



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and
Integration**

30 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:

Dr Stephen Farry (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Tom Elliott
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Ms Evelyn Hoy) Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Colin Jack)

The Deputy Chairperson (Dr Farry):

I formally welcome Colin Jack and Evelyn Hoy to the Committee. I remind the witnesses that the evidence session will be recorded by Hansard. For the benefit of our witnesses, I declare an interest as a member of the Community Relations Council, and I will stay well clear of issues relating to that. I invite you to make some introductory comments, and then we will open the floor for questions.

Mr Colin Jack (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Committee today on the draft programme for cohesion,

sharing and integration. The Committee had a briefing on the programme last week, but I am conscious that you received the document only shortly before the meeting, so I hope that members will have had time to look at it since then.

When my colleagues appeared before the Committee last week, they gave a commitment to forward the draft equality impact assessment separately to the Committee. Unfortunately, we have been unable to do that, because we have not been in a position to finalise it. I appreciate that that is not ideal for giving the Committee the opportunity to comment on the document.

The Deputy Chairperson:

In light of the fact that we are now entering the summer recess, would it be possible for it to be circulated independently to members when it becomes available?

Mr Jack:

Yes; we will let you know as soon as it is available.

Mrs D Kelly:

Why is it not available? Is it the case that it has been completed, and you are just not sharing it with us?

Mr Jack:

The draft equality impact assessment has not been agreed by Ministers.

Mrs D Kelly:

Has the assessment been completed and the outcome of it not been agreed, or has the methodology in respect of the level of the equality impact assessment not been agreed?

Mr Jack:

There is consultation on the draft equality impact assessment as part of the consultation process. Therefore, we would never have a final equality impact assessment until after the consultation process has ended. As I understand it, there is still some work to do to finalise the content of the draft that will be circulated as part of the document.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I am conscious that we are interrupting you at a particular point, but Martina has indicated that she has a point on that issue.

Ms Anderson:

I am just wondering about the equality impact assessment. Is it equality more than anything else that is being discussed at this moment? For instance, at various stages throughout the process, I assume that you would have developed a screening template. Can we get an understanding of where that is at, and the quality of that template?

Mr Jack:

We are taking forward the draft equality impact assessment following guidance, and in consultation with the Equality Commission. The key part of undertaking an equality impact assessment is to identify any potential equality impacts and to consult on what impacts there are. It will be part of the consultation process to —

Ms Anderson:

I know that it will be part of the consultation process, but I am wondering about the quality of the screening template that you would have had in the developmental process before it even got to the stage of producing a document.

Mr Jack:

As regards screening, we have taken the view that a full equality impact assessment of the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration will be required. In that sense, a full equality impact assessment will be taken forward.

Mrs D Kelly:

That has not yet been agreed by Ministers?

Mr Jack:

We are not in a position to share the draft equality impact assessment with the Committee today. We hope to have it ready very shortly.

The Deputy Chairperson:

OK, Colin. I will let you get back to your opening comments.

Mr Jack:

As I mentioned, as soon as we have the draft equality impact assessment, we will send a copy to the Committee as a matter of urgency. In the meantime, we would very much value the Committee's input on other aspects of the programme.

It is a very important programme, which has the potential to impact positively on all sections of the community. Members will recall seeing the original draft document, which was the philosophical core of the document, when we briefed the Committee on 24 March. A lot of work has been done in getting input from all the Departments. The Committee was briefed last week on the additional elements that have been built into the document.

My colleague Evelyn Hoy and I would be very willing to answer questions about any aspect of the document in greater detail if you wish. I am also aware that Mr Elliott raised a couple of specific issues at last week's meeting, and we will be happy to come back on those today.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you very much. I will start with a couple of general questions before opening for wider comment. Before you entered, there was some discussion about the evolution of this document. The Committee last saw a work-in-progress document in March, and, since then, the current document has been largely influenced by the submissions from Departments. I think that it would be useful if we could get some sense, not necessarily through a verbal answer, of the changes that have occurred since March. There has also been a particular request from members to see the individual submissions from Departments that the Executive received. I appreciate that those are Executive papers, but we are making that request. If agreeable, could those be circulated to us?

Mr Jack:

Significant changes have been made throughout the document. The philosophical part of it has remained largely the same, but the actions from Departments have been woven in throughout the document. In respect of the Departments' input, we may need to get agreement from Ministers to release those papers to the Committee, but we can make that request.

The Deputy Chairperson:

We will certainly make that request formally.

What is the timescale for what happens now? Is this a formal pre-consultation with the Committee, or is it simply a courtesy? Will the comments that members make today have an impact on the final decisions that the Department and the Executive take? Arising from that, what is the timetable for formal consideration and approval by the Executive? How do you envisage the timescale for any public consultation that follows?

Mr Jack:

When my colleagues met the Committee last week, we had hoped that the document might be considered by the Executive last Thursday. We now expect the document to be considered at the next Executive meeting. As I understand it, the date for that meeting has yet to be agreed, but it is possible that it might be 22 July. We will seek to have the document agreed as quickly as possible after this meeting.

The document is being published for consultation, and we hope that the Committee will respond substantively as part of the consultation exercise. We also have quite a detailed plan for conducting the consultation. We will advise all Assembly Members about public meetings in their areas and some of the other sectoral events.

Ms Evelyn Hoy (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

We are conscious that the summer is a difficult time to get everyone's involvement in a consultation. Taking that into account, we plan to carry out the public element of the consultation — the public events — in September, when everyone is back in work and school and it is possible for people to take as full a part as possible. Those events will be run in the evenings and, as far as possible, right across Northern Ireland so that people have accessible opportunities. We intend to write to MLAs to inform them that we will be in the area and to give everyone, as far as possible, an opportunity to attend a public event.

During the summer, we also intend to take forward a group of sectoral events for interested groups, which will be smaller and designed to elicit responses on perhaps single issues out of the document. We plan to talk to victims and survivors, statutory bodies, groups of academics and minority ethnic groups. We hope to have a children's and young people's event, and events for

the voluntary and community sector, and ex-prisoners and former combatants. The analysis of the shared future consultation showed that that last group in particular did not have the opportunity to speak about it. The business community and district councils' good relations officers will be included, because we run a good-relations programme through the councils.

The Deputy Chairperson:

If the document is cleared by the Executive on 22 July, as has been potentially set out, will the consultation run from August or September and close towards the end of October?

Mr Jack:

Yes; it would close towards the end of October.

The Deputy Chairperson:

To what extent will the Department take into account the level of responses that were received to the shared future document, which, if I recall, was quite significant?

Ms Hoy:

We have sought assistance on running the discursive elements of the public meeting and the independent analysis of the responses to the consultation. We are assessing tenders that have been responded to for that, replying that departmental officials will, of course, lead the consultation but that breakout groups, discussions, and so on, will be facilitated independently. At the same time, a single analyst will look at the totality of all that has been received, with a lot of administrative support from departmental officials.

Mrs D Kelly:

Thank you for your presentation. I have recently rejoined the Committee, so I missed your previous presentation in March. I read through much of the document last night, and I found it difficult to see clearly the aims and objectives of what is supposed to be a strategic vision. I am disappointed that sectarianism, which is one of the core difficulties that society faces, and how we are going to build reconciliation, are not addressed up front in what has been a much-awaited document. I noted that racism is referred to in a lot of sentences. I am not underestimating the racism that exists, but the reality is that sectarianism is the most difficult issue for us all to deal with. I was disappointed that it was not up front, and that we were not looking for hard methods with which to challenge and deal with individuals and groups.

It would also be useful if we knew what the budget will be in relation to the outworkings of the strategic document. I get a sense that there is a bit of good practice here and some good ideas there; I get the impression that it was very hastily cobbled together. I did not find it very inspiring at all. If it is supposed to give leadership, where is the challenge to all of the organisations?

Evelyn, in her opening remarks, spoke about how there will be consultation during the summer with victims and survivors, former combatants and ex-prisoners, etc, yet there is no reference to our past in the document. There seems to be a lot of gaping omissions. The previous Deputy Chairperson, Naomi Long, said at one stage in the Assembly that whole chapters were missing. I do not think that she was understating that, given what I have seen in the last few days.

Mr Jack:

The current document is quite different from the one that was circulated in March, because there were gaps in that version. There had been no input from other Departments at that stage. In respect of a budget for the document, we are currently entering a new comprehensive spending review (CSR) exercise, so it is not possible to give a definitive budget for the coming years.

Mrs D Kelly:

What is the current budget?

Mr Jack:

The current budget is of the order of £10 million per annum. We have had £29 million over the three years of the current CSR period, but that is just the budget of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Clearly, other Departments' actions will be additional to that; in some cases it may be significantly more than that if the actions relate to fundamental aspects of the way that those Departments take forward their business. We certainly note your other points.

Mrs D Kelly:

During the introductory remarks, I took note of the fact that there are inverted commas in paragraph 1.14, page 5, which states that:

“We want to ensure that we have an immigration policy that ‘works for here’.”

Why are those inverted commas there?

Mr Jack:

I do not think there is any great significance to those inverted commas. It is simply stylistic.

Mrs D Kelly:

It suggests that it is a quotation. Is it because there is no agreement on referring to Northern Ireland or the North of Ireland in the document?

Mr Jack:

No; I do not think so. There is a reference to Northern Ireland further up the page.

Mrs D Kelly:

That is a reference to the Northern Ireland Act. I just wondered what the significance was, and whether it was a quotation taken from another document.

Mr Jack:

No; it is just the way the document has been written.

Mrs D Kelly:

OK.

Ms Anderson:

Thank you very much for the presentation. When you were here last week, we were not able to have much discussion because we had only received the document, but when I read it and cross-referenced it with the briefing and the material that we received on 19 March, I came away very confused. Although I completely accept the fact that there have been significant changes, as you mentioned last week, there are also omissions. I think that things have been deleted that are crucial in line with objective 5 of PSA 7 of the Programme for Government and what we have committed ourselves to do in relation to equality and good relations.

Paragraph 1.12 of the document received on 19 March states that:

“All government policy is developed within the context of the equality of opportunity provisions set out in s.75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This is particularly relevant to the Good Relations duty”.

That is actually quite a powerful statement, in that it states what the law tells us about the context

of moving forward and how we should be moving forward. Yet, that has been removed from this document.

We were also sent an emailed version of the document, and this latest version states that an additional amendment has been introduced that states that further complementary policies and frameworks to promote equality, fairness and rights, respect and responsibility for all section 75(1) groupings, as outlined in paragraph 1.4, will be consistent with the Programme for Government targets for cohesion, sharing and integration.

That is completely different in context to what we had previously received in paragraph 1.12. The changes in this document advocate and highlight good relations over and above equality of opportunity. We should not have to have this continual conversation about section 75, the equality duty being necessary and good relations being desirable, because good relations not built on equality are good relations built on sand.

We have spent £28.7 million in the CSR period, and we still have the problems in our constituencies that we are all trying to address. I thought that the context that you had previously set was a meaningful one for moving forward, but the context that you provided us with as of last week is completely different. Why has that been changed?

Mr Jack:

Some editing was done to the document, compared with previous versions, because there was some repetition in it.

Ms Anderson:

This was not repetition. It was only said once. You could not say that there was any repetition of that. It was removed.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I will just interject there, Colin. I appreciate that Martina is coming from a particular position on this issue, but in very general terms, you said that, in essence, the philosophical shape of the document was essentially unaltered, and Martina's question goes to that very issue. Is there a potential issue there? Has the balance of that philosophical underpinning shifted through editing, whether deliberate or inadvertent? That is a concern.

Mr Jack:

There was certainly no intention to shift it. We have been in discussion with Ministers about the draft, and it was agreed that this section of it was to be released to the Committee. Was there anything that you wanted to add, Evelyn?

Ms Hoy:

Nothing other than we will take those points on board.

Ms Anderson:

Colin, given that point, you are now saying to us that complementary policies must be consistent with the Programme for Government view on cohesion, sharing and integration. So what you are telling us is that future policies in pursuance of section 75(1), which is the necessary equality agenda, must not prejudice the cohesion, sharing and integration policy in respect of good relations. That is turning everything around on its head. There is not even an equality impact assessment (EQIA) to accompany the document. I am very seriously concerned about this draft document and how it has been presented to us today.

Mr Jack:

We hoped that there would be a draft EQIA with the Committee very shortly after last week's meeting. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to provide that. The draft EQIA we will ensure that —

Ms Anderson:

You are talking about future section 75 policies. We as a Committee have just come through a child poverty inquiry and made a number of recommendations, so even where policies may be required on the basis to address objective need, you are telling us that good relations will be paramount, even though that is not the statutory position.

Mr Jack:

The statutory position is the statutory position, between section 75(1) and section 75(2) —

Ms Anderson:

It should be the other way round. The framework that you have provided us with today and how

it has been set, as the Deputy Chairperson said, is completely skewed.

Mr Jack:

We will reflect on that point and have a look at it. We will see whether any amendment is needed in light of that.

The Deputy Chairperson:

There are no other indications of interest in asking questions.

Ms Anderson:

May I ask one more? How would you see the LGBT community fitting into the programme? There was a vicious attack on a young man last week in Derry. When I looked at your annual report to the Equality Commission, I saw that, in 2008-09, OFMDFM listed the section 75 categories and, under persons of different sexual orientation, stated that the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration for a shared and better future is one that will assist the LGBT community. However, I do not see much reference to that in the version of the document that we have been provided with. Perhaps that is something that you could come back to the Committee on.

Mr Jack:

The document makes a number of references to the Executive's rejection of any form of hate crime, and outlines the section 75 groups. Over the past few months, we have engaged with representatives from LGBT organisations as part of the work that we have been doing on policy development. We expect to engage with those groups as part of our engagement with the voluntary sector.

Ms Anderson:

I imagine that all Departments are expected to engage with such groups under their section 75 obligations. However, the office's report to the Equality Commission mentions forthcoming initiatives and lists the section 75 categories. Under that, where it outlines the changes in policies and practices that will have a result on outcomes and an effect on each of the categories, one programme talks about cohesion, sharing and integration. I am not asking what you do when it comes to consultation, but how the report will impact on the LGBT community, as well as on other section 75 categories.

Mr Jack:

Ministers see the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration as benefiting all sections of the community.

Ms Anderson:

The LGBT community would be comforted to see that it is included. It should not have to assume that.

Mr Jack:

We can reflect on that.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I formally thank Colin and Evelyn for their evidence.