



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Programme for Government: Delivery
Reports**

23 June 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)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr Dale Heaney)
Mr Tim Losty) Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr James McEldowney)

The Chairperson (Mr Kennedy):

Mr Losty has stayed with us, and we are grateful for that because he will now brief us on Programme for Government delivery reports. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have tabled a motion for debate this coming Monday asking the Assembly to note the delivery reports from 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009, and up to September 2009. Copies of the reports were emailed to members on Monday with tables highlighting issues that may be relevant. Copies of the reports were sent to all Statutory Committees on Monday to allow them to consider them before the debate. Mr Losty is joined by Dale Heaney and James McEldowney.

Mr Tim Losty (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

A take-note debate is scheduled for next week to look at the two main findings reports, one up to March 2009 and the other up to September 2009. The Programme for Government is an ambitious document, with 66 indicators used to inform the five key priorities, and 331 indicators to inform the 23 public service agreements. There is a lot of data to get through. However, it is important that we have that information and monitor it, because in doing so we are marking our homework and making sure that we see where there is progress or where there is a need to take action.

At September 2009, with regard to the Executive's five priorities, 38 of the 66 indicators — 58% — were met or were broadly on track. That is a positive indicator. I will break down the five priorities by looking at where we are in achieving targets.

In priority 1, growing a dynamic, innovative economy, 53% of the targets are on track for achievement. In priority 2, promoting tolerance, inclusion and health and well-being, 71% of targets are on track. In priority 3, the environment, 45% of targets are on track. In priority 4, infrastructure, 73% of targets are reported as green or green/amber. That refers to our results tracking mechanism, which is red, amber, amber/green or green. In priority 5, high quality public services, 40% are on track for achievement.

Those are generally positive indicators. Overall, however, the trend is towards deterioration in some performance. In respect of the 23 individual public service agreements, 213 of the 331 indicators — 64% — are either on course to be met or have been achieved already.

Where we identify cause for concern with some of the indicators, we have a facility whereby Ministers or senior officials will meet the relevant senior responsible officer or Ministers of other Departments to look at what is happening with those indicators and targets so that we can take remedial action. Following the March report, there were five areas to be looked at: regeneration; STEM subjects, which are science, technology, engineering and maths; greenhouse gases; sustainable development; and tourism and productivity. From the September report, we identified three further areas that we need to discuss and look at the trends and impediments to progress on. Those are: child poverty and victims; the development of rural businesses; and addressing health inequalities.

The Programme for Government is an ambitious document. There are some very detailed measurement statistics that we have to look at. We meet Departments regularly to review those statistics and the evidence as to how the results can be tabulated and whether they have been achieved or are still to be achieved. It is a robust document, and there is a robust process behind the measurement. We have a central team whose priority role is to challenge the information that comes from the various Departments. That challenge role is seen as apposite by the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee.

Although there have been achievements in some areas and there is some cause for concern with other indicators, if seen against the background of the severe economic difficulties that every region has faced over recent years, overall we are in a positive place. However, we are not complacent about that. We are happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. By way of clarification, am I right in thinking that the data is for up until September 2009?

Mr Losty:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

However, there is no data from that point to the end of the previous financial year. Is there a reason for that?

Mr Losty:

There are four reports that are produced from the Programme for Government. The two main reports are the six-monthly ones that are presented to the Assembly. As well as that, the Executive have two additional reports. We also have that challenge role, and that information is presented to the Executive. It is used to help us to monitor our progress towards achieving the main targets.

The Chairperson:

It seems that we are failing to meet the requirements of PSA 7, which is on child poverty and

victims. The target to work towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012 is red and there is an amber warning light on reducing child poverty by 50% by 2010. As regards victims, the document states:

“the first two targets demonstrated progress only after significant delay compared to the original timeframes”.

It also refers to:

“significant slippage against the target timeframe specified within the PfG.”

You cannot blame the economic downturn for that.

Mr Losty:

There are a lot of variable factors. We need to consider what we mean by child poverty and how it is measured. That was highlighted in discussions with colleagues and in our review of our performance, and Ministers will be considering that in future.

The Chairperson:

And on the issue of victims and survivors?

Mr Losty:

Plans for the new victims’ and survivors’ service went out to consultation in 2009. That service will replace other funding schemes currently provided by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We are analysing the consultation responses and considering the next steps. We think that that will be back on track.

Ms Anderson:

Go raibh míle maith agat. Thank you, Tim, for that presentation. I am a bit concerned about the explanations being given for child poverty. The Committee had a child poverty inquiry and I am concerned that rather than looking at what measures need to be put in place to tackle child poverty, the definition may be changed because we are not meeting the target. A whole discussion is needed about income disregard, for instance; that is, the amount of hours that people can work before they lose some of their benefit. An increase in that threshold could address at least a percentage of the child poverty that we face here. Although you would not be able to recoup some money, you are keeping some more money in people’s pockets. I am just concerned that it is a case of, “Let us look at the definition so that we can end up with a better statistic”, as opposed to coming up with new and innovative measures to tackle child poverty.

You will not be surprised at me talking about Ebrington, given that I am from Derry. I see that, under PSA 7, Ebrington has moved from green to amber. Is the Department seeking to take that matter forward?

Mr Losty:

On your first point, we would not be seeking to review the definition of child poverty on the basis of trying to make it easier to achieve the target; we would be doing it so that we can identify more meaningful actions that need to be taken. We are getting information from consultations with colleagues and stakeholders about how we move to more meaningful action that would have a tangible impact. The example that you mentioned has been put to me since I came to the Department in February. It is a case of trying to encompass that, rather than having a definition that may be too broad and does not allow us to get into the actions that will achieve the desired impact. Therefore, when Ministers start to look at the definition issue, they will do so in a way that makes it meaningful rather than broad.

The Chairperson:

We had a meeting in Brussels and took evidence on the issue of poverty. Child poverty was part of that. In Europe, they have begun to reshape the argument in the sense that rather than eradicate child poverty, the best that they can hope to do is to alleviate it. Many of us probably accept that we are now in that position. The sooner that we all accept that, the more progress will be made.

What began as a very ambitious target, which was to reduce child poverty by 50% by a certain date, is clearly not possible for a variety of reasons. We had better rescale it and see what is more achievable, because if we continue to say that we are going to eradicate things when plainly that is not possible, that strikes at our own credibility.

Ms Anderson:

We need to be ambitious. I do not think that we should reduce our ambition to alleviate child poverty, because we have not developed an effective and efficient way of using the resources that we have to try to put in place actions to challenge it. We are saying that despite all our best efforts, we are still at the point where we cannot eradicate it. However, we have not yet put our best efforts into trying to address it. When we come out the other end after having done so, then we should assess it. I believe that based on the proper application of the equality impact assessment process, you could do a hell of a lot more to alleviate and eradicate child poverty, for

instance, than what this Administration is doing.

The statistics that you talk about date until September 2009. Since then, we have had multiple deprivation indicator data for 2010. You are using data from 2001 when we received data for 2010 a number of weeks ago. Data that would inform the thinking, allow us to measure and tell us what we can do is not being used. Something in the system needs to start correcting itself, particularly because of the pressure that we are under at the moment with the pressure on the block grant. People are looking for a smarter and more effective way of doing business, and I do not think that the system, across the board, has provided us with the kind of mechanism to tackle those problems. That is what is missing. It seems like a tick-box exercise.

Mr Losty:

Much effort, work and consultation goes into trying to address a lot of PSA targets and to get work done on the ground. There are a lot of strategies and forums meeting. We are at a stage where we want to move towards taking a lot more action to address the issues. Ministers are discussing some of the issues that you raised in relation to what happens in the future, and officials will be inputting information to those discussions. We will certainly ensure that Ministers are made aware of some of the points that have been raised.

Mr Molloy:

Going back to the Chairperson's point, one of the alarming things about the visit to Europe was that they had moved towards saying that they could not now reach the target and were giving community groups paintbrushes to go and paint up their concerns on the walls instead of dealing with them. To some extent, we often find the same situation here. There are no solutions, so people are just given something to keep them active instead.

The Chairperson:

I think that we will avoid paintbrushes.

Mr Losty:

As regards the Ebrington barracks project, I am just looking at our March 2010 update from the officials involved in that.

Mr Dale Heaney (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

It remains on amber for the current period; that is, March 2010.

Ms Anderson:

It had been on green.

Mr Losty:

A number of issues have impacted on or slowed down some of the development. The peace bridge connecting the city centre with Ebrington is on target for completion. However, there are some construction issues that mean that there will be some short delay in the process. Planning permission has been obtained for the parade ground, and the contract is due to be awarded shortly.

There will be limited development at Fort George by 2011, as the Department for Social Development and Ilex have invoked indemnities against previous owners of the site, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the Port and Harbour Commissioners in order to fund the decontamination costs. That still has to be satisfactorily resolved. The Department is trying to finalise that with the MOD now.

Although there are delays that must be reflected in the red, amber, amber/green or green targets, those issues would not give us major cause for concern that the project would not go ahead. We are being objective with Departments, which must provide sound evidence to demonstrate their progress. Departments may say that they will still achieve the targets but there may be some delay, but we will not change the status until we get evidence that there has been movement in the process to rectify the matter. We are being quite objective in how we apply those mechanisms.

Mr Spratt:

My question is simple. I always worry when I see so many reports, because it means that a lot of Departments are involved and there is a lot of information. My mind tells me that there is a wee factory lurking someplace producing all that information. How much does the reporting process cost and, secondly, does that cost involve any external consultancy fees?

Mr Losty:

I do not have information on the cost of processing the information. However, I can say that no consultancy costs are involved. Departments supply the information to a central unit, consisting of ourselves and colleagues from the Department of Finance and Personnel, and we perform the challenge role. No consultants were brought in to help to gather information or challenge it.

Mr Spratt:

So none of the Departments has used consultants to help to, for the want of a better phrase, improve the figures?

Mr Elliott:

Fix them.

The Chairperson:

Produce the desired outcome.

Ms Anderson:

Massage the figures.

Mr Spratt:

That may be an unfair question, so I will not ask you to answer it. Nevertheless, there must be a cost for all of that work.

Mr Losty:

There is a resource cost for the staff time taken to gather and input information and, at our end, to analyse it and to have follow up meetings. To some extent, it is a necessary resource allocation, because we need to see where progress is being made and where it is possible to streamline or improve the process and make it more effective. With any procedure, that possibility always exists.

Mr Spratt:

You might have to do that by 25%.

Mr Losty:

That possibility has a strong impact on how we look at doing things in the future.

Mr Spratt:

I am interested, because I sense that there will be quite a bit to be done. It would be helpful if you could give us a figure to the nearest million.

Mr Losty:

I was going to say that it will not be anywhere near that amount, but I will not commit myself until I check.

Mr Spratt:

The nearest thousand or hundred thousand then.

Mr Losty:

The purpose of doing it is to make sure that the work that the Executive and the Assembly laid out in the Programme for Government is progressing. It is always an onerous task to gather information and data, but we do not want the process to take over from what, ultimately, we are trying to find out.

Mr Spratt:

It worries me.

Mr Losty:

It is a fair point, and we will try to come back to you on it.

The Chairperson:

Looking at the amount of paper used, it is the South American rainforests that concern me.

Mr Elliott:

Martina raised the issue of the Ebrington Barracks site. I notice that the regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh site is depicted as amber.

Ms Anderson:

It got gates.

Mr Elliott:

How could it be on amber when nothing has been done except having the project tossed and continuing to spend money? I do not know the original timeline for the first master plan that was scrapped off —

Mr Spratt:

There are new gates, Tom.

Mr Elliott:

Are there? Sorry about that; my apologies.

Ms Anderson:

The site has been decontaminated and there are new gates, and £20 million is sitting in Europe if everyone can get their act together and draw it down.

Mr Losty:

My understanding is that the master plan outlines a long-term process for the development of the site and a number of key stages had to happen first, including safeguarding and protecting the site and the decontamination of a lot of the land. If that is the evidence that was presented to us, those are the sorts of indicators that we would look at. A draft statutory rule to establish the MLK development corporation has been prepared and will be scheduled for debate in due course. That is one measurement that was put out.

Mr Elliott:

In due course could mean 10 years.

Mr Losty:

We will have dates against which we will measure progress.

The Chairperson:

I commend you for your tolerance.

Mr Elliott:

There is one other issue that I want to ask about quickly. Minimisation of the slippage in the number of Executive Bills introduced to the Assembly is also on amber. How do you define that? I am not asking for the answer now. Perhaps you could provide a definition of how that is calculated.

Mr Losty:

On how to minimise slippage in the number of Executive Bill?

Mr Elliott:

Yes. Does that refer to the number of Bills or the number that passes through the Executive? How is that calculated?

Mr Losty:

It is based on the number of Executive Bills that are scheduled to go forward plus the number of days that they take to go from officials to Ministers to get to the Executive.

Mr Elliott:

I would be interested in some background information on that.

The Chairperson:

OK; we request that.

Mr G Robinson:

On the decontamination issue, we were led to believe that that was almost complete.

The Chairperson:

Yes. We were told fairly recently that another £1 million would kill it.

Thank you, gentlemen, for your presentation and answers. I ask you to provide us with the additional information sought. Thank you.