



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Child Poverty in Northern Ireland:
Department for Communities

27 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:

Mr Colum Boyle	Department for Communities
Ms Emer Morelli	Department for Communities
Mr Paddy Rooney	Department for Communities
Mr George Sampson	Department for Communities
Mr Stuart Stevenson	Department of Finance
Ms Dorinnia Carville	Northern Ireland Audit Office

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I welcome Colum Boyle, permanent secretary and accounting officer of the Department for Communities (DFC); Emer Morelli, deputy secretary, engaged communities group; Paddy Rooney, deputy secretary, work and health group; and George Sampson, chief economist and director of analytics. We are joined by Dorinnia Carville, who is the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) in the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), Stuart Stevenson, who is the Treasury Officer of Accounts (TOA) in the Department of Finance, and Julie Sewell from the Department of Finance.

We appreciate your time and thank you for taking our questions on this important inquiry. This is a key priority area for many Assembly Members and one in which Committee members are very interested. We are keen to hear answers to some of the important questions that we have. I invite you to make some brief opening remarks.

Mr Colum Boyle (Department for Communities): Thank you, Chair, for inviting us to meet the Committee today. We agree that it is a very important subject. I know that everyone will agree with my Department's viewpoint that one child in poverty is a child too many. We know that a child who starts their life in poverty is much more likely to remain in that situation into adulthood and beyond.

As the Audit Office's report highlights, poverty is a complex issue and there is no single cause. Since 2016, DFC has led on the coordination of and reporting on the child poverty strategy on behalf of the Executive. During that time, much work has been done across all Departments, endeavouring to address child poverty and its impacts. That is well summarised in the body of the NIAO report, and we

have seen some movement across a range of indicators, such as the slight reduction in absolute child poverty before housing costs, going down from 18% to 15% over the strategy's lifetime. More recently, however, we acknowledge that rates have risen, primarily due to cost-of-living impacts, as they have done across all our neighbouring jurisdictions. In 2022-23, the proportion of children in relative poverty after housing costs in the UK is estimated to be 30%. It is 26% in Scotland, 33% in Wales and 25% in Northern Ireland.

Despite the delivery challenges noted in the Audit Office's report, we have seen progress across a number of areas, including the creation of additional jobs by Invest NI; increased benefit uptake; extended schools activities; social housing build; and investment in neighbourhood renewal. What we have not seen, however, is the cumulative effect of those activities having the full desired impact.

The strategy has brought focus to Departments' efforts to address child poverty. It has given visibility and progress against key actions, with comprehensive annual reports being laid in the Assembly and published on the DFC website. We recognise the value in the report and the insights that have emerged, and we recognise that much more needs to be done collectively, in a more connected way, to ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive. The Audit Office has, indeed, identified key areas for improvement in its recommendations. In particular, I welcome the recognition that addressing child poverty in Northern Ireland is a whole-of-government issue.

Despite DFC's focus on responding to social need, poverty and deprivation, it is clear from the NIAO report that addressing child poverty requires a more targeted and sustained focus by the Communities, Health, Education, Economy, Finance, Justice and Executive Office Departments. We also recognise the value of our sectoral partners and key stakeholders in working with us to achieve what we all want to see.

The eradication of child poverty in Northern Ireland is a hugely ambitious task. It needs to be evidence-based, and it needs to have clear direction, dedicated resources and — I stress this — an action plan for delivery that is practical, fully funded, sustainable and value for money. We will continue to work closely with other Departments, the Civil Service and other key parties to bring forward an anti-poverty strategy for Executive consideration and endorsement in this financial year. This is a challenging area, but the NIAO's recommendations will be included as an integral part of the evidence base that we will use to inform the decisions to be made by my Minister and, following his consideration, by the Northern Ireland Executive. Minister Lyons has already stated his commitment to bringing the strategy forward at pace in this financial year, and my officials have been tasked to do just that.

I hope that those opening remarks are a helpful starting point, and we are happy to take questions from the Committee.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you very much for those opening remarks and for keeping them to the point and short, which will enable members to get straight to questions. As I outlined, it is a huge priority for us all as legislators and absolutely for the Committee. We have concerns, and those concerns are clearly outlined in the Audit Office report. Some of the questions that we have today will point strongly towards those concerns.

First, Mr Boyle, child poverty levels across all measures are either unchanged or have increased since the strategy was implemented. Has the strategy been effective in achieving its aims of turning the curve on child poverty?

Mr Boyle: The really key phrase in your question is "turning the curve". The NIAO report focused quite a lot on Scotland, and we have also been focusing on Scotland quite a bit and watching the level of investment that the Scots have put into the eradication of child poverty. Indeed, the Scottish Government have stated on many occasions that it is their number-one priority. Their First Minister and repeated First Ministers have been clear on that. They are struggling to turn the curve. It is unlikely that they will meet their targets this year, and the same chill winds that blow in our faces will blow in their faces. When I look at the magnitude of investment, the level of focus and the level of strategic leverage that they are trying to effect to secure that turning of the dial, I recognise what the permanent secretary over there says and what their First Minister has said on a number of occasions, which is that the turning of that dial will take more than the life of one Government; it will take a genuine, sustained focus over a long number of years to achieve that.

To answer your question, I think that this was a useful starting point. It focused on a lot of things that were already being done. To be truthful about this, those things were being done because

Departments had limited capacity to move outside what was being done. At no stage did that strategy receive any additional funding. I have five people in my Department working on it, and I have kept them working on it the whole time that I have been there. They are very important with the knowledge that they have, but it is not an army. I am looking at what would be required to sustain a real change, and I am looking at some of the things, for example, in the expert panel report that people are asking for and the significant sums of money involved in all of that. That is where I come back to focus, strategic leverage, funding, affordability, value for money and all of that. To answer your question, I think that it was a good starter, but there is much more to do.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): One of the key parts of that question that I would have picked up on is that, across all measures, child poverty levels are either unchanged or have increased. What impact is your Department having on improving the outcomes of the strategy?

Mr Boyle: My Department is not working alone on this. This is an Executive strategy. Multiple Departments are engaged on it.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): You are the lead Department.

Mr Boyle: We are the lead Department, and, if you read the Audit Office report, you will see that our role is to monitor the delivery, to report on it and to coordinate activities. I have no responsibility, role or scope to hold any other Department to account or to change gear and say to other Departments, "X, y and z are not working. We'd like you to change that, please".

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Mr Boyle, with respect, if I were to take that attitude to every witness or every Department that came in here, we would go nowhere. You are the lead Department responsible for the implementation of the strategy. I have asked you a direct question, and you are pointing to what other Departments are or are not doing.

Mr Boyle: I am actually not, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I have asked you, as the lead Department, Mr Boyle, a direct question. The key point of the question is that the child poverty levels across all measures are either unchanged or have increased. My question to you is this: what has your Department achieved, as the lead Department, in this area?

Mr Boyle: My lead Department's role is to coordinate, report and monitor. That is set in legislation. The legislation gives me no mandate over any other Department. That strategy ran from 2016 to 2022. For the first three years of that period, we had a pause in the political process. We had no stewardship at a political level, so there was no ministerial oversight group sitting above this. It was left to officials to do it, and the officials gave it their best shot.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): In the absence of a Minister in that period, what oversight powers did the accounting officer have? I am not sure whether you were in that role then.

Mr Boyle: It was a cross-cutting issue, so we would not have had the power to say, "OK. We don't think this strategy is working. Let's bin these activities. Let's go for a different approach in the remaining years". In fact, our Minister at the time took the decision to extend the strategy by a further two years, beyond 2020 into 2022. In the same way as we have been operating in the past couple of years without Ministers and not being able to do anything cross-cutting of any significant nature, so it was then. I suggest that trying to change an Executive-owned and Executive-approved anti-poverty strategy would have required Executive approval.

Ms Emer Morelli (Department for Communities): I will add something on the roles and responsibilities. When the strategy came over to the Department for Communities as the lead Department, it came with an established governance structure and oversight role that firmly put the Executive and their Ministers in that role. The Department for Communities, under our accounting officer, was responsible for ensuring that that governance was maintained as far as it could be. That went to our monitoring and reporting arrangements, in the main; it did not allow us the agility to respond to the economic shocks that subsequently emerged from the COVID pandemic and the various crises. We were in a structure that we inherited with little room to move within that. That is not to excuse or to say that we did not act: we delivered what was in the strategy at that time. The fundamental question is whether that strategy, which was designed in 2016, was the right approach to

eradicating child poverty now. That is one that we are learning lessons from. We look to colleagues, advice and stakeholders on how to move that. We were constrained, up to a point.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Ms Morelli, you have pointed directly to the question that I have asked Mr Boyle: has the strategy been effective in achieving its aim of turning the curve on child poverty? I think that you have both answered no.

Mr Boyle: Not yet; it has not, yet.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): To date, it has not. How many years are we down the road?

Mr Boyle: From 2016 to now.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Do you think that that is acceptable?

Mr Boyle: It requires a gear change and a different approach. It also requires a realistic approach.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): What gear change? What realistic approach are we talking about? We are eight years down the road. What are we talking about?

Mr Boyle: In such circumstances, I tend to look at other jurisdictions. I have been looking at Southern Ireland, but Scotland tends to be a pretty strong leader. New Zealand is also well out there in driving forward with a much more focused approach. When you look back at the strategy that the Executive agreed in 2016, you see that it was very broad. It contained a lot of activity, and you had different Departments leading on particular strands of work. There were designed-in features that have led us to where we are.

The strategy was borne out of a lot of consultation. For the most part, from my understanding from reading back on comments from the time, most people were satisfied with it. Time has moved on, and the dial has not moved to the extent that we would have liked. However, even the jurisdictions that are doing novel things and compressing down into a smaller number of key factors that they want to change to try to turn the dial still find that extremely challenging. Therefore, even if we had a set of targets tomorrow morning and we knew what levers we needed to pull to strive towards those targets, it could be challenging to meet them.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It is safe to say, Mr Boyle, that you are not filling me with any hope or confidence.

In addition to your coordination role across other Departments, did your Department have responsibility for delivering any specific aspect of the strategy?

Mr Boyle: Yes. We focused on things such as affordable warmth. Welfare reform mitigations formed a huge part of what we did on eradication of poverty. They were two key elements. Operation of the social security system to provide discretionary support was another piece to ensure that we did everything we could to put money into people's pockets. Everything to do with homelessness prevention was also a key element. A wide range of our work impacted on the strategy. On mindset, if I am honest, we wanted to do everything we could to ensure that the strategy delivered. If you dig into the NIAO report, you will see lots of small activities as well as a lot of bigger ones. Do you want to come in on that, Emer?

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Just before you do — thank you, Mr Boyle — what did the programmes that you outlined achieve? Were targets set, and did the Department achieve them?

Mr Boyle: Yes. Under the social housing legislation, the targets were set until the end of the strategy. We are in different times now, with the tight constraints on the budget, but, even so, we are building 2,000 new starts each year. We still have significant housing stress, so it is not enough. When it comes to how that impacts on children, however, I know the strategy that the Housing Executive employs to try to prevent homelessness. It was well funded by the Department, and its strategy was to put the child first, which it has done successfully.

Ms Morelli: Reporting against the child poverty strategy targets was collated and laid before the Assembly annually. The targets in the strategy were met, but reflection and review leads to the question of whether those targets were the right ones to address the impacts. Obviously, with the figures that we have in front of us now, they have not —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Ms Morelli, why has it taken eight years to decide whether they are the right targets?

Ms Morelli: That is a really key point. The child poverty strategy will be taken into the wider anti-poverty strategy whereby we will look at the wider social and economic space that child poverty sits in. It is not a stand-alone item but part of a wider ecosystem in which we need to tackle the root causes of poverty in communities and across the population, and the child will be focused on in that.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): If the track record since 2016 is anything to go by, I do not have great confidence, to be honest.

The child poverty strategy was extended from 2020, but it was allowed to lapse in 2022. Given the continued evidence that more needed to be done for one of the most vulnerable groups in society, why was the strategy not further extended in 2022?

Mr Boyle: The focus was really being applied to moving ahead. We discussed with our then Minister moving that into the anti-poverty space, and that seemed to be a much more valuable exercise. We wanted to incorporate child poverty as a key element of the wider anti-poverty piece. That was the approach.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK.

From your knowledge, Mr Boyle, can you point to any successes that the child poverty strategy has had?

Mr Boyle: The drop in absolute child poverty from 18% to 15% is modest, yes, and there were other indicators that did not move far. I will bring in George in a second, because he is across the detail in a more forensic way than I am. When you look back at the climate and the time in which this was done, you see that we set the hare running by saying, "There is the strategy. We believe that it is going to work. Let it roll and take effect". That is what happened, and that is what we did. Every Department that needed to be given its head to do what it needed to do was allowed that. We followed the methodology that was to be deployed. With the benefit of 20/20 vision in hindsight, we can say, "This did not work as well as we thought it would", but I would also challenge and push back, on the basis of what I have seen in other jurisdictions that have been more adventurous, more focused and ahead of the curve, because you would ask the same questions of those jurisdictions.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I am asking it of you.

Mr Boyle: I am giving you the answer. It has not done as well as it could have done, absolutely. I am saying to you that it is an exceptionally challenging task. Your view is that we are not filling you with confidence, but, if you look across the world at where child poverty is being eradicated, it would not fill anybody with confidence because —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Northern Ireland is one of the worst examples of child poverty in the UK.

Mr Boyle: I am looking at the jurisdiction here and comparing the numbers with those in other parts of the UK, and the other parts of the UK are worse. Wales is worse.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Is that is a good thing?

Mr Boyle: No. I am just answering your question. It is not a good thing at all. No child poverty is good. I am with you on this. I want to see child poverty dealt with properly.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I do not dispute that, Mr Boyle. We all want to see that, but there has not been enough action to guarantee it. That is my concern. After the opening responses to those

straightforward questions, I have not the slightest confidence that the Department will lead on this successfully or that it has done so to date. Sitting back and hindsight are two of the things that definitely apply.

Ms Morelli: It is really important that we are learning the lessons. Many successful pilots have gone through the child poverty strategy. Health inequalities, early interventions for children and prevention have come more to the fore than reactive actions that maybe did not turn the curve as much as they should have. Seeing where the investment is needed — investment is needed — will be the core principle moving forward.

This has to be resourced. Health inequalities feed into child poverty inequalities. We can now see the map before us and the landscape. Certain categories such as disabled children need our support and help. Mr Boyle made the point earlier that the almost scattergun approach of the first strategy — it listed a wide range of areas and topics, most of which were achieved — did not focus on the key levers that will move. We now have a significant amount of evidence that we did not have when this was set in 2016 to say that, if we invest here, we have potential to move the —. We cannot give commitments. This is a societal issue at its heart, but we need to focus on the key areas that, we know, work, and prevention, particularly in the early years, will be a real focus going forward in the wider anti-poverty space.

Mr Boyle: Chair, the biggest lesson for me in all of this is the configuration of the authority to do what needs to be done if corrective action has to be taken in a dynamic and agile way during the delivery of it. That needs to be thought through and done differently. It is key to have political institutions available during that time to oversee that and to enable the decision-making with the legislation that is in place. The idea that this Department or any other Department sat on its hands and sleepwalked through this is wrong and misleading. We did not do that. We were heavily constrained during that time.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I have no doubt that political instability played its part, but it does not in any way justify how, eight years later, the curve has not been turned in an acceptable way.

Ms Morelli, you touched on an important point. Do you believe that the child poverty strategy was ambitious enough?

Ms Morelli: In 2016, at the time, it was an ambitious strategy. It had come behind a number of different models and interventions. In 2016, it was the first time that the Executive took full ownership, and all the Departments had roles to play. There is a question about whether that model was fit for purpose and whether we can learn lessons from that. We absolutely can, but, at the time, in its approach and content, it had a level of ambition. It might be too wide in its ambition. That is the point that I am making: we may need to target down.

Mr Boyle: There needed to be extra capacity to allow Departments to do what they needed to do. You cannot put a strategy on the ground and say, "Let's make this work. Let's change the dial of something as big as child poverty, but let's do it within existing budgets, and, by the way, let's cut those existing budgets as we go". You will get what you have always got. My plea to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is this: you want to make recommendations around this, and you will do that, but we cannot do an anti-poverty strategy without the funding. It is just not possible, and we are kidding ourselves if we think that it is. You might say, "Let's look back at the last eight years", but my knowledge of the last eight years has been Brexit, COVID, standing up services out of nothing, not having enough money and cut after cut after cut. That is my experience of that time. My colleagues did that as well, against a backdrop of no political institutions. That made it difficult to deliver the strategy.

It is not down to Departments on their own; the whole system of government here has to deliver it. Even Scotland, with the stability and the form of government that it has, is still not turning that dial. I am really pushing hard on the realism around the issue. It is really dear to us. All of us deal with poverty every day of the week. We do not shy away from it. We are honest and transparent about it. We have no problem with taking responsibility for what we are responsible for. However, we would like it to be understood properly, rather than have someone saying, "OK, let's apportion blame here". This is shared across the piece.

To take Emer's point, nobody knew back in 2016. I think that 2016 looked pretty adventurous at the time. A lot of experience has been gained along the way. If you had some of the Scots sitting in the room, it would be interesting to hear officials' perspectives on the journey that they are on.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you, Ms Morelli and Mr Boyle.

Mr Delargy: Thanks for your answers so far. I will touch on two issues: one is the focus on turning the curve, and the other is cross-departmental working. You have mentioned turning the curve a couple of times; it has been a theme of what we are looking at. I totally appreciate what you said about 2016 and the changing dynamic. I totally agree that the learning in that regard, in terms of being agile and able to adapt to these things, is important. On turning the curve, we are really looking at reducing child poverty. That is what we have to do. I wonder why we do not use the term "eradicate child poverty", and why we talk about "reducing child poverty". There might be a technical nuance in that regard — correct me if I have picked you up incorrectly — but I am concerned that our target and ambition is to reduce, rather than to eradicate, child poverty.

Mr Boyle: That is a very important point, and I fully acknowledge it. At the moment, I do not know whether the current Executive want to reduce or eradicate poverty. That is where the challenge is. There are a range of possibilities. If you were looking at child poverty, you would look at dimensions around income. You would be trying to improve levels of income, whether people are on benefits and cannot work or they are in work but need to earn more. Prosperity needs to generate that. You would also look at employability and the quality of jobs, where those jobs are and the accessibility of those jobs. You would look at everything that feeds into that, including the extent to which children perform well enough at school through to the availability of childcare and the work that is being done to improve special educational needs provision. There is a whole-of-government system that is at stake. Around all of that, you have the wider pressures of trying to deal with the cost of living and all the rest that we have.

The answer to the question of whether you want to eradicate or to reduce child poverty is that it is down to two things. First, there needs to be clarity about the quality of your strategy. You need to make sure that you understand that the four, five or six levers that you will pull or combine will have the impact of either reducing or eradicating child poverty. Secondly, it is about making sure that, in terms of the levers that you want to pull, you have money to pay for it. There is no point in having a nice Audit Office report, with a wish list tacked to the back of it that says, "We'd like to eradicate child poverty, and here's all the things we'd like to do, but do you know what? We can't afford any of it because we don't have the fiscal levers to do it". Again, it is back to the whole-of-government approach. I know that I am being challenging. I feel passionately about the issue. I totally believe that, if you are going to fix the problem, it is not about one Department or even the Departments themselves. It is also about all the other sectors and this institution. It is about what the Executive want.

I look to Scotland again. I watched the First Minister holding a summit last March on child poverty. He has said that eradicating child poverty and food bank usage is:

"the single most important policy objective ... for my Government."

That is some statement. We need to do our homework, bring through the elements of what the strategy can be for Northern Ireland, assess what is and is not affordable and bring evidence to Minister Lyons for him to sift and sieve through it so that he can take a paper to the Executive. That is the process that we have to step through. There is a layer of significant challenges in trying to do that. That is the only way that we can answer that question. You asked me a question, but, right now, I do not know the answer. We will know, however, by the time that the Executive consider the paper. We will know the answer then.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Pádraig, can I just touch on —?

Mr Delargy: I have only one more question on this, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK.

Mr Delargy: My second question is about cross-departmental working. I agree with you about the one Department thing. I worked as a primary-school teacher before I took on this role. I worked in one of the most deprived areas in Derry. For me, poverty can, of course, be seen in educational outcomes. It can also be seen in health outcomes, in areas relating to the Department of Justice's work or in economic zones and regions. It can be seen cross-departmentally. I totally agree with you on that point.

You have experience of working on the strategy and this report, among, I am sure, myriad other reports. You mentioned and focused on the cross-departmental element, which is essential. For me, going forward and getting solutions to child poverty require us to listen to your experience to see how we can change things and make them better. For me, that is fundamental. In your experience, what is the way to crack cross-departmental working? While you are the lead Department and have the responsibility associated with that, how can we crack the issues around silo working and ensure that we are not faced with a similar situation or another report where we are looking at targets that were not achieved? How do we crack that?

Mr Boyle: I will start and then bring colleagues in. Pádraig, just before the Executive and the Assembly came back, we did some work with the head of the Civil Service on her missions, one of which was a people mission that looked at all this stuff: inequalities in health, education and housing. Every Department was at that table. People from all parties, some of whom are in this room, engaged in that. I could see the desire to fix it, but the silver bullet is having the capacity to do the things that we need to do. The Audit Office report made a couple of comments along the lines of, "We see a lot of the things that you are already doing". The reason why you see a lot of those things is that some of them worked well. For some of the newer things, however, you need the capacity that comes with having the additional people and the extra money to do them.

The idea of trying to do more for less has been really difficult. As a service, we have been somersaulting. I take my hat off to our staff at all levels. They have not sat on their hands. At times, they have done two or three jobs to get us through. There is an onus on us to find extra capacity to do new things in different ways. The mission stuff showed some of that. We should target particular items. Rather than trying to eat the elephant in any given two- or three-year period, we should pick two or three aspects of child poverty or poverty that we want to tackle and address them. We need to stop trying to do everything all the time.

Do any of you guys want to come in and add anything to that?

Ms Morelli: The Audit Office has recommendations for removing silo working and for cross-cutting work. It is a priority for Departments. 'Managing Public Money' gives a lot of different models that can be applied. Which one is best? Which is fit for purpose? The one that is best is where governance comes from the Executive down for issues that are cross-government. That is the model that was employed for the strategy, but, in employing that, we need to make sure that everyone involved understands very clearly what their roles and responsibilities are. It is not overly complicated. It is set out clearly for us in guidance. The Comptroller and Auditor General, in other reports around innovation and risk management, shows that there are models that work for the public sector. Good work is happening within government and with our partners, especially in the wider third sector: the voluntary and community sector.

While it is a long period, the evidence base that we have and the lessons that we have learned allow us to quickly look at a model that will potentially turn the curve. I keep saying "potentially turn the curve" because all we can do is what is best practice now, what we can learn from and what we can take forward. At each stage, we need to step back and review. The models for joint working are set out for us. Treasury has also responded to the wider National Audit Office's report 'Cross-government working' with clear recommendations. They give permissions to Northern Ireland Departments and the clear direction of travel that one Department cannot do this on its own. We have to work together. In a time of great stress around capacity, funding and resources, we work together on priorities. As Mr Boyle said, it is the priorities that we now need set for us, and we can work together around those.

Mr Boyle: Do you want to say a wee word about neighbourhood renewal pilots in Aghnacloy and Derry?

Ms Morelli: Yes. The People and Place strategic review is ongoing. That is looking from the bottom up. Rather than those of us in government looking at our processes and going down, we have gone out to neighbourhood renewal groups and our sectors — we engaged with our voluntary and community partners too — and asked for their view of how we work together. What are the blocks for partners coming into the Civil Service to engage? In the wider scheme of things, the blocks are fairly simple: bureaucracy; no one-time applications; the absence of multi-year budgets and ways around that; and how, if we do not have multi-year budgets, we can support the sector in that wider strategic aim. There is really useful work coming out of that, including, potentially, from the perspective of the Audit Office and the PAC, areas of potential duplication of funding and wider transparency in the use of public funds. We can see clearly now through a digital landscape, rather than a wide spread of

paper, where the money is, what is working and what the outcomes are. If it works there, will it work here? Is a rural model needed that is different from an urban model? All those key elements are being tested through that pilot, which will link into that wider work.

Mr Boyle: Paddy —.

Mr Delargy: You touched on — sorry, go ahead.

Mr Boyle: Paddy wants to come in for one second, Pádraig, if that is OK.

Mr Delargy: Yes, of course.

Mr Paddy Rooney (Department for Communities): I am just picking up on the question around cross-departmental working. We have examples of where that is very effective. Certainly, we can learn lessons from it. In the employability space, there is a realisation and understanding across all Departments of the benefits of increasing income for families and children. I will take two examples from my side of the house. One is Job Start, which is for 18- to 24-year-olds. In that, we have specialist programmes that bring together the Health, Justice, Education and Economy Departments to help and support young people into work, whether they be young people with disabilities or health conditions, returning citizens or care leavers. There is a dedicated and passionate approach to ensuring that we give those opportunities to all those young people.

We have local labour market partnerships working across all 11 council areas. In every one of those areas, there is representation from Health, Justice and Education sitting alongside us, industry and the voluntary and community sector to help and support people back into work. There are many examples of where cross-departmental working is effective and where we are not working in silos.

Mr Delargy: I totally agree with you, Colum, on all the points that you make. For me, fundamentally, the best way to reduce poverty is by breaking the cycle of poverty, and that is done through employment, education and myriad other factors.

One of the things that you touched on, Emer, was multi-year budgets. We are looking at how we tackle and eradicate poverty, and ad hoc and in-year funding does not cut it. We must look at sustainability over a much longer period and at how we can plan to reduce poverty.

From a constituency perspective, I certainly stand over what you said about the absolute imperative for the community and voluntary sector to be involved in everything that is done locally.

You have answered a lot of the questions that I was going to ask. I had a few other questions, but you touched on them as well. I appreciate your answers. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Before bringing in John Stewart MLA, I want to pick up on something that you said, Mr Boyle. The Executive and Assembly have been back since February — five months. I find it alarming that, as the permanent secretary and accounting officer for a Department, you are not conscious of what direction the Executive are going in: whether they want to eradicate or to reduce poverty. Is that because the new strategy has not been brought before the Executive or because there is no Programme for Government to outline the direction of travel?

Mr Boyle: I have a good feel for what will be in the Programme for Government. That is not an issue for me. We had a draft anti-poverty strategy, which Minister Harghey saw before the political institutions dropped. When the NIO contacted us about carrying out the review of the child poverty strategy, the issue for me was that the last thing that I wanted to do was to give the current Minister a strategy that might change. I go back to what I said in my opening statement: I want to make sure that whatever comes through from NIO forms an integral part of what I recommend to the Minister. There is some good stuff in there, and I want to make sure that he gets best in class — something that will work. That is what I am trying to do. There is no point in asking him to look at a strategy and saying, "Actually, we might change that in four or five months". I will not waste his time, but he wants us to move really fast. We are moving fast, and we will continue to move fast: I give you that commitment.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I have no doubt that you will give me that commitment, but your and my definition of "fast" definitely differ, Mr Boyle.

You raised a point about resources. You made valid points about funding that I have heard from multiple accounting officers for various Departments. I understand the challenges with funding and the hurdles in the timescale from 2016 to now. You also mentioned challenges with resources. Are issues with resources made worse by the challenges with recruitment and retention of staff that your Department faces?

Mr Boyle: The challenges are, effectively, due to an issue of budget. We know how many staff we would like to have, and we know the number that we can afford. There are about 690 posts that we would love to fill but cannot. Those posts will not be filled.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): How many of those posts are relevant to work on the strategy from 2016 to now and into the future?

Mr Boyle: If you are asking me whether I would like a few more staff to be deployed to child poverty and the anti-poverty strategy, the answer is yes, I absolutely would. At the minute, we have five members of staff dedicated to that, and we have kept them dedicated to it the whole way through. They have continued to review what is going on and to look at the evidence base and all the research. We put additional research into play as well.

I would, nevertheless, need more people, yes. I have not totally quantified that need. I do not want to give you a figure now and have to revisit it in a couple of weeks' time, not that it would make any difference, because I will not get them anyway.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Is it safe to say that the vacant, unfilled posts in your Department — now or in previous times — hinder any potential to progress the strategy to where it should be?

Mr Boyle: They mean that I am required to make decisions about where I deploy resources across my organisation.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Prioritise, you mean.

Mr Boyle: Yes, prioritise.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I do not want to pick you up wrongly, but does that tell me that the child poverty strategy has not been a priority?

Mr Boyle: I was trying to say that there will be stages of work. For example, when we did not have an Executive, we were keeping an eye on the evidence base and any new or emerging research. We can keep four or five people dedicated to that, but, if you want us to push really hard over the next six or seven months — to drive additional consultation, prepare papers for the Minister, drive through options and make sure that a business case is prepared — five people will not cut it.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): That is within your gift, Mr Boyle, as the accounting officer for that Department.

Mr Boyle: Within the compressed and tight limitations that I have.

Ms Morelli: *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Yes, but — sorry, Ms Morelli, just a brief moment — you said in answer to the opening questions that this is a key priority for your Department, but I do not see how: you are not even ensuring that the resources are there to carry forward the work that is expected.

Mr Boyle: I think that that is unfair.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I am just repeating the line —.

Mr Boyle: I know, but it is unfair. The point is that I have quite a number of statutory priorities. I have a priority to make sure that all the social security benefits get delivered properly. I have a priority to make sure that people who come from tax credits to universal credit land properly. I have a priority to make sure that fraud and error are dealt with properly. I can go on and on.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Is everything a priority, Mr Boyle?

Mr Boyle: No. There are a number of —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Mr Boyle, with respect, I am asking you a direct question. This is an important, fundamental issue. It is about children and child poverty. You have said that it is a priority. Where on your priority list is it?

Mr Boyle: It is very high on my priority list.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Where? You have just listed a number of things.

Mr Boyle: It is in my business plan for this year, and I will make sure that it gets resourced so that we will deliver on time.

Ms Morelli: I recently assumed responsibility for the anti-poverty strategy and the social inclusion strategy. In my role, I have assessed the resources needed for strategy development, which are the key people whom I have around me. The key issue around resource allocation will come in the prioritisation of the action plan, which is the fundamental driver of the strategic aims. We will need additional resources across government for the action plan. In the development of the strategy — this reflects the experience of colleagues who have been on the journey — we have greatly benefited from our co-design teams, our expert advisory panels and all the information that we collated in working towards the anti-poverty strategy. The resources that we have are in line with the normal resources required to develop a strategy. The action plan is where we will need to focus.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. Thank you, Ms Morelli.

Mr Stewart: Thanks very much for coming along today and for the answers so far. We will deal with few more important issues than this. From the passion in the room today, it is evident that we are all on the same page. It is a hugely emotional topic.

Pádraig talked briefly about the silo mentality and cross-departmental working. I know that you outlined some of the areas where cross-departmental working is working, but there is still a fundamental belief that it is not working well enough. The cross-cutting nature of delivering the child poverty strategy is integral to this. Is there a fundamental problem with cross-departmental working? How do we compare with the likes of the Scottish Government, for example, who seem to be much more advanced in that?

Mr Boyle: The Scottish Government's make-up is different in how they collaborate and how their Departments are set up. Each Department here is set up as a single legal entity. You are always working in a situation where every Department works to where the Minister wants to go. That is a key piece.

I do not detect any territoriality from permanent secretaries or deputy secretaries across the piece about the fact that they are the people who lead on this. I detect a desire to achieve the right outcomes. There are things in the models that we can apply to how we do it — I will bring Emer in on that in a second — and that can make a difference and make it easier for us, such as having shared budgets for certain things, which would help. There are practical things that could change, but, for me, there is not a cultural issue.

Five or 10 years ago, if you had asked me, "Should things be more deeply wedded to working cross-departmentally?", I would have said yes, but I have seen a difference and a really good collegial way of working. The example that Paddy gave was a good one.

Do you want to add anything to that?

Ms Morelli: Absolutely. We in the Civil Service have learned that, in times of crisis, we have to work together. We can now see the benefits probably more clearly than ever, because they are more evidence-based. That was particularly the case during the COVID period, when we worked more closely not only among ourselves but with our community and voluntary sector partners and our local government partners. We saw that there were relatively straightforward ways to work together. There is an education piece for the Departments. Where it works well, let us talk to each other and share that

information. That is where the People and Place review, in particular, is coming very much to life, because all Departments own that review, and, again, the report will go to the Executive.

We are on a journey. From where we were in 2016 when those models were first being tested and rolled out, we have come a long way in working out what works and what does not work. However, I am not saying today that we have solved the issue of cross-departmental working; there is more to do.

Mr Stewart: I am interested in why the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 has not been more widely used to enable cross-departmental working. What are the barriers? Is there compliance with the important statutory requirement in the Act?

Ms Morelli: It has been useful to have the Children's Services Co-operation Act. A number of its sections could be used and looked at more closely, and we have done that as part of the work to get ready for the anti-poverty strategy. We need to be careful not to bring in more bureaucracy and administration when looking at legislation, and that is a key lens. What do we already do that works well in a simple way? It is about simplifying it as much as possible, because with simplicity come transparency and accountability. We are looking at what worked well under the Act and what else could be used going forward.

Mr Stewart: Finally, how often do the key heads of Departments meet to look at the strategy collectively, and how they can deliver? We acknowledge that everyone has a role to play. Does enough happen in that respect?

Mr Boyle: George?

Mr George Sampson (Department for Communities): Are you referring to the child poverty strategy?

Mr Stewart: Yes.

Mr Sampson: The strategy transferred to DFC in 2016, as did the requirement for the Department to monitor and report on the child poverty strategy. One of the key mechanisms was the outcome delivery group, and meetings took place over the course of 2016 to 2019 at regular intervals, and the departmental leads were present. There was a period after 2020 when those meetings did not take place, but the emphasis shifted to developing the anti-poverty strategy. One of the key mechanisms that we put in place was a cross-departmental working group whereby lead officials from each Department met regularly, with DFC in the lead on the development of the anti-poverty strategy. Throughout 2016 and until 2022, when the Ministers left office, there were regular meetings across Departments of officials who led on child poverty or, more recently, on developing the anti-poverty strategy.

Mr Stewart: That is useful, George. How often has that cross-departmental working group met since the return of the Assembly?

Mr Sampson: The group has not met since the Assembly returned, but Emer might have more information on that. Work is in place to bring the group back.

Mr Stewart: I have no doubt about that, but five months have passed. Given that we all acknowledge the high priority of the issue and the requirement for cross-departmental working, it struck me that it might have happened in the first five months. Is it unusual for that not to happen?

Ms Morelli: Work has been going on, and we have informal engagement. We need to make sure that we have the appropriate representatives from the Departments on the cross-departmental working group: they need to be at the right grade and the right level of seniority. The group will be set up, subject to the Minister's agreement, in the coming months to make sure that it is in the right place.

It is important that we do not fall back into the ways of the past and that we learn the lessons. We need people who are decision-makers in their Department and can give the right perspective and advice. In that way, when the meetings return, they will be productive and move things on. It is not in any way saying that the previous models did not do that, but we have a short window to get an anti-poverty strategy that is right and that will make real change. Five months since the return of the Executive sounds like a long time, but we have worked through everything that we have learned to

date, and we are now at the stage of bringing recommendations to the Minister. We do not want to take a blunderbuss to this again, taking a scattergun approach of saying that we have done everything across the Departments and hoping that it works. We need strategic thought and critical thinking, and we need the time with a Minister and the Executive in place to understand what are the best levers.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): John, may I come in?

We have to be realistic. John touched on a very important area. The Committee outlined its concerns, and you explained that this is a priority. The body that John referred to has not met since the Executive returned five months ago. When will the group meet?

Ms Morelli: It is a group of officials —

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Yes, but when?

Ms Morelli: — who come with their departmental Minister's views to a collaborative working space —

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Almost half a year has passed.

Ms Morelli: — where we can all agree. The budgets were formally allocated to Departments in May, and there are different perspectives on the wider landscape. We need to bring that all together but in the right way.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): There is a lot, Ms Morelli, that we need to do, and, with respect to you all, all I hear is "We need to do this", "We need to do that", but I hear nothing about timescales and very little about action. I hear a lot about priority but not what the priority is or how the objectives will be achieved. What is being done about this? It is five months since the Executive came back. This is outrageous.

Mr Boyle: It is not outrageous at all.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It is outrageous.

Mr Boyle: With the greatest respect, no, it is not.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It is.

Mr Boyle: I have discussed this —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Mr Boyle, in all honesty, you cannot point to anything that has been achieved by your Department. There was even a bit of filibustering going on in response to John's question. It is not acceptable — five months.

Mr Boyle: I have discussed this with my permanent secretary colleagues. It is pointless to embark on developing where we go next without having clarity. The clarity of the report, the bearing that it will have, the recommendations and how the memorandum of reply (MOR) will work will have a significant bearing, we believe, on how we carry this forward. I said that before. There is no point in embarking on a journey, stopping, reversing up the road and going back down another road.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): How long is the road?

Mr Boyle: I said to you that I will make sure that a paper goes to the Executive on this through my Minister.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): When?

Mr Boyle: I said that it will be in this financial year. With the greatest respect, if you listened to what I said about the challenges of how we bring all of that together —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I am conscious of the challenges, Mr Boyle. You have rehearsed them very well. I am asking you for a time frame.

Mr Boyle: It will take us every minute of that time to get a paper to the Executive.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Give a date to the Committee now, so that we can —.

Mr Boyle: I can give you a commitment now that, unless something outside my or my Minister's control goes badly wrong, we will have the paper to the Executive by, I believe, the end of March. That is my target. That is what I have promised my Minister, what is in my business plan and what I am driving to do. You are asking me about one priority, but, with everything else that I have to do — all the things that you could easily ask me about that are also priorities — I have to manage all of that.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Nine months, Mr Boyle. That is what you are telling us.

Mr Boyle: The end of March, so it is however much time there is between now and the end of March, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. John, are you content?

Mr Stewart: I want to tease out a final point. Obviously, we all agree about the key nature and importance of cross-departmental working. You have a lead role in keeping track of that. Now that the Assembly is back, who is tracking and reporting from the other Departments on their responsibilities in the absence of the working group meeting? You said that it will be another couple of months before it meets. Are we sure that the work is being done by the relevant Departments that need to do that work as part of the strategy?

Ms Morelli: It is important to differentiate between timescales. The child poverty strategy was extended until the end of 2022. We are bringing the child poverty strategy into an anti-poverty strategy, because all the lessons learned indicate that, if we do not tackle the wider issues, we will not lift children out of poverty. We have to bring everything together.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Yes.

Mr Stewart: That is a good point.

Ms Morelli: We have spent that time. I make no excuse for spending the time to look back, learn the lessons and see what worked and did not work. We will now convene in the wider anti-poverty group — it is no longer a child poverty cross-departmental group but an anti-poverty group — to get the right officials at the right grade with the right seniority who can make decisions and give the right advice in that collaborative space. It will all be subject to their Ministers' discretion and control, but we will give the best collective advice that we can, as that group of officials, on the anti-poverty strategy. We are working closely with Departments on that.

There are people working in all areas — in health inequalities, in justice, in anti-poverty — and we have a lot of cross-departmental strategies going on. I want to say to Civil Service colleagues that we need to make sure that we join those together to have a cumulative impact, because we have failed to do that.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you, Colum and team, for your answers so far. Just before this, I was in a meeting with groups working in early years. Evidence was brought in on the impact of poverty on early years, and there were some pretty heartbreaking stories. It is so important that we have the issue on the agenda, and I am pleased to be addressing it.

Colum, you said a number of times that Mr Lyons is committed to bringing the anti-poverty strategy forward at pace, and I welcome that. Key to that, as Emer said a few times, is that lessons need to be learned from the previous policy's development so that the Minister has the best strategy. On that development, I want to speak to the data and targets in the strategy that is reviewed in the report or, rather, the absence of specific targets to reduce child poverty. Will you explain to the Committee why no targets were set to reduce child poverty levels in Northern Ireland in the previous strategy?

Mr Boyle: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) developed that strategy back in the day. I am pretty sure that the Department for Social Development (DSD) would have had a representative on that team; I cannot recall who that might have been. When that strategy was developed and went to the Executive and when the Executive agreed it after the consultation process that they went through with all the organisations that they were working with, I think, they based it on the evidence that they had available at that point. We are in a different space now. There was no New Zealand blazing a trail and no Scotland trying to drive the policy in the way that it is driving it. The benchmarks were different at that stage.

This was not our strategy; it was handed across to the fledgling DFC in 2016, which was getting bits added to it from all over the place and was being asked to land it. By the time that it had found its feet, the Executive were gone, in 2017. Where our remit is concerned, we did not have control over any of that.

Ms Forsythe: Is having a strategy without specific targets a good idea?

Mr Boyle: I will bring George in, because he is close to this work. I know that outcomes-based accountability (OBA) was involved the last time. Was that well done? One of the insights in the report was good. There were examples of lots of low-level activities, and the report raised this query: how did DFC monitor and report on those activities, when there was just so much?

Was the OBA well done? I do not think that it was, to be honest. It was not as well done as it should have been, but we did not have the mechanisms or the power to change it. Going from there into a target space depends how you feel about the target. You need to be clear about how you will base your target, what will shift you towards it and how much resource you will need to shift you towards it, so you need to be clear on, first, what you will do and, secondly, how you will resource it. Scotland will find it exceptionally challenging to meet its target. Now, I do not mind having targets that cannot or might not be met. I love specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) targets. I love things that you can achieve. That is really important, and I would not shy away from that. That is not my decision, however.

Ms Forsythe: You were discussing whether we were going to say "reduce" or "eradicate" poverty. The question for either of those is that there is a need to measure to see if you are going in the right direction when you continue to invest. How do you do that without targets?

Mr Boyle: This will come down to the attitude of Ministers on the extent to which they want to go after a target here. It is perfectly feasible for them to want to do that, and I would have no difficulty with that. However, I would also understand if they preferred to use measures and milestone markers to see how well they are doing. George, do you want to come in on that?

Mr Sampson: Yes. The issue with setting targets on child poverty is that targets would be based on the official poverty measure. At the moment, there are a number of measures. There is relative poverty, and there is absolute poverty, both before and after housing costs are calculated. We report all that through the poverty and income inequality report that my team publishes.

One reason why we might want to be cautious about setting targets for child poverty reduction is that those official measures are based on household income. A child is defined as living in absolute poverty if the income of the household that they live in is below 60% of the UK median in 2010-11 and uplifted for inflation. A child is said to be in relative poverty if the household that they live in has an income of less than 60% of the UK median in the year in question. Those are income-based measures. If we set targets for the reduction of an income-based official poverty metric, it has the potential to focus activity and intervention on households that are closest to the poverty line — those are the quick wins — and it may inadvertently lead to those who are deepest in poverty being left behind, which is not something that we want to see.

Ms Forsythe: Both the Audit Office report and the witnesses last week strongly advocate the need for a strategy with targets. I appreciate what you say, but those measures are the official measures of poverty. Why can we not have a strategy with other targets that you can set to measure things around poverty, rather than just the statutory measures that you outlined?

Mr Sampson: There is work ongoing with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to develop a new poverty metric. It is called the "below average resources" (BAR) poverty metric. My team is involved in several working groups on that. That measure, with a fair wind, could be introduced in

2026. If there are issues with the questions that need to be asked through the family resources survey (FRS), which is the main survey that we collect poverty data from, it could be introduced a year or two later. However, that below average resources measure will not focus just on income; it will be more holistic and will capture information on outgoings that households have to make. We could have a more holistic and more appropriate poverty metric introduced soon that may, I suppose, mitigate the risk of using an income-based metric that focuses activity on those closest to the poverty line or simply on income-raising measures and interventions at the cost potentially of measures that reduce the cost base to households. Work is ongoing, and, hopefully, it will lead to a better poverty metric that we can use.

Mr Boyle: We will want to tease that answer out pretty quickly for what we would recommend to our Ministers. There are still a few things that we want to evaluate, but we will get that done quickly.

Ms Forsythe: Absolutely. In part 3 of the Audit Office report, there is commentary from the Department that targets:

"can provide perverse incentives or unintended consequences."

What are the perverse incentives and unintended consequences of setting targets that you are concerned about?

Mr Sampson: It is really what I just said about the inadvertent attention focused on raising incomes, potentially at the expense of lowering the cost base to households in poverty and the potential that focus might be on those who are closest to the poverty line, rather than households that are deep in poverty, so that targets could be met more easily, essentially.

Ms Forsythe: OK. We have had other reports come here to PAC, and it feels a bit like you are measuring throughput rather than outcomes. Are there any plans in the Department to look at targets of the new strategy in terms of outcomes and effectiveness and how it touches children's lives?

Ms Morelli: This will be really important when we look again at what key indicators we are looking at. The original intention behind the child poverty strategy when we got it in 2016 was that it should be under the outcomes framework. We need to be clever in how we design and set it up in that achieving the outcomes has to absolutely be our goal, but we need to do it in a way that is milestone-driven and so that we can give clear advice to decision makers that says, "The direction of travel is working, because we have met the following targets, and we will achieve this outcome". If it is not working, we need to prioritise and have that agility within our framework so that we can say, "We will now move to a different model or a different way of working".

I do not want to go back through the history of the subject, but that inability to flex and prioritise different actions over the rest has impeded the outcome delivery that we want. That is where the collective view and the understanding of everyone working who is in this space, not just our Department, needs to be brought together, and we need to get that collective insight.

Mr Boyle: We have an open mind about how we tackle it.

Ms Forsythe: That is good to hear. I am just looking at the final question for me, which is this: looking at the annual report on the child poverty strategy, I can see that you set out the number of programmes that were delivered and the number of children who took part. Just tell me again, however, how you measure the effectiveness of those actions and their genuine impact on children in poverty.

Mr Boyle: We have not done that well enough; I acknowledge that. We could have been better with that. We could have been better at getting at a cumulative impact of it all. We have not caught that just right, and that, for me, is one of the biggest lessons that I see just in reading back on the Audit Office report and watching some of the things that we have done. You may have a different take on that from a more purist perspective, George.

Mr Sampson: No.

Mr Boyle: From my angle, I would want to address that.

Ms Morelli: We are also looking to the Delivering Social Change programmes, which were specifically targeted at early years intervention in particular, after-school provision for children and the wider support through a child's journey. We can see those interventions that improved outcomes, and we now need to say in our advice to Ministers that that has the potential to shift the curve.

Mr Stewart: Just to follow on from Diane's point, on the impact of the actions of the child poverty strategy what I took from you was that you were not overly content with how the data had been analysed and reported in terms of the outputs. Is that what you said?

Mr Boyle: I am saying that there is too much noise in there. There is a lot of activity but not enough levered outcome.

Mr Stewart: How do you get to a point where you can concentrate that data down in order to positively impact future strategies to tackle this? That data is essential.

Mr Boyle: The Audit Office report is clear. We need to come up with a set of clusters of the key things that will make a difference in moving that dial. We cannot keep reporting on absolutely everything that goes on. We need to look at it through a different lens. We need to let every Minister look at it through their own lens as well. There has to be something in this so that, for example, the Health and Education Ministers can see it in the way that they need to see it. We need to see it in the round for the child as well. We have to get a two-way approach, and that is difficult.

Mr Stewart: The report highlights time lags and deficits in the data that has been collected. Our witnesses last week spoke about the limitations of the survey data. What is your Department doing to improve the timeliness and quality of the poverty data?

Mr Boyle: You asked a really difficult question. We have limited power to deal with that. I will let George take that one, because the FRS is the main thing.

Mr Sampson: We collect our poverty data through the family resources survey. It is what is called a "continuous household survey", so it runs throughout the year up to the end of March in any given year. It is based on door-to-door household surveys that last a few hours, so detailed data is gathered from households. At the end of March, the results of that survey and all the information that is collected is sent across to DWP, which oversees the family resources survey across the entire UK. Once it arrives there at the end of March, DWP has to go through the process of validating the data. It needs to make the incomes equivalent and look at quality assurance issues. It takes time to get that right, because those are official statistics publications.

DWP sends the data back to us around February the following year. If you take the end of March 2023 as the point at which we send the data across, DWP sends it back in February 2024. My team then spends the next month taking all that information and works at pace to put it into the form of the poverty and income inequality report. This year, it was published at the end of March. Given that we use the family resources survey and make sure that the data that is published is statistically robust and has been subject to proper quality assurance, it really is not possible to do that work in a shorter time frame.

You may have heard a reference to the use of administrative data. By that, most people are referring to information that His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) gathers through tax returns. The way that the tax year ends in April in a given year means that tax returns for that year are not due online until the end of January the following year. The consequence, ultimately, is that administrative data would not be available for use to inform the development of the poverty strategy for 12 to 18 months after it is collected either. Really, if we are referring to the time lags and issues regarding the timeliness of data, if we are going to use robust information that will be subject to proper quality assurance and controls, it is really not possible to get it any more quickly. For example, the report published at the end of March this year contains data that goes up to the end of March 2023, and that is really about as quick as it gets.

Mr Stewart: As departmental officials, are you content with that process for the collection of data, or would you like to see it done differently?

Mr Sampson: In an ideal world, you would have live data.

Mr Stewart: Would you want to strive towards that in order to tackle the matter properly?

Mr Sampson: In order for that data to be rigorous and robust so that we can rely on it, it needs to go through the process of being checked, made equivalent and validated. It is just not possible to get it any more quickly.

Mr Boyle: We do not have the capacity to do that.

Mr Sampson: Are we content with the information? Well, it is robust, and it is an official statistic, so we place reliance on it.

Mr Stewart: OK. Thank you.

Mr Gildernew: I just want to make clear that I am also Chair of the Communities Committee. I want to bring you back to the meeting of the Communities Committee when, in response to one of my first questions about the anti-poverty strategy, you told me that you expected that it was months away at that point. I know that that created a lot of despondency in the sector given that the strategy had been drafted and the panels had done a significant amount of work. I am afraid now that this session will lead to further despair about the time frame for the strategy. When you gave me that answer, permanent secretary, was it in your business plan at that stage for it to be more than a year away, or has that slipped since we spoke on it?

Mr Boyle: No, we have had to eyeball all the timelines that we had across everything that we do in the Department on the basis of availability of resource. There has probably been a bit of slip on a number of things. If I am honest, we were aiming to try to get it done and to the Executive by January, but I worry about sitting here and saying to you that we will definitely get it there for January. It is more likely to be March, so I need to give a bit of comfort to the team. There could be issues with some of the consultation that could be more tricky or more difficult, or the Executive or the Minister might want to take longer on it. We need to build in a bit of timescale for some of those things.

Mr Gildernew: All those things might happen. I have a concern about how the Department for Communities champions and prioritises the strategy. You told us in this session that it is one of your top priorities, so I do not know how it has slipped or if it has slipped as a result of resourcing issues. I thought that we heard that there was sufficient resource to do the job. You outlined all the problems that you have in your ability or inability to get other Departments to buy in, but none of that matters until there is a strategy with which to hold them to account. Where resourcing the strategy is concerned, none of that matters. How do we know what resources we need if we do not have a strategy measured out so that the Finance Minister or the Executive can seek additional resources? The strategy is the starting point, and that is why I am hugely concerned at the continued slippage of delivery of the strategy.

Mr Boyle: We will hit the resourcing questions at the right time of year. By late November or December, we need to have an idea of what we will need for the year ahead, and I think that we will be on target to do that.

Mr Gildernew: Did you not just tell me that the timing of the strategy has slipped as a result of not having resource to move forward?

Mr Boyle: No. I am saying to you that I want to build in extra wriggle room so that I can make sure that I can deliver it in this financial year. Ideally, I would like to have it done by January, but it might take me to March.

Ms Morelli: While we lead on the development of the strategy, it reflects the contributions of all the Departments, and, to your point, those Departments come under the championship of the Department for Communities, and we are absolutely in that space. They then need to come with their Ministers' imprimatur on that input that they are making and signing up to. Given the picture that we have and with the budgets that have just been formally put out at the start of April — when we first engaged, it was prior to that position — we now need to let the Departments settle and see where they are and bring it forward. We have a prioritised leadership on anti-poverty in particular in the Department, and, under that leadership, we have a key role in bringing our colleagues with us and making sure that that happens, but it is happening.

Mr Gildernew: It jars with people when you talk about letting things settle. This is a priority. People are really struggling in real time and are looking to the Assembly and the Executive to bring forward these measures in a cost-of-living crisis. You mentioned that, permanent secretary, so it needs to be an absolute priority that is driven by the Department for Communities. Colum, you mentioned not turning the dial on child poverty. I am concerned that we are seen to be dialling down the expectations, and we cannot allow that to happen. We absolutely must ensure that a strategy is driven into the Executive and into a Programme for Government as urgently as possible.

Mr Boyle: I have no difficulty with that, other than to say that being honest about the constraints that we face is not dialling back on the ambition. However, I do not know yet what the ambition is across the Executive. I do not know how individual Ministers will respond to this, and I am not sure to what extent they will say, "Actually, on the basis of the content of this strategy, we are prepared to make x amount of money available to put into child poverty next year and that, as a consequence of doing that, we might put a bit less into something else".

Mr Gildernew: Until we have a strategy, no one is at that point. That is my difficulty.

Mr Boyle: Yes, and my job, as accounting officer, is to make sure that what I put before Gordon Lyons and what he then puts in front of the Executive is solid, evidence-based and based on something that is affordable, sustainable and effective. I have to consider all those factors, because I could put something through to the Minister and he could say that he cannot go with it, there is nothing in there or it is not what he wants to see. I have to make sure that I tick those boxes. He has been explicit about what he wants, and he is right to be. It is clear. He wants to make sure that he does not have a strategy that sits on a shelf and gathers dust; he wants something that will impact on people's lives.

Mr Gildernew: In that regard, the report highlights the benefits of prevention and early intervention initiatives in ensuring that fewer children experience poverty and go on to become poorer adults, but it says that such interventions are often the first to be cut when budgets are constrained. How important are prevention and early intervention in tackling poverty? Did the strategy focus sufficiently on that?

Mr Boyle: The strategy was probably always going to suffer from the point of view that, whenever things get tight, the areas of work that are most discretionary are the first to go when cuts are applied. That would always be a factor. On the basis of the configuration of how it was set up, I do not think that enough was done to develop the prevention strategies. For me, that is another key area. There is a lesson in there. I will draw colleagues in if they want to add anything.

Ms Morelli: The evidence points to the fact that addressing child poverty has to start even before the child is born, at the prenatal stage. It is about the health of the mother and the family that that child will be born into. That is well evidence-based and well prioritised. I suppose that I did not make my earlier point as clearly as I should have done. The Department of Health's schemes on prenatal care for the child and health visitor support for the young mother bringing the children up, the Department of Education's children and young people strategy and the opportunities under the Children's Services Co-operation Act are all in play here. That is where we need to get the best advice about the impact of the intervention and where it will change the curve. That is why we have lists of things that, we know, we can do.

Mr Gildernew: Will that be included as a priority in the new strategy?

Ms Morelli: That is subject to the views of Ministers and the Executive and the funding available. We also have evidence that older people in poverty are more at risk of going into hospital and needing end-of-life care etc, so there is a wide gamut of societal issues. We need to keep children who are at risk of falling into the justice system —.

Mr Gildernew: I absolutely agree with all that. Although we are focusing on child poverty today, I absolutely agree that we need to address all those issues as priorities.

Looking to the anti-poverty strategy development and involving the people whom I spoke to you about in the first meeting with you, Mr Boyle, speaking to those who have lived experience seems to be key to getting it right across a range of areas. What efforts have you made to involve children specifically and their families in designing the new strategy and its outcomes?

Mr Boyle: Do you want to talk about the co-design process?

Mr Sampson: OK. One of the mechanisms that we put in place back in 2020 to gather the evidence that we need to develop an anti-poverty strategy was to establish the co-design group, which Trása Canavan, who appeared last week, co-chaired. That co-design group for the anti-poverty strategy comprised over 20 organisations representing people who live in poverty. The advice that we got was that direct engagement with people in poverty might have been intimidating for them, so it was done through the co-design group.

Mr Gildernew: I find that a bit patronising. I do not think that anybody who is in poverty is one bit afraid of you; in fact, I think that they would welcome engagement with you and anyone else. I include children in that. Did you speak to any children?

Mr Sampson: That would have been done through the co-design group. It was there to feed us the information that we needed to make informed choices about what content to put before a Minister.

Mr Gildernew: How many children were engaged with it as a result of that process?

Mr Sampson: I do not have a figure for that here.

Mr Gildernew: Can you get that for us?

Ms Morelli: We will need to go back to the Executive Office about those whom it engaged with when it designed the strategy. I know that, at the time, the Children's Commissioner was a key partner in the design of that strategy, but we will look to our partners in TEO to see whether the information is there.

The points that have been made, which were made in previous evidence sessions as well, are valid. We are willing to listen to all the views of everyone involved in this on why they are affected, and we will do that in the best way for them. We will always take advice on that. If people and children, in particular, feel able and want to come forward, we are very open to that. Across the Department, through every area of our business, we engage face to face with people who face real difficulties every day.

Mr Boyle: I do not want to give the impression, Colm, that the Department and its officials are somehow stand-offish when it comes to people with lived experience; the opposite is the case. Paddy, do you want to talk a bit about that? There is a load of stuff that we do at the coalface all the time.

Mr Rooney: Every day, we deliver social security benefits to people across Northern Ireland. If you look —

Mr Gildernew: I do not want to go off on a tangent; I want to focus on this inquiry and this area. I do not want to drag out too much of my time for questions.

Mr Boyle: My point is that it is in our DNA to want to go face to face and to get close. We have done a lot of that, and we will do a lot of it with the anti-poverty strategy.

Mr Gildernew: I am glad to hear that.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I want to follow up on a number of those points. Members of the co-design group came before the Committee last week and had a fantastic evidence session. When was the last time that you engaged with them?

Mr Boyle: With the co-design group? I have never met the co-design group members.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Has the Department had any engagement with the co-design group since the Assembly returned?

Mr Sampson: No, it has not.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Why not?

Mr Sampson: The last meeting with the co-design group was in the previous mandate when its members met Minister Hargey. At that point, substantive development of the strategy was paused. We

put a draft before Minister Hargey, and the engagement with the co-design group had, at that point, delivered on what we had expected.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): When you say "the previous mandate", do you mean two years ago?

Mr Sampson: The last meeting that we had with the co-design group was in, I think, September or October 2022.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Mr Sampson, child poverty is a priority for the Department. My understanding based on solid evidence that was given to the Committee last week is that the co-design group has attempted to reach out and engage with the Department on a number of occasions but has not been responded to. Why is that?

Ms Morelli: The structure of our engagement will involve a clear role for the co-design group and the stakeholders. I know that the group wrote to the Minister, and he gave his view that he was not yet in a position to meet it. It is now incumbent on us, as officials, to get that advice and look at doing that. We have not formally engaged with the co-design group. We have received such a wealth of expertise and evidence from the group, and we used it in identifying our lessons learned and considering our way forward. That is not to say that we are not working on it, but we have to engage with the group.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Ms Morelli, with respect, as Mr Sampson rightly pointed out, the last engagement with the co-design group was two years ago, yet child poverty is a priority for the Department. The Minister has been in place for five months, but it is a priority for the Department. Despite the co-design group writing to the Minister, in two years there has been no engagement with its members, whom you are heavily relying on for their experiences, evidence and submissions. Is that acceptable?

Ms Morelli: We now have the co-design group and the expert advisory panel's reports. We are looking to understand what that means. We are engaging with our colleagues across government to understand what is feasible in this space, what we can recommend and what the best evidence is. When we are in a position to revert to what is not the Department's strategy but an Executive strategy, we will do so.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It has been two years. Mr Gildernew asked important questions about who you really are engaging with. It will, no doubt, lead to further questions from the Committee about that, because there has clearly been little engagement in the two years since the previous mandate or since the re-establishment of the Executive five months ago.

Mr Boyle: Let me be clear: as permanent secretary, I do not have the power to bring forward a new anti-poverty strategy, nor does the group of permanent secretaries, and —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): No one is suggesting that you do. I suggest, however, that little has been done to ensure that the Department treats child poverty as a priority or that it is even on the Minister's desk. From what I can see today, everything is a matter of saying what you will do and that you will get it done. Nothing has been done or delivered in a timely fashion. The time frames are questionable, and targets are absent. It is a shambles, to be honest with you.

Mr Boyle: The timescales are there. The targets for delivery are there. There is nothing shambolic about it.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I return to a point about the timescales, Mr Boyle, that you made. It will be March before the strategy comes to the Minister: is that right?

Mr Boyle: No. The Executive will have it by March.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. The Budget for 2025-26 will have been set by that stage. Does that mean that the implementation of the strategy will not take place until the following year, because obtaining the necessary finance through the budgetary process —.

Mr Boyle: I said to your colleague that, in November this year, we want to be in the position of having an eye on the money that we will need for the next year to do the things that will be in the strategy for next year.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): The Executive will not get sight of the strategy until March.

Mr Boyle: There may well be consultation with Executive members before that.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): "There may well be" or "There will be": which is it?

Ms Morelli: It is really important to understand the process that we are engaged in. If it is an incorrect process, we will step back. It is an Executive-led strategy on which we engage closely with departmental colleagues involved in anti-poverty work. Action plans will be delivered underneath the strategy, but they need to be grounded. Departments need to be content with what is going forward. In the Department for Communities, we can bring forward the actions that we want, including what, we believe, will make a contribution, through our Minister. Other Departments need to do that too for their Ministers to be content and for the Executive to have a view.

The process that we have followed has given us a lot of evidence. There has been a lot of great work. We have had really engaged stakeholder involvement. I know that it has been two years since the formal meeting, but that does not mean that we have stepped back and not engaged in any of it. However, going forward —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I do not see what has happened since that, Ms Morelli.

Ms Morelli: There is little use in bringing forward a strategy if we do not have an action plan with it. The key fundamental criticism and lesson that we are learning is about that action plan and its targets and what it delivers, but that requires the agreement of everyone across Departments and then the Executive to be in the collaborative working space. If the legislation did not require a cross-cutting strategy, the Department for Communities could bring forward interventions and actions. However, in isolation, those will not target the issue.

Mr Gildernew: I am confused. I understand what you say: the Department for Communities will have certain measures that it can take to address poverty, such as mitigations and other things that we have mentioned. However, you are also responsible for developing and leading on the strategy itself, which will include Health.

Ms Morelli: Yes.

Mr Gildernew: Are you struggling with that part of the role?

Mr Boyle: No, we are not struggling. We want to be clear about what our proposition is for Departments and what their propositions are, and we want to fuse those two things together. With the greatest of respect, I want to be clear about what comes out of this today as well, and I want my Minister to be clear about it. I think that the Executive will find this challenging. If the Executive sign up to a strategy that is as ambitious as the sectors want it to be, it will be really tough to resource. The sums of money are eye-watering.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Are you saying that it is unworkable or undeliverable?

Mr Boyle: No, I am saying that it is exceptionally challenging.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It sounds as though you are saying that it is undeliverable.

Mr Boyle: No, I am not. Do not put words in my mouth, please. I am saying that it is exceptionally challenging. I did not say that it is not workable. It has worked in other places. However, other places introduced additional fiscal powers to make that happen.

Mr Gildernew: I understand that sectors will rightly seek to hold us all to account to deliver the maximum, but what everyone really wants to see is progress and a strategy in place. They want to see the building blocks of that strategy being pulled together and driven forward. I get a strong sense that,

because you are having to do so much work to engage on all the other elements, getting it pulled together and up and running is a significant challenge.

Mr Boyle: Colm, this is tough. There are so —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It is tough for the children.

Mr Boyle: Sorry?

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It is tough for the children and those who are impacted.

Mr Boyle: I absolutely get that. That is the first thing that I talked about when I came through the door. I am not knocking this down the road. I could give the Executive a piece of paper all right. I could give them a nice fancy strategy with lovely charts and all the rest of it, and they could say, "What's this? What's this going to do?". I want to give them something with proper evidence, proper costings and proper options that will impact on the child. I will give them that.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I want it to impact on children today, Mr Boyle. With respect, a child who is born today will be 10 by the time that it is delivered.

Mr Boyle: That is a bit unfair.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It is not unfair. We are eight years since the child —.

Mr Boyle: Well.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Let us be fair about this, Mr Boyle, if you want to talk about fairness. What about the children who are impacted as a result of the constant delays and the lack of delivery around the original strategy, which has been gathering dust — to use your words from earlier — for the past eight years. What about fairness in that regard? People are struggling.

Mr Boyle: I understand —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): We hear it every day in our communities. Your Department is the lead Department with responsibility for that strategy. With respect to you and colleagues, all that I see is failure in that regard.

Mr Boyle: Your assessment of that is way off beam. People are struggling because of many issues, not just —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): In terms of your strategy.

Mr Boyle: The strategy will not be life-changing for people on its own. It will require lots of other things to happen with it.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Nothing is happening at the minute, with respect.

Mr Boyle: What is happening is that we are trying to put the foundations in to get it right. That is what we are trying to do.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Foundations. That is dubious. We will not even get into it.

Colm, have you finished your questions?

Mr Gildernew: Yes.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you, Chair. I really appreciate the answers so far. This is a very emotive and difficult subject.

We spoke about the co-design process. That is difficult to talk about. People put a lot of time and effort into the process. I just want to ask you this honestly: what, do you feel, went well with the co-design process and what could have been done better?

Mr Boyle: I was not in post when that was being done, so I was not personally involved in it. I can give you a view. George, you were involved in it: what was your sense?

Mr Sampson: My sense was that there was good participation and great interest from the sector. We got lots of really useful information, and we ultimately got a position paper from it. There was lots of really good input. We could not have developed the draft that we put before Minister Hargey without the co-design group and without the time, effort and commitment that they provided us with.

A number of areas could have worked better. We could have provided a clearer understanding and expectation of what the co-design process meant and involved at the outset. You heard last week from the co-chair of the co-design group. Perhaps, we could have kept them up to date over the past while on what we were doing in the Department so that, when it came to revisiting engagement with them, they knew where we were with things. However, ultimately, as a Department, we found that the co-design process was an instrumental component in the development of the draft that we put before Minister Hargey. We could not have done that without the co-design process.

Ms Brownlee: From the last inquiry, we know how fundamental the voluntary and community sector is in delivering for services. From the Audit Office report, you can see that there has been a lack of trust. Those in the sector may feel that they do not want to engage further because they question whether their engagement in the previous process was a waste of their time. They talked, as Colm said, about feeling that lived experience had not been included — that is in the report — and about the fractured relationship. How can that be repaired?

Mr Boyle: We have had a good relationship with the voluntary and community sector generally for many years. Co-design work that we have done has, typically, gone well. This has been a bit of an aberration, if I am honest. The passion that you mentioned a few seconds ago is a big factor in that. People with lived experience really want a particular outcome as quickly as they can get it. There is a strong belief on the ground that they know the answer, and they are asking why are we taking so damn long over it.

We have a different bar that we have got to reach with economists, business plans and business cases to get this over the line so that somebody will not be sitting in Daniel's seat in five years' time asking, "What did you spend money on that for?". We have got to make sure that we can stand over our decisions. The bar that we have to meet is high one. If we cock that up and make a mess of it, our colleagues in the Audit Office will, I am sure, have something to say about it. That is another dimension to this. However, the lived experience is absolutely vital, and it sits alongside all the other research, evidence base and things that need to be done. We give that equal weighting.

Do you want to add anything, Emer?

Ms Morelli: That has been the key lesson learned, to be honest: the lived experience. We were working with the sectors and adopted a model on their advice. We took that advice, but we did not go to the people with the lived experience. We now know from the feedback that we have received that it was not correct to have that funnelled to us through organisations. We need to find a safe way for those individuals to come forward and give their stories and their views.

Ms Brownlee: I appreciate that that has been recognised. As you said, there are two different perspectives: your bar is different from someone else's. I get that. However, there is lived experience and an understanding of the barriers. I know that the barriers are childcare and employment — we all know that — but what are the specific barriers? Is it the fact that universal credit is a nightmare that means that you have to update everything every month, or is it to do with rent? What are the small barriers to a person? We know the big barriers with the big titles, but what are the small steps that stop people moving further? That is the lived experience that you need to understand and address in the strategy. I appreciate that we are coming from —.

Mr Boyle: We might not have done it well enough in this piece. As Paddy will confirm, there are loads of other examples where we have done it exceptionally well. It is in our DNA to do it well. I have had direct feedback from the voluntary and community sector and neighbourhood renewal organisations to tell me that.

Ms Brownlee: I was reading the statistics about pensioners in poverty and about how that issue has been well handled. Are there areas of best practice that you can take from that and integrate into the strategy?

Mr Boyle: Absolutely. Every day is a school day. We can certainly apply those perspectives in how we deal with the strategy. There is no doubt about it.

Ms Brownlee: Has that been investigated?

Ms Morelli: That has been part of the key work that we have been doing to progress the various stages. The child poverty strategy was a stand-alone strategy. A decision was taken to bring it into the wider anti-poverty strategy, which has, ultimately, expanded the landscape. If a different model is to continue to focus on a child poverty strategy, that will be a different model for decision makers. In that space, where you are talking about biting off all the different aspects, the wider benefit of the anti-poverty strategy umbrella is that everyone in society is brought under it. However, it is for other people to decide on the resources, capacity and priorities. That is where we are at the moment.

Ms Brownlee: My final question is about the co-design group and the documentation that it provided you with. What has been done with that? Has anything been implemented or taken from it? What has the Department achieved with the work of the co-design group to date?

Mr Boyle: We fed it into the strategy document.

Mr Sampson: It was an instrumental component of the draft anti-poverty strategy that we put before Minister Harghey. However, before we pulled that draft together to put before the Minister, we independently facilitated a joint session of the cross-departmental working group and the co-design group, where there was a useful in-depth discussion. The session was online, and the co-design group members met the senior officials from the Departments. The report that the co-design group produced was discussed at that session to help develop a range of content for the anti-poverty strategy.

Ms Brownlee: Are they able to see the outcome of their work? Have they seen any of that yet?

Mr Sampson: No. As Trása said last week, they have not seen it. We do not have the authority to share an Executive strategy. The previous Minister reviewed the draft, but we did not get the authority to share it more widely, including with the co-design group.

Ms Brownlee: You can understand where the frustration comes from.

Mr Boyle: We absolutely get it.

Ms Morelli: On the tangible outcomes, the Executive have moved on the work of the co-design group and the expert advisory panel around childcare provision. The Executive have moved on that and on the living wage. I know that the real living wage is the ultimate ask, but the Executive are a recognised living wage employer. There are various elements proceeding under the Departments in different areas, especially under the children and young people strategy work in DE. We need to make sure that we capture all of that in what we do. I know that the delay is leading to frustration, but we need to make sure that the model that we bring forward is robust, reflects views and allows people to see where they fit within it. Obviously, the key stakeholders are the children, and we need to engage with their lived experience.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you.

Ms Forsythe: I want to draw out Cheryl's point. You have all referred to the development of the strategy, and co-design has happened. However, the Audit Office's report is really damning on how that co-design process proceeded. I appreciate that there has been a change of officials since then. There is an Executive requirement for co-design, and you are talking as though co-design happened in the past, but, from the evidence that we have heard and from what the Audit Office report said, that broke down so much that the groups involved had to bypass officials and go straight to the Minister. Does a step to revisit that need to be taken? From the tone of your responses here, it is as though the

box has been ticked, co-design has happened and you are moving forward, whereas the evidence that we heard last week and the report show us that co-design did not happen well.

Mr Boyle: There is a reconnect that has to happen.

Ms Morelli: We commissioned an independent review of the co-design process that was engaged with, and its recommendations were applied. Lessons came out of that, especially on the parameters of the roles and responsibilities in co-design and the expectations of everyone who comes into that field, that will be reflected in updated co-design guidance. As I said at the start, the model — a model of strategic development founded on co-design — was innovative in 2016. I am harking back a lot to lessons learned, but, especially on the co-design methodology, they are key. If that can be got right, it can be shared across government and used as a fundamental tool, especially to drive cross-cutting work.

Ms Forsythe: It is about rebuilding the relationships.

Ms Morelli: Absolutely.

Ms Forsythe: It is a critical sector from the perspective of child poverty and the anti-poverty strategy. After the evidence that we heard last week, I am really concerned about the damage to relationships, so I wanted to draw out that point.

Mr Boyle: We are aware of it — we are very alive to it — and I believe that we can remedy it.

Mr Honeyford: Thank you for coming in. My questions have all been answered, kind of. One of my concerns is that we are talking about a co-design process, yet one of the witnesses who gave evidence last week said that they did not feel that there was co-design. Their actual words — I could look it up; it was along these lines, if I am not paraphrasing it wrong — were that there was no co-design, because they:

"cannot tell you a single word"

of a strategy that they were said to have co-designed. How is that the case?

Mr Boyle: It is the case because it is about who owns the information in the Executive paper. We need to fix this; we know that we need to fix it. We need to play it a different way. We will engage with our Minister on how we do that. It is key that he is involved in that, because it will come down to decisions on what goes into the final paper. You can co-design it up to a certain point, but, at the end of the day, a Minister makes a decision on what he or she is prepared to put through to the Executive. It is about managing expectations around that. That maybe did not work properly last time. We have to revisit and refresh the terms of reference so that people understand the various roles and remits.

Mr Honeyford: OK. One of the other things from last week that stood out was the report's finding that, by the time a child in poverty goes to school at the age of four, they are, effectively, a year — 25% of their life — behind. If you create a gap at that age, how can you ever recover it? Yet, we are not listening to the child. That is another thing that came out of the evidence: we have not involved the child in the strategy. Is there any way to hear the voice of the child in the process? If we are taking from now until March — I appreciate your saying that — over it, how can we listen to the child in that circumstance?

Mr Boyle: Bear in mind that it is a wider anti-poverty strategy that we are taking forward, which has a wider remit, but, absolutely, I am very open to ensuring that lived experience has a direct role in it.

Mr Sampson: We will need to look at ways in which we can do that. In the process that we used to develop the draft strategy that we prepared for 2022, I point again to the composition of the co-design group, which was co-chaired by Trása from Barnardo's. We relied on that process of engagement with the co-design group members to get the views of children and all sections of society with experience of poverty. However, as Colum alluded to, improvements will be made to the process that will mean better direct engagement.

Mr Honeyford: I understand that you want to do that, but what I am trying to get at is how that will happen, because the same person told us last week that it did not happen and that was part of the problem. If that is the problem, we do not need to hear, "We need to look at it"; we need that to be addressed. We need the voice of that child to be heard.

Ms Morelli: That is really important; thank you for bringing that onto the horizon. I suppose the first step will be engaging with the Children's Commissioner and taking his advice on how to engage with children in the safest way for them to tell their stories. The strategy is also for other vulnerable groups, so we need to go to the Older People's Commissioner too and other experts that do this daily so that we can hear their voices. The point was really well made earlier that a child who is going to school and is falling behind in educational attainment may not have had their breakfast and might be cold.

Mr Honeyford: Yes, I appreciate that. I sit on the Economy Committee and part of the solution is creating jobs and raising salaries; it is across the board.

To follow what Diane said, groups from the voluntary and community sector, such as Barnardo's, are the guys who will deliver the actions. Having a strategy is one thing, and I agree with you that we need to have something that is actionable. In this place, we have lots of strategies, and we think that they are the end goal rather than the starting line. The starting line needs to be achievable, but to achieve it we will need those voluntary and community groups to deliver a lot of it. How does that happen? How do we repair the relationships? Obviously, from what we heard last week, there has been a massive breakdown in the relationship. How do we repair the relationship so that those guys are enthused to deliver the strategy on behalf of all of us?

Mr Boyle: There are now some different players involved on our side, including a different Minister, and there is a different approach. A lot of things are different. We have read the feedback, and we had a conversation with the Audit Office. We know that there are things raised in its report that we need to fix. We know that we are not perfect and that everything has not worked properly. We will reach out and seek to reconnect and involve and engage in the way that Emer described. All we can do is our very best to achieve that. When people see that we are reaching out and want to genuinely engage, the relationship will, over time, be repaired.

Ms Morelli: We are working closely with the community and voluntary sector, as per the joint communiqué, to understand the shared objectives. Everyone here has the interests of the child at heart. We are all frustrated. However, if we work together towards that ultimate outcome, we will achieve it. We need to be fair to our voluntary and community sector partners too regarding the bureaucracy that is involved in engagement with government and the pressure that it puts on them and make it as easy as possible. That is a key issue that we need to look at regarding co-design. As a result of the People and Place review, we are hearing a lot of suggestions of innovative ways of doing that and different ways of working. The processes need to support that as well. We also need to seek permission from the Executive earlier to share the information.

Mr Honeyford: You mentioned your DNA to Colm a couple of times: I dealt with you before, when I was around Communities, and I do not question that. Everybody in the room wants to see progress on this, and I understand the frustrations at the pace with which this is moving forward. However, that relationship-building needs to happen sooner rather than later, and it needs to happen as a matter of urgency that those groups are of a wide range —

Mr Boyle: I understand that.

Mr Honeyford: That they will pick it up.

Mr Boyle: We will pick it up fast.

Mr Honeyford: And that they feel part of this. They are a key player here, and we need their expertise in the field. We cannot have government and community and voluntary working separately; we need there to be a real partnership in order to deliver. That is absolutely key to moving forward.

Mr Boyle: There will always be a tough challenge in this with managing expectations on where this will end up. You were talking about how dashed people felt because of the time we wanted to take. We wanted to take that time for a good reason: to get it right so that it is right first time. We just need to make sure that we bring people onside with us quickly. I absolutely get that.

Mr Honeyford: That is exactly what I am saying.

Mr Boyle: When we get to the point of decision-making — the Minister will make a decision, and the Executive will make a decision — we will run the risk of people not liking the look of the decisions. There needs to be a clear sense of, "We can go the full nine yards on this, but people might not get everything that they want". That is the issue.

Mr Gildernew: We do not want to allow the perfect to become the enemy of the good. People need to see progress, they need to see something happen and they need to see light at the end of the tunnel. That is one thing.

Co-production and co-design should not be viewed as events within a process; they should be an integral and ongoing part of the process. We have heard similar things from the disability sector, so that is something that the Department needs to consider and work on more broadly.

My last question is hopefully a reasonably straightforward one, given the time. It is two years since the child poverty strategy ended. What has been done to review its successes and, potentially, its limitations? What are the one or two most important things that you have learned from it?

Ms Morelli: We have done the normal post-project evaluation (PPE) assessments and business case reviews. The fundamental lens that the Audit Office has brought to this has been really helpful. The lessons learned around the right model for cross-cutting work and having the flexibility and agility in a strategy and with the action plans so that they can move as other issues emerge and allow more responsive government are important. We do not want children who are born now not to have a hopeful future, well-being and happiness at the heart of what they do. Those are the key lessons that we have learned. There also needs to be a target focus. We cannot consolidate what everyone is doing for a child in one place without it being pulled together in a more focused way.

Mr Boyle: The first lesson learned for me is that a broad brush will not work here. That is what the previous strategy used. Also, on the issue of Departments' capacity to deliver, adding stuff to what they are currently doing is not good enough. You need to resource it and be honest about resourcing it: you are either going to do it or not going to do it. Also, keep partners on board, not just until you think that that bit is done but right through to the end. Those are the takeaways for me.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I have a final question on the links between interventions and outcomes. Paragraph 3.10 refers to the low participation levels in some of the interventions and cites cycling proficiency as an example. Colum, can you explain how that is considered an effective intervention for children in poverty, given that they require a bicycle and, indeed, safety equipment in order to participate? There is therefore a barrier to children in poverty accessing that scheme. It is also noted that the schemes tend to be universal, rather than targeted towards children in poverty. Does that not misrepresent the support that is being provided by dressing up universally offered schemes as anti-poverty measures?

Mr Boyle: That is the point that I was making, Daniel, when I was talking about too many things being in the child poverty strategy actions: there was business-as-usual stuff and too much noise in there. The value of what should be in there versus what was in there was not right. It needs to be slimmed down and a lot more targeted. We need to understand what the four, five, six or 10 things are that, you know, will turn the dial most quickly, if you invest in them. With the greatest will in the world, cycling proficiency will not necessarily do that. I know that safety is one of the things in that strategy. I have read it too: I was not there at the time, but I am looking at it now and thinking, "What?". It does not really compute for me either. There are clear lessons there about making sure that the interventions in the strategy are the most crucial ones. Interventions should not be included to flesh out the strategy. I do not really know the background of why that was in there, but it is there. It was not for us to take it out either, so we could not really tamper with it for the reasons I gave you at the outset. The next one that we design has to be on the money in terms of the big stuff that makes a difference.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you, permanent secretary, Ms Morelli, Mr Sampson and Mr Rooney. We appreciate you taking our questions. It was a fairly heated exchange at times, but, all the same, this is a very important area to the people whom we represent across Northern Ireland. We look forward to engaging with you in the future.

Does the C&AG have anything?

Ms Dorinnia Carville (Northern Ireland Audit Office): No.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. Thank you.