



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Child Poverty in Northern Ireland:  
Barnardo's; Northern Ireland Commissioner  
for Children and Young People; Ulster  
University

20 June 2024

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Daniel McCrossan (Chairperson)  
Ms Cheryl Brownlee (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Pádraig Delargy  
Ms Diane Forsythe  
Mr Colm Gildernew  
Mr David Honeyford  
Mr John Stewart

**Witnesses:**

Ms Trása Canavan	Barnardo's
Mr Stuart Stevenson	Department of Finance
Ms Dorinnia Carville	Northern Ireland Audit Office
Mr Chris Quinn	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
Ms Goretti Horgan	Ulster University

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I welcome Chris Quinn, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY); Trása Canavan, from Barnardo's, who is the chair of the anti-poverty co-design group; and Goretti Horgan, from Ulster University (UU), who is a member of the anti-poverty expert panel. We are also joined by Dorinnia Carville, who is the Comptroller and Auditor General in the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), and Stuart Stevenson, who is the Treasury Officer of Accounts (TOA) in the Department of Finance. Thank you for taking the time to meet us. I invite you to make some brief opening remarks.

**Mr Chris Quinn (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):** Thank you for giving us the opportunity to feed into the inquiry. Addressing child poverty is a priority for my office and for me as Children's Commissioner. I open by stating that I am deeply concerned about the delay in implementing an anti-poverty strategy and the devastating effect that that is having on our most vulnerable. I welcome the Northern Ireland Audit Office's report, and I endorse its recommendations. The fact that there has been little sustained improvement in child poverty levels since 2016 is startling, and, as part of the inquiry, it is important to reflect on lessons learned about the impact that high-level strategies have on the lives of children and young people. I suggest that the current models of strategy development, delivery and reporting are not fit for purpose to deliver real outcomes on the ground. Government needs to listen to children and young people, as well as to organisations that work with, and on behalf of, people in poverty, throughout the strategy development process.

Although there are a number of areas that I would like to talk about, I will highlight five key areas for consideration. First, poverty is a blight on children's lives, a breach of their rights and a waste of public

money. It is unacceptable that between one in four and one in five children lives in poverty in Northern Ireland. It is also unacceptable that children are more likely to be in poverty than people of working age or older people. Moreover, that is not an accident. Poverty is a political choice. Government policy determines where resources are targeted at to reduce poverty, and, to date, the resources have not been directed to children. On a positive note, we saw a reduction in pensioner poverty a number of years ago. That demonstrates that, when there is the political will, and that is reflected in resource allocation, we can make change. We need to turn the tide and focus on early intervention, prevention and support for our most vulnerable. Those arguments are well evidenced and well rehearsed, yet we are still in a cycle of short-term decision-making and of pouring resources into systems that are broken. The fact of the matter is that, with better investment of public resources, rather than the current system, under which we pay more to address the harms created by poverty, we can lift children out of poverty.

Secondly, the child poverty strategy was a legislative requirement, yet deadlines were breached. That is not unusual. The Northern Ireland Audit Office report highlights the statutory obligation in section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to "adopt" an anti-poverty strategy. Despite the judicial review in 2015, the strategy is yet to be published. I want to know why its publication has been held up and why the anti-poverty strategy does not appear to be an immediate priority for the Northern Ireland Executive. As far as I can see, there is no reason that it should be delayed. When requirements to develop and implement strategies are set in legislation, it reflects an absolute commitment to their delivery. In practice, however, when there is inaction or delay in response to statutory requirements, there appear to be very few repercussions.

Thirdly, there is insufficient focus on involving experts by experience in the development of strategies. That can be said about the child poverty strategy, the anti-poverty strategy and, indeed, the children and young people's strategy, where there has been very little involvement of their intended beneficiaries. For each, that was explained as being unfortunate but as a result of having limited time and resources. That is not acceptable, particularly given the delays that have occurred in the publication of each. Although the co-design groups attempted to hold focus group meetings with people who were experiencing poverty in order to inform the anti-poverty strategy, they were not resourced to do so, and there was pressure to hold them within a very short period. A more meaningful form of engagement would go beyond single focus groups and, instead, involve children and their parents in an ongoing, supported and resourced process.

Fourthly, an anti-poverty strategy will require a ring-fenced budget. Although we are currently operating in a very difficult financial context, and it is helpful to consider what can be done without incurring additional costs, it is essential that there be an ability to direct the allocation of resources at actions that will deliver on the strategic outcomes.

The Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 provides an enabling power for statutory bodies and agencies to pool resources and facilitate collaborative working. We understand, however, that that continues to prove problematic. Examples of pooled budgets appear to be few and far between.

The Minister of Finance recently indicated her commitment to support collaborative working through pooled budgets. DOF should review the administrative barriers to pooling budgets and adapt the financial governance processes accordingly. It is entirely feasible for the Executive to allocate funding to the anti-poverty strategy and to the children and young people's strategy in order to encourage collaboration.

The fifth point is about leadership. Leadership at the highest level is required in order to drive development and delivery of Executive strategies. Cross-Executive strategies are recognised as being some of the most important strategies, requiring close collaboration among Departments and agencies to develop and deliver them. It can, however, reportedly be hard even to get such matters on to the Executive agenda and to establish a shared commitment across government.

There are questions about whether Ministers have the required leadership or authority across the Executive to ensure that other Ministers collaborate. Arguably, moving the children and young people's strategy and the anti-poverty strategy from the then Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to other Departments has not been effective, and returning them to the Executive Office should be considered.

I will pause now and invite my colleagues to come in.

**Ms Goretti Horgan (Ulster University):** Hello. Thanks for inviting me to give evidence. I endorse everything that Chris has just said and will make two or three brief comments in addition.

You will have noted that the expert panel on the anti-poverty strategy did not propose a separate child poverty strategy. There was a reason for that, and it is outlined in the Audit Office report on the previous child poverty strategy. We felt that, if we were to go for a separate child poverty strategy, it would be likely to be just another version of what we have had to date. That is why we proposed an anti-poverty Act that includes a duty to reduce child poverty and to set SMART — specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound — targets, timetables etc. It was good to see the Audit Office recommend a similar approach.

We are also very clear that any anti-poverty strategy needs to be evidence-based. Any actions to be included need to have been shown to make a difference to poverty levels and not just that they are a nice idea but that there is evidence that supports them.

All our recommendations were based on evidence. That is why we focused on what would reduce costs to households and increase income to households. We did that because all the evidence shows that, if we want to reduce poverty, that is what we need to do. We need to reduce the cost to public services in particular, which is something that the Government can do, and increase income.

Finally, we suggested an anti-poverty commission as a way of monitoring and overseeing any anti-poverty strategy, and Chris referred to that. The idea would be that an anti-poverty commission would be independent. It would be made up of experts by experience, including children, but also experts who know about statistics, have done their research and know what the evidence says. Again, it was good to see the Audit Office recommend a similar approach. I will hand over to Trása now for her comments.

**Ms Trása Canavan (Barnardo's):** I will be pretty brief. Thank you for inviting us to come to talk to you today and also for undertaking this inquiry into such an important issue. As Chris said, it is shameful that between one in four and one in five children lives in poverty in Northern Ireland in this day and age. We really cannot overlook that fact. It is an absolute disgrace.

We really need to rethink what we are doing. What we have been doing has not been working. The number of children in poverty has stayed largely the same for two decades. As the Audit Office states in its report, it stayed the same throughout the duration of the child poverty strategy. The strategy made no impact. Although it was well intentioned, good intentions do not change the number of children living in poverty, and it was therefore completely ineffective.

I am really glad that the Committee is looking at the issue. The important consideration for the Committee is how we spend public money. We are having a lot of conversations about the lack of money and about budgets being tight. That is true, but we must never lose sight of the fact that we are still spending billions of pounds. How are we spending that money, and how can we be more effective in how we spend it? As Goretti said, the strategy needs to be evidence-based, and, as Chris pointed out, we have the Children's Services Co-operation Act to enable Departments to work together. There is huge opportunity for there to be creativity and for bureaucracy to be cut through, which is what everybody talks about. Let us spend money not on bureaucracy but on delivering for children and families. That is what we need to do.

The Committee's 'Report on Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland' that was published this morning talks about the benefits of investing in early intervention and about how money can be made back out the other side. We are already paying the price of poverty. It is just that we are paying for it out the other end, when we are faced with its consequences. Why not instead pay to alleviate the problems? Why not stop them becoming issues to begin with? Are we willing to pay the price of poverty in perpetuity? Is what we are saying that we will always just pay for it out the other side and that we are not going to deal with it?

The anti-poverty strategy represents potential for change. A fantastic amount of work has been done. The expert advisory panel produced a great report, on which the co-design group built. Where are we now, however? Where is the strategy? I have not seen it. It makes me very worried that it is locked behind closed doors. For the strategy even to start to make a difference, we need to see the actions that are in it and how we can deliver against them.

We need to remember that this is about the children and families in our communities, in our society and in your constituencies whom we walk past on the street every day. They are the people who are

impacted on by the conversations that we will have in this room today. Their lives are the ones to which we want to make a difference, and we can make a difference. That is the beauty. There is something that we can do. Poverty is a solvable problem.

What will this Assembly's legacy be? Will it be that it stood by and looked on while the number of children in poverty stays the same for the next 20 years, or are we going to do something about it?

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I thank each of you for a very honest, hard-hitting and impactful reflection on the reality for many of our children and young people. We appreciate it. You absolutely hit the nail on the head, and we share your frustrations.

You have shared a common theme that the Committee continues to hear about over and over again, which is Departments' silo mentality and the excuses for that that are often found instead of reasons to work together in people's interests, so thank you for that. Early intervention is another key theme about which we continue to hear.

Let alone in this Committee since the return of the Assembly, I have now heard the Children's Services Co-operation Act mentioned three times today. We are conscious of the fact that the Act has not been properly implemented across Departments. That is entirely unacceptable. You have an open door with the Committee, and we look forward to proceeding with this all-important inquiry. We chose the subject because it is an important area for so many people in Northern Ireland.

By design, the vision of the Good Friday Agreement was to lift people out of all those problems, but, unfortunately, they are trapped. The inquiry will hopefully shine a bright light on why there has been no implementation of the new strategy, or why it has been delayed for so long. Delay is the theme of the Assembly but not of the Committee. We are here to shine a spotlight on such things, and, hopefully, the inquiry will help do that, so I thank the three of you.

We will proceed with questions. Each Committee member has a few questions that are relevant to specific areas, and there may then be a bit of crossover.

I will begin, if that is OK. This question is potentially addressed to all three of you. It is concerning to see the high levels of child poverty that are reported, and the statistics are well publicised now, but I am concerned that they do not tell the full story, as is often the case. Given the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, is the true scale of child poverty more widespread and deeper than has been reported?

**Ms Horgan:** The answer is yes. Most of the statistics that you will have seen are before the inclusion of housing costs. Anybody who lives in Northern Ireland knows that housing costs have gone through the roof in the past three or four years. We are therefore getting a very false picture. We know from Housing Executive statistics that there are — Chris and I were talking about this just before we came in — over 5,000 children living in temporary accommodation in Northern Ireland at the minute. In other words, they are homeless. When the numbers in the Republic reached 4,000 children in temporary accommodation, it was front-page news, dominated questions in the Dáil and was the scandal of the week, or, in fact, a couple of weeks. Proportionately, if we had the same size of population as the Republic, we would be talking about 12,000 or perhaps even 14,000 children living in temporary accommodation.

The Housing Executive tells us that the main reason that people end up homeless is financial difficulties, particularly from running up arrears. More than half the children who are living in poverty are living in private rented accommodation, and that accommodation has become so expensive that families are having to find as much as £110 or £120 a month on top of their housing benefit to meet the cost. We have to remember that those are working families and universal credit families, as well as families who are living on benefits. As well as the children who become homeless, which is the hardest element of poverty, because they are then effectively destitute, there are a whole lot of families who are having to use that £110 a month, which should be spent on food, clothing or heating, for rent instead. That means that poverty figures after housing costs are far higher, were we to have those figures, but we do not have them.

**Ms Canavan:** I completely agree with that. The other issue that we are not seeing is the families who are cutting back on everything and having to lead different lives now in order to just about scrape by. At the moment, we are looking at what bar we are setting for children in their childhood. When we talked to families about what they are doing during the cost-of-living crisis — I may have talked about this at the Communities Committee — there was a dad who talked about trying to do everything that

he could hold on to swimming lessons for his kids, because that was the one thing that they really enjoyed. He had cut back on everything else, however, and, unfortunately, food trumps swimming lessons, so the lessons had to go. That is a family that is struggling and in poverty. It is a family that needs support, yet we are saying, "You don't deserve swimming lessons any more. In fact, all that you deserve is to be able to eat and have a roof over your head". We are not looking for our children to thrive any more. Rather, it is just about their surviving. I know that I said this earlier, but that is a disgrace. It is absolutely disgraceful that we are hoping that our children just make it through to the next week or the next month. When we look at the statistics, it is really important to remember what lies behind them: real families and real children who are struggling day by day.

The other thing to add is that parents do as much as they can to protect children from knowing what is happening and from understanding the depths of poverty and its impact, but children do understand, because children are very smart. They can pick up on what is going on in a family home, and they can feel the stress, worry and concern. I have talked to children who can tell me what a payday loan is, because they know that, on payday, their parents do x, y and z. They know about food banks, and they perhaps know that it is a bit shameful to have to go to a food bank. That is stress that we are putting on young children's shoulders because we are not getting on top of child poverty in Northern Ireland.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** You make some interesting points in response to my question. Given that, because of what we have been through, our society is much more resilient than the rest of the island, is it the case that those challenges have become the norm, and so much so that we are not hearing people speak out in the way in which they are doing so on the rest of this island?

**Mr Quinn:** I am alarmed at how normalised food banks and food parcels have become. To answer your first question, I agree. The real figures are probably higher. To pick up on what Trása said, when I speak with children, they tell me that they worry about their mummy and daddy's bills, worry about turning on the heat and worry about the price of shopping. A child should not need to worry about such things. Between April 2023 and March 2024, the Trussell Trust issued 90,377 food parcels. The 'Belfast Telegraph' reported that 60,831 of those parcels went to houses with children. That is staggering.

You asked about the true figures. The Women's Regional Consortium (WRC) published a report in June 2023. Of the respondents to the report, 91% of women said that they had difficulty paying their bills because of the increased cost of living, 56% said that they were in debt and 82% said that they had had to borrow as a result of the cost-of-living crisis. I do not think that the data takes into account borrowing or lending. Sometimes, children in communities know from where to borrow, and it is not always from the most reliable sources, let us put it that way. We are in a very dangerous situation. To answer your question, we need real-time data. By the time that reports are published and we receive the data, things have sometimes moved on a little. I think that the figures are conservative. Certainly, from what I have seen in my nine months in office, children and young people are very conscious of and worried about poverty.

**Ms Canavan:** May I pick up on your point about resilience? It is important for us to recognise the impact of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the trauma that it caused to generations of people who lived through it and the intergenerational trauma. The report that the Committee launched this morning on mental health services shows the challenges that we have around mental health. We know how closely mental health challenges are linked to poverty. It is therefore important to recognise that they are compounding issues. You then get into a vicious circle, in which somebody who has mental health challenges may feel unable to go to work because they are not getting support with their mental health. That then creates a financial burden and stress, which further exacerbates issues. In fact, in Northern Ireland, we potentially have an even greater problem to overcome, because we have trauma that has to be dealt with in society as a whole. The fact that poverty is so ingrained in our society further exacerbates those two issues and creates a cycle that can be dangerous.

**Ms Horgan:** We talk about resilience, and, yes, we are a very resilient nation, but stigma is also at play here. I know that to be true, because those of us who are involved in anti-poverty work are regularly called by journalists asking us to find a family who are starving or homeless. It is very difficult. I understand perfectly why I would not want my children to see me on the TV saying how difficult things are. Parents who are in temporary accommodation go to great lengths to make sure that, for example, their children get to school. Some of them have to drive 50-mile round trips to get their children to school in the morning in order to preserve some kind of normality for them. It is a really dreadful situation, and that is why there was such an outcry in the South. We should make sure that,

from today, there is that kind of outcry here. We will not hear from individual families, because of the stigma that is attached. In a place as small as Northern Ireland, no one can blame them for that.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** That points to the moral question. It may be difficult to determine the severity of the issue in our community because of the stigma attached. It is more severe than what is recorded, but, on that basis, it is difficult to determine by just how much or by what percentage.

I am frustrated by the absence from the strategy of specific targets to reduce child poverty. What are your views on a strategy that has no targets and that has no budget attached?

**Mr Quinn:** Do you want to go first?

**Ms Canavan:** I am more than happy to go first. Not to be too blunt, but what then is the point of it? What are we trying to do? Where are we going? On what are we spending our money? Do we have any money to spend? Again, nice words will not lift anybody out of poverty. We need real action. Actions need to be evidence-based. We also need clear targets, with timelines. The strategy should not just be that, at some point in the future, we might do something. When? By what date? What will progress look like? How are we going to get there? How are we monitoring progress?

What is really important is that we not only put a strategy in place — this is looking ahead to an anti-poverty strategy that is hopefully to come — but accept that we might not get everything right at the start. As fantastic as all our politicians, the community and voluntary sector and our officials are at inputting into that, we might get some things wrong. Some things might not work as we thought they would. How, then, do we review, adjust as we go and take account of situations that arise that we could not possibly have foreseen? Given what we have seen in recent times with COVID, the war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis, all of which could not have been anticipated, how do we flex and make sure that what we have in place works?

The expert advisory panel recommended, as did the co-design group, the need for clear, time-bound targets that are not only backed up by funding but monitored by an independent body such as a commission, which would then make sure that we deliver on what we said we would deliver on. Wrapping that all up in legislation means that you really will be held to account, that those are not just warm words that you can step away from when things get a bit tough, that you are absolutely committed to tackling child poverty and that you need to deliver on it. Why would we not want to do that? Why do we not want to lift children out of poverty? Why do we not want to lift our families and communities out of poverty? It is something that we should absolutely get behind, deliver on and commit ourselves to in a very concrete way.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Does the lack of targets and measurables point to a Department and an Executive that really are not treating the matter as a priority at all?

**Ms Canavan:** I can start. It really needs to sit across every single Department. That is key. Although DFC leads on tackling child poverty, and I am really keen to see what DFC has been —.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** The Executive generally, yes?

**Ms Canavan:** Yes. We need to see the full Executive get right behind the strategy. It cannot be the case that Departments point at other Departments and say, "That's for you to do". That is where the Children's Services Co-operation Act should come into its own, with Departments are working together, not just beside one another or somewhere in the same direction. How do Departments help one another? How do they make sure that they get to where they need to get to? Having targets that everyone is committed to is really important, as are shared outcomes and shared funding. Oftentimes, what really drives officials is what the money has been spent on. Let us therefore rethink how we account for our finances and how we use our resources to deliver.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** The function of the Committee is to ensure value for public money. In the absence of those measurables or targets, it is very difficult to determine that. One could be forgiven for saying that it is somewhat typical of how government has operated for a long time.

The child poverty strategy ended in 2022, and the new anti-poverty strategy has been in development since 2020. Chris, you have rightly explained your frustration, which we all share, at the delays. What impact has the lack of a strategy for the past few years had on children's lives on the ground?

**Mr Quinn:** Before coming into post, I had already identified poverty as being probably the priority area on which we needed to work, because the simple fact of the matter is that it has an impact on so many other areas of a child's life, such as education, health, justice and housing. Poverty is often a driver, and sometimes a consequence, of injustice. The effect of poverty on the lives of children and young people is, for some, devastating.

We have a special educational needs crisis at the minute. I know that this is a slightly different topic, but more children than ever are presenting with more complex needs. We have to think about how poverty relates to the crisis that we have in special educational needs, as it is both a cause and a consequence.

I have visited many communities and many young people and parents, and I would argue that, in times of crisis, children and young people's rights suffer the most. We have been through over a decade of crisis after crisis, from austerity and COVID-19 to the cost of living and Government instability, and children and young people's rights have suffered disproportionately.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Absolutely. It is very clear that that is indeed the case.

**Ms Forsythe:** The three of you touched on the point that the Audit Office report makes about the fact that there was no marked improvement under the child poverty strategy, which ended in 2022. Although there has been no strategy for the past two years, it is therefore hard to say whether things are any worse than they were under a strategy that was not delivering well. I just wanted to ask whether a strategy is the answer. How do we make a new strategy the answer? What does it need to do that the old one did not do?

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Targets.

**Ms Horgan:** First, the Executive are required to produce an anti-poverty strategy under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the St Andrews Agreement and — go on, tell me some of the other ones — the Stormont House Agreement. If you go through them all, you will see that they all say that the Executive will produce an anti-poverty strategy. There is a High Court ruling that makes the exact point that the Chair made: what is a strategy if it does not have targets etc. The High Court said that it is not a strategy if it does not have clear, time-limited targets that can be evaluated. The point and purpose of a strategy is that you can measure whether any change is happening. That is the reason why the High Court said that there needs to be one that is not as vague as anything that we have had so far.

We have seen elsewhere that such strategies can help to reduce child poverty. Here and across the UK in the 2000s, up until about 2012 or 2014 or so, we saw child poverty going down as a result of the Child Poverty Act 2010 and the child poverty strategies that had the SMART targets that we are talking about here.

**Ms Canavan:** The other thing is that when we talk to young people about an anti-poverty strategy, they ask, "What is a strategy?". Well, it is a plan. Now we are telling our young people that we have no plan for dealing with poverty in Northern Ireland.

**Ms Forsythe:** The point that I am making is this: what would be the better plan? We are saying that it failed before, and we have nothing now. We need to think about what will make it better.

**Ms Canavan:** A better plan would be to adopt the recommendations from the expert advisory panel and the co-design group. We put together a document of nearly 100 pages, which set out evidence-based recommendations. That was key. The Department really pressed us on that and said, "If you are making any recommendation as part of this process, it absolutely needs to be informed by evidence". We could not just come up with nice ideas and thoughts. It is about evidence-based actions and having clear timelines and targets.

What is our overall target? For the co-design group, it was the eradication of poverty. It is not about just reducing it, because that says that we are OK with a number of people living in poverty. We are not: we want to get rid of poverty, but we also appreciate that you cannot do that overnight. So, how do we get there and what is our timeline for that? What does progress look like? We need to be able to hold ourselves to something. I do not doubt that everyone across the board agrees that we need to get rid of poverty on every level, but until we put action and timelines behind that so that we can have something to work towards, we are really not going to get there.



**Mr Quinn:** May I just add something about the learning from what we have done in the past? The targets in the child poverty strategy were aspirational rather than specific. It did not contain any new actions; it almost felt like the actions in it were recycled. I absolutely agree that we need to do things differently. The Government have adopted an outcomes-based accountability approach. In any new strategy, we would have to link specific, measurable and time-bound targets and actions to that, and we would have to have the necessary resource. Furthermore, I believe that we need to think seriously about an Act, because that would establish a legal duty to reduce child poverty.

The other thing would be where the strategy sits. At the moment, I feel that an Executive strategy should sit within the Executive Office, which would enable those actions and outcomes to be delivered.

**Ms Forsythe:** Thank you.

**Ms Brownlee:** Thank you so much for the update. This is the first time that I have got to use Maslow's hierarchy of needs in a Committee. It is something that I have always referred to. It is very basic: if somebody cannot meet those psychological needs, they are not going to go much further. Those are the fundamental building blocks of life. So often now, we are seeing people who are struggling to get food and shelter. Those are the basics, before you look at anything else. It is great that that underpins everything here. My question is about silo working. We often talk about it, and we talked about it at our lunch earlier today. What are the panel's opinions on silo working and on how work can be done better?

**Mr Quinn:** My office and I are looking at that issue very closely. We are trying to breathe some life into the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. I hosted a round-table meeting within the past few weeks with children's champions from across the Departments. That was a very positive meeting. I said in my introduction that the onus may be on the Department of Finance to help to remove the barriers that exist when budgets and resources are pooled. That is a barrier in the Children's Services Co-operation Act.

Silo working is absolutely an issue. I argue that we need to work not only across but within Departments. In my office, we are grappling with that theme across many areas. How do we solve it? It requires leadership. I welcome the Finance Minister's recent comments about pooling resources, but, again, it needs to be put into action. We need more than words on a page. We need it to be led by Ministers and permanent secretaries.

**Ms Brownlee:** How can we see whether an action has been embedded and then measure the outcomes?

**Ms Horgan:** We really need to persuade the different Departments that they can save money by working together. For example, I spoke earlier about the number of children who are homeless. I have a personal reason for my imagination being caught by that, because I remember hating going away on holidays if I had to share a hotel room with children because you do not get a good night's sleep. Imagine doing that for two or three years. We have some families who have been doing that for five years. It is a really awful situation to be in.

It costs the Housing Executive £32 million a year to keep 4,000 families in temporary accommodation. Can you imagine what could be done with that money, if it were used for after-school clubs, breakfast clubs or whatever? The Department for Communities, which looks after the Housing Executive, could use that money to do something else, although it might be annually managed expenditure (AME). I am not sure, but somebody can figure that out. That probably is a bad example if it is AME, but the point is that we often think that we are saving money, for example by not paying the full rent for private rented accommodation. When there are children involved, I am really only interested in what is happening with them. However, by paying that little bit extra, we can sometimes save millions. Departments need to be persuaded of that. I guess that is your job.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** That is a very good point.

**Ms Canavan:** We also really need leadership. Officials know that it is possible. They are very aware of the theory of it, and many, I think, have bought into the idea. Often, however, it can feel like they are breaking new ground or doing something that has not been done before, and that can feel daunting. We really need the leadership to say, "Not only should you do it but we expect you to do it". That will come from the Committee by holding them to account and creating that expectation, but it is also

about changing the culture within Departments to one in which we expect our civil servants to function in that way and to be able to flex to respond to need. Silo working costs a huge amount of money, and Goretti hit the nail on the head on that. We are being so ineffective. We talk about how little money we have, so let us be much more effective with it and get to the root of the problem.

**Ms Brownlee:** I appreciate that. We often talk about silo working and have done so for a long time, but it is about how we move past the conversation and into action. It really is about a collaborative approach, because no one Department will be able to solve the problem. It is about everybody working together.

**Ms Canavan:** The community and voluntary sector has a role to play in collaborative working. You are right: responsibility does not just sit with Departments. We have to make sure that we, as a society, are working together towards that. There are some fantastic examples of working collaboratively. One of our services in north Belfast, THRiVE, does that collaborative piece fantastically. It brings in Justice, Communities, Health and Education to all put in money to deliver outcomes for the community. That is on a small scale: how do we replicate it on a much bigger scale, and how do we make sure that we are effective? So, I completely agree.

**Mr Quinn:** I have worked with the THRiVE project before. From talking to the people involved, one of the barriers has been the administrative burden. When you are sharing money across Departments or agencies, the bureaucracy can be really problematic. That is why I am looking to DOF, perhaps, to provide guidance on how we reduce that bureaucracy and enable the pooling of resources. THRiVE does it very well but that is one of the barriers that it is grappling with.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** In what way does the Children's Services Co-operation Act place a requirement on Government to function in that way?

**Mr Quinn:** The Act places a duty on Departments to collaborate, which is framed on the well-being of children. It enables the pooling of resources, but I do not believe that we are living that piece of legislation out. I do not know whether it requires secondary legislation —

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** It does.

**Mr Quinn:** — but we need to breathe life into it. From talking to people at various levels, it sometimes sounds like it is more of a problem than an opportunity. We have to change that mindset. As Goretti said, doing so will save money. If we use the Act, it will save money and make children's lives better, so why on earth are we not doing that?

**Ms Canavan:** The Children's Services Co-operation Act sets out what is possible, but it does not tell anyone how to do it. That is where we need the guidelines and the frameworks. We need to say, "Here are the steps that you can take". Guidance and leadership from the Department of Finance would be really valuable to tell Departments, "If you are looking to operate under the Children's Services Co-operation Act, which you should do, this is how you go about it".

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Does the legislation need to be strengthened to ensure that action is taken to ensure necessary cooperation?

**Ms Canavan:** I am not sure that it necessarily needs legislation. We have the framework there, the practicalities are the issue. How do you bring legislation to life? What are the barriers for Departments? What do they need to feel facilitated and enabled to use that legislation? I do not know whether the answer is necessarily further legislation, but —

**Ms Horgan:** It could be done by regulation. There is no reason why not. The legislation is fairly clear.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Yes, it is very clear.

**Ms Horgan:** The question really is just about its implementation, so some regulations may be useful.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** It is so clear that it is not being adhered to.

**Mr Quinn:** We are still awaiting an update from the Department of Education on the implementation and effectiveness of the Act. We have yet to see any report on that. That will be an interesting read.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I hope that you are not in a good mood on the day that you read it, because it will not be good reading.

**Mr Gildernew:** Thank you, all, for the evidence so far. A lot of themes come up repeatedly, and there are things that we are now well aware of, but we are still behind the curve in taking the next step. From my social work experience, I understand the frustration that comes from knowing that if you got out there that wee bit sooner, you would head off so many difficulties and the issues would be so much easier and, in financial terms, cheaper to address.

In many ways, it overlaps with the findings in the report of our inquiry into invest-to-save funding. The idea of getting upstream on some of the issues is fundamental. Also, in the Committee for Communities, we have expressed our frustration at the slowness in bringing the anti-poverty strategy forward. Given all the work that has already been done on that, it is really important that we make progress. While I fully agree with the need for a cross-departmental Executive approach, somebody needs to champion that. It is the role of Communities to champion and drive that at the Executive.

We have heard about the recurring issue of silo working. The other recurring issue that we have heard about in this and other Committees is the lack of data that we often have in some key areas. In my previous Health Committee role, I often quoted the saying that what gets measured gets done. The much more dangerous corollary of that is what does not get measured, does not get done.

Chris, you mentioned the need for real-time data. What do we need to be doing to change the data that we have or how do we capture and use the data better?

**Mr Quinn:** There is so much in that. Data is a fundamental piece of the jigsaw, and we come across that a lot in different areas. There definitely is data; there is a lot of data. We are recording data on ourselves every minute of the day through these little devices that we hold. Schools are recording data, and Health is recording data. There seems to be a nervousness about how we share that across disciplines. There are probably areas that we need to delve into deeper on what we are recording and how we are evidencing that. A frustration of mine, however, is on the sharing of data and how we can use that to identify trends.

You also mentioned early intervention. A theme across different areas is the need for early intervention and how we support children and families from the earliest stages of their lives. At the earliest stage of life, health visitors are involved, and different people are involved throughout the life journey of a child, so the issue is how we record those milestones and share that data across different disciplines to put the resources where they are needed. I am not sure whether I have answered your question entirely.

**Mr Gildernew:** You have certainly answered it in part. It links back to the silo thing. Somebody said that, rather than silos, we would be better looking at them as castles, with people working in their own little castles. That is something that we fundamentally need to cut through on and find a better way of addressing.

**Ms Horgan:** We do have some centralised data, such as the family resources survey and the households below average income surveys. We are told by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) that the sample sizes of those surveys are too small to tell us very much. Obviously, the next thing you say when somebody tells you that a sample size is too small, is "Well, why don't you increase the sample size?". Basically, NISRA says that it is too expensive to do that, but we have to grasp that nettle at some stage. The sample size has been getting proportionately smaller as our population grows.

Take something that is important for child poverty, such as the persistence of poverty. If a child is living in poverty for three out of any four years, it does dreadful damage to their lives. Children can handle a year or two in poverty — that is not so bad — but if they are living in persistent poverty, the damage to their educational outcomes will be much greater as will their chances, if they are a boy, of ending up in prison or, if they are a girl, of ending up pregnant as a teenager, which are the kinds of outcomes that we do not like to see. We know from research, done nearly 20 years ago now, that there used to be a high level of persistent poverty in Northern Ireland. We cannot tell the level of persistent child poverty very well now: we have figures for persistent adult poverty but not for

persistent child poverty. That is because the sample sizes are so small that they could not follow enough families, year by year, to know.

We really have to do something to address that or, in 10 years' time, you will have the equivalent of me back here — I am retiring soon *[Laughter]* — you will be asking the same questions, and they will be saying to you, "We can't say anything about child poverty because the data has got so bad". We can tell some stuff from what is called "administrative data" — for example, the social security figures — but they do not tell you the kinds of things that those surveys do. If you talk to anybody who is working in the poverty field, they will say that you need to get NISRA representatives in here and ask them, "What do you need to get that better data and why aren't you asking for what you need to do that?". I do not know who is in charge of NISRA. Is it the Department of Finance?

**Mr Gildernew:** It is, yes.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** It is, yes.

**Mr Stewart:** Thanks very much for coming along and for the answers so far. There are few issues more important than this one. You have articulated that today, and I thank you for all the work that you are doing in the fight against child poverty. As you have said, it is important to remember that we are not just talking about statistics; behind every one of them is a child and a family who are under pressure every single day. It is incumbent on all of us to do all that we can.

The Chair touched on outcomes. The Audit Office report highlights that the focus of the strategy seemed to be more on outputs than outcomes. Do you agree with that assessment? How could that have been improved?

**Ms Canavan:** I absolutely agree. When we focus on outputs, we are just counting the things that we are doing, as opposed to actually looking at the difference that we are making. I have heard people describe it as "a measure of busyness". I do not care how busy people are; I care about the impact of what they are doing. As Chris mentioned at the start, a lot of the recent conversations on the anti-poverty strategy have been about what we are already doing, and saying "Let's just bring in a lot of what is already being done and say that it is to tackle poverty". Fantastic pieces of work are going on; I am not trying to say that nothing is working. For example, Sure Start is doing incredible work, but we now need to build on that and understand how we can really make a difference. We cannot just keep counting how many children went to x; what impact did going to that programme have? What difference are we trying to achieve? Again, that really brings us back to setting out the outcomes that we are looking to achieve, the targets that we want to hit on the way there and the timeline for achieving those targets, because we cannot just count heads in a room. We cannot just count the number of children who received books — what are they doing with them when they receive them? What are they doing when they get into that room or stay behind after school? All that really matters.

Fantastic work is going on, so we want to see those examples of best practice replicated and used to model what happens elsewhere throughout Northern Ireland, instead of just having it done really well in one little pocket of our nation. Let every child have that opportunity.

**Mr Quinn:** I will just link to that, very briefly, a point on experts by experience. What does a good outcome look like for a child who lives in poverty? What does a good outcome look like for a family who are struggling to feed their children and put uniforms on their backs? That is the level of detail that we need to get. If we talk about co-design and people with lived experiences, they need to be involved in setting those outcomes and measuring them.

**Mr Stewart:** Both points are well made and touch on a previous point about the silo mentality. As you said, some great work is being done, but there is a lot of replication, and probably wastage, because there is no communication. We need a much more joined-up approach. Otherwise, it simply will not work.

My second question relates to early intervention and prevention. The report highlights the benefits of prevention and early intervention initiatives in ensuring that fewer children experience poverty and go on to be poor adults, but says that those kinds of interventions are often the first to be cut when budgets are constrained. How important is prevention and early intervention in tackling poverty? Did the strategy focus sufficiently on that?

**Mr Quinn:** They are fundamental. As I said in my opening remarks, we have a cycle of investing in a system that is not really working, or is not really as effective and efficient as it could be. Earlier, Trása commented on the role of the community and voluntary sector in all that. Often, it is the services that it provides, which are so important to people and communities, that are the ones that get cut or are seen as discretionary. For people who use those services, they are absolutely not discretionary. For me, early intervention is absolutely crucial. We almost need to tip everything upside down and invest more resources at the earliest stages. We are well versed on early intervention: its impacts are evidenced but we are not doing it.

**Ms Horgan:** When it comes to disabled children, that is when you really see how counterproductive it is not to provide that early intervention and do it in the joined-up way that we were talking about earlier. For example, we know that there are very long waiting lists for children to be assessed for autism and other conditions. The problem is that, while they are waiting to be assessed by the Department of Health, they cannot get into a special needs school or a specialist nursery, which is likely to involve the Department of Education. Meanwhile, community and voluntary sector organisations very often take those children without the diagnosis. However, without the diagnosis, they will not necessarily get the payment that they should get, so, sometimes, they just cannot take them on. You can see that that is the problem with working in silos. It is also about the lack of early intervention, which means that a child who could have become verbal will remain non-verbal for the rest of their life, with all the additional dependency issues that that will bring. Basically, you are preventing children from reaching their full potential by not having that early intervention in a joined-up manner. "Joined up" is going to be the phrase that we all come away with from this session.

**Mr Quinn:** A statistic that was given to me recently was that two children in every classroom have undiagnosed speech and language needs. Once you are in that cycle, those needs can be really limiting throughout a person's life.

**Mr Stewart:** I totally agree. "Joined up" is definitely the theme, as is invest to save, which has been the focus of the Committee, whether it is in our analysis of the mental health strategy — catch it and deal with it early — or in this case. Any approach that does not do that is, quite simply, penny wise and pound foolish. The earlier that we invest and the more that we invest at the earliest possible stages, the greater the impact on society and on the amount of money saved down the road. It is a no-brainer, but it is not happening. That is the most frustrating thing.

**Ms Canavan:** We are spending that money. It is not that we are not —.

**Mr Stewart:** Exactly. We are just spending it on the other side.

**Ms Canavan:** Exactly.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Your tag line of invest to save could appear in our report very shortly.

**Ms Forsythe:** Thanks very much for your answers so far. I think that you all mentioned the contribution of the voluntary and community sector. You mentioned the THRIVE project in particular. Have you found any other examples of statutory agencies working particularly well with the voluntary and community sector to support children who are in poverty?

**Mr Quinn:** There are pockets of really good examples. I visited a project recently that is a collaboration of, I think, 10 special schools across [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*] They are collaborating across Departments, sectors and agencies. It is sometimes the exception as opposed to the rule, particularly where you are talking about statutory agencies, but the community and voluntary sector is particularly good at collaborating. The challenges are around short-term funding and discretionary funding being cut. Linked to that, you will have heard lots about the need for multi-year budgeting. Small steps such as that could be enablers at a community level. I do not know whether colleagues want to add to that.

**Ms Canavan:** There are some fantastic partnerships. We really saw that — the community and voluntary sector as a whole really reflects on this — during COVID. We saw flexibility from Departments, and a lot of people said, "Let's get alongside each other to deliver support very quickly". There was a recognition that the community and voluntary sector often had those links with families and communities. People said, "We need to get this intervention out here. Who do we talk to? How do

we get it out there?". A lot of red tape was cut through very quickly. A lot of people saw that and thought, "Wow, this is the art of the possible. Look what we're doing here". However, when we came out of the other side of it, things just went back to the way they were previously: red tape and bureaucracy appeared again. It was as though, because we were no longer in a crisis, there was no need to be working like that any more. It was very disappointing for the sector, having seen what was possible, how quickly we were able to be impactful and how well we worked, to have that situation reversed. There are a lot of projects that work well, and statutory colleagues are trying to make a difference, but there is a lot of bureaucracy and red tape. There is a risk-averse nature, which is important at times, but it cannot be so strong that it stops us from taking any action at all, and that may be where we have ended up.

**Ms Forsythe:** That is a really good example coming through COVID. However, it should not take a crisis to push us together to work with the Departments, the agencies and the community and voluntary sector. More often than not, it is the community and voluntary sector activists on the ground who recognise the need in the community and build it up. It is tagged on to the government funding, whereas the community and voluntary sector are actually delivering the core outcomes. It would be a really strong recommendation to take that learning forward. I had asked about where you saw the community and voluntary sector supporting children who are experiencing poverty. Have you any examples of how the community and voluntary sector can transform the outcomes and the learning in the future?

**Ms Horgan:** I am worried about depending too much on the community and voluntary sector, for a number of reasons. First, it has been decimated over the past 10 or 15 years. There are large parts of the region where there is no community and voluntary sector that could do what you are talking about. Secondly, there is a lot of evidence that, while the community and voluntary sector is funded to do various pilot projects which are often independently evaluated as successful, the funding dries up because there has to be some innovation. It is always, "What innovative thing are you going to do?"

There is a danger. While the community and voluntary sector wants to be part of dealing with child poverty, it cannot lead, because it is too precarious. At the moment, most community and voluntary sector organisations on the ground have put their workers on protective notice. If the workers are on protective notice for three months every year, they cannot provide the consistency that children need. If the community and voluntary sector is resourced to do the work that you are talking about, that is great. However, we need to make sure that it is consistent across the regions so that it is not just Belfast or Derry that have the kind of resources that are needed. We also need to make sure that there is consistency, and that has been lost because of the decimation of the sector. "Decimation" is the only word to use.

**Ms Forsythe:** I accept your point, but it is important to note that many of the community and voluntary sector organisations also have skilled and talented policy departments. Their work alongside the statutory bodies is important; I do not just mean direct service delivery to the children.

**Mr Quinn:** What we are trying to achieve is the best outcomes for children. There is work to be done, and I believe that work is ongoing in the Department for Communities about the relationship between government and the community and voluntary sector. However, the best outcomes are where trust exists. The best outcomes in community and voluntary sector models are often when the funding is longer-term and there is trust in the experts to deliver the outcomes. Again, it comes back to bureaucracy and sustainability. There are great models, but the sector is under immense pressure.

**Ms Canavan:** Your point about policy development in the community and voluntary sector is well made. It is essential that the expertise on the ground is used to inform what we are doing. We cannot just have fantastic work happening that does not inform policy development. The way that we link all that up is important. Goretti is right: the community and voluntary sector is being decimated. The expertise that we are losing is terrifying. If we lose projects and teams, and then suddenly money is found again in a few years' time, we do not get those people back. The expertise is lost. Suddenly, the teams have to be built back up again, and we have talked about money being wasted, but the team could have been kept on and there would have been consistency for children. We could have had careers being built for people, and Northern Ireland would benefit from that. Not only are we decimating what is happening now, but it will have longer-term impacts. We really need to make sure that the community and voluntary sector is valued and that it is funded sustainably in a long-term way so that it can plan for the future. These one-year budgets will absolutely not help and, if anything, they are creating serious issues. Every single year, this comes around.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Another theme that we are continually hearing about is the importance of the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. We should be shouting from the rooftops our appreciation for what that sector does daily in holding up our entire society. I do know that the lack of multi-year budgets, which puts a very serious strain on those organisations, has destroyed a number of them, in that they no longer exist, and has caused huge issues with morale. We are very well aware of that. I put firmly on record our deep appreciation to all the community and voluntary sector organisations, because our society would be much worse without their incredible contribution and selflessness.

**Mr Honeyford:** I absolutely agree with that. In my area, I deal with organisations such as Home-Start, and I try to get funding from other sources to secure them. The work that they do is phenomenal. As I said before you came in, one of the things that struck me when I was reading the report was the gap of a year before children even get to school. As you said, we are paying for it and it is costing the budget, but not at the right point. Following on from the bit about partnership with the voluntary and community sector, the report gave a really damning review of the co-design process, particularly around the group taking the step of publishing its own report. In your view, what are the key issues in the co-design process, and what could have been avoided there?

**Ms Canavan:** Do we have enough time? As has been laid out by the group, the fundamental problem was with talking about it as a co-design process because, ultimately, that is not what it was. Co-design is not just a term that we can chuck about. It actually is something very meaningful, and the sector has done a lot of work on looking at what meaningful co-design looks like. Before I even get into that, I want to say upfront, as Chris mentioned in his comments at the start, that there was no incorporation in a meaningful way of people with lived experience. It was entirely put on the groups that participated in this process to somehow be the link. I, as someone from Barnardo's, was expected to speak on behalf of children living in poverty. I am not a child, and I cannot speak for children. I can absolutely talk about our services, and I can talk to our children and feed that back, but that will never, ever replace talking to children directly and giving them that forum to speak on their own behalf, because they are so eloquent and the things that they will say to you will stay with you. Our officials need to hear that directly, because they are the ones who are drafting the piece of work. While what happened in the end was that we as organisations all went out and did what we could with focus groups and getting that input in that way, it is not a replacement and is absolutely not a good substitute.

I will not take up all the time talking about the co-design process, but, fundamentally, calling it co-design was wrong. The process did not lend itself to that truly collaborative approach. One of the key pieces that was missing was engagement with wider Departments. The only officials that the co-design group really had contact with in a meaningful way were from the Department for Communities, which then meant that we did not really know what was happening in other Departments. We understood that, as the paper sets out, there is a cross-departmental group that meets, but our engagement with it was extremely limited. How are we supposed to meaningfully co-design a piece of work if we are not talking to the people who are supposed to be putting into it?

Jumping to the other end of it, my understanding of the strategy is that something has been drafted and that it is somewhere within the Department for Communities. As someone who has participated in the co-design process, I cannot tell you a single word that is on that page, so how can I be said to have co-designed it? I presume that the word "poverty" is in there. That is probably what I can tell you about it. I have been told that it does take account of everything — it takes account of the expert panel and of what the co-design group did — but I have not seen it, so I cannot tell you that. My fear is that I could have serious concerns with whatever is produced because I have not been able to speak to it at all. I am more than happy to go into more detail, but I do not think that the Committee has time for it. There were serious challenges, and I hope that lessons can be learned. There have been better co-design processes that we can learn from, and I hope that we can learn from this one too by learning what not to do.

**Mr Quinn:** I was not on the co-design group, but I want to make a very quick point about that delay. From what I understand, a heck of a lot of work has been put into this. It was reported on 29 February that the Minister was trying to prioritise, and it was also mentioned that we were months away from an anti-poverty strategy coming before the Executive. That was four months ago. Is that correct?

**Ms Horgan:** Yes.

**Mr Quinn:** That goes back to my original question, which was why. Why is it still being delayed? A huge amount of work has gone into it. There must be a draft somewhere. What is the delay? Why is it being held up, and by whom?

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Do you get the sense that there is a great amount of discomfort around publishing the strategy and that that may be because some of the things that arise in it will not be comfortable for the Department?

**Mr Quinn:** I cannot comment on that. I do not know whether either of you —.

**Ms Horgan:** I do not think that any of us can really comment on that. I suppose that there may be a concern that it will not meet the standards set for it by the High Court, which says that it has to have SMART targets, timetables and all that. It is not just about you folk, the Committee for Communities or the Audit Office; it will have to be weighed up against the High Court judgment.

**Ms Canavan:** There is another element: money. That is always an issue. This will have to be resourced. There is no point in bringing forward a strategy that will not be resourced. I understand that we are in a challenging budgetary environment, but we cannot let that stop us from moving forward with the strategy. We need to be able to take action on poverty. We have talked at length in this Committee about how we are paying for it on the other side. Let us start somewhere and get ahead of it. There is so much willingness. The work has been done; we just need to get moving on this.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** There seems to be a continuous theme that asking forgiveness is easier than the cure, which is completely sickening. It is entirely reactionary.

**Ms Canavan:** It is not good for our children and families. It is not easy to say, "I am really sorry that you are in poverty," and it is not fair to do that. We say that we are dealing with the other side of poverty because people's lives have been ruined. We talk about children who end up in the justice system or in our care system, but that is all avoidable if we get in early to support families from the beginning. In doing so, we would not just be saving money; we would be saving heartache by giving people rich, healthy, happy lives. Let us invest money that way, rather than dealing with the problems at the other end of the spectrum.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Do you agree that Departments here are too reactionary and not proactive or solutions-focused when it comes to problems such as child poverty, mental health and those sorts of things?

**Ms Horgan:** Yes, but I also think that there is a dreadful kind of stigma. In fact, it is not just a stigma; it is worse than that. There is an idea that poverty is somehow people's own fault. Take into account the fact that about two thirds of the children who live in poverty are in families that are in employment.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Exactly.

**Ms Horgan:** Their parents are working and doing what they can, but we have this situation because of low wages, high costs of childcare and the high costs of working — the costs of travelling to work are really high in Northern Ireland compared with other parts of these islands. When you put all those things together, it is obvious that it is not people's own fault that they are in poverty. However, I think that there is a view among a whole lot of people, including a lot of policymakers — not just politicians, but policymakers more generally — that it is people's own fault to some extent, and that it is therefore not as much of an issue. We can see that from social attitude surveys and things, and why would policymakers be any different to the general public?

**Mr Quinn:** I will say very briefly that children cannot afford to wait any longer. We cannot wait. Some very clear proposals have been made, including a £20 payment per child. That would be at a cost to the public purse, but it would save a lot of money in the long run, would lift a lot of children out of poverty and is not, as it has been described by some, an artificial prop. That £20 payment makes a big impact, and we have seen that in other jurisdictions.

**Ms Canavan:** I think that some people hear £20 per week and think, "What would I do with £20 a week? I might get myself a takeaway". Actually, you are very lucky if that is what you are thinking £20 a week would do for you, because the families that we are talking about — those that would get the £20 a week — can tell you absolutely how they would spend every single penny. They can tell you



that they will now be able to turn on their heating when it gets cold again. They will be able to tell you that that will mean that they can get a dinner that is a bit healthier for their kids. It might mean that they can afford to get that book that their kid really wants, even though they had said, "There is no chance we can afford that". Maybe that dad can take his kids to swimming lessons. That is the tangible difference that £20 a week makes. If you are so privileged that you cannot think of the difference that £20 a week would make to you, then count yourself lucky and remember those families that will account for every single penny of it.

**Ms Horgan:** That £20 is not just a mythical thing, because remember that universal credit was uplifted

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** That is right, yes.

**Ms Horgan:** — by £20 a week during COVID, and families tell us the difference that it made to them then. We saw for a while the difference that it made, with food bank use and stuff like that going down. We know that something as little as that can make a big difference to families and to outcomes for children, including their mental health outcomes, their education outcomes and their health outcomes, mainly because their mothers, or other parents, are less stressed, actually. That £20 is not just something that people grabbed out of the air. We know the real-life impact of it.

**Mr Honeyford:** I agree with everything that you said. It is such an important conversation. You said that you do not know what is going to be in the report. I find that absolutely unbelievable. Since you put those findings in, what contact have you had with the Department?

**Ms Canavan:** We have reached out. The group wrote to the Minister a few months back, and, very, very, very recently, I received a response that did not accept our request for a meeting. The group is concerned that our involvement in the process is now at an end. Obviously, we are not anticipating that this is something that is going to be written, and the terms of reference clearly set out that it is owned by the Executive, and the officials are drafting it, but the sector was asked to contribute time and expertise in a very intensive way. When we started this process, dates were put in our diary for a full year, and we were expected to be at every meeting. We then turned our report around very quickly in a short period of time. A huge amount of work went into that right across the piece, but we now have a situation where I cannot tell you what is in it. I assume — I hope — that a lot of what we have said will be in there, but that is acting in good faith, because I do not know meaningfully, and no plan has been laid out as to how the group will be brought back into the process. I know that there is a willingness from the group to be involved and to present to the Minister and the ministerial steering group.

**Mr Honeyford:** To clarify, you have not had any contact?

**Ms Canavan:** I had a response.

**Mr Honeyford:** Bar one response? OK.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Your evidence session today — we are almost at the end — has been a real eye-opener for the Committee, and we appreciate the honesty with which you have presented. We will certainly be asking questions of the Department as to why it is not meeting you. We can give you that assurance.

**Mr Delargy:** Thanks very much for your answers so far. There are a couple of supplementary questions that I had hoped to ask, but you have answered most of them. What would make the biggest difference in tackling child poverty?

**Ms Horgan:** I think it is what we have just said, Pádraig. The child payment would make a huge difference, and we know that from Scotland. We did not just pull those things out of the air, as I said. We know it from the £20 uplift in universal credit and from what is happening in Scotland.

**Ms Canavan:** To add to that, it is really important to recognise the environment that we are now living in. Twenty pounds a week was the recommendation that the co-design group made in 2022 when we released our paper. We are now in 2024, and so much has changed since then, so we are talking about a minimum of £20 per week per child. As has already been said, it is based on evidence from

what happened here during COVID, but also what is happening in Scotland, that it will absolutely lift children out of poverty.

**Mr Delargy:** Thank you. I appreciate that. The only other two short points that I have are from the report. On page 42, there is a word that I see in all reports, and it is "stakeholders". It is a word that, to be honest, frustrates me, because it does not say who we are talking about. It is how much evidence we are getting. Goretti touched on a really important point earlier that it is very difficult to get specific families and people to talk about it, because of the nature of it. I would like more clarification on who exactly those "stakeholders" are to ensure that we are speaking to the right people.

The other thing is that, on page 60, it mentions the 24% gap in GCSE attainment. It stood out to me, as a former teacher, in particular. It is a really stark figure. Those are just comments more than anything else, but the two things that struck me in particular were the stakeholder piece in respect of who is involved specifically, and to what extent, and then the GCSE attainment gap also really stood out.

You answered my previous question as well; by this stage, you have answered all the questions. Can you provide clarity on that singular point on the specific key action? I know that all the actions are key, but is there a specific one coming out of this? Thanks very much for your presentation.

**Mr Quinn:** I will respond very briefly. I will argue that, from my perspective, key stakeholders are the children. You and I were in the Creggan last week or the week before talking to children and their parents. That is the starting point. They are key to all of it. In respect of educational attainment, the DE permanent secretary was in front of the Committee recently, and he spoke very eloquently about the link between poverty and educational underachievement. It is stark. The figures are there. We know all of that.

I will just make one passing comment on how we measure children, and it is not a criticism of your question, Pádraig, by any stretch. We are hung up on measuring children's success by five GCSEs. We need to measure children's success on their well-being. We need to measure success by a child who goes to school who is not hungry, who has had sleep and has come from a loving environment. Those children deserve to live in their utopia. They should not have to worry about food, the clothes that they wear or the heating. I have gone off on a tangent there.

**Mr Delargy:** I totally agree with you, Chris. That specifically is my point around "stakeholders". It is a word that suggests that it is very much a policy document only. To me, that is a vital part of it, but the key part is hearing from young people who are impacted on, hearing from families and hearing actual lived experiences. I am totally in agreement with you. To me, that is critical. The word "stakeholder" sometimes jumps out at me because it suggests that that is not a key part, but I am totally in agreement with you on that. As you said, we had those discussions last week or the week before, and it is really stark, particularly in my constituency in Derry, and I look forward to working with all of you to ensure that we can reduce and end child poverty.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** As the questions were evolving, I was thinking about children in residential care and the significant cost associated with that. The key contributor to children ending up in residential care is poverty. It costs £260,000 a year per child. Is that correct?

**Mr Quinn:** Yes.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** It is significant.

**Mr Quinn:** Children's support needs are simply not being met. That goes back to the early intervention piece and the housing and homelessness piece that Goretti referred to.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** When you put it into context, Goretti, the three of you have put a heavy weight on the importance of that £20. Some could easily throw it away and say, "It's just £20", but you have rightly articulated how important that money is for people in that difficult situation. Look at the cost of children ending up in care: £260,000. The whole system is completely upside down.

**Ms Horgan:** It is even worse when we look at disabled children with complex needs. They are let down so badly by not having early intervention that they end up in specialist units for the rest of their life, which may cost an individual health and social care trust half a million pounds a year. That is for

the rest of a child's life. Can you imagine what that does to their families as well? Families will feel that they have really let their child down, because they are essentially institutionalised all their life instead of being able, if they had the early intervention, to have a decent life in which they are able to contribute to society rather than being locked away, which is how some end up.

**Ms Canavan:** We recently had the independent review of children's social care services by Ray Jones. He talked clearly about poverty; he saw it as a key factor in driving the issues that we see in social care at the moment. A lot of the issues that we are talking about — the role of the community and voluntary sector, the funding, the way in which we approach the issue and our silo working — are absolutely replicated there. Again, the problems dovetail, unfortunately: where you have poverty, you often have those same challenges, and families are just not having their needs met at all.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Therein lies the story of ensuring that Departments work together.

**Ms Canavan:** Exactly.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** A lack of early intervention leads to poor health outcomes, which impacts on the Department of Health; it impacts on education through special educational needs or other complex needs; and it impacts on the justice system. It is all inextricably linked. The whole thing is a real mess, to be honest.

**Mr Gildernew:** I want to make a small point on the graph, because it is striking. I fully agree with you, Chris, that that should not be, nor is it, any measure of children's value or worth, but the striking similarities between the two lines provide longitudinal evidence of the impact of poverty.

**Mr Quinn:** Absolutely.

**Mr Gildernew:** If that is not a call to action, what is?

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Thank you, members. Dorinnia, have you any comments?

**Ms Dorinnia Carville (Northern Ireland Audit Office):** No. I will just say to the Committee that your witnesses have brought a richness and a strength to the evidence that our report could not bring you, being much closer to children than we are in the Audit Office. You have had a really useful evidence session. Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Thank you, Dorinnia. Stuart, have you anything?

**Mr Stuart Stevenson (Department of Finance):** No, Chair. I will just echo the support from the Department of Finance for the issues raised. We take reducing bureaucracy seriously. For example, at the Audit Office, back in 2015, I worked on reducing bureaucracy for the community and voluntary sector. It is disappointing that, nine years later, the issue remains, especially with collaboration. That highlights how important this inquiry is, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Absolutely. Thank you, Stuart. Thank you, Chris, Trása and Goretti for being with us. Your evidence session was invaluable. It was exceptional and really provided a very difficult insight into some of the serious challenges that exist for the most vulnerable in our society — our children. They are the people for whom we should all work collectively, to ensure that they have a good quality of life, with opportunities, and that their well-being is a priority for the House. I appreciate that very much, so thank you for your time and for taking our questions.

**Mr Quinn:** You are welcome. Thank you for having us.

**Ms Horgan:** Thank you very much for having us.