



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Programme for the Cohesion, Sharing
and Integration Equality Impact
Assessment**

27 July 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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

**Programme for the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Equality
Impact Assessment**

27 July 2010

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

The Deputy Chairperson (Dr Farry):

We now move on to the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI). Members were due to receive an update from officials from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), but instead we received an e-mail, which has been tabled. As I understand it, the Executive agreed a document last week, which will be released at 5.00 pm today. It will then go out to public consultation.

Mrs D Kelly:

Did the Department offer the Committee an official briefing, or did the Committee request a briefing?

The Deputy Chairperson:

The Committee requested a briefing at a meeting in June.

Mrs D Kelly:

My understanding is that, when a Committee call witnesses, witnesses must attend. There is a fear of summonses, court proceedings, and so forth.

Mr Spratt:

If Ministers are launching the CSI document at 5.00 pm, it would be incredible that officials be called to the Committee this afternoon to be questioned about the official launch of a consultation process. All Dolores is doing is trying to politicise the whole thing, as usual.

Mrs D Kelly:

No, Deputy Chairperson. The Committee made a decision and it is now told that the officials are not coming.

The Deputy Chairperson:

If we turn to the minutes, we can see that we made a request for advice to officials. I am not exactly sure of our powers. However, I do not think we made a demand and, even had we made such a demand, I do not know whether that it is enforceable.

Mrs D Kelly:

It is, Deputy Chairperson.

The Deputy Chairperson:

We agreed two action points. First, we agreed to write to the Department requesting copies of all its responses concerning the programme. We also requested details of the changes made to the document since March so that Members could track the document's evolution. Neither of those has been followed up. I ask the Committee Clerk to follow that up with the Department and for the information be tabled ahead of our meeting in September. Secondly, we agreed to request that the equality impact assessment should be forwarded to members as soon as possible. Another e-mail from the Department states:

"I am aware that there are outstanding queries from the Committee regarding the development of the Programme and we will respond to those in due course."

Therefore, the officials are mindful that they have outstanding commitments to deliver information to us. There is a specific issue about the equality impact assessment. At the end of the documents that we have, the equality impact assessment is addressed in detail to an extent.

Mrs D Kelly:

Perhaps the Committee Clerk could clarify the issue about the request made to the officials. As I understand it, if officials are asked to attend the Committee, they must do so.

The Committee Clerk:

There is no point in officials attending if they cannot say anything because they have been told by the Ministers that they cannot do so until this has published. It is embargoed.

Mrs D Kelly:

That does not address my question. Surely, the role of the Committee is distinct from that of Ministers. The Committee's role is to scrutinise the work of the Department.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Yes, Dolores, but look at the minutes. We did not formally demand that the officials attend today. The point you are making is moot in some respects.

Mrs D Kelly:

Sorry, Deputy Chairperson. You said that you were unsure whether we had the power. I say that we do have the power. I want to clarify that.

The Deputy Chairperson:

OK. We have the power. We will park that point for now. The issue is that we did not actually request that officials attend today in any case. Look at the minutes. There are a number of outstanding requests for information. In her e-mail, Gail acknowledged that those requests are outstanding. We have asked the Committee Clerk to follow that up with the Department and to ensure that those requests are met ahead of our meeting in September. That is as far as we can take it at this point.

Mrs D Kelly:

Yes, but we have a right to register our discontent at the way we are being treated. The information is not here.

The Deputy Chairperson:

We can express our disappointment that the request we made —

Mr Spratt:

Let me clarify that: this is not “our” discontent. I have heard discontent from one member. Let us be clear about that.

Mrs D Kelly:

I have every right to express an opinion.

Mr Spratt:

Yes, but you said “our” discontent.

Mrs D Kelly:

If the rest of the Committee members are happy to be treated in such a cavalier fashion by the Department, that is fine for them and their parties. However, the SDLP is not happy that a Committee should operate at such a standard.

The Deputy Chairperson:

The point has been made.

Ms Anderson:

I will try to change the mood of the discussion. We should acknowledge that the document is finally going out to consultation. That development will be welcome to many people who have argued and stated that they have wanted to see the document for a long time.

We have not previously had a consultation document such as this. People have identified that they want to be involved in the conversation and engaged in the development of the CSI strategy; therefore, we should welcome the fact that it is now going out for consultation. It will be launched at 5.00 pm today. Members will read the document and perhaps, at that stage, we will issue a demand for officials to attend the Committee. However, at this stage, we are not demanding the attendance of officials. I do not think that we are being dealt with in a cavalier fashion. Most people will welcome the fact that the document is being released. Let us face it: the Executive in the previous mandate could not get to the point of publishing such a document.

Mrs D Kelly:

I wonder why that was.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Basically, all that we are required to do today is to note the document. Dolores has made her point. We are aware of it. From the Committee's point of view, we are, essentially, asking the Committee Clerk to follow up outstanding requests that have been made. There is no doubt that they will be met by September. In its correspondence, the Department has acknowledged them as outstanding issues. I am sure that we will return to those issues in autumn, probably after the consultation. We will then formally look at the responses to the consultation.

Ms Anderson:

Did the Community Relations Council (CRC) happen to send the rest of the parties an e-mail about that document, leaving out my party and the DUP, as it did the last time?

The Deputy Chairperson:

Today? No. As far as I am aware, it did not. For the record, I acknowledge that the CRC took the wrong approach in sending that e-mail to only a number of members initially. However, to be fair to it, it contacted the Chairperson to request that it was copied to all members. I believe that that point was made at the previous meeting. Undoubtedly, there was an initial breach of protocol with respect to communication. To answer Martina's point: there has been no further correspondence that I am aware of.

Mr Molloy:

At the previous meeting, I raised a question about the CRC's independence and the fact that it did not write to all parties on the Committee, but to certain members only. Have we received any correspondence from it about that?

The Deputy Chairperson:

I believe that Duncan Morrow intended to clarify the issue directly with members. I am not sure whether he has done so. There is no doubt that he should.

Mr Spratt:

Are you saying that Duncan Morrow was to contact individual parties directly?

The Deputy Chairperson:

I am not sure. I understood that he was minded to try to contact members directly —

Mr Spratt:

As regards the discussion of the matter at the previous meeting: I want to reiterate that it is absolutely disgraceful that my party was left out of that process. What communication then went to the CRC from the Committee?

The Committee Clerk:

I sent a letter to the CRC. I will copy it to you.

Mr Spratt:

Will you let us all have a copy?

The Committee Clerk:

Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson:

At the time, we agreed that the Committee Clerk would follow the matter up and remind the CRC of protocols.

Mr Spratt:

I understand that. A number of weeks later, the CRC still has not had the decency to respond.

The Deputy Chairperson:

OK. We will move on.