



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Draft Sustainable Development Strategy

14 April 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kennedy (Chairperson)
Mrs Naomi Long (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon

Witnesses:

Mr John Bradley)	
Mr Damian Prince)	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Jim Sutherland)	

The Chairperson (Mr Kennedy):

We move to the draft sustainable development strategy. The Committee is being briefed by departmental officials on the final consultation report on the sustainable development implementation plan. Members should note that, due to its size, the document was e-mailed on Wednesday 31 March 2010. Included in the Committee papers for members is the Department's response to concerns that were raised by the critical friends stakeholder group about the strategy. That follows my meeting with the Chairpersons of the Committee for the Environment and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Critical Friends stakeholder group.

We welcome Damian Prince, Jim Sutherland and John Bradley. Thank you for coming. This session is being recorded by Hansard. I invite you to make an opening statement, and then to make yourselves available for questions.

Mr Damian Prince (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

Thank you. With me today are Jim Sutherland and John Bradley from the Department's sustainable development unit. The unit has been busy since our previous discussion with the Committee on 20 January 2010. We are now beginning to make substantial progress on the sustainable development strategy and its associated implementation plan, and I hope that our discussion today will provide the Committee with a degree of reassurance that that is indeed the case.

Since the conclusion of the public consultation on 15 January, we have been working to complete the final consultation report, of which the Committee has a copy. We have been considering the ways in which we can best respond to the strategic issues that were raised — by which I mean the issues that have been identified as recurring themes throughout the course of the full consultation exercise — and, subsequently, to incorporate responsive measures into the document itself. Some of those themes resonate with earlier discussions that we had with the Committee, during which members highlighted areas such as procurement and governance as significant owing to their potential positive impacts. Therefore, we have strengthened the reference to those and other areas in the latest draft of the strategy. Naturally, we will take account of any issues that today's meeting may produce, before finalising the strategy for presentation to Ministers and the Executive.

Work on the implementation plan is progressing well. An implementation plan steering group has been set up under the chairmanship of the OFMDFM junior Ministers. That group has met twice, in February and in March, and another meeting is planned for the end of April. As we indicated at our meeting with the Committee on 30 September 2009, the steering group model has allowed us to invite a diverse range of representatives from the economic, social and environmental sectors to actively participate in the development of the implementation plan. The signs are that the model is effective in channelling communications and agreeing actions.

We have also been meeting stakeholders, organisations, departmental officials and various SD champions to progress the development of the implementation plan. Those meetings are scheduled to continue throughout April, with the intention of taking a set of draft priorities and objectives to the steering group for approval. That would effectively lead us into stage 2

of the project, which relates to populating the plan with actions to support the delivery of the objectives. When the implementation plan is sufficiently developed we intend, of course, to conduct a full public consultation, and we will provide a draft to the Committee for its input.

I am happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson:

Can you give us an insight on the indicators that you will use to measure and monitor progress? How can you convince us that those measures are, or will be, in place, and that they will deal effectively with any shortfalls in the new strategy?

Mr Prince:

That is where the implementation plan measures will fill in the gaps. During the consultation on the strategy, comments were made that the strategy is devoid of metrics to measure progress and to demonstrate that we are accomplishing and achieving that which we thought we would. Through the steering group, and in liaison with stakeholder groups, we have set up a model in which key priorities and objectives are identified and beyond which measures will get down to the hard and fast details of what we will do, when we will do it, how much it will cost, when it will be completed and what it will achieve.

You will recall that the intention was to bring the Programme for Government more directly into line with the sustainable development strategy. In the Programme for Government, there are a raft of things that will contribute to the sustainable development agenda. That is already happening. Initially, we will identify those things, and then, we will identify gaps thrown up during consultation on the sustainable development strategy and on the implementation plan in order to come up with a comprehensive set of measures to determine whether we have achieved what we thought we would achieve.

To give you a flavour of the priorities, I shall pass over to my colleague.

Mr Jim Sutherland (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

When setting up the implementation plan, we identified six priority areas that are consistent with the aims of the Programme for Government, including building the economy and improving society. Those priority action areas are supported by a number of objectives, which were first identified by the sustainable development unit.

With respect to the implementation plan itself, through the mechanisms that Damian

Prince identified involving the steering group, the stakeholder forum and the sustainable development champions network within Departments, we are at the stage of discussing the objectives to ensure that the views of stakeholders and champions are incorporated into them. The next stage is to take the objectives to the steering group with a view to signing-off on them as being capable of delivering the priorities that we have identified.

The Chairperson:

We received representation that the sustainable development implementation plan steering group does not include any local government representatives. Why is that?

Mr Sutherland:

As we said in September, we wanted to put together a group that represents the three broad pillars of sustainable development. You will recall that one of the main reasons for coming up with a new sustainable development strategy was to balance all three pillars — economy, environment and social — more evenly, and that is what we have achieved. We wanted the composition of the steering group to be representative of those three sectors.

We see local government as being in a special place; it is another iteration of government, quite distinct from other interest groups. Currently, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) is on the stakeholder group, and that gives us a way to bring its comments to the group. In addition, to garner its views, we have twice invited NILGA to talk to us directly. Obviously, Ministers signed off on the composition of the steering group, but, as part of that, there is an understanding that if it is not producing the representative sample that we think it needs, we can review the membership.

The Chairperson:

Do you have to replace, or can you simply add, members?

Mr Prince:

I do not think that there is a cap on the number of people who can be on the steering group. As we said previously, the arrangements that underpinned the old strategy became cumbersome because so many people were involved. The steering group had about 60 people on it, so it was cumbersome when trying to move things forward responsively and quickly. We thought that a smaller, representative group that could speak for sectors would be more relevant.

Mr Molloy:

I was going to raise that very point about local government representation. It would seem that the old strategy of appointing quango members, rather than people being elected democratically, is still in place; you select who represents people, not the public. That has been the case over the years, and there is no longer any need for that. It is unfortunate that local government has to implement a strategy into which it has no input. If setting up quangos to deal with such matters is to continue, you cannot expect local government to take up the issues and deal with them when they are handed on to it.

Mr Prince:

I note that point. The Department clearly recognises that there is an important role for local government. As we told the Committee on previous occasions, the strength of the new strategy is that it could reach beyond central government and into local government and the third sector to promote sustainable development in a more comprehensive way.

We recognise the importance of the contribution that local government has to make, and we have an offer out with NILGA to liaise directly with them to hear views and to gather information as it is needed. I would not want to leave the Committee with the impression that we do not regard local government as an important sector, because we do. It is a vital sector, and we want to engage with it.

Mr Molloy:

I have a view that the Department does not rate local government, and talking to NILGA is not talking to local government. NILGA is one of the organisations that represent local government, but it does not speak on behalf of local government with regard to councils. The issue comes back to quangos. We hoped that we had moved on from the Northern Ireland Office strategy of just setting up quangos in place of democracy. Yet we find here another attempt to do just that. It will fall flat on its face because of that attitude towards local government.

Mr Prince:

I can only note what you say, Mr Molloy.

The Chairperson:

Very wise. What is the next stage with regard to timelines and future actions?

Mr Prince:

The Department is keen to hear anything that the Committee wants to say about the strategy, because we would like to finalise it by the end of the month. That is just the strategy bit. The more meaningful bit is the activities of the implementation plan. We hope to have an implementation plan out for consultation by July, always conscious that July and August are bad times to go out to public consultation, and we will keep that under review. At this stage of the game, however, we are inclined to take whatever time it takes to get the plan done right, rather than to get it done quickly.

Mrs Long:

What is the situation with regard to the appointment of a sustainable development commissioner?

Mr Prince:

The interviews have taken place, and a recommendation has gone to the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mrs Long:

When did that happen, and when is an outcome expected?

Mr Prince:

I do not know, Naomi. Sorry.

The Chairperson:

Can we check that?

Mrs Long:

It would be helpful to have in place someone who could influence the shaping of the strategy.

Mr Prince:

Yes; sure.

Mr Elliott:

Surely the Programme for Government will be almost complete by the time that all that is put in place? The consultation was issued in October 2009, I believe. You are planning for the implementation plan to go out for consultation in July, which is likely to be August or September. It will probably be completed in October, and we are near the end of the

Programme for Government process. Is it worth all that?

Mr Prince:

I think that it is, Mr Elliott. You make a fair point: the timing is not great, being into the last year of the current Programme for Government.

Mr Elliott:

Not great? It is pretty pathetic.

Mr Prince:

In one sense, it could be said that we are preparing the field early, because we do not know, and no one knows, what the next spending review has in store. We will probably get no detail about even the size of the Northern Ireland slice of the cake.

Mr Elliott:

So, once you get that, you will have to review the strategy again.

Mr Prince:

Knowing that those problems are there means that we can prepare for them as we go along.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. Have some mercy, please. Gentlemen, thank you very much indeed for your time. Good afternoon.

Are members content to forward the Department's response to the concerns raised by the critical friend stakeholder group about the draft sustainable development strategy to the Committee for the Environment and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for their information? Will we forward the response to all Statutory Committees?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Molloy:

We have to make a point about how those structures are put together. All sorts of organisations are pulled together — the great and the good — but the people who have to go out and knock on doors, as we have to do ourselves at the moment, are left in quango land.

The Chairperson:

Everyone is involved, to a greater or lesser extent.

Mrs Long:

I agree that local government should have been involved. I do not share Mr Molloy's views when it comes to the value of some of the other people who have been involved in those processes. There are people with expertise in research and development who are able to bring that to the table. The fact that we have democratic accountability should not necessarily negate all the work that is done by other sectors. However, there is an issue about sectors that will have a big influence on how the strategy is delivered having absolutely no say in how it is developed. Apart from anything else, that is not good process.

I share the concerns that have been expressed about the exclusion of local government from the implementation strategy group. However, I do not share the slightly dim view that has been taken of the people on that group, because I do not know that they are —

Mr Molloy:

I was not expressing a dim view of the people who are on the implementation group. I was expressing a dim view that there were people left off it.

The Chairperson:

I think that I got that, and I hope that Hansard did too.