



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Neighbourhood Renewal

5 June 2008

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Gregory Campbell (Chairperson)

Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Mickey Brady

Mr Thomas Burns

Mr Fred Cobain

Mr Jonathan Craig

Ms Anna Lo

Mr Fra McCann

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr Alban Maginness

Witnesses:

Ms Paula Bradshaw	South West Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Ms Renee Crawford	Lenadoon Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Brendan Curran	Brownlow Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Michael Doherty	Lenadoon Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Mark Finlay	Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Paul Gallagher	Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Charles Lamberton	Triax — Cityside Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Roy McCartney	Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Cathal McCauley	Outer North Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Damien McIlroy	Waterside Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Gerry McIlroy	Brownlow Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr John McGrillen	Downpatrick Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Paddy McMenamin	Lurgan Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Gerry O'Reilly	Newry Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr David Patterson	Downpatrick Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership
Mr Danny Power	Greater Falls Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership

Ms Alison Clarke) Department for Social Development
Mr Mark O'Donnell)

The Chairperson (Mr Campbell):

The next item on the agenda comprises five evidence sessions with representatives of neighbourhood renewal partnerships. In the first session, there will be a briefing by Mr Danny Power, Mr Charles Lamberton, Mr Mark Finlay and Mr Brendan Curran.

You are all welcome. Do you want to make presentations consecutively or has a speaking order been established?

Mr Brendan Curran (Brownlow Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

We have decided that Mr Power will make his presentation first.

Mr Danny Power (Greater Falls Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

That is correct, but we should introduce ourselves first.

Mr Curran:

I am Brendan Curran from the Brownlow Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership.

Mr Power:

I am Danny Power from the Greater Falls Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership.

Mr Charles Lamberton (Triax — Cityside Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

I am Charles Lamberton from the Triax — Cityside Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership, Derry.

Mr Mark Finlay (Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

I am Mark Finlay from the Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership. I agreed with my colleagues that it would be important to state at the outset that neighbourhood partnership is not a community-sector initiative. Neighbourhood renewal is supposed to be about joined-up Government, involving the community sector, the private sector and all of the statutory agencies. I reinforce that point by declaring that I am a director of a number of businesses and come from the private sector. It has been a pleasure to be involved in the process; all of the partnerships represented have many shared experiences.

Mr Power:

I thank the Committee for granting us the opportunity to bring these issues to your attention. There will be a fair amount of criticism of the process and the history of neighbourhood renewal. However, there is almost unanimous agreement that the concept of neighbourhood renewal — and its collective aims — is right.

Neighbourhood renewal has generated much debate and discussion, particularly over the last three years, although the policy is now almost five years old. To be fair, it is difficult to capture the story of the strategy's development over the past five years and give each of the 36 neighbourhood partnerships due regard. There are many examples and much evidence that the processes and practices are not what were originally offered or sold. It is important to go back to the strategic aims of the strategy that were declared at its outset.

The strategic aims were to develop confident communities that were able and committed to improving the quality of life in their areas; develop economic activity in the most deprived neighbourhoods and connect them to the wider economy; improve social conditions for the people who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods through better co-ordinated public services and the creation of safer environments; and help to create attractive, safe, sustainable environments in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

In addition, neighbourhood partnerships believed that neighbourhood renewal offered locally-led regeneration and additional resources to get the job done. They believed that it would tackle deprivation in the most deprived areas and that, crucially, it would create joined-up Government with cross-departmental responsibility and offer an opportunity to get it right. We were also promised new thinking and a flexibility to involve communities in a real and meaningful way.

To give some examples of where that transpires, in December 2006 the then Minister for Social Development, David Hanson MP, said:

“Neighbourhood renewal is unique and different to anything that Government has done before. It is a long term commitment and is based on communities working in partnership with the public, private and political representatives to tackle the real causes of poverty. The short term and uncoordinated approach of the past has to change if we are to make the necessary improvements on the ground”.

The issue of the cross-departmental ministerial group was raised in a DSD neighbourhood newsletter. It stated that:

“The most important role of the Group is to ensure that all parts of Government remain committed to the purpose and delivery of Neighbourhood Renewal. It is made up of senior representatives from each Government Department and meets quarterly to monitor progress and provide direction to the way Neighbourhood Renewal is delivered to communities.”

DSD’s implementation plan for neighbourhood renewal referred to how neighbourhood renewal was to be delivered and stated that it:

“must be adopted by Government Departments, statutory bodies and other service providers to ensure better coordinated, targeted and, where appropriate, better tailored delivery of services.”

The implantation plan went on to state that:

“Many of the key service providers will be represented on the Neighbourhood Partnerships.”

It then outlined the wider Government’s contribution:

“Genuine reforms of the way that public services are delivered will be critical to the success of Neighbourhood Renewal.”

The implementation plan then expanded the role of the cross-departmental group and stated:

“The DSD Minister will lead a cross-Departmental Group to take forward the work on Neighbourhood Renewal. The

Group will provide the necessary strategic direction and secure the commitment of all parts of Government to the successful implementation of the Strategy.”

It also referred to the issue of resourcing neighbourhood renewal and stated:

“Government Departments, agencies and public bodies spend substantial amounts of money on programmes aimed at improving the social, economic and environmental well-being of deprived areas. The Ministerial Group will ensure that all Government Departments remain committed to targeting funding at the needs of the most deprived neighbourhoods”.

Our experience — and this is where the critical analysis comes in — is that, theoretically, neighbourhood renewal involves the public, private and community sector and other delivery agencies. As my colleague Mark pointed out, it is not a community sector programme. However, it is fair to point out that in an overwhelming number of partnerships, although representation from the statutory sector varies, the level of statutory participation does not. Actual contribution has been poor. In many cases, that is not the fault of many of those representatives who have bothered to turn up — and there is an issue about who arrives at the table — but rather the lack of any real guidance on their roles and responsibilities from their employer organisation.

At all levels of Government, neighbourhood partnerships have raised consistently their concerns through face-to-face meetings, letters to key officials, freedom of information requests and political lobbying about the slow pace of progress or, unfortunately in some cases, no progress at all. I am sure that it is not the first time that the Committee has discussed the difficulties in the implementation of neighbourhood renewal. My colleagues will provide more specific examples.

We have raised concerns about the need to identify a Government-wide neighbourhood renewal budget, the lack of a joined-up Government response, and the patchy response and dismissive attitude of some Departments and agencies. For example, in November 2007, at the second neighbourhood renewal conference in Templepatrick, a strikingly negative response from the Department for Employment and Learning representative was illustrative of the lip service that almost all Departments are giving to the neighbourhood renewal process. Although it is fair to point out that the community sector is not the sole champion of neighbourhood renewal, it has been left to do much of the heavy lifting during the scheme’s implementation.

That said, and returning to positive matters, in the post-devolution era, the Programme for Government states:

“Our over-arching aim is to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in years to come. To achieve this we need to pursue an innovative and productive economy and a fair society that promotes social inclusion, sustainable communities and personal

health and well-being.”

The Programme for Government’s key goals include:

“Work towards the elimination of child poverty in Northern Ireland by 2020 and reducing child poverty by 50% by 2010 ... Investing over £500m in regenerating disadvantaged communities, neighbourhoods, towns and cities by 2012.”

The neighbourhood renewal ethos can be mapped and linked throughout the public service agreements. I do not propose to take members through those, because I am sure that you know them better than me.

The Programme for Government’s conclusions suggest that, despite the implementation difficulties, neighbourhood renewal is the right thing to do, has a long-term future and should remain a Government-wide matter that is co-ordinated by DSD.

When we came together to discuss these matters, it became apparent that we probably had more questions than answers. Therefore, in our submission, we have listed a range of questions, and we expect cross-cutting responses from Ministers and Departments, the agencies for which they are responsible and the formation of neighbourhood partnerships.

How did neighbourhood renewal affect strategic, operational and financial planning in the relevant Departments and agencies? What communication and discussion processes did organisations and Departments adopt? What criteria did senior officials and Ministers disseminate to Departments in order to communicate their views about involvement in neighbourhood renewal partnerships? What were the selection and operational criteria for the agency or departmental officers involved in neighbourhood renewal? Were guidelines issued to representatives?

Furthermore, how did each Department prepare to fully engage with the cross-cutting policy? How was it envisaged that that policy would influence planning for the next departmental funding cycles? Was there a review of the decision-making process in each Department in order to reflect the new neighbourhood renewal arrangements? Crucially, what performance management processes were put in place within and between Departments to monitor the effectiveness of neighbourhood renewal?

Since the launch of ‘People and Place’ in June 2003 — five years ago — there have been no

clear criteria for departmental involvement. Instead, fluffy language about participation has increasingly been used.

There are additional questions that need to be asked to gauge the ongoing involvement in neighbourhood partnerships and the formation of action plans — or “agendas for change”, as we have grown to know and love them. What levels of participation have there been in the action-planning process, and what influence has that had on individual agencies and Departments? What evidence has there been of “bending the spend” in each agency or Department? What mechanism was or is in place for forward planning for each Department within the current priority-for-action cycle and future programming?

Crucially, we would like to leave you with some key recommendations. The interdepartmental ministerial group on neighbourhood renewal, chaired by the Minister for Social Development, should meet regularly, and this scrutiny Committee should undertake a regular review of that process to ensure that the translation of neighbourhood renewal from that grouping filters through to implementation throughout the neighbourhood renewal areas.

The Social Development Minister, in conjunction with neighbourhood partnerships and her Executive colleagues, should develop protocols whereby each Department neighbourhood-proofs its strategic, operational and financial planning to incorporate the development and implementation of neighbourhood renewal. We were originally quoted a seven- to 10-year vision for the implementation of neighbourhood renewal, so we are roughly halfway through. Nonetheless, it should become a permanent, renewable and ongoing process undertaken by DSD with the support of the Executive through the Programme for Government and its outworking.

Neighbourhood renewal should become a standing agenda item for the permanent secretaries group, and this scrutiny Committee should undertake a process whereby the implementation of neighbourhood renewal is raised, and similar evidence panels convened, across all departmental scrutiny Committees.

We would like to stress that our approach to this presentation was one of critical engagement. We have an absolute commitment to making neighbourhood renewal work, and we have demonstrated that over the last few years. The theory and underpinning rationale behind neighbourhood renewal is absolutely the way forward. We must recommit ourselves to the ideas

outlined earlier in the submission. Thank you for your attention.

Mr Finlay:

To reinforce what has been said, I was overwhelmed with the level of participation by communities and businesses in inner south Belfast — which represents the three proud communities of the lower Ormeau, Donegall Pass and the Markets. There was a fantastic level of response, and people really bought into the process as a new way forward to deliver change. Disillusionment can be seen quickly welling up across these communities — disillusionment that it is not delivering as quickly as it ought to. We have heard that this is a cross-departmental initiative, so one wonders whether the blame lies with the Department responsible for the co-ordination, or with the Executive representing all the Departments.

What was absolutely striking for me was the fact that one has to read into the depths of the appendices of the Programme for Government before actually finding any mention of neighbourhood renewal. I think it appears in about the third page of public service agreements. It does not appear at any stage before that. Those of us who have got stuck into it have been told that it is a new way forward, a cross-cutting governmental approach. It deserves to be front and centre in the Programme for Government; it deserves to be specifically mentioned in every Department's plan and to be a recurring agenda item — not only at the Executive level, but at the official level in the permanent secretaries group. That is an important change which must be reflected in procedures as we move forward.

Mr Lamberton:

Coming out of today's meeting I would like to see this Committee use its role to become more of a champion for the neighbourhood renewal strategy. I would like to see the Committee work with us in pushing the Departments' delivery and commitments to bring that strategy to the centre of Government.

We believe that the strategy has the support of Government, but we do not believe that it is getting the necessary attention or push, and that is where the downfall is.

The Chairperson:

If Committee members had been asked to second-guess what you were likely to say, I do not think that it would have been too far away from what you have said. That indicates the level of

concern among MLAs. We are hearing it on the ground, and now we are hearing it face to face.

Given that there are 36 neighbourhood groups, are there overarching concerns that affect every group irrespective of geographic or demographic concerns? Are there individual areas where you think that neighbourhood renewal has not delivered because of concern in a specific area?

The Committee will not want to be dragged into every single one of those 36 areas to find minutiae that are applicable only to that group. We are looking for general concerns. If there are concerns underneath that, fine, but we want to take a bigger, overarching approach about what needs to be done. Mr Power, you have outlined some of that in terms of attendance and the importance of delivery — or the lack thereof — but can all or any of you point to issues that concern all 36 groups?

Mr Power:

I think I can say without fear of contradiction that the issue of departmental involvement is of grave concern across all 36 neighbourhood partnerships.

The Chairperson:

What does that actually mean?

Mr Power:

Essentially it is the ability of the agencies that a Department has responsibility for to bring resources, experience and knowledge to the table and to implement neighbourhood renewal across all the neighbourhood partnerships.

Quite often, there is a distinction between people attending neighbourhood partnerships and actually being able to bring the views of their organisation to the table. Often someone is nominated to represent an organisation, but the ability — the clout, if you like — to provide information and resources and then take that right back through all the levels of their organisation, up to senior departmental level, is clearly lacking, right across the board.

That is where our recommendation comes in of an examination from each Department and each Assembly scrutiny Committee of the detail of what their Department has done, as opposed to the fluffy language — as I termed it earlier — surrounding participation.

There is a difference between giving out information at the ministerial group around the involvement of each Department and that information translating into real working initiatives within each neighbourhood renewal area. I think that that is the common view, right across the board.

Mr Finlay:

It is important to clarify that regional disparities exist and that the partnerships have varying experiences of different Departments and agencies. For example, in south Belfast we have benefited from engagement with some Departments and agencies. However, interestingly — and I am not mentioning the Departments — one of my colleagues in this group received an unimpressive response from the same Department in their area. Therefore, regional disparity exists, but it is important to adopt a consistent approach to the production and implementation of plans across all the areas.

I agree with Mr Power about lip service. Although some agencies have participated actively, others have never come to the table. We sought to engage with everybody. When that engagement was not forthcoming, we wrote to everybody offering them another opportunity to attend. We gave them a last chance, and, finally, I personally wrote to all the permanent secretaries. Some Departments responded, whereas others are yet to do so.

All the participants have devised actions and established priorities; it is important to now ensure that the appropriate Department or agency accepts ownership of and responsibility for those actions. However, it is difficult to convince Departments to take seriously actions that they have not identified internally. It is critical that those actions be incorporated into the plans of each Department and agency.

Mr Curran:

The fact that different areas have had varying results indicates the lack of direction from the top. We depend on individuals who represent statutory agencies; sometimes they are brilliant, other times they simply fill a role. There is no joined-up thinking, because those individuals represent the Department rather than engage in an overlapping process. That lack of joined-up thinking among Departments creates the largest problems. On one occasion, the chairperson of our group told representatives, in frustration, that neighbourhood renewal was not somewhere to dip your

hand — like the big lottery — but a process that requires engagement and a contribution to the kitty. That input is missing.

Mr Lamberton:

An effective neighbourhood renewal programme group in Derry, run by the North West Development Office, has been in place for some time. Although the willingness of participants is admirable and the discussions are beneficial, without central direction from Departments their hands are tied. The health board, the Department for Employment and Learning and so on are implementing strategies centrally, with no flexibility.

Our paper stresses that the Department for Social Development must be the driver of the process. How often is the ministerial group convened? Attendance on the part of other Departments is an issue. If the Department for Social Development is trying to push it, but other Departments are not responding, then that is an issue that somebody should be dealing with. How often have the Executive discussed neighbourhood renewal? The Committee should investigate that in order to determine whether the Government take the neighbourhood renewal strategy seriously.

Mr F McCann:

I agree with Mr Finlay that there are regional disparities between the groups. It is gelled together by the levels of deprivation that exist throughout all the neighbourhood renewal partnership areas. Danny Power mentioned “bending the spend” — at a meeting that we held about neighbourhood renewal, a DSD representative said that they regretted that that had ever been said at a meeting. Will you explain the partnership’s interpretation of “bending the spend”?

Mr Power:

If one considers neighbourhood renewal at its outset — as a programme for the regeneration of local communities — the assumption is that no one agency or organisation is able to deliver the package required to regenerate those communities. The issue of “bending the spend” becomes particularly relevant when one brings people to the table in how they collectively use the resources available in each of the organisations, agencies or Departments to implement neighbourhood renewal.

The idea was that the neighbourhood renewal programme would become part and parcel of

their own departmental responsibility, rather than being an added burden forced upon it; that it would help to meet the targets and priorities of Departments in the context of local neighbourhoods. That would require them to use their existing budgets, not necessarily separate neighbourhood renewal budgets that Departments dip in and out of. Instead, they would bring their own resources to the table.

It is about joined-up thinking at a local level and implementing a high-level strategy in a local community. That is essentially what we mean by “bending the spend.” It is about incorporating the programme of neighbourhood development and local regeneration into the working of Departments with their own resources, rather than expecting the Department for Social Development to be the champion or leader of neighbourhood renewal and pick up the tab.

The Chairperson:

It sounds like somebody thought of a nice cliché and then realised the implications of it.

Mr Finlay:

It is about efficiency. We have to direct existing resources to those parties that are best placed to deliver the actions. Departmental officials must recognise that it may not be their Department or existing agencies that are best placed to deal with and implement those actions.

I, for one, argue strongly that neighbourhood renewal should not be about finding financial resources to maintain existing community structures. It should be about identifying which party is best placed to take responsibility for and implement the action. That means that a Department might have to redirect funding that it has previously spent in a different way.

Somebody mentioned the conference in Templepatrick and the response from the Department for Employment and Learning. The term that was used was that it would be “inconceivable” to have education initiatives delivered at a community level. Well, no plans or ideas are bad ones when we are failing in any area. We need to investigate thoroughly whether there are better agencies at a local community level that have the resources and could target them better. We are failing in that area, and we must improve.

Mr Lamberton:

You are right about the catchphrase, “bending the spend”. At times, that has made areas of the

public sector afraid to engage in the process. They fear that the community sector is sitting waiting to take all. Over the time that we have been involved in developing the neighbourhood renewal strategy in our area, there has been a growing realisation that neighbourhood renewal is not about the community and voluntary sector — it is a serious attempt by all to try and deal with the issues.

I do not know whether this is accurate, but we were once told that the neighbourhood renewal fund accounts for 1% of the total public funds that will go into any given area, when everything is taken into account.

We also understand that some things are a given; public money must be spent in a particular way. However, there can be movement in some areas — not of money or resources, but of priorities. Departments and agencies have their priorities, and they do not deviate from them — there is no flexibility. If we can alleviate their fear that the community sector is waiting to spend all that money on itself and achieve more co-operation, “bending the spend” has a chance of working.

Mr Curran:

Neighbourhood renewal provides an opportunity for people to come up with innovative ideas. According to colleagues from other areas, the community is coming up with ideas. The problem is that the statutory agencies are not relaxing their budgets, which are set at the start of the year. If someone were to come along with a brilliant idea, he or she would be told that nothing could be done, because the budget has already been allocated. There must be a degree of leeway.

There must also be cross-departmental input into projects that are not necessarily long term. There must also be a long-term vision — a five-year plan, if you like. Most Departments do not appear to have that. In Brownlow, we have a particular problem, because Departments do not know which land or property is in public ownership or even which Department owns it. They are not even attempting to find out, despite numerous requests. There is an opportunity for Government to work properly, not only at local level, but further up the line.

Mr Finlay:

We should not be talking about one-year budgets at all. It is clear that neighbourhood renewal must be front and centre in the Programme for Government. That does not mean that every

Department or agency must have an identified budget, or that the Executive must set a budget for neighbourhood renewal. However, support must be given and ownership taken. David Hanson said that neighbourhood renewal was a long-term commitment:

“The short-term and uncoordinated approach of the past has to change”.

It has not changed.

The Chairperson:

The idea of this session was to enable you to set out the background to neighbourhood renewal, and you have all achieved that remarkably well. You have set the foundation stone, and the Committee will hear from the other groups. We are beginning to see an emerging picture. Hopefully, by the end of today, the Committee will be very much better informed and will be able to go back to the Minister with that information. Thank you.

Session two is about the role of the partnership boards. The witnesses are Mr Roy McCartney from Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership and Mr Cathal McCauley from Outer North Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership.

Mr Roy McCartney (Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

I thank the Chairperson and the Committee for inviting us here today. As the Chairperson said, we will talk about the role and responsibilities of the neighbourhood partnership boards. We were going to give the Committee a short overview of DSD’s guidance, but perhaps the Committee is already aware of it?

The Chairperson:

Yes.

Mr Roy McCartney:

In that case, we will go straight into our comments and recommendations.

To date, the role of the neighbourhood partnership boards has been greatly restricted, for several reasons. Extensive community engagement took place, but there was, and continues to be, apathy about consultations. The lack of any real change serves only to reinforce that. We contend that the delivery of change, particularly physical and visible improvements, will improve attitudes.

In some areas, it took almost two years to get any meaningful engagement from public bodies. Most, if not all, agencies claim to be doing everything already. There is some truth in that response, though in some cases the claims were spurious at best. Lack of communication and public awareness are felt in some instances. We recommend fuller communication than is currently available, and a real attempt to “bend the spend”, as some of our colleagues put it.

With respect to public representatives, there are opposing opinions from chairpersons, which highlights the lack of consistency across the development offices. Some report that representatives of public bodies rarely contribute and can make no decisions; other areas report that such representatives make all the decisions, with little notice paid to community opinion. Examples were given of some development classes putting all funding and resources through public bodies, giving the appearance to some of a done deal between DSD and other central or local Government offices.

Suggestions of an inappropriate use of neighbourhood renewal funds were made. The following examples were cited: public roads repaired with neighbourhood renewal funds; and nursery units, which are in their fifth year of funding by DSD as a pilot project and in their third year of receiving neighbourhood renewal funds. We recommend that, in order that the partnerships can function to best effect, all members must be treated as equal partners and their opinions valued as such. In the case of a lack of participation by representatives of public bodies, it is the responsibility of DSD to ensure full participation and co-operation. With regard to inappropriate use of funds, accountability is the guiding principle of the DSD neighbourhood renewal process.

It has proven difficult to attract private business expertise in some areas. Some representatives of the private sector who have participated have become disillusioned and left due to the lack of movement in the process. Our recommendation to counter that is that partnership boards should make real decisions: that is more likely to keep people interested.

All areas have key community representatives on neighbourhood partnership boards, but most feel that their opinions are not taken on board as much as they hoped or expected. Our recommendation here is that local offices cannot be blamed if the Department continues to be indecisive and provides endless continuations of current funding. Decisions seem to be made

through politicians, lobbying for people's jobs rather than for improved services in neighbourhood renewal areas.

DSD's indecision about the continuation of contracts has in some areas resulted in more of the same, with no real change. Irrespective of input from partnership boards, indicative budgets continue to be used on some projects which either do not meet neighbourhood renewal objectives or are clearly the responsibility of other Departments. Our recommendation is that DSD must ensure commitment from other Departments to stand over recent decisions in areas which seem to have forced the hand of other Departments.

Mr Cathal McCauley (Outer North Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

Membership of the boards has been frustrating. The outstanding issue affecting partnership boards in all aspects of the neighbourhood renewal process is lack of commitment from other Departments. It is a recurring theme, and I am sure that it will crop up in other presentations. For the most part, neighbourhood partnership boards have done what was asked of them. Some excellent work has been done since the establishment of the partnership boards, and there has been an improved, albeit limited, community input to decision making. There is evidence that some Departments are contributing to the process. I have no hesitation in saying that the Housing Executive and some local councils are playing a particular role. However, there seems to be differing attitudes; some Departments and councils are playing the game and others are not.

The north-west development office seems to be leading the way, and it has been supported in the process by neighbourhood partnership boards in the area. That is obviously causing difficulties, discomfort and angst among the community sector. However, if DSD stands over its recent funding decisions, there is an expectation that the partnership boards will have more say in where the funds are going. That will make an impact in those areas, rather than continually funding the same projects year after year. We thought that we had reached the same stage as last year, but then, suddenly, a Minister's decision changes everything, and now we are one year down the line and we are back to where we started.

Essentially, there must be a commitment by all Departments, including at a local level. Without knowing anything about procedures here, we are simply saying that if DSD cannot ensure a commitment from other Departments, can OFMDFM?

Finally, it is essential that the neighbourhood partnership board has maximum input in all decisions of expenditure and neighbourhood renewal funds. The development office in Derry and the programme group have agreed that the neighbourhood partnership boards will have an input in identifying the targets and outputs of all neighbourhood renewal funded projects, irrespective of the delivery agent. We are examining how that can be implemented, but it has been clearly agreed at programme group level, and we are expecting it to be implemented.

The Chairperson:

You talked about participants on partnership boards making real decisions; does that mean that the decisions of those participants would be translated into tangible change?

Mr Roy McCartney:

Yes, that is what I meant. At the minute, people in the community sector feel that they are simply putting a sticking plaster on a broken leg. The communities, more than anyone, have a long-term vision of where they want to go with neighbourhood renewal. We seem to be hindered to such an extent that the decisions that are being made by statutory bodies will not affect the real change that should be happening.

The Chairperson:

That is a basic question, but answer it as you see fit. Do you largely agree with what was said in the previous session?

Mr Roy McCartney:

Yes.

Mr McCauley:

That is why our session is so short.

The Chairperson:

I thought that that would be the case. If you were to make suggestions about change and you were to come back in two years' time, would you not be saying what you are saying now? Would you suggest a series of minor changes, or would you say that things are so structurally deficient that we have to go back to square one?

Mr Roy McCartney:

I made a few notes on the previous session. I believe that the community representatives are the most important people on the partnership boards, because they have a vested interest in any decisions taken, and more weight should be given to their views. There also seems to be a lack of consistency throughout the neighbourhood renewal areas. The development offices seem to be working not on different agendas, but in different ways.

One of the major concerns that I have with statutory bodies is the serious lack of match funding that is available. Indeed, statutory bodies only seem to be topping up their own budgets and seem to have no long-term plans. Once DSD funding stops, anything that the other Departments are doing in the neighbourhood renewal sector will stop as well. Things will go back to square one.

Mr F McCann:

I have two questions. First, do you agree that the concept of neighbourhood renewal offers, and has offered, the best opportunity for a cross-community and cross-sectoral approach to deal with social deprivation?

Secondly, as regards questions about departmental lack of faith in partnership boards being able to deliver the right decisions; how do you feel about consultants being appointed to deal with master plans, thus taking the decision away from the partnership boards?

Mr McCauley:

That proved very difficult at the time. We dropped the consultants who were working with us, because they were producing rubbish. However — and I should have said this when answering the last question — our partnership feels that there is a commitment from some departmental representatives at a local level. Even at a programme-group level, the people who are sitting round the table — normally the heads of Departments — seem determined to make it work and to try to make changes to improve those areas.

We met the Minister, and she has assured us that she is doing all she can to make the other Departments contribute. However, there seems to be a gap between the Minister and people at local level. Somewhere in-between — in the middle tier — the message is not getting through.

The concept is that things should work. The theory is brilliant, and we all entered into it with great enthusiasm. Indeed, we believed that it would make the big difference in those areas.

For the past thirty years, when census returns have been completed and statistics produced, the same areas emerge as the most deprived in the North. Nothing will really change that — despite the work being done by the Departments. Even at a local level, they tell us that all of their resources are being directed to those areas. That may be the case, but it is not making any difference.

The concept and process of neighbourhood renewal is opportunity to make a difference. However, as was mentioned earlier, it may not always be the case that a particular Department is the best agency to deliver a particular project or service.

There is great hope and optimism about the process. However, lack of buy-in from other Departments causes problems. Departmental staff at local level have told us, clearly, that they have had to make cuts and meet targets, and that, as a result, they cannot commit or move resources. Flexibility across all Departments needs to be improved to make this work. We think that they should be making a better effort.

Mr Brady:

Thank you for the presentation. You mentioned inappropriate use of neighbour renewal funds. It seems to me that money that has been ring-fenced for neighbourhood renewal in areas of deprivation has been siphoned off for other projects. Is that practice widespread throughout the 36 partnerships?

Mr McCauley:

Some are worse than others. I have met the chairpersons of other partnerships. All money goes through public bodies in the first place, which is nonsense. There may be questions about the capacity in the partnerships. However, I am not qualified to talk about that. Even in the north-west development offices there were examples of partnerships hanging on for grim death. The repeated message coming forward is that they are still at a pilot stage, and are still being funded. To be fair, continuations are partly responsible for the situation dragging on for so long, but as far as I am aware, other areas are a hell of a lot worse, and the north-west is the exception rather than the rule.

Mr Roy McCartney:

I cannot answer for all 36 partnerships, but through this process I have spoken to people involved in partnerships in three or four areas, and they have experienced the same problems. It may be harsh and a bit too strong to call the spending inappropriate, but the money is not being spent on what communities and partnerships would put at the top of their list.

Mr Brady:

You said that the term “inappropriate” may be a bit strong, but it reflects people’s perceptions.

Mr Roy McCartney:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

Perhaps “better spent” would be a better way to express it.

Mr Roy McCartney:

Yes, the money could be better spent.

Mr A Maginness:

I am impressed by the analysis of Mr McCauley and Mr McCartney of how neighbourhood renewal works on the ground. However, they paint a gloomy and disappointing picture. There is no single answer to my next question, but how can one improve the situation on the ground at a local level? How can you transform the relationship on the ground between other Departments and representatives of other statutory agencies? How can you possibly do that, or have you come to the conclusion that you cannot and that the Northern Ireland Executive must renew their commitment to neighbourhood renewal at an Executive and departmental level?

Mr McCauley:

It is essential that the Executive recommit to the process. If the partnerships, including the community representatives who sit round the table, have a real say in the Budget, it is far more likely that other Departments will increase their input at a local level, because money will be available. That could well be the case, as I keep mentioning.

If the decisions remain as they are, there will be more commitment because of increased match-funding and an enhanced potential to work with new money — it is not really new money as such, but it is money that is newly available. There is an increased likelihood that partnerships will work because that pot of money is available.

The Chairperson:

We are being presented with a clear and consistent picture, to which you have added. Thank you again. I now welcome Michael Doherty from the Lenadoon Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership, Paula Bradshaw from the South West Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership, Paul Gallagher from the Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership and David Patterson from the Downpatrick Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership.

Ms Paula Bradshaw (South West Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

I met the other representatives a couple of weeks ago, which was good because we agreed on all the points. Therefore, my presentation has been agreed. I have the misfortune of having to give a bit of a history lesson about the development of the plans from the outset, which is important in order to put the issues in context.

We recognise that DSD put a lot of effort in at the start to try to get statutory engagement; however, its efforts resulted in minimal contributions from the statutory agencies. Given that there were no statutory partners and few political representatives around the table, what resulted was a series of wish lists from the community sector. Basically, everything that the various groups wanted was included on the wish lists.

Owing to lack of involvement by the statutory agencies — for example, Roads Service, there was no one involved who could say whether schemes were practical. Therefore, as I said, everything was put on the lists. It was nearly comical at that stage, because people were ensuring that all schemes were included on the lists in an attempt to get core funding. However, there was a lack of recognition that not all projects should or could be funded in the long term. In South West Belfast Neighbourhood Partnership we ended up with 147 actions that had no priorities set against them, and with little contribution from the statutory agencies.

At a strategic level, because there was no statutory buy-in, the few statutory-allocated projects that went through received no statutory-allocated funding. The community is now frustrated that

the statutory agencies are not delivering. However, they never said from the outset that they could. That being the case, no money could be allocated; therefore, no one has any idea of the costings of their schemes. For example, new street lighting on the Donegal Road cost £170,000. That would cost a lot of money were it to be replicated across the Province.

I know that there has been a lot of praise for DSD to date, but I am going to have to take that down a notch. In our area, for example, we got our action plan through the South Belfast Partnership Board, which was finished in March 2006. However, the guidance from DSD did not materialise until April 2006. Therefore, we had our plan finished before they told us how to develop it. Had we received more guidance from the outset, perhaps we would not have created that massive wish list.

The contribution from DSD throughout the process was patchy. We were working in the dark a lot of the time. When we finally had our draft plan that the community had signed off on, DSD was slow to respond because there was a recognition that the process was unwieldy, and signing off on schemes would commit it to deliver them.

The Chairperson:

You referred to DSD being slow to respond. At the risk of being too precise, were you referring to the actual Department, or did you mean the Belfast Regeneration Office?

Ms Bradshaw:

I was referring to the Belfast Regeneration Office.

A term used from the start was “floor targets”, which involved measuring the progress of certain schemes. That has all disappeared; there is no monitoring of the impact of what we are doing. We are years into the process, and no one has a clue whether anyone is better off.

We can all identify individual projects that we think have been a success, where, for example, kids have been made a wee bit happier because they have a new playground. However, the impact of that is not monitored, so we are still in the dark as to whether we are making any impact at all.

Mr P Gallagher (Strabane Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

A lot of groups — as you said, there are 36 — are working in communities and have, in my opinion, been working very hard over the last few years. The chairpersons of the boards of those groups are providing the input to today's meeting, and many of the boards are anxiously awaiting the outcome of this meeting. Will a draft report of the meeting be produced that the chairpersons can present to their boards? That would help them feel that they have had a full input, because they have given a lot of time and commitment over the last few years. Some apathy exists, so it is important that we welcome this opportunity to provide input and welcome the prospect of change, as that will help people to feel that their work has been acknowledged.

Mr M Doherty (Lenadoon Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

Initially, I was totally sceptical of neighbourhood renewal, because it came after four years of the Belfast action teams and four or five years of the Making Belfast Work initiative, so I saw it as yet another initiative. However, despite the scepticism, we decided to get involved and see whether we could make it work. The attractive element was that, for once, Government were going to take a long-term approach, as the initiative involved a seven-to-10-year programme and three-year action plans.

Therefore, we convinced our community to buy into the neighbourhood renewal initiative and go through the process of preparing a statement of readiness, developing a vision framework and, most importantly, taking part in the consultation. That consultation was conducted by external, professional consultants, but it was effectively carried out in our community and involved all elements of the community, including politicians, the clergy, the schools and the statutory sector.

By August last year, we had a three-year action plan in place that our community had bought into, and which we felt reflected the needs in our community and dealt with its problems. Very little has changed since that action plan was produced, other than that, until August of this year, the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) will be funding between 80% and 90% of the activities in our action plan. We do not know what is happening after that.

In my opinion, the lack of buy-in from other Departments has been the biggest weakness in the process. We have dealt with issues relating to health, education and the environment, and have considered initiatives that are working on the ground. I do not believe that the BRO should be funding those projects or that DSD should be providing the budget after March next year. The

relevant Department should be weighing in behind different projects.

All of our neighbourhood partnerships have said that they want to be monitored, evaluated and have performance criteria set, which must be met if they are to receive funding. The criteria should be based on value for money and on the partnerships delivering on performance. The reality is that that is happening already but, despite our having neighbourhood action plans, we can get no buy-in from the relevant Departments. I believe that that is the biggest challenge for the Department for Social Development.

We had heard about the cross-departmental neighbourhood renewal group. It strikes me that that must be a talking shop, because there does not seem to be any buy-in coming from other Departments. Responsibility for neighbourhood renewal seems to have fallen into the lap of DSD and the impression on the ground is that that Department will probably be left with that responsibility until it goes to the councils in 2011. People across the North are wondering what is going to happen. Our partnership does not know where it will stand after August and whether, if anything, things are going to get worse.

Mr David Patterson (Downpatrick Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

I want to add some points about delivery — I apologise if I reiterate some points made earlier, but I believe that they are quite important. I will discuss budgets, buy-in, participation and, perhaps, comment on applications. We also have a couple of recommendations to make.

There was a great deal uncertainty over how much of a budget would be allocated to each neighbourhood partnership board. Many partnership boards are still uncertain about that, and that has impacted significantly on the board's opportunity for forward planning and addressing priority issues.

At the start of the process, we understood that partnership boards would have a significant influence over how their budgets were allowed, but that does not appear to have materialised in a variety of areas. There is an appraisal process for all projects, and DSD is still intent on appraising applications with very little input from board members. That has led to several projects — arguably dead wood — being carried forward without any radical approach.

As has been said already, there has been little statutory buy-in from the start of the process,

and that has resulted in a minimal delivery of the individual actions by the relevant Departments. However, there are some notable exceptions; Northern Ireland Housing Executive and, to a considerable extent, some local councils and health trusts where they have been supportive of a community development approach. Nevertheless, many neighbourhood action plans are largely built around available DSD funds and little else.

There is also the question of whether mechanisms have been set up in the relevant Departments to adopt and deliver on neighbourhood renewal actions. There is rhetoric at the top and there is commitment from individual officers who may be trying to participate in partnerships, but there is a big space in between, in which there is no clear departmental and practical commitment and planning.

The community and voluntary sectors are trying to drive forward delivery of the action plans. In many instances, private-sector representatives have been involved, but they have become so frustrated with the slow pace of implementation that they left their relevant boards. The attendance of elected representatives on the various boards appears to be patchy, although that may not be consistent.

The application process for funding from DSD — the main funder — continues to be slow, and payments of claims where projects are funded directly is complex. Again, that is impacting disproportionately. Continuous audit queries and adjustments have to be made to groups, putting them in a position where there is a greater emphasis on financial audit than on delivery and impact.

The neighbourhood renewal partnerships made a couple of recommendations that relate to the wider issue. First, Departments should consider allocating a certain amount of their budget for neighbourhood renewal projects, similar to a version of Executive funds, which could be stipulated within the Programme for Government. Behind that is the requirement for a stated and clear systematic commitment from other Departments. Secondly, many partnerships are unaware of the cross-developmental neighbourhood partnership groups, and they would like to have a greater and closer policy link. We felt that, as a minimum, the chairpersons of neighbourhood partnership boards should be issued with the minutes of the cross-developmental neighbourhood partnership group meetings, so that they understand what is going on and can assist with the greater joining up at a higher policy level.

The Chairperson:

There have been several references today to the lack of buy-in or follow-up from a variety of Departments. Without being overly specific, are you talking about a range of Departments? Aside from DSD, is no one interested in neighbourhood renewal, or are one or two Departments particularly guilty of not buying in because of the nature of some of the projects?

Ms Bradshaw:

The Belfast-based partnerships are completely different from the country partnerships as regards which Departments they rely on. As we said, the Housing Executive has been very good. The health and social care trusts have been good up to a point; they have been good attendees and contributors, but not necessarily financially. The councils have also been good.

Aside from those organisations, there has been no input from anyone else at all. Issues such as education are particularly relevant in the inner-city areas. Other organisations have not been attending meetings at all and have sent nothing in. It is disgusting. If there were an amalgamation of three primary schools in our area, they would not attend a meeting or answer a letter to tell us what is happening. It is not even as if we are asking them to spend money; we are asking them to come along to meetings and contribute to the remodelling and regeneration of the area by telling us what they are planning to do.

The Chairperson:

And they are not even doing that?

Ms Bradshaw:

Sometimes it is just a matter of getting information. If they are planning to change the schools, we can work out how we can support that transition.

Mr P Gallagher:

The problem with the Departments is across the board. Many Departments just do not have a remit. When we argue with them at the top level, they say that they do not have a remit; they say that the matter is district-wide, borough-wide or region-wide. When we ask them about neighbourhood renewal, they come back at us with talk of equality of opportunity and say that we cannot have a honed-in project. We have argued for the targeting of specific resources at specific areas to bring everyone up to the same level district-wide so that people can participate on an

equal basis. The problem goes across the Departments.

The Chairperson:

Is that the case all over the Province?

Mr M Doherty:

This is an issue across all Government Departments. As Ms Bradshaw said, some Departments are more relevant. In city areas, most of the actions involve the Departments of Health or Education.

Mr Patterson:

Agencies such as the Housing Executive, and, to a considerable extent, local councils are structured in such a way that they are more able to do things. In some ways, Government Departments still have an ethos of checking, or, dare I say, protection. For example, the district manager of the Housing Executive is extremely active in our partnership. Looking across a whole range of policies, there is a clear commitment from the agency to engage in that process. Generally speaking, Government Departments do not seem to have the same mindset.

Mr F McCann:

My understanding is that the Department for Social Development has allocated more than £60 million over the next three years for neighbourhood renewal — I hope that my figures are right. There are 36 neighbourhood renewal areas and master plans. How will that impact on your ability to deliver all those master plans?

Mr M Doherty:

In many ways, it is not just about the money. We went on one visit before we drew up our action plan. We visited an area of Liverpool that had a budget of £55 million to cover a 10-year period. We also went to an area in Chester, about 30 miles away, where they had a budget of roughly £180,000 a year. When I returned home, I said that I would rather have had the £180,000. The difference was that the people in Chester had statutory buy-in. They were able to get the council to change the way in which it funded projects, and they were able to engage with various Government Departments when they were drawing up their action plan. They were able to examine the budget and find out exactly how much was being allocated to their communities and develop ways to get Government to use that money more effectively. We all know that a lot of

money is being spent on services that are not working. Unfortunately, the habit that has developed here is that Government keeps on funding those services regardless. The neighbourhood renewal schemes offered us an opportunity to consider how to spend money more effectively.

Mr Burns:

Your comments are very interesting. You all seem to be very frustrated that you have spent all this time on action plans and consultants —

The Chairperson:

Did you detect that, Mr Burns? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Burns:

Money has been spent on consultants and consulting, and you are nearly consulted out. There does not seem to be a mechanism to bring it to action. Michael Doherty asked whether the issue would sit until the new councils were established in 2011, and be moved on then. Paula Bradshaw gave the simple example of three schools having to amalgamate and the changes that that would make to the neighbourhood and the community. No one seems to be coming forward from the Department of Education or other Departments to gel all of that together and bring it forward. It is not enough to throw money at it without a strategic plan of how it all fits together. We do not seem to be in that ball game.

Mr M Doherty:

Everyone has agreed on the action plan collectively. It is a plan that can effect change for the neighbourhood. The problem is that DSD — through the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) and the other local development organisations across the North — carries the cost for all of that. The statutory bodies should have been brought on board with the use of interim funding — not to fund everything, but to look strategically at what is working effectively and what their responsibility is.

I will give one brief example. We have a family support project, which works with children who have been referred to it by health professionals. Those children may be in care or on the child protection register. Year in and year out, the project gets children out of care or off the child protection register while working with families. That project has been identified by our neighbourhood action plan as being a very effective model. It is also a cost-effective model; it

saved the Department of Health over £1 million last year. Rather than DSD through BRO, the Health Department should be funding that project.

There are scores, if not hundreds, of similar projects in neighbourhood renewal areas across the North. The other Departments are happy to let DSD carry the cost; they must face up to their responsibilities, perhaps through a cross-departmental working group, rather than using the excuse that they need to make efficiency savings.

Mr P Gallagher:

It is not all bad. I come from Strabane, and, over the past few years, we have funded a number of projects.

Mr Cobain:

If Claire were here, she would tell you something different. *[Laughter.]*

Mr P Gallagher:

Sorry, I missed that.

Mr Burns:

If Claire McGill had been here.

Mr P Gallagher:

The playing field must be levelled. In Strabane, Melvin Hall has been redeveloped, and a number of community groups have been funded to deliver services in areas of high deprivation, so it is not all bad. Earlier, you asked whether the process should be thrown out altogether. I do not think that it should be. We have been working at a local level; local people are involved; local players, elected representatives and managers of Departments are around the table.

Although it might be good, bad or indifferent, we have a development plan. Importantly, that development plan is fluid. From it, action teams go out and develop projects with inter-agency help. We need managers to say that they can buy into that process and feed it up. If we are doing that at local level, it is up to you at the top level to get the Departments to deliver. It is not all our responsibility, but we are working hard at a local level to develop local plans.

Mr Cobain:

Fra McCann said that neighbourhood renewal is a new and innovative way of tackling deprivation. It is done at a strategic level; DSD is leading it and is in contact with other Departments. My big worry is that the policy is fragmented because the other Departments are not buying in at the macro level. What possibility is there that they will buy in when the councils take over?

Mr P Gallagher:

I agree, and I think that that will make it worse. We have not been consulted.

Mr Cobain:

Some of the councils have not been consulted either.

Mr P Gallagher:

We have not had any input. There are dangers around losing inter-agency communication and the community and voluntary sector not having an input or decision-making capacity. If we hand over to councils we could hear that it has become a corporate decision and responsibility and that there may be no input from the community and voluntary sector after 2011.

Mr Cobain:

The point I was making is that DSD cannot focus the Departments. The neighbourhood renewal partnership was set up to focus Departments and to allow communities to look at particular budgets and distribute them in a way that those communities thought best for them.

If DSD cannot do that — within the Executive, and led by a Minister — what influence is a council going to have on an education and library board that does not turn up to meetings? None. Do you think — as I do — that a lot of Departments are washing their hands of neighbourhood renewal and saying that this thing has not worked?

Mr M Doherty:

That definitely is the case. Mr Maginness asked what can be done and how we can transform neighbourhood renewal. One possible suggestion is to get Government Departments to commit a percentage of their budget to neighbourhood renewal, or — as was done with the children's fund — to establish a neighbourhood renewal fund and get the various Government Departments to put

a percentage of their budget into that so that it may be handled centrally by the Executive. We need something.

Ms Lo:

Bringing neighbourhood renewal to council level is not going to work for you at all — that is going downwards. We should be thinking about bringing the whole strategy into the Executive. I used to be involved with the South Belfast Partnership Board and I know of some of the difficulties and issues that you mentioned. One of the difficulties for the partnership boards was that different Departments send staff to the meetings, but they are not at a senior enough level. Those people cannot bring issues back to the Department; they do not have the clout to ask the Department to do things.

The whole thing should be pushed up a notch and placed right in the centre of Government. Departments will then be asked to have joined-up working and thinking and to push the neighbourhood renewal strategy, which really is a wonderful idea. That is what joined-up government should be; working together in partnership with local groups to sort out the different issues that affect people's lives.

In many ways, people on the ground do not care who is doing what. They just want to see that benefits are being delivered in housing, education and all those things that have kept disadvantaged communities down. That is the real work of government, regardless of Department, but that work needs to be joined-up and it is not down to DSD to carry the cost. DSD has been struggling on for the last two or three years, wasting a lot of money and raising expectations in local communities. People talk for weeks and weeks in consultations, coming up with ideas, but those ideas are not being realised. That is very demoralising for the communities involved.

We need to put some impetus on this to make it happen for the different communities and partnership boards who have invested time and bought into this scheme heart and soul. I am very angry about the lack of progress in this.

The Chairperson:

There will be a session dealing with the issue of councils, so we will be able to deal with that then.

Ms Bradshaw:

Way back when we were first presented with this proposal, we were told that it would lead to the better delivery of public services. The view then was that the community and voluntary sector would need to play a lesser role, which was great. There is a perception that the community sector has its begging bowl out constantly. We do not want to have to drive this forward. We would like to work ourselves out of a job. There is a saying in the Village, “We don’t care who’s doing it as long as it’s done.” Clearly, it is not being done, and it is being left to us to do. It is not that we are trying to perpetuate our jobs. I would love to be doing something less stressful somewhere else, but there is a job still to be done.

Mr M Doherty:

I read yesterday about the huge underspend that there has been in various Departments. The Executive are attempting to claw that money back. The Department for Social Development could, perhaps, make a pitch for funds for a neighbourhood renewal investment fund.

The Chairperson:

I was wondering who would bring that up. I thought that myself when I saw it yesterday.

Mr P Gallagher:

We were talking earlier about the Budget and the £60 million for neighbourhood renewal. The proportion of that money that would go into our action plan in Strabane would not even cover 10%. The danger is that if that money is given to councils, it will be the same cake that is being cut. The gap for people who are suffering deprivation will only get wider.

The Chairperson:

Someone asked what happens now. A transcript of this meeting is being prepared by Hansard and will be available online in a few weeks’ time. The Committee intends to follow up on the specific issues that have been raised. Furthermore, after the summer recess, the Committee will publish a report on the entire consultation, which will be the subject of a debate in the Assembly.

Mr F McCann:

There is almost complete buy-in on the part of councils in England. I have spoken to people in London, and they have told me that hundreds of millions of pounds had been targeted on deprivation, which is in stark contrast to what seems like petty jealousies and interdepartmental

rivalry when it comes to allowing resources to pour into areas.

The Chairperson:

OK. Thank you, everyone. The session has been very helpful.

(The Deputy Chairperson [Mr Hilditch] in the Chair)

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Hilditch):

I welcome Ms Renee Crawford and Mr Paddy McMennamin to the next session.

Ms Renee Crawford (Lenadoon Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee. I will give members some brief background to neighbourhood renewal. In June 2003, DSD published 'People and Place: A strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal', which was designed to help close the gap between the quality of life for people in Northern Ireland's most deprived neighbourhoods and that of the rest of society. In July 2004, the then Minister for Social Development, John Spellar MP, announced the 32 primary neighbourhood renewal areas.

Phase 2 of the neighbourhood renewal investment fund had several programme objectives:

"To support a robust and selective network of well-established community organisations within Neighbourhood Renewal Areas whose existence is critical to the success of Neighbourhood Renewal.

To ensure community support for the delivery of Neighbourhood Renewal in the target areas and the production of Neighbourhood Action Plans, ensuring that differing perspectives and priorities are reflected in the Plan.

To build a positive and effective relationship between residents of Neighbourhood Renewal areas and the statutory, community and private sector services that support them.

To contribute towards improving service delivery in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas and bending mainstream spend through a small number of pilots and exemplars that will provide a source of learning and good practice.

To ensure inclusion in the processes of Neighbourhood Renewal of the most marginalized communities and groups through learning and skills development.

To support a network of Neighbourhood Partnership Boards, one in each Neighbourhood Renewal area."

The Department's overriding interest is to ensure that local people can influence decision-making and have a real say in the future of their areas. It has adopted a long-term approach, and neighbourhood renewal will roll out over seven to 10 years. Like Danny Power, I do not know when the clock started on the seven to 10 years.

It is important to note that those extracts from the strategy mirror some of the strategies that local organisations have put in place over the last 15 years, such as the Lenadoon Community Forum and the Upper Andersonstown Community Forum, although we are speaking on behalf of neighbourhood partnerships from across the North. Key objectives were identified in areas, and groups and organisations have worked to implement them.

Neighbourhood renewal was to facilitate a multi-agency approach for the next seven to 10 years, but, to date, there has been no commitment from other Departments to participate in it. There has been no uniformity in rolling out neighbourhood renewal geographically. No other Departments have bought into the idea of “bend the spend”, which means using existing resources to maximise the impact on deprivation. More importantly, there are no sanctions against Departments that have not bought in.

There is too much time-consuming bureaucracy around finance. Some regional community organisations were not consulted about the financing of neighbourhood renewal. No processes have been put in place for different Departments to affect the strategic, operational and financial planning for neighbourhood renewal.

Despite two years’ hard work and commitment on the part of community organisations and volunteers, no decisions have been made regarding operations or financial resources on the ground. We must have an explanation — and a breakdown — of the £60 million neighbourhood renewal investment fund.

Clear guidelines and processes for the strategic, operational and financial implementation of neighbourhood renewal are required from each Department. Each Department must give a definite moral commitment and state the percentage of its financial buy-in. Moreover, there must be a breakdown of where the £60 million was allocated, and by whom.

There must be one point of contact for the implementation of financial operations. For example, one lead, or accountable, agency should be in charge of rolling out resources to maximise their impact in the renewal areas. We put those points together at our first meeting at Stormont, and we were asked to present them to the Committee.

The Deputy Chairperson:

You mentioned that there was too much bureaucracy in terms of finance and time. Will you elaborate on that?

Ms Crawford:

The Committee has heard some examples from the other witnesses this morning. I hear about so many new initiatives that, if I had a coffee table, it would be propped up by glossy leaflets and reports. Neighbourhood renewal was announced as the new best thing for Northern Ireland. There was a lot of concern and scepticism, but people got fully involved in it, because it was the first opportunity of its kind that involved all Departments. Everyone was supposed to buy into it, and we were to have a common purpose. However, we are now many years down the line, and that is why I asked when the clock started on the seven to 10 years of the project. We have spent a lot of time trying to put together the bones of the project, but nothing is happening on the ground. That is frustrating everyone, and everyone commented on it at the meetings.

The Deputy Chairperson:

You also mentioned that there should be a lead agency responsible for the financial resources, given that there was no adequate explanation for the allocation of the £60 million. Do you see any other advantages in having one agency in charge?

Ms Crawford:

It would be a one-stop shop. When we were going through the process we had to deal with different Departments. Paula Bradshaw told us how her partnership board had drawn up an action plan before the guidelines came out. That was closing the gate long after the horse had bolted. The process should be streamlined by having one overseeing Department.

It is important to have real sanctions. This morning, we have talked about buy-in. BRO is setting up a strategic working group with the other Departments to discuss that. At present, there is no buy-in from other Government Departments. If they do commit part of their budgets to a neighbourhood renewal investment fund, sanctions should be put in place.

Ms Lo:

You talked about making claims. Is that still a slow process? They say that the system has been improved; has that impacted on your work?

Ms Crawford:

From what people said at the meeting, it seems that that has not made a difference. Earlier, I mentioned bureaucracy; people still believe that we are wrapped up in red tape, which prevents us from completing processes through a streamlined and fast-track approach. People still report that the processes are long and involved. Claiming in arrears means that people are having to borrow money to keep them afloat because they cannot meet the cost of a bank overdraft or the charges incurred. People report that that is a real problem.

Ms Lo:

People from different projects have said that they have had to get an overdraft from the bank because the claims process is so slow. Does that still happen?

Ms Crawford:

Yes. We have a common purpose; we are about implementing the actions. The consultation with local communities identified people's priorities for what they wanted to happen in their areas. People are frustrated that they are not seeing that happen on the ground.

Mr A Maginness:

I have listened carefully to what has been said. By its very nature, it is a critical analysis of what is happening. I urge people to remember that we are here to see how effective neighbourhood renewal is, and whether it should exist. If the situation on the ground is bad and the schemes are ineffective, there is only one conclusion to be drawn — to scrap the whole thing. I am not so certain that the local groups want that to happen. While they are critical of neighbourhood renewal and recognise its shortcomings, there is a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. I urge the witnesses to reflect on that. Do they mean that the system is so bad — so unreformable — that it is not worth proceeding with? I do not think that they are saying that, but one could come to that conclusion.

The last point that you made, Ms Crawford, was in reference to a single point of contact for the implementation of financial operations. Do we not have that already, given that DSD is the lead Department? Should another agency take responsibility? Although I understand the concept of a single point of contact, I do not quite understand your point. What is actually happening on the ground?

Mr Paddy McMenamin (Lurgan Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

The Lurgan Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership spent two years compiling an action plan, and we discovered similar issues in all five areas in Lurgan. That enabled us to implement our action plan throughout those areas.

Agency representatives attended our meetings and listened to what was being said, and we believed that they were buying into the process. We understood that the budget for Lurgan was going to be just over £900,000 a year and that we, together with the agencies, would assess applications to decide what was required most and quickest. That did not happen. The agencies did not bring any money to the table, and that has slowed things down.

After an application is assessed, an economic appraisal is conducted, which is a slow process. After that, the application goes to the Department for approval. Although the £900,000 a year is allocated from April to March, some projects are taking so long to put together that we will end up losing money. If a community is told that it will be getting £10 million over 10 years, then it should receive £10 million over 10 years. One cannot tell people that they can have £900,000 in a particular year but that if they do not spend it in that year they will lose it. There should be some way to ensure that funding is carried over.

People in community groups work on a voluntary basis, and, given that we must talk to people in the community, it takes a long time to develop projects and plans. Bureaucracy, including applying for planning permission and giving evidence to the Committee, makes the process even longer. Everything takes too long. In addition, there is a big buy-in from the communities themselves. Everybody in the five communities in Lurgan bought into our scheme and worked hard on it. Nonetheless, when an application leaves our hands, we struggle with bureaucracy.

Ms Crawford:

Alban Maginness's point about a single point of contact for questions about implementation and finances came up at one meeting, and people from several areas said that they had received various roll-out instructions. In some cases, directions and guidelines were issued, only to be changed before they hit the ground.

Concerning Mr Maginness's second point; obviously, we do not intend to throw the baby out

with the bath water, but it would be nice to know what the baby looked like before the announcement of its birth. *[Laughter.]* Neighbourhood renewal was announced as a concept, but for the past three years people have been attempting to work out what it is actually meant to be. If time had been taken to work that out before it was announced, we might not have found it necessary to sit round this table.

Mr McMenamin:

Another important point that was raised earlier is that when we began to create our action plan we asked all the Government agencies to tell us about their long-term plans, but none of them did. Therefore, agencies whose representatives sit at the table with us have no remit. They cannot say that they will make a specific investment or support a particular project — they must refer to the Executive — and that affects the whole programme.

Mr F McCann:

Most of the witnesses, including you, have said that the neighbourhood renewal concept is brilliant — it brought everyone with an interest in an area together in order to determine where the resources should go.

As one of those who DSD initially approached about neighbourhood renewal and its outworking, I know that one of the commitments given was that, for the first time, communities would have a say about where services for their area would be directed. Years have been spent building up neighbourhood renewal partnerships without input from many Departments and without the effective partnerships that would allow them to look at the wider areas and resource needs. My concern — and I would like to hear your opinion on this — is that next year DSD will consider which Departments will have responsibility for many of the projects. DSD will then say that, from next year, it will no longer fund those projects, and that it will be up to the relevant Department to provide the funding. If there is no buy-in from Departments, where will that leave many of the projects? Looking at the matter from the outside, it seems that, without that buy-in, 60% of all projects could be wiped out.

Ms Crawford:

In my view, this will be another crisis that we will be reading about. Part of DSD's original role and remit was to pump-prime the sector and bring in the Departments that had responsibility for certain issues. That is what neighbourhood renewal is about. It goes back to the point about there

being no statutory buy-in. The Assembly must reaffirm its commitment to neighbourhood renewal and create sanctions for those who do not deliver.

Mr McCann is right: the Belfast Regeneration Office and DSD have categorised what elements will fall into the three categories next year. The second category will include matters that the Department will fund for a very short period only, and the third category will include matters that it will not be funding at all. Discussions and agreements with the Departments that will have responsibility for those areas have not begun or been committed to; so, I do not know what will happen. I think that there will be a massive reduction in funding at ground level. People will read and hear about the matter, and politicians will be lobbied by people about the crisis they face. To avert that situation, discussions must be held now, and agreements reached.

The Deputy Chairperson:

As there are no more questions, I thank you for your presentation.

I welcome Mr Gerry McIlroy from Brownlow Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership; Mr John McGrillen from Downpatrick Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership; Mr Damien McIlroy from Waterside Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership, and Mr Gerry O'Reilly from Newry Neighbourhood Renewal.

Mr Gerry O'Reilly (Newry Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

I am the spokesperson for this group. We have no chairperson, so everyone will give their opinions. I introduce Mr Gerry McIlroy from Brownlow Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership; Mr Damien McIlroy from Waterside Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership and Mr John McGrillen from Downpatrick Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership. We have submitted some papers already, and I will stick very much to the text of those.

We will discuss the transfer of responsibility for neighbourhood renewal to local councils, and we have divided our presentation into three sections. We tried to reach consensus on section one, but it became a bitching session. Section two explains our recommendations, which are laid out in section three. We have therefore adopted a summary position.

It is an understatement to say that the Minister's statement on the transfer of neighbourhood renewal to local councils surprised all the partnerships. There has been no consultation, and the

partnerships that had spent years reaching a working accommodation with DSD face new dilemmas. That is the position, and we assume that RPA is the driving force behind that decision.

Section one of our presentation comprises a series of questions. Does the Minister intend to transfer neighbourhood renewal to current councils, or does she intend to wait until the super-councils are established? Do councils and super-councils want that responsibility? Do they have adequate resources to deal with neighbourhood renewal? Who will pay the councils to deliver neighbourhood renewal? Will the funding come from the local neighbourhood renewal budget? Will they have overall responsibility across the departmental bodies to ensure delivery of the actions? Will they have the same power and authority as the Assembly to work across Departments? That was a theme highlighted during previous submissions.

Some Departments appear to be paying lip service at the moment; how can councils improve processes? Under RPA, some Departments will not fall within the remit of the councils — or will they? How can neighbourhood renewal partnerships ensure implementation of all aspects of their action plans? At the moment, councils are one of many lead partners: will the transfer of powers lead to an imbalance in the partnership?

The partnerships believe that if the transfer takes place, they should submit a route map that outlines how it can be achieved without damaging past work and future aims. RPA proposals affirm that neighbourhood renewal will transfer to local councils. Incorporating neighbourhood renewal into the wider strategic context of community planning will provide it with a physical location within new council boundaries to tackle deprivation. It is currently a well-intentioned policy that is driven, largely, by one Government Department.

Relocating neighbourhood renewal into more heavily-muscled councils with enhanced powers will allow partnerships to make deeper and more far-reaching decisions about tackling deprivation. That will be carried out in a broader council area, within the overall neighbourhood renewal regional framework, which will, presumably, be retained.

Under new RPA arrangements, a clear timetable must be produced for the integration of neighbourhood renewal into council workings. Neighbourhood renewal's role in the broad community-planning framework should be spelt out unequivocally in law. That law must highlight interdepartmental responsibility for neighbourhood renewal and enable partnerships to

establish targets.

Although the rationalisation process will inevitably put a strain on council resources, there is a clear opportunity to “bend the spend” and pool resources interdepartmentally. We must examine how the community sector can supplement council services through a more dynamic and innovative use of service level agreements with, possibly, full cost recovery.

Deprivation is neighbourhood renewal’s entire *raison d’être*. Given that council areas will house the most deprived members of society, tackling deprivation should become central to those new councils. The merging of councils brings with it the responsibility of putting deprivation front and centre in the new councils’ corporate development plans. Tackling deprivation should not be an addendum but a clear thread that runs through each council department’s work programme; and clear targets and actions should be agreed with the neighbourhood renewal partnerships.

The role of the partnerships and the retention of experience are important factors. To tackle deprivation, it is crucial that appropriate arrangements for community engagement are sustained and enhanced in order to develop dynamic interdepartmental working methods. Neighbourhood renewal partnerships have already demonstrated their ability to work on that basis and operate within delineated neighbourhood renewal areas. Furthermore, from a functional perspective, the continued implementation of neighbourhood renewal as a core plank of Government policy for councils should be carried out by the experienced DSD staff who have a proven track record in implementing neighbourhood renewal from its inception, and who support the partnerships and understand the local neighbourhood renewal process thoroughly.

It is recommended that local partnership guidelines and constitutions should remain under the direction of DSD — we still see that as a central position, not a devolved one. Neighbourhood renewal projects should have financial independence from super-council spending. Administration of neighbourhood renewal funding should be controlled by the super-councils: however, there is a distinct difference between that and actual control of the funding. We expect the secretariat and bureaucracy relating to the funding to be run by the councils.

Neighbourhood renewal partnerships, because they are community-led, should retain an independent decision-making process for projects. Neighbourhood renewal projects should have

representation on super-council subcommittees, such as those dealing with economics and planning, as well as health and education, and that representation should be based on the nature of the council structure. Super-councils would be in the best position to ensure joined-up delivery. They would be local, after all. Each super-council should have a full-time neighbourhood renewal department. The 11 super-councils will embrace several neighbourhood renewal regions, which, in turn, will have separate chairpersons.

What are our expectations from today's meeting? RPA is still under way, and structures are still evolving. The outcome of the review is central to our strategic plans. We expect some form of consultation paper to emerge from the first panel discussion that will direct us towards access points in the process so that we can figure out where this is all going.

Mr Gerry McIlroy (Brownlow Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

I will make a couple of points quickly, if I may. Neighbourhood renewal projects are worthwhile. The partnerships represented here would not have spent the past three years working on them if we did not think that that was the case. There are problems, and we have highlighted many of them this morning. When we all got together at first, we recognised that the most pressing problem — apart from terrible phrases such as “bend the spend” — was buy-in by statutory agencies.

A few minutes ago, we heard about spending. A great deal of the difficulties associated with spending is down to the statutory agencies. The partnerships expressed an interest, but when we went back to ask why things are not happening, we discovered two or three months later that the statutory agency had not submitted an application. They are not “buying-in”, in that sense. An expression of interest is registered and is then forgotten about, or the agencies say that they do not have the money, or that they are going to do something else. Meanwhile, the partnerships, and DSD in particular, are taking the blame unfairly, because they have nothing to process.

It all comes back to that issue, which ties in with what Mr Cobain said earlier about councils. If we cannot get Departments to buy into the projects, given that we have a Minister and an interdepartmental group at Stormont, what chance will we have of getting them to do so when the matter is transferred to local government? We will be returning to those issues.

Mr D McIlroy (Waterside Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

Alban Maginness asked starkly whether the initiative was working, because it seems to be in such a mess. The partnerships believe unanimously in the process. They believe in the concept of neighbourhood renewal and in its ideas and ideals. They have put a lot of time and effort into trying to make it work locally.

The big issue that has come over in all of the submissions is the lack of strategic Government buy-in. Neighbourhood renewal will work only if that strategic buy-in exists. If we get that, neighbourhood renewal will work better in any configuration. Currently, that is not the case.

Neighbourhood renewal is about tackling deprivation. When working with people who live in deprived areas, on either a thematic or area basis, it is very important that resources are spent on a basis of equality. For example, when neighbourhood renewal partnerships were integrated into the broader and more robust community-planning framework in Scotland, the councils developed an equality facility to ensure that neighbourhood renewal plans that were introduced and the council processes were equality-proofed. That is still the case, and we must think seriously about it as we go forward.

It is extremely important for this Committee to note that points are being made today in the context of the Minister's statement, because there is an expectation that neighbourhood renewal will be transferred to local councils. Whether that actually transpires is not a matter for us. However, our points should be taken in that context, because they concern the issues that will be important should the transfer to local government take place.

It is important to give this policy a home. At present, neighbourhood renewal is simply a policy that is being driven by one Department. In Scotland, and in the South, where social inclusion is part of county development-plan apparatus, giving the policy a physical location was very important and proved to be successful. Again, Government must work strategically.

Mr John McGrillen (Downpatrick Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership):

Although I am a member of Downpatrick Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership, in my day job I am the chief executive of Down District Council. Therefore the Committee will not be surprised if I address the matter from a slightly different perspective.

A recurring theme in this morning's presentations has been the lack of a joined-up approach in tackling issues at the local level. The Committee would not be surprised if I were to argue that the issues should be transferred to local government, because they are local issues and local government is best placed to tackle them.

I agree with almost every witness who spoke this morning, because in order to do tackle those issues effectively, a very strong community-planning framework must be put in place through legislation to ensure that the other statutory partners buy into the concept of joined-up Government, look at the needs of communities in an holistic fashion, and seek to use their limited resources to best effect. At the moment, it appears that some things are being duplicated, and we do not make the best use of the available resources.

From a local-government perspective, buy-in to the initiative is probably variable. In my neck of the woods, the council is heavily committed to the neighbourhood renewal partnership and is heavily involved in delivering many of the projects that come out of it. However, I recognise that there is a need for community engagement. I suggest that that theme will become increasingly important, as we move forward with the RPA.

I have an issue with the fact that the Department for Social Development is pretty much focused on urban areas — we have severe deprivation at the rural level as well. There are towns that may not fall within the remit of the DSD because of their size, but that does not mean that there is not a requirement for neighbourhood renewal in those towns, and for that renewal to be resourced. That is an argument for saying that some issues should transfer to local government. There appears to be a divide between urban and rural towns, depending on their size, because, on a policy basis, some are looked after by the Department for Social Development and some are looked after by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. We must take a holistic approach to the problem.

The Deputy Chairperson:

It appears that Minister Ritchie is considering transferring some functions in advance of the new councils being established. Are you in favour of that?

Mr G McIlroy:

The matter is slightly contentious, and from what we have seen this morning, no one is

particularly enthused with the idea of neighbourhood renewal going to councils. I have not met any representative who says that it is a good idea. There is lack of consultation, and I do not see how I can answer that question.

The Deputy Chairperson:

That is a fair point.

Mr D McIlroy:

I have to look at examples of how neighbourhood renewal operates and how it has been transferred to councils — particularly in Scotland — and there are good and bad examples. We must learn from the bad examples and focus on the good examples. If neighbourhood renewal is transferred to councils, I am fairly confident of the ability of councils to take it on board. However, one should not transfer matters to councils willy-nilly. The legislation must be strong and unambiguous in stating what is expected of councils with regard to the implementation of neighbourhood renewal when it is handed over. There must be buy-in at strategic level. Various council departments will be responsible to the Assembly and the Executive and, therefore, secondary and primary responsibilities must be outlined in legislation.

If functions are to be transferred now, then the partnerships need to know what those functions are and, if that is to be the case, there must be better communication. It must also be part of an overall package to ensure that it is coherent and that it is not being done arse about face — if you will excuse my expression.

Mr McGrillen:

You might think that that would not be a bad thing. In 2011, when functions transfer to the new councils, failure will not be an option. Those councils must function properly from day one with the mergers of two, three or, perhaps, four councils and with functions being transferred to them. We must try to ensure that any problems that may occur are ironed out in advance of that happening. Although everyone might not be comfortable with everything being transferred, lock, stock and barrel, there is an argument for putting some pilot projects in place to test the water and see how they would work, with a view to identifying the benefits and the problems and using the interim period to address any issues.

Mr O'Reilly:

As to how we would feel about giving some responsibilities to councils now; clearly from the previous four submissions there are problems within neighbourhood renewal as regards funding, action plans, etc. On the basis that super-councils are to be created in 2011, and given the logistical nightmare that will follow over the following two years, we would be better off trying to develop our own structures with DSD than trying to work with a structure that is being established and is trying to set its own agenda.

Mr Cobain:

I am disappointed that anyone supports handing responsibility for neighbourhood renewal to councils. The big issues that have an effect on deprivation — housing, health, education, etc — have nothing to do with local councils. Councils have absolutely no input whatsoever into the key drivers that affect deprivation. I am disappointed that people think that transferring the initiative to councils will make some difference. If one cannot get a Department, led by a Minister, to engage with other people, and when departmental representatives do not even turn up at meetings, I do not know how councils are going to force people to come to meetings, if a Minister, with all the power she has, cannot do so.

The old saying is that success has many fathers — if this were a successful operation it would certainly not be being transferred to councils. My big worry is that I do not think that councils have the wherewithal to deal with the initiative. Also, the idea of placing an additional resource burden on councils to fund some of the stuff is just out the window. Thirdly, and this is an important issue for me, without long-term strategic planning on some of the issues surrounding deprivation, we are not going anywhere. To take action on educational matters will take 10, 15 or 20 years, as will action on housing. As you are head of a council, Mr McGrillen, tell me how a council is going to influence DSD to spend additional money on housing in a particular area? How is a council going to influence Catriona Ruane to spend additional money for education in particular areas? What is the mechanism for doing that?

Mr McGrillen:

My point is that we need to be working in a coherent manner, both at the regional and local levels. I accept the point that councils will not be able to force a particular Minister to spend a certain amount of money in a particular area. The point was made earlier that what we need to do to address all of those issues is to look at the needs of a community holistically, try and identify

how those needs might be met, and agree, through the community planning route, a community plan that can then be resourced from the various Departments. Clearly there will be tensions about where resources will be spent, and how that might be done, but it will at least allow a more coherent approach from a unitary level, if considering a specific group of people, or geographical area, as to how those things will be best done.

If one looks at an issue such as antisocial behaviour, many elements contribute to that; housing design, lack of local authority leisure facilities, poor educational attainment — there are a whole bunch of things needed to deal with that. However, there are examples of where the statutory bodies have got together to identify local needs — I would say that that has happened through the neighbourhood renewal framework — and where substantial resources have been made available in addition to DSD money. There have been examples of that in the Flying Horse area of Downpatrick, where large sums of money have been made available by the health trust, the education and library board, the council, and others, to make specific projects happen that will ultimately make a difference in the longer term.

Mr Cobain:

If one speaks to any of the neighbourhood renewal groups, they all have action plans ready to go. I can only speak of the groups that I know, but none of the agencies have actually bought into those plans. DSD is spending money, but that is only one particular Department. You are very fortunate in Downpatrick.

Mr McGrillen:

I agree.

Mr Cobain:

In Belfast, we have had some experiences of being unable to get people from the education and library board to even attend meetings. You are very fortunate that you have got additional money from the education board there to run your particular projects. That has not been the experience of other people throughout Northern Ireland.

Perhaps I have not explained myself properly: the main issue is that none of the Departments has actually bought into neighbourhood renewal — they have never bought into it. Health boards, housing associations and education boards have not bought into it. None of the big

drivers that could actually make a difference to social deprivation in those areas has bought into it. What could the leader of a council do that Margaret Ritchie, the Executive Minister at Stormont, could not do? Tell me what you can do and that she cannot do to force people into meetings and produce money?

Mr McGrillen:

I am not suggesting that we can force people to take action. Obviously, we must try to work coherently together. Giving neighbourhood-renewal functions to councils could not make the situation any worse.

Mr Cobain:

It could not make the situation any worse because it is already a disaster.

Mr McGrillen:

That may well be the case. However, RPA might help. Part of the problem is that there are 26 district councils and I do not know how many neighbourhood-renewal areas. People often come to the table during meetings and they do not have the wherewithal to take decisions to allocate resources. For example, are representatives from Invest Northern Ireland likely to turn up to 30 different meetings in 30 different areas and have senior executives, who are in a position to take decisions, attend those meetings? That will not happen. However, if there were community plans that covered greater geographical areas within which those neighbourhood-renewal areas sit, it is more likely that senior executives would attend who would listen to the points made and who would be in a position to commit resources jointly.

Mr G McIlroy:

I want to highlight the fact that there is, obviously, a three-to-one split here. *[Laughter.]* Perhaps, it is a 2.5-to-1.5 split. Damien is wavering.

Mr D McIlroy:

I can see both points of view.

Mr G McIlroy:

We have consulted with the other partnerships, which is as good as we can get as regards the representations of the feelings of 35 partnerships. I must confess that I did not realise that

Downpatrick Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership is getting resources from health and housing agencies. Although Brownlow Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership is in the same area, it did not get anything. We have fought with those agencies for the past year. We have actually fought with them to submit applications. Obviously, you are better informed than any of the rest of us.

Mr D McIlroy:

The shortcomings of the neighbourhood-renewal process ask questions about all Government in general; what happens at strategic level and the fact that there is no buy-in. If we were to get it right at strategic level, and Government Departments were to buy in — and I could ask you, Fred, what you are doing to ensure that Ministers who are elected to the Executive buy into the process —

Mr Cobain:

I do it every day of the week. We have a politburo, and it is difficult for Members to influence a politburo.

Mr D McIlroy:

I understand that. My point is that the strategic Government, the Executive, has executive authority to develop the interdepartmental process that will inform the neighbourhood-renewal process and make it work. That needs to be done correctly. If it is, I imagine that the rest of the neighbourhood-renewal process will kick in. The fact is that councils can work only with the powers that they currently have. If councils were given more powers and were made more robust, they would be able to use those powers.

Mr O'Reilly:

I want to emphasise that we recommended the financial independence of neighbourhood renewal from super-councils' spend. We merely expect super-councils to be the administration and secretariat of that. Therefore, strategic planning, in our opinion, would still rest with DSD. We also recommended that partnerships have full independent decision over projects, so that there is still a community-focused approach. We still have to decide on those matters.

We want to have political representation at the subcommittee stage in those super-councils. We want neighbourhood renewal to have a home, and, at the same time, to participate in the decision-making process at a local level. I acknowledge that we are cherry-picking, but so be it.

Mr Brady:

This is not a “pick on John” morning, honestly.

The lack of consultation, or the feeling that consultation should have been part of the process, has been raised in all today’s presentations. As chief executive of a council, you may be better placed than most to comment. When the Minister announced that functions may be handed over to councils, it came as a surprise to many people, including us. Was there any consultation with your council?

The point was made that there will have to be a staged handover of functions to the councils. When super-councils are subsequently established and take over, they may well decide that they do not want the functions that have been forced on them. Has the consultation process on that started, or will that happen much further down the road?

Mr McGrillen:

I will start at the end and work back, if I may. I would be hugely surprised if any council did not regard tackling deprivation as a key issue for its local authority. I imagine, therefore, that were they given those powers, they would make good use of them, and I suggest that many currently do so.

As a family, local government would probably argue that the word “engagement” should be used, rather than “consultation”, and that there has been limited engagement on decisions relating to the review of public administration. A review document was printed, decisions were taken, and the Executive decided to review those, and several meetings were held; but there was no significant consultation with local government on the RPA.

The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE) and other bodies expressed their views, but, with the possible exception of one or two Departments, there was no serious discussion at departmental level on the transfer of functions. I am not surprised that people involved in neighbourhood renewal are disappointed, or feel disenfranchised, due to the lack of significant consultation. The lack of overall engagement on the RPA was felt across the board. Monumental decisions were taken without the degree of prior engagement that one would have expected.

Mr Brady:

As someone who fortunately, or unfortunately, has never been a councillor, I do not have an axe to grind. I ran an advice centre for 25 years that, I hope, went some way towards tackling deprivation by maximising people's benefits, enhancing their quality of life, and so forth. However, trying to obtain council funding was like pulling teeth, although it varies from council to council. For the first 17 years, the centre got no funding. It was only when match funding came through from the Department for Social Development's voluntary activity unit did the council begin to provide funding to the centre. I am not sure whether all councils are committed to tackling deprivation.

Mr McGrillen

I cannot comment on every council. I can only say that my council gives £173,000 annually to tackling deprivation, against which it receives a £32,000 grant and is, therefore, strongly committed.

Mr Brady:

I should have moved to Downpatrick years ago.

Mr A Maginness:

The submission and debate have been very interesting. I do not hold firm views on the transfer of functions, and I am persuadable either way. From listening to Mr McGrillen and, to a certain extent, Mr McIlroy, I can conceive of a model at local government level in which neighbourhood renewal is regarded as an important function.

One could use the new extended powers of the council and the new clout that they have, as a result of their larger size and greater influence, to press Government to exercise the functions necessary in a neighbourhood renewal area.

A fundamental problem has emerged today: in the terminology used by the witnesses, there has not been "buy-in" by other Government Departments. Therefore, irrespective of whether DSD or local councils are in the lead, that problem needs to be addressed. If it is not addressed, then neighbourhood renewal will not work under the leadership of either DSD or the councils. Let us park that macro-political problem, because it is one that needs to be addressed.

It seems to me that there are great advantages in the exercise of neighbourhood renewal functions by local government, because local people will be addressing local problems and local councillors will take local responsibility. It seems to work well in Scotland, so there is a model. Furthermore, proper guarantees should be given by the DSD that the funding provided will be additional funding. If those guarantees are forthcoming, local government should be in pole position to deal much more effectively with neighbourhood renewal.

Mr D McIlroy:

The points made by Mr O'Reilly were made in the context of the Minister's statement that neighbourhood renewal functions would be transferred to local councils. That is not to say that the issue is firm in any way.

We need robust local government: democracy needs to be devolved to the lowest common denominator and brought closer to people. The question is whether neighbourhood renewal's integration into local government will be part of that. It would certainly embed further the local partnership process, which would not be a bad thing. The key to delivery and success of neighbourhood renewal at local level is the continued role of the interdepartmental, inter-sectoral partnerships, and retention of the administrative experience that exists in the regional offices.

Mr F McCann:

The debate is interesting, and no doubt it will continue. It has many facets. I was unable to see the possibility of neighbourhood renewal being handed over to local government because it had been continuously put forward as the Government's strategy to deal with social deprivation and to deal with deprivation on a wider basis.

I am a member of Belfast City Council, as are Fred Cobain and Alban Maginness, and I am not confident that councils have the ability to manage neighbourhood renewal. Current arguments over deprivation show that there is much to be desired. It is difficult to understand how it will be managed in future.

Some people believe that DSD, at senior level have already given up the ghost of neighbourhood renewal. That is one of the reasons why they want to give it to local government, but it may be put forward as a pilot scheme so that DSD would be rid of it sooner rather than

later.

Deprivation must be tackled at senior level within Government, and it must be tackled by one unit rather than 11 different units. Alban, Fred and I talked about that after the last meeting, when we were surprised to hear that there had been on-going negotiations within local government. However, we, as councillors, were not involved in any negotiations. Every time that Fred or I checked, no one was able to tell us where those negotiations were taking place. There will be major difficulties in moving neighbourhood renewal effectively across to local government — if that were to happen. If we can get it right a Government level, then that is where it should stay.

I appreciate Mr McGrillen's point that there is a perception that neighbourhood renewal is an urban issue, although I also appreciate that are pockets of deprivation that must be deal with in many rural areas. However, the fact remains that the major areas of deprivation exist in urban areas in the North. A mechanism must be available that allows us to deal with the pockets of deprivation that exist elsewhere.

Mr McGrillen:

I take the point about the levels of deprivation in urban areas. I attended a similar function run by the Department for Regional Development yesterday, where people from the west of the Bann were making the opposite argument. They said that there were pockets, but that there were lots of blue areas west of the Province.

Fra McCann and Fred Cobain have already made the point that if central Government cannot sort the problem out, how will local government work it out, and that is a reasonable argument. It also strengthens the argument that if one is going to put community planning powers in place for local government, those powers must be meaningful and people must be required, under legislation, to commit to it. If it is tokenistic, we will end up with the same problem that we have now. I am not saying that local government is the panacea.

Central Government tends to have policies that apply right across the board. There is a uniform policy because it is departmental policy and it applies to every area of Northern Ireland. However, some of these issues are not universal in nature. They are local in nature and different policies must be applied in different ways. To some extent, that is why I feel that some measures

have failed. We have had a policy for the identification of neighbourhood renewal partnership areas. When the policy was applied in Downpatrick, it excluded a much disenfranchised unionist community that felt that it had not been looked after. When the map was applied using that policy, that community was excluded from it. However, I argue that if the local authority had been applying it, it would have included that community and it would have addressed issues in that community with regard to inclusivity, equality and delivery of service. I continue to argue that while neighbourhood renewal requires commitment from central Government, it is better delivered at a local level.

Mr O'Reilly:

I reiterate that we are recommending that the decision process — the strategy direction of neighbourhood renewal — stays distinctly with DSD at a ministerial level. Whatever sub-groups sit under the Ministers must apply lobbying and realpolitik until it takes place at that level. We specifically referred to the funding stream in councils — the administration side for local level — and we specifically referred to economics and planning. It is inconceivable that deprivation can be handled in exclusion from local planners. We have distinctively identified our role for neighbourhood renewal in the local super-council structure, with the strategic direction of neighbourhood renewal fundamentally staying with DSD.

Mr F McCann:

The difference with London and Glasgow was that there was a complete buy-in by all the Departments, and resources were used by each Department to make neighbourhood renewal a success in many areas. There has been no commitment from Departments here. Councils are terrified councils that money from neighbourhood renewal will not be available in five or ten year's time. It is feared that the scheme — which communities have bought into lock, stock and barrel — will become a thing of the past and be replaced by a new scheme aimed at dealing with severe social deprivation. Merely paying lip service to deprivation could make the problem worse.

Mr Gerry McIlroy:

John McGrillen said that neighbourhood renewal had to be a council responsibility but it does not have to be that way. He also highlighted an area that had been omitted from the scheme. The neighbourhood partnerships in Lurgan, Portadown and Brownlow do not have any council representation, which is strange. When our boundary was being drawn up, three estates that should

have been included were left out. They were included in the poverty programme in 1990 and had not visibly improved since then. We solved that problem in partnership with DSD. Therefore, neighbourhood renewal does not necessarily have to be the remit of a local council.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I must draw this discussion to a close. It has been a very lively session but we are pushed for time. Apparently, there is another meeting up on the hill today. *[Laughter.]* Thanks very much for your time; it has been a very useful meeting.

The final part of the evidence session is a question and answer session with departmental officials. I welcome Angela Clarke, Head of Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, and Mark O'Donnell, Belfast Regeneration Office.

Ms Angela Clarke (Department for Social Development):

Thank you, Chairperson and Committee members, for your invitation to listen to the presentations and to contribute to the evidence session. Mark and I are not going to make a presentation but we are keen to contribute to the discussion in any way that we can. We will also respond to any questions that the Committee wants to ask.

We have listened carefully to all the five presentations and the Department agrees with many of the points that have been made. There has been a huge commitment to neighbourhood renewal, much of which has been community-led with support from DSD. However, neighbourhood renewal is the Executive's strategy for tackling deprivation — it is not owned by DSD. Neighbourhood renewal has the support of the Ministers in the Executive. That fact has recently been reaffirmed by our Minister, Margaret Ritchie, through correspondence with her ministerial colleagues.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Has it been brought to the table?

Ms Clarke:

No, but there is correspondence to that effect.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Has the Minister brought it to the Executive table?

Ms Clarke:

She has written to her ministerial colleagues very recently about the workings of the departmental ministerial group and the support and commitment to neighbourhood renewal. That is on the understanding that tackling deprivation is the responsibility of all parts of Government. The translation of that responsibility to subregional and local level has not always been as clear and active as it should have been. That presents a challenge to the Department, and this morning's presentations have indicated just how big that challenge is.

Neighbourhood renewal is not just about demonstrating that the additional money is being provided for certain areas; there has been much discussion about "bend to spend". The scheme is very much about making mainstream Government budgets as effective as possible and able to achieve the biggest impact. A significant amount of money is spent that is not always used as effectively as possible. Neighbourhood renewal is about making budgets responsive and effective to local need.

Margaret Ritchie's statement on 10 March outlined the next stage of the implementation process for neighbourhood renewal. It attempted to clarify her expectations of other Departments' responsibilities. Some DSD moneys are being used for things that some people would say are not appropriate. Indeed, mention was made of that issue this morning. That is part and parcel of neighbourhood renewal, and the Minister is saying clearly that we want to use the dedicated money that we have in DSD to support new approaches.

Neighbourhood renewal is about doing new things and meeting need in a better way. However, in order to do that, we must remove ourselves from supporting things that are clearly the responsibility of other Departments. It could be argued that for some time we have been funding items that are the responsibility of other Departments. Therefore, it is about encouraging those Departments to step up to the mark. However, that is very difficult to do. Neither Margaret Ritchie nor her Department have the power to tell other Departments what they must do, but we must encourage, promote, support and demonstrate the benefits of neighbourhood renewal.

Public service agreements were included in the Programme for Government. They are clear,

specific objectives for other Departments for which they are accountable, and they are crucial to the success of neighbourhood renewal.

The Deputy Chairperson:

How often does the ministerial group meet?

Ms A Clarke:

It is supposed to meet every quarter, but it has not met since August 2007. It is scheduled to meet again in September 2008.

The Deputy Chairperson:

That will have been a year since the previous meeting. Does everyone attend the meeting?

Ms A Clarke:

All Departments are represented at a very senior level, but, recently, it has been difficult to get a date to suit those senior officials, as they have had other priorities.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Has an action plan or forward work programme been developed?

Ms A Clarke:

There is no work programme.

Mr F McCann:

Several issues arose in the presentation, and I have no doubt that the Committee will write and seek responses to those issues. When Angela spoke about the level of moneys going into areas, it was clear from most of the earlier presentations that it is not all about money — it is about resources. The expression “bend to spend” was about other Departments providing resources. It is no use sitting at Executive or middle-management level saying that one is willing to examine resources. My understanding was that, for the first time, local people were going to be allowed to take a local approach to where the money was going, but that has not happened. Therein lies one of the main difficulties.

I know that this has nothing to do with you, but it is a disgrace that a meeting has not been

held in almost a year, yet this is the main strategy to deal with areas of deprivation. The lack of such a meeting does not instil much hope that Departments will be forced into a position of providing those resources, and it even hardens the attitude that if it is happening now, what would it be like if local government were to deal with them.

Ms A Clarke:

Although there has been no formal meeting, there has been a great deal of contact between Margaret Ritchie and other Ministers about the neighbourhood renewal process. Therefore, it is not as though there are no discussions around that.

Mr F McCann:

It will be interesting to find out how many times the issue was raised at the Executive.

Mr Cobain:

That answer tells me everything that I need to know about neighbourhood renewal and how seriously people are taking the issue. Education is a big issue for people in working-class areas of Belfast, yet it is really disappointing that the education and library boards do not even attend the meetings.

Ms A Clarke:

We have had an ongoing issue with the education and library boards.

Mr Cobain:

I am aware of that, but the point is that the education and library board, which is the main provider for education in Belfast, does not think that it is worthwhile, or simply does not want to attend meetings on neighbourhood renewal. I could provide a great deal more examples of that. I do not care what is in the Programme for Government — it should begin with “once upon a time”. I am not worried about what the Programme for Government contains, because it changes every week. However, the point that I am making is that deprivation is not at the top of the agenda for other Departments in the Executive.

Ms A Clarke:

I appreciate that.

Mr Cobain:

To say that the Executive have not met for a year, when deprivation is at the top of the agenda, as Fra McCann says, is an absolute disgrace. Departments talk about tackling deprivation, but their representatives do not even attend the meetings and no sanction is placed on those Departments. I get so frustrated about neighbourhood renewal; it drives me absolutely crackers. To say that lifting neighbourhood renewal from central Government and giving it to local councils will somehow make things better is to live in fairy land.

Ms A Clarke:

It might be useful for Mark to talk about what is happening in the Belfast strategy group.

The Deputy Chairperson:

You will have to be brief.

Mr Mark O'Donnell (Department for Social Development)

I will be very brief. I understand that there is a problem with some of the Departments not being able to field people for individual neighbourhood partnership meetings. They have their own reasons for that and they can answer for themselves. In Belfast, partly as a response to that, we formed the Belfast strategy group, which is representative of all the Departments, including the Department of Education. It has started a process of engagement with the neighbourhood partnerships through workshops that have themes. The first one was on education, training and skills. The second was on health. We are learning that process as we go along. I do not want to leave the Committee with the impression that there is no engagement going on at any level. Some of the Departments are asking us how best to engage with the partnerships.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I will have to end the discussion there. Thank you for your contribution this morning.