this year.

Mrs Dillon: I really appreciate that. I will come back to you, probably on a separate occasion, about policing and social care and social care homes in particular, but that is a separate issue. Finally, what are the success criteria for the children's social care reform programme in terms of improving the system and the outcomes for children and young people? How is progress being monitored and measured?

Ms McDaniel: That was one of the challenges that the Reimagine Children's Collective set for us in the Department. We all work within the framework of the children's strategy, which identifies outcomes that we want to deliver for children and young people. We have a looked-after children's strategy that identifies all the same intended outcomes. The aim of that strategy is to improve well-being, measured in exactly the same way as we measure well-being for any other child, but what sets the strategy apart is how we get there, so there will be specific actions that we need to take to deliver outcomes for looked-after children that are the same as those that we want to deliver for any other child. That is the

framework that we work within. We might need specific indicators and actions for that group of young people in order to ensure that we get there within a reasonable time frame.

Mrs Dillon: Thank you.

Ms Flynn: I know that we are really tight for time, Chair, so I will ask the panel just one question. Thanks very much for all your opening remarks. My question is about the reform work in children's services overall. How do we link the mental health strategy and action plan with that? No matter what briefing you read, you see, raised by Ray Jones and all the other reports, that issues such as childhood disability, particularly related to mental health, and addiction run throughout. Regardless of whether it is about looked-after children or children who end up in those positions through poverty or for whatever reason, those are the trends throughout. I am a wee bit concerned, because it is really important that the work is closely joined up with the 10-year mental health strategy and action plan. It will be a missed opportunity if we follow the course of the 10-year mental health strategy and then try to implement the Ray Jones recommendations; it is about how we join them up. Eilís, I know that the new programme board has a work stream for children's disability.

Ms McDaniel: Yes.

Ms Flynn: Would the mental health aspect fall under that? Is there any active engagement between your team and the team that is involved in the mental health strategy?

Ms McDaniel: The children's services reform programme is one of three reform programmes, the second of which relates to adult social care. A collaborative forum has been established for that. Then there is the mental health reform programme under the strategy. Peter Toogood is the senior responsible officer (SRO) for all the programmes, so all that falls within Peter's group in the Department. He will be the link between the reform programmes and a means of ensuring that they are all connected to each other. I am confident that, under Peter's leadership, they will be connected.

You are quite right that mental health is a huge problem in the looked-after population in particular, so that will absolutely feature as an issue. Under the looked-after children's strategy, for example, we invested in the emotional health and well-being in education framework. That is an acknowledgement that mental health is an issue. I am confident that, under Peter Toogood's leadership, all the connections that need to be made will be made.

Ms Flynn: That is good.

Ms Morrison: Professional social work officers sit on all three of those boards as well, so we have a role in joining things up. In particular, the workforce have the skills to tackle mental health or disability issues: we have dedicated professional officers working on those issues. Furthermore, I lead workforce reform across mental health, adult social care and children's social care, so I am joining them up.

Ms Flynn: It will be important to have a unified voice on any funding streams coming out of the mental health strategy or the action plan so that this area of work gets some benefit from them. It is good to know that you are across all of that.

Miss McAllister: Thank you for coming today. VOYPIC representatives have left, but I wanted to welcome them and Include Youth. We have a number of young people with us who have had experience in care and are now experts in what should be the way to look after them. The 4,000 children mentioned here have equal value and as legitimate a future as you or I or my children, so it is really important that we listen to them.

Some of the young people provided me with questions that they wanted to ask. Unfortunately, one has already left, but their question is this: why is a young person who lives in Belfast or Derry given different services and access from what their peers across Northern Ireland get, just because they live in a different area? When you are a 16-, 14- or 12-year-old, bureaucracy does not matter; all that matters is your life, your future and the things that you are dealing with. On such a crucial issue — a young person's life and future — why do they not get the same service no matter where they live in Northern Ireland?

Ms McDaniel: All the trusts work within the same legislative framework, so, technically, they should be doing broadly similar things. One point is that not all trusts have the same workforce experiences. There are much higher vacancy rates in Belfast than in the Western Trust, for example. That is one explanation, Nuala; I am not saying that it is the explanation. That is why Ray Jones made the recommendation of a single ALB. It was prompted, in part, by what young people had said. When I met young people as part of the consultation exercise, that message came through loud and clear: why does somebody in the west receive something different from somebody in Belfast? That is why Ray recommended an ALB to ensure that we have greater consistency of service provision and that everybody does broadly similar things within a legislative framework that facilitates them.

Miss McAllister: It is particularly frustrating that we have had the Ray Jones report. It made many recommendations, some of which can be implemented rather quickly and others in the long term. On one in particular, the children's services directorate, we hear, through feedback in the Chamber or through questions for written answer, that there does not seem to be the desire for it to take place. I do not know whether that is the case or whether you can provide any further clarity. We have had a review, but we now hear that there are more work streams and reviews to find out more. We have recommendations on the best way forward: why do we not just implement them?

Ms McDaniel: We made it clear in the consultation that, of the 53 recommendations that Ray made, there were around 28 that we said that we should implement now, wholly, in part or with some adjustment. We have started the process of implementing a significant number of the recommendations. Some have been located in the reform programme. I will give you a couple of examples. One of Ray's recommendations was smaller children's homes. That is being considered by the placement capacity work stream. We have a work stream on family support that is looking at how we support families better. There are 28 recommendations in that group. We still asked questions about them in the consultation because we wanted to hear whether anybody had anything else to say about the 28 recommendations. I want to assure you that we are not doing nothing. We are doing quite a lot, including implementing 28 of the recommendations that Ray made. There were a further 20 that we did not take any position on at all, and we also asked questions about them in the consultation. Some of the big recommendations are in that group.

Miss McAllister: I respect the fact that some of those will be for a ministerial decision. I am sure that this Committee will keep up the pressure. At some point, we will have to look at whether the Committee needs to go through those recommendations to see whether they have been implemented, rejected or approved. Only by keeping up the pace can we say to the young people — those here today and many others — "We have listened to you, the Department has listened to you, and we are doing what is best for you".

Another question that some of the young people have in common is about the transition out of children's services into supported living and the fact that there is no guarantee of accommodation after the two years. It could be an adult hostel. Is there any ongoing work with the Department for Communities on specified ring-fenced housing or allocations for those who are leaving care and supported accommodation?

Ms McDaniel: We already have jointly commissioned arrangements in place between the health and social care trusts and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). There are a considerable number of supported accommodation projects in place across the North, and they are jointly funded by the health and social care trusts and NIHE. We need to do more of that, Nuala. The pressure on placements is quite considerable in care, which then extends to aftercare. Again, some of it is already being done, but there is a lot more to be done, including developing other accommodation options. Within the trusts, they are having to develop other accommodation options. One of the Department's responsibilities is to put some kind of standards framework around that to make absolutely certain that the accommodation being provided is of the same standard across the board, which goes back to your original question.

Miss McAllister: It would be worthwhile keeping in touch about that and exploring it.

Ms McDaniel: In the consultation report, we hope to set out very clearly what is being done, where it is being done, what more remains to be done and when that will get done.

Ms Morrison: If I may just add, Nuala, going back to your first question, which was about regional variation, that there are regular meetings with the executive directors of social work in the trusts. One of the conversations that we have regularly is about best practice and examples from elsewhere.

There are certainly efforts to share and learn from each other. The children's directors meet every Friday morning, and part of that will be about learning from good practice elsewhere, sharing ideas and, indeed, working jointly on many initiatives. While we recognise that there is an issue with regional variation, there is also good work going on around learning from each other. That is a feature of the work streams under the strategic reform board as well.

Miss McAllister: You mentioned the regional variation, and we also hear this around respite services for children. Also, any young person who is in a hospital setting for more than three months comes under the social care network, and there has to be that engagement with families. What is the Department doing, with regard to its statutory duty, to ensure that children who are placed in those long-term settings are moved out of them? We understand that there are multiple judicial reviews (JRs) from external organisations against the Department of Health and the trusts to try to get those young people out of those care centres — the Iveagh Centre, in particular. Children have been waiting for five years to be moved within the community. What is going on here? There has already been a judicial review that was not in the Department's favour. Why have decisions not been made to ensure that young people, whether they are in the Iveagh Centre, Beechcroft or Woodlands, who have had bail conditions already met are moved back into the community? The social care system is failing them. What is happening here? There is too much going on that is impacting negatively on the lives of these young people, and this impacts on their future and that of their parents, their siblings and everyone around them.

Ms McDaniel: I acknowledge that there have been delayed discharges from Iveagh, and, unfortunately, that has led to some cases ending up in court. It was one of the reasons why the children with a disability strategic framework was developed. It will look at things like transitions and everything, Nuala. Again, there is a work stream built around that, as Órlaithí has acknowledged. It has happened. It should not have happened, but, hopefully, by way of the work that is planned, we will prevent it from happening again. We also have work ongoing across care and justice that is partly intended to prevent that movement between care and justice and ensure that, for example, children are in secure care for very limited periods and for the shortest time possible. We have had a whole programme around that.

Miss McAllister: I recognise that it is difficult. This is my last question. I am not trying to be deliberately difficult. It is just that every single one of those cases is a young person with a future, and, when you hear that there are work streams, it almost makes you say, "Do it". It is worth doing it and worth spending the money from the funding, because it costs more not to do it, financially, ethically and morally, given what it means for that young person. Again, I am not being deliberately difficult, but I think that it is important to really progress the issues to ensure that those young people are where they should be.

Ms McDaniel: The programme is an attempt at pulling together things that need to be pulled together into one place. Órlaithí asked whether we consider mental health issues when we look at these other things. It is just a means of pulling things together. I think that we will stand or fall on the actions that we take through that programme, so there is an onus on us to be able to demonstrate that we are taking concrete actions and that those actions are making a difference.

Miss McAllister: We can continue, then, to get an update on these programmes as we move through.

The Chairperson (Ms Kimmins): Yes.

Mr Donnelly: I will follow on from a couple of the issues that have been raised. Since June last year, you have already started to implement 28 of the 53 recommendations. Obviously, a programme of work is ongoing despite significant workforce pressures, and you have implemented a timetable of changes. I have three quick questions around that. You have identified some low-hanging fruit: quick changes that you could do right away. What are the priorities for action? You have undertaken already quite a few changes. More than half of the recommendations have started to be implemented. What would have the most tangible benefit? Have you identified anything in particular that would significantly improve the outcomes?

Ms McDaniel: For me, there are three things. This is all reflected in Ray Jones's report. The first one is family support. We need to get better at supporting families to prevent children from being referred to statutory and children's services, needing a child protection plan and being taken into care. I genuinely think that we need to be able to do that. Some of that will require funding because children

are still in care, and care places need to be funded and so on. For me, that is one of the key things that we need to be able to tackle the issue and tackle it well. The second one is workforce. We will have to stabilise our workforce and introduce a greater skills mix into our workforce. The third thing is placements. We have the highest number of children in care since the Children Order was implemented. We need to ensure that we have good placements for those children, so we need to develop what we currently offer. We are doing some of that. Smaller children's homes are necessary. As I said, we are looking at putting a standards framework around supported accommodation. Trusts are developing their own bespoke placements for young people by maybe using existing trust properties or leased properties. We need to develop that further and ensure that a proper standards framework is built around that.

We are also looking at multi-site children's homes. That builds on something that happened during the pandemic, when we permitted what we called annexing. When children needed to self-isolate, for example, or where children were going through long periods of lockdown and maybe needed a bit of time out somewhere, we allowed our trusts to develop annexing arrangements. That worked quite well, although there were still some quite important lessons to be learned from it. We want to translate that into what we call a multi-site children's home, where you have a core home with a number of different buildings attached to it, all registered in one place and with one registered manager. That enables trusts to manage their population across that multi-site home. Again, however, we need to build rules around how that should operate. It is about those three things: family support, sorting the workforce and sorting placement availability for the number of children whom we currently have in care.

Mr Donnelly: The number of children in care grew by 37% in the past 10 years. Is that trend still going up, or what is the trend at the minute?

Ms McDaniel: The number continues to increase. In January of this year, the number grew again to 3,970. The point that I am making is that we need to stop that tide. That will happen if families are able to stay together. Some families need to be supported to enable them to stay together. We need to do more of that. Otherwise, that number and the pressures on placements will continue to grow. We definitely need to do something about that, and quickly.

Mr Donnelly: It is a shocking trajectory.

Ms McDaniel: It is.

The Chairperson (Ms Kimmins): Alan Robinson.

Mr Robinson: Chair, my question about the postcode lottery for childcare services has been answered. Thank you.

Mrs Dodds: Danny has, very helpfully, asked the question that I was going to ask about how to prioritise some of the recommendations in the report. You talk in quite broad terms about what you want to prioritise, but we will have to get down to particular actions in particular areas. The report highlights that different trusts have different ways of dealing with things and different policies. What a young person can expect in different areas can be very different.

Your priorities around family support, workforce and placement are absolutely spot on, but we need to drill down into that and get some kind of plan for how you intend to do that, rather than saying that we want to increase the workforce or increase the skills of the workforce. Many young social workers whom I talk to feel poorly supported. They are thrown into very difficult situations very quickly. They are very worried about their position and about the young person or child whom they are supporting. Will you develop a plan to put those three priorities into operation? If so, can we see it? I accept that you are taking a lot of that to the Minister, and his stamp will then be on it. I will be interested to see that. We need to get to the stage of planning it out and thinking about how we would do that.

Ms McDaniel: There is a plan under the reform programme that looks like that. There are a considerable number of actions in it. Peter Toogood has asked all the work stream chairs to focus on three pretty concrete actions that need to take place more quickly than not to deliver change that cannot wait.

Mrs Dodds: Have you identified the three in each of those work streams?

Ms McDaniel: Each of the chairs or co-chairs has been asked to do that. Hopefully, within a relatively short period, we should be able to provide that information to the Committee across the nine work streams.

Mrs Dodds: It will be interesting to see how those priorities pan out and how, in six months or whatever, we can measure how work has been going on in relation to each of those priorities, which is probably the role of the Committee. Thank you.

Finally, I have had some fairly traumatic incidents in my constituency — they will live with me for quite a while — concerning the lack of availability of foster carers. The Southern Trust has put stickers on my door and all the rest of it about the importance of fostering. Will there be a specific campaign around fostering? Something was done about a year ago.

Ms McDaniel: Fostering campaigns are ongoing. They happen every year. The foster carer population has remained pretty stable over the last year, but that is not good enough. We have more children in care, and we need more foster carers. Within that fostering work stream — I am sorry to keep harking back to it — the recruitment and retention of foster carers is one of the areas that will be looked at.

The Chairperson (Ms Kimmins): OK, members, no one else has indicated that they wish to speak. This has been a very good session, and we will pick up this subject as we go along. Eilís, if updates come to the Committee, we can take them on board. For me — you said this in one of the points that you made to Danny — it is about the importance of early intervention to ensure that we lower the trajectory by getting support at the right time, so that children are not going into care in the first place and families are getting the support that they need to keep them together. That is our ultimate priority in all this. That is certainly what comes out very strongly in Professor Jones's report.

I thank you all. That was really good, and I am sure that we will see you again very soon.

Ms McDaniel: Thank you.