



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Programme for Government:
OFMDFM Progress

13 March 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Alex Maskey
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Dr Paul Geddis	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Henry Johnston	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Dr Denis McMahon	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Chairperson: I welcome from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) Dr Denis McMahon, Henry Johnston and Paul Geddis, who was with us last week. We decided then to postpone our discussions on Programme for Government (PFG) commitment 26, which is on drawdown of EU funds. Denis, before we go into the commitments, as you know, we had a presentation from some of your colleagues last week. I will quote from the Hansard report of that meeting on the late tabling of papers:

"A central team in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is charged with the responsibility of challenging and checking the delivery plans ... The plans then go to a programme executive group for further challenge ... The actual management process is the responsibility of our colleagues who will be here next week."

Is that Civil Service speak for, "A big boy did it and ran away"? Are you the big boy?

Dr Denis McMahon (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I am certainly responsible for the Programme for Government co-ordination. I will make one minor, but important, point about the central team. The central team comprises both the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and OFMDFM. That is not removing any responsibility for this issue from me, but it is just important that you know that DFP scrutinises our delivery plans and that we do not scrutinise our own.

Yes, we do take responsibility for this. I take this opportunity to apologise for the lateness of the papers. I think that it is absolutely understandable that the Committee expects papers to come in on

time. I am sorry that the Department was not able to meet the timetable. We fully respect the Committee's views on the Programme for Government and the delivery plans. As you know, a number of the commitments in the Programme for Government were changed as a result of the feedback that we got from the Committee during the consultation on the Programme for Government. So, we fully accept the Committee's role. All that I can say, Chair, is that I apologise for the fact that the papers were not in on time.

The Chairperson: I accept that. For the record, I hope that you accept that, if we cannot scrutinise, we cannot support. It is not a question of always looking to scrutinise so that we can criticise; we would like to assist and support. We recognise that that is a key function of the Committee. However, that is very hard to do if we are not given adequate time to scrutinise. Can it be fixed?

Dr McMahon: Do you mean the timescales?

The Chairperson: I mean the process. We seem to have an awful lot of process, and, at times, we do not seem to be that good at it.

Dr McMahon: There are certainly things that we can learn from this process. We have tried to put as much detail as possible into the delivery plans. We have tried to ensure that there is plenty to scrutinise. There is a challenge to ensure that we simplify all our processes as much as possible. To be fair, we are now nearly 10 months on from the development of the Programme for Government initial plans, and we are now getting a sense of how it works in practice. So, I think that there are always things that we can do to simplify, and we are looking at that.

The other thing to say is that, obviously, they also have to be properly scrutinised in the Department. They have to go through a process there. I would not want to mislead the Committee by saying that I have total control over that process. The Department has to have a response.

Mr Henry Johnston (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): There are two sets of processes here. There are processes for OFMDFM's own delivery plans, which is what we will talk about shortly. As Denis said, there have been some learning points. We are now refining our thinking about what we would like to see in it and the level of detail that we want other officials to provide.

There is also the overall process of how the central team monitors the executive board and how the delivery oversight group monitors. Why did we take so long to get there? We are now talking essentially about two quarter 3 updates. The first thing that the central team had to do was to challenge the information that we got in from Departments during January. Indeed, DFP had to do that for OFMDFM and OFMDFM for DFP. So, it took until 1 February for us to be in a position to bring the delivery oversight group together under the chairmanship of the head of the Civil Service. That group then had some further queries with which it went back to a number of Departments, including us. It was only then that we were able to convene the executive programme board on 19 February, and Ministers themselves then had some queries. So, there was a series of challenges before we reached this stage. We would like to try to compress that timeline a bit so that we are not talking about a quarter end two-and-a-half months after the fact.

The Chairperson: As we learn from these things, could we perhaps agree to have fixed dates for you to come to the Committee to review the Programme for Government?

Dr McMahon: As officials, we are very happy to do that, subject to ministerial agreement.

The Chairperson: So, we will need to write to the Ministers and suggest that. Are members content for us to do that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Denis, before we move on, there are two other things to consider. Detailed delivery plans have been given to us on a confidence basis. The Department sent a covering letter stating:

"Abridged versions of the full plans will be readily accessible to everybody via the Executive's website."

When you go on to the website, you see this message:

"Programme for Government Delivery Plans are currently under review and will be available here shortly."

How long has that message been up?

Mr Johnston: It has been up for probably a month and a half, since the last wave of plans came in. We will be writing to the Committee about the new plans. Executive colleagues now have a copy of all the summary plans and the Q3 quarterly updates, and those will be transmitted to this Committee. After you have had a few days, they will be put up on the OFMDFM website, and you can anticipate them then.

The Chairperson: So, does that mean that the Q2 updates were taken down a month and a half ago?

Mr Johnston: The Q2 updates were kept up, but the summary delivery plans were taken down.

The Chairperson: So, does that mean that, for a month and a half, anybody who is interested in this has not been able to access any of it?

Mr Johnston: The text that was up was the full text of the Programme for Government commitments, but the summary delivery plans were not up at that stage.

The Chairperson: Finally, Denis, the first ones that we have had sight of are from March 2012, I think. On commitment 33, at key actions for delivery of commitment, you put —

Dr McMahon: Sorry, Chair. Is this March 2012 or 2013?

The Chairperson: It is 2012; the first one. You have sent an update, but, in our papers, we have the Programme for Government delivery plans, which state that the date of the latest version is 28 March 2012. There are three key actions for delivery of commitment. Surely you keep those in and do not take anything out as you update?

Dr McMahon: No. Are you talking about the three annual commitments as published in the —

The Chairperson: I am talking about key actions for the delivery of commitment. In March 2012, on Programme for Government commitment 33 to publish and implement a childcare strategy, point 5 of your key actions is to, by 31 March 2014:

"Have achieved at least £3 million of expenditure".

That has gone.

Dr McMahon: Yes; those key actions change.

The Chairperson: Why has it gone?

Dr McMahon: The idea is to show what we have done. Where things have moved, we have had to change some of the milestones. However, we have not changed the annual milestones.

The Chairperson: How do you follow the narrative if you just take material out?

Dr McMahon: In each case, we have tried to reflect what has actually happened. We have tried to identify what needs to happen for the next steps in the process. These are living documents. Ministers have committed to meeting the commitments in the Programme for Government, and they have committed to the three published milestones in the Programme for Government. The delivery plans are about how we will meet those overall commitments. The idea then is that the section at the end of the delivery plans says, "Here is the current state of play, and here is what we need to do to complete and meet those commitments."

Mr Johnston: All the plans, except the published commitment and the published annual milestones, will change fairly regularly. If there are any changes in the published commitment, even in the level of detail, a summary, which is the first section that you get to, will explain that. Social investment is an example. The published commitment refers to eight zones, but Ministers have now agreed nine. The published text still refers to eight zones, but the summary explains that there are now nine.

The Chairperson: Specifically on the childcare strategy, one of the key actions in March 2012 was a commitment to spend at least £3 million by 31 March 2014. In the most up-to-date version, that commitment has gone, and instead you have a target to achieve the remaining expenditure of £12 million by 31 March 2015, which is the following year. In between our receiving those two papers, we heard evidence from your colleague Mr Devitt last week that Ministers have approved up to another £4.5 million out of that £12 million already. What is it? How do you follow all this? There is a commitment that was there but has gone. You have a different commitment here, and you have a different briefing there.

Dr McMahon: The overall commitment is to spend £12 million over the Programme for Government period.

The Chairperson: How do we monitor how you are doing? Are you hoping to spend £3 million by the end of March 2014?

Dr McMahon: That would be the aim, but whether —

The Chairperson: That is not in the current papers; it is only in the old papers.

Dr McMahon: That is a fair point. It is there as a published commitment; that has not changed. However, it is a fair point to say that we could include that in the delivery plan by saying, "Here is the detailed profile over that period."

The Chairperson: As a Committee, we decided to go through the plan by concentrating on point 3, which is key actions, and point 2, which deals with performance indicators.

Dr McMahon: We have not removed that commitment from the front page of the delivery plan. It is still there. We are not trying to avoid doing it or saying that we will not do it. It is still there, and we can be scrutinised on it.

The Chairperson: OK.

Paul, thank you very much for coming back this week. Your area of interest is Programme for Government commitment 26, which is to:

"Facilitate delivery of the Executive's 20% target for increased drawdown of competitive EU funds".

Rather than take presentations, it would be useful to just go into the detail, particularly of point 3, which is the key actions for delivery of the commitment. Paul, will you talk us through those, please?

Dr Paul Geddis (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Yes, Chairman. Actions 1, 2 and 3 have been completed. Action 4 has been partially completed. The actual and projected drawdown by Department was taken forward in year 2 and reported to the Budget review group. We have not identified the drawdown by EU funding stream as we move forward. That is because the 2007-2013 financial perspective is winding down. Clarity about the precise nature of the 2014-2020 programmes is not available, as they are in the process of being set up, and in view of that, Departments were reluctant to commit to targets by funding stream.

The Chairperson: Your targets that had a deadline that has passed are targets 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. Those are all late or very late, Paul. Is there a reason why none was completed on time?

Dr Geddis: I think that the fundamental issue here, Chairman, is that the delivery plan is a working, living document that is designed primarily for officials. When you received the very first delivery plan, dating back to 20 March 2012, a lot of the material went in at the outset of the process. There have been various versions of the delivery plan; by my count, there have been five in total. The targets

have been reviewed at various stages. So, the delivery plan is used in the first instance to facilitate officials in delivering the target.

There is good news to report on this target. The individual actions may have variable timescales, but the target is well ahead of progress. The First Minister reported that last Tuesday afternoon in response to George Robinson's question for oral answer. In year 1, we achieved drawdown of £15.8 million. In year 2, we anticipate drawdown to the end of this month of £13.5 million. On the basis of the original baseline against this PFG commitment, we are ahead of our target by some £2.9 million midpoint in the year. I think that that is the important point to take forward.

The Chairperson: At one point, you were predicting a shortfall of £7 million in the overall drawdown target of £53 million.

Dr Geddis: Yes. Again, that reflects a position that existed at the midpoint of the current financial year; that is, after the monitoring of 30 September 2012. Once we reviewed the returns from Departments and projected forward to the end of the four-year Budget period, we anticipated a £7 million shortfall. The delivery plan indicated the action that we had taken to go back to Departments to ask them to move this work forward and reassess their figures. It was, of course, as a consequence of that action that we then received a late notification of drawdown from the Department of Education. However, at the end of the four-year Budget period, the position against the £11 million baseline and the £53 million drawdown is that we are optimistic about meeting that. That was reflected in the First Minister's response to George's question.

The Chairperson: I want to get a sense of the ambitiousness of the project, Paul. The baseline year was 2010-11, when you drew down £11 million of EU competitive funds. What is the total pot of competitive funds in the whole EU?

Dr Geddis: I have no idea, simply because there is such a large variety of competitive EU-funding sources. I am not aware of the totality of the funding under all those sources.

The Chairperson: So, does that mean that you do not know whether this is 0.1%, 0.001% or 0.000001% of the total?

Dr Geddis: No, we do not have that information to hand. On specific programmes such as FP7, the drawdown pot under the current financial perspective will be of the order of £50 billion. On the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), the estimates for the next financial perspective were £80 billion or thereabouts, but those were reduced to somewhere around £50 billion. So, the amount of money at European level is considerable. You are asking me for a total to be calculated across all the EU finding streams spanning two financial perspectives. The figures are there for the current financial perspective. However, that is not necessarily the case for the period 2014-2020. The fundamental issue is that the baseline was calculated against the drawdown in this region in the year 2010-11.

The Chairperson: What is "back-ended drawdown"?

Dr Geddis: "Back-ended drawdown" is a term that was used early in the process. It derives from structural funds, primarily because the origins of the 20% target were initially based on structural funds baselines. The very first delivery plan, dated 28 March, references its origins in the first paragraph. Where you have a pre-allocated funding amount, where that is for a seven-year financial period, where operational programmes are designed and where project applications come in, the experience under structural funds is that it takes time to ramp up to draw the money down. So, there is a weight of moneys that tends to be drawn down later in the process.

The fundamental issue is that competitive EU funds are not pre-allocated. Therefore, the use of the term is not strictly correct. You are competing against the totality of other European regions and against criteria that are set out in European Commission calls, and your applications are assessed on a trans-European competitive basis. That is the fundamental difference. Therefore, in actual fact, when we begin to look at competitive EU funds drawdown, one of the observations that we are now aware of is that it is non-linear. The analogy that I draw is that it is a bit like watching the FTSE 100. Whether you are looking at it intra-day, over a week, over a month, over a year, over three years or over five years, you see that it is a series of peaks and troughs. We are experiencing that kind of profiling with competitive EU funds. Therefore, the concept of back-ended drawdown, although valid for structural funds, is not, in my view, completely valid for competitive EU funds.

The Chairperson: Paul, I must say that, as an item of English literature, "back-ended drawdown" is related to "upstream engagement". You have a line that states:

"It is anticipated that enhanced engagement with Europe and greater anticipation in European networks and partnerships will be a prerequisite for successful delivery."

The term "enhanced engagement" was used. Paul, we have the Barroso task force working group. What more of an enhanced relationship with Europe do you want than Barroso?

Dr Geddis: There are two aspects to this, Chairman. The first is the infrastructure that the Executive have established over a number of years for engaging with Europe, and the second is the use that is made of that infrastructure. I think that, when the First Minister and the deputy First Minister reinvigorated the Barroso task force, they were very clear that they were looking for a step change from Departments in European engagement that would deliver smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and give expression to the Executive's commitment to a 20% increase in competitive EU funds. That means, effectively, that departmental officials are required to pinpoint EU policies, funding programmes and knowledge networks that are appropriate to the Executive. There is a clear focus both on outcomes and additionality. When you are targeting those areas, you need to be selective and realistic about the limited resource that is available to you. So, fundamentally, commitment 1.26 is a developmental target.

In response to George Robinson's question for oral answer, Mr Byrne asked what I thought was quite an important supplementary on R&D moneys. The First Minister said that, at the end of the Budget period, when we are perhaps reflecting on success, we will have done well to have achieved the 20% target, but we will also say that we want an increase on that increased figure and that we will continue to push and stretch Departments. That reflects the nature of the target. It is a developmental target, and, in the first two years, as we have progressed towards it, the focus has very much been on absolute funding drawdown. I think that relative performance needs to be addressed, but, to achieve drawdown and in coming back to the specific mention of networking and partnership building, the key question is: are you networking — yes or no? If you are networking, are you partnership working — yes or no? If you are, are you a junior partner? If you are a junior partner, you need to become a senior partner. As you move up that developmental progression, your propensity to create a virtuous and positive circle to enhance your funding drawdown increases. If that is correctly geared to policy outcomes that benefit citizens and businesses in the region, the upshot is that we will have mainstreamed Europe far better. That is why this is quite important.

Mr Maskey: Thanks, Paul, for that very detailed explanation. I am trying to get as much detailed information and understanding of this as possible, but, by the same token, I am keeping an eye on the bigger picture. I accept entirely that the 20% target was very important. As you said, it was benchmarked against our previous drawdown figures, so we are comparing with ourselves. I do not want to reopen the debate on that, but I am curious about the point at which we might compare with other more favourable examples, such as other successful states that have managed to draw down more. You said that OFMDFM is committed to pushing the envelope all the time with all the other Departments, so I suppose that, at some point, there may be a little bit of an overlap in saying that our target is 20%. However, if we are really comparing with the drawdown of other more successful states, we might be saying that we want a 30% increase or 20%, plus whatever that might be.

You said that Departments are reluctant to tell us what their drawdown is for each stream. You really need to know that, because, to sweat and push them, you need to know how they are performing against each of the streams. I notice that all the projections are discounted at the minute. For example, if the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) or the Department of Education (DE) were expected to have a 5% increase and a 10% increase and so on, at this moment in time, we do not know the situation. They may well be exceeding those, for all I know. They may well be on target. How soon will we know? Probably more importantly, how soon will you know how well they are doing against these benchmarks so that we can sweat them and push them to the limit?

Dr Geddis: The idea that we need to examine absolute and relative performance is an exceptionally important and very well-made point. That is the fundamental issue. You could be doing well against an absolute target, which we are, but if we compare ourselves with the best in Europe, which is where the competitive element is, the important question to ask is: how do we fare on that basis in relation to what they are drawing down?

The starting point is to look at it on a per capita basis, indexed with this region as 100, and you need to do that by EU funding programme. I think that, initially, the funding comparison should be made with other devolved Administrations, including England per se, with the UK as a whole, and, of course, with the Republic of Ireland. You can then develop that model and be more sophisticated by including other European regions that have similar socio-economic profiles and that are the best in class.

So, I do not think that this is a straightforward or simple process, but a start needs to be made, and that needs to be done by EU funding stream. The important determinant in a lot of this will be the availability and quality of statistical data, because, fundamentally, you have to make like-with-like comparisons. If your comparisons are not like with like, you will get the wrong answers and you will be asking the wrong questions.

Benchmarking has been carried out in the current work. That has not been as much as we would like, but it has been carried out on the two main funding sources that contributed to the majority of drawdown in the baseline year and in year 1. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) took that analysis forward. For example, if you consider the Trans-European Transport Network's (TEN-T) programme per capita, you will see that this region has outperformed the other UK Administrations. That is despite the fact that England is in a much better position to attract larger sums of funding because of the number of its transport projects, their scale, the size of the network and England's better-developed rail infrastructure, which transports freight. So, we have success there.

If we consider FP7, we see that we are ranked last of the UK regions and substantially below Ireland. That situation is, obviously, well known. If you examine some of the reasons for that, you will discover that we have the fewest universities of any region and on the island of Ireland, and that impacts adversely on the pool of applicants. Another limiting factor is the small size and sophistication of the private sector, with relatively few large, R&D-intensive companies that have the expertise and resources to match funds.

Those are some of the emerging factors. I am not in a position to provide more detail on that, because those two Departments drive those types of comparisons. A start has been made on benchmarking, but it is an extremely detailed area. However, it is fundamental to good policymaking. That is where we are positioned. I think that, after the revalidation exercise that the First Minister referred to is concluded, the delivery plan will begin to reflect a much greater emphasis on benchmarking as we move through the next two years of the Budget period.

Mr Maskey: Thank you Paul, again, for that. As you say, it is a competitive fund, so it is not just reallocated; you have to apply to it. Are there examples of where we are applying but our applications are not matched or met? In other words, are we applying for things that we are not getting? If so, is there any particular reason for that?

Dr Geddis: I do not get anything centrally to me on that. However, when we reinvigorated the task force several years ago, we brought in the DRD TEN-T applications team to make a presentation to the Commission services and to those Departments that were present at a seminar at Belfast Castle. We used the team as an example of good practice. Under TEN-T, and as we move forward into the new financial perspective, we see that there are difficulties in how the funding operational programme will be determined. So, there are infrastructural differences in what they can and cannot apply for under the eligibility criteria.

The competition is also getting more severe. Although they are putting in excellent project applications, they might find that they can be ranked near the top but still not get the funding. The environment out there is very difficult, which is why commitment 1.26 is very challenging target. It is one that requires a culture change in how we function. The money is not pre-allocated; it is not there to be drawn down readily. In the current economic climate and what is happening in Europe, you have to fight for your money.

Mr Maskey: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Ms Fearon: First, I do not think that 20% is nearly enough, but I recognise that it is a starting point and it is good that we can work on that. I have said time and again here and in the Finance Committee that Departments are not doing nearly enough or as much as they can to maximise opportunities that are available in Europe. That touches on Alex's point about how we can learn from other regions. In particular, we can learn a lot from the South, which is leaps and bounds ahead of us in drawing down

European funding. That can be seen in its infrastructure alone. However, it seems that you nearly need to be in there at the beginning of the funding streams that are being created to shape them to suit your needs. As far I understand, that is what the South and other Governments in Europe do. What is your opinion on that?

Dr Geddis: I agree absolutely with that. Of course, that is why the First Minister and the deputy First Minister were in Brussels at the end of January, and why, on two other large-scale ministerial visits to Brussels in 2012, we focused on the multiannual financial framework. As they reported to the Assembly, part of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's work there was to meet Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn to ensure that our views on how Horizon 2020 is shaped were taken on board as best we could achieve. So, yes, that is absolutely critical. You need to be there, doing business in Europe in person, and you need to be building your networks across the totality of the funding streams that you want to target. This is a very important time for Departments to be present on the ground; I agree completely with that point.

Dr McMahon: I will build on a point that Paul made. Obviously, my part of OFMDFM leads on the social cohesion element of it. One of the things that Ministers have asked us to do is form a partnership with universities. It comes back to the benchmarking point. It is not just about how we do that in bidding for resources but about looking at similar-sized regions and areas and asking what makes them successful and how we can use their practices. We are in the process of setting that up, which is reflected in the Department's plan. We will engage with the universities to see where we can get European experts in or go to see them, and we will certainly be in touch with Máire Geoghegan-Quinn's office. We are going there on a visit at the end of this month to pick up on that contact. That is crucial because the big win is getting the next round of funding.

Mr Johnston: I will add something about the benchmarking. The universities see one of the opportunities as being to get in early on projects and help to shape the format of a larger programme to follow. The average success rate for universities is 20%, but our universities are not achieving that. That is one of the reasons why they are interested in this centre as a way of networking better and improving links with Government, which will, hopefully, result in better applications that have more chance of success.

The Chairperson: Of the EU regions, which are what you called the best in class?

Dr Geddis: It depends on the particular sectoral areas that you look at. For innovation and technology, it would definitely be northern European and particularly Scandinavian regions.

The Chairperson: Your commitment 7/9 is to benchmark performance against the highest achieving EU regions. The timescale for that started at June 2012 and is now May 2013.

Dr Geddis: Yes, Chairman. That again reflects the fact that these delivery plans are working documents for officials. That was an aspiration at that point, but the timing was simply not right. That is something that we at the centre wanted to achieve, but we can move only as fast as can 12 Departments. So it was, I think, an unrealistic action at that point. But the key —

Mr Lyttle: Chair, can I ask a quick question on that? Does "living document" translate to, "Just change the target dates every time you want to."? I appreciate that "living document" is sincere for officials who are working with changing dates, but what target dates ever stay the same to allow Committees to assess, on behalf of the public, whether progress has been achieved as it was meant to?

Dr McMahon: That comes back to the earlier point. Ministers have given a very firm commitment through the overall commitment in the Programme for Government and the three milestones. That has not changed, but we have to recognise that, when we set up those plans, we do so for a number of purposes. Obviously, one purpose is to ensure that the public and key stakeholders are aware of what we are trying to do and how we are trying to do it. Another purpose is to try to ensure that the system responds quickly, so we deliberately build space into those targets to ensure that some of the targets in the plan at the back are going to be tighter than we need them to be. If we did not do that, there is a danger that, if people had a year to do it, they would take a year to do it. The problem with that is that it then means that you have to move back some of those smaller milestones.

The key point is that we cannot go outside of the annual milestones or, more importantly, the overall commitment. That is what Ministers are committed to. In fairness, in some cases, it is not just a case of moving the milestones. It is a case of having found a different way of approaching the problems or some of the commitments, so we are doing things in a slightly different way. That is also reflected there. That is really what we mean by living documents, but the overall commitment is the overall commitment and we have to live with that.

Dr Geddis: I will just add, before we leave that particular point, that those are key actions for the delivery of the commitment, they are not actually targets. There is a time frame put in against an action. They are not targets. The target is the 20%.

Mr Lyttle: I think the problem is that a lot of the annual milestones are not met either; it is not just the delivery targets. However, I appreciate the explanation. Thanks, Chair, and I am sorry to interrupt the presentation.

The Chairperson: Is that you happy?

Mr Lyttle: Yes.

Ms McGahan: How is the money that is drawn down by arm's-length bodies like Invest NI measured? Is that measured in the parent Department or separately?

Dr Geddis: It is measured through the parent Department. The other component of that is third parties. The definition of "drawdown" extends to Departments, arm's-length bodies and third parties. The summary details of section 1 of the delivery plan indicate that, and also the conditions under which Departments can count that drawdown.

The Chairperson: OK, folks. If we are content, that leaves me to thank Paul. I really appreciate you coming back for the second week. As far as we are concerned, you are free to go, but I do not know what arrangements you have with your colleagues.

Dr Geddis: I appreciate that, Chair, thank you. Thank you, members.

The Chairperson: We will move on to Programme for Government commitments 31 and 32, which relate to the two £40 million blocks within the social investment fund. Denis, can you walk us through the key actions for delivery of the commitments? Will you bring us up to speed on what we should bear in mind about what has and has not been achieved?

Dr McMahon: Henry can take us through them in more detail. The first key action is to establish a formal programme of management arrangements, including a programme board. We have had that. That is part of the wider Delivering Social Change programme structure. It is one of the innovations. It does not sound very innovative, but it is actually quite an important one, in that we have special advisers and officials on all those programme boards, which means that we have a more joined-up approach.

We have had an independent gateway review of the project to determine the deliverability risk rating. There are obviously risks attached to it, which are reflected in the delivery plan, but the project is being managed in a way that is compliant with the principles of good practice in project management.

We had to secure Executive approval for the final operation of the investment fund, but, obviously, that has happened. There was a lot of detailed consideration about how that would happen, the formation of the groups, and so on.

We have DFP approval for the outline business case; we have gone through that process.

More work needs to be done on the action to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework. The issue there is that you can only really decide what it is that you are going to measure when you are clear about what specific projects you are going to deliver. Obviously, we are in the process of doing that at the minute.

The next action was to establish delivery teams to support communities to develop strategic area plans. Again, that has happened.

The technical assistance has been provided. Obviously, the nine groups have been putting together their plans. Those plans are now with the Department and being considered.

We also have the signature projects in here. We will come back to that later when we talk about Delivering Social Change. It goes back to the earlier point that the Ministers were very clear that they want to ensure that, in addition to proceeding with the social investment fund process as originally intended, we also try to create additional momentum through the signature projects.

We are developing the supporting structures at the moment. The key point is getting agreement in the Department on which projects should go forward and getting those projects through the approval process. At this stage, we have the plans, and those are being scrutinised in detail. There is a lot of detail in those plans.

I do not know whether you want to add anything to that, Henry.

Mr Johnston: As Denis said, we now have the full area plans and appraisals for each of the prioritised projects. We are now going through a period of consideration and refinement of those. That will require further work on both the plans and the projects. We expect the projects to get through that process, not all in a single convoy but in a series of projects. We will have about 90 appraisals to consider. We have agreed with DFP that the process by which that will be done will be a range of internal and external approvals. We will then be able to provide recommendations for Ministers on what we may fund out of the available finance. Ministers have also extended the period in which we will be able to fund SIF area-based planning projects into the first year of the next CSR period.

The Chairperson: Presumably these area plans are absolutely critical to effective delivery.

Mr Johnston: Yes.

The Chairperson: How do we monitor the success of these plans?

Mr Johnston: A wide partnership of people is involved in drawing up the plans. We are still working through the process of looking at those plans. Some of the plans are very good, and some are less good. Within those, there are a number of excellent projects that we will hopefully be able to take forward. That will be made public as we move forward through the process and with continued engagement both locally and with the Committee.

The Chairperson: One of the actions is to assess and secure business case approval. Denis, in my limited experience of working in the public sector with the Victims' Commission, business cases were key documents to any activities. They are referenced here several times, not least in your risk and contingent actions. The difficulty is that we do not get sight of business cases. How do we robustly assess, scrutinise, support or criticise when we cannot see the business cases that are so critical to all these actions?

Dr McMahon: You are right that business cases are an important technical element of the decision-making process, but the decisions will ultimately be communicated through the plans. When the Department and the Ministers have decided which projects they are going to be moving forward with from the plans, it will be clear what the individual projects are supposed to deliver. We will also have to have metrics to show how we will measure progress against those projects. Those are the main areas that can be scrutinised apart from business cases.

Mr Lyttle: I declare an interest as a member of the east Belfast area steering group, but I speak today solely in my role as a Committee member.

From day one, there has been concern about the delivery of this project but support for its aims. Groups were invited to express interests and propose projects to the area steering groups. Area plans have been produced and submitted to OFMDFM. How are the groups that made expressions of interest or proposed projects being updated given that a number of months have passed since they made those proposals?

Mr Johnston: There will be a feedback mechanism through the partnerships. We received the final plans and the appraisals at the end of February. We received the draft plans at the end of January.

There are really two classes of project plans that will come forward. The first relates to capital projects. It is pretty clear whether the thing is going forward or not going forward. On the revenue projects, we were trying to communicate that we were looking for people to identify need. We were looking for people to identify a potential way forward but not necessarily the delivery partner. So, some further work will be required on that.

We will communicate through the partnerships. However, our teams are still going through the plans, looking at the identified projects and starting to provide information on those projects whose appraisals look like they are closest to being ready for further consideration. Some of them need a reasonable amount of work where there are missing elements or a lack of clarity. We are also oversubscribed given the available budget.

Mr Lyttle: I want to clarify that OFMDFM is communicating directly with anyone who made a proposal on the capital side but has not been included in an area plan.

Mr Johnston: No; that is a job for the partnerships.

Mr Lyttle: When you say partnerships, do you mean area steering groups?

Mr Johnston: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: OK; fair enough. You mentioned that there has been an overbid for resources. Against which criteria will projects be prioritised?

Mr Johnston: We will be working through that process. We have received bids in relation to plans. People have prioritised within those plans. We will need to see whether the individual projects' business cases stack up. We will then see what the likely allocation of spend per area will be. We have not determined those figures.

Mr Lyttle: So, you do not know how you will prioritise those just yet?

Mr Johnston: No; not in detail.

Dr McMahon: The first step is to make sure that we know which projects are real, achievable projects. We assume that there has been a level of scrutiny. However, with the best will in the world, some of the projects will be more worked up than others. None of them is speculative, but people are quite rightly coming forward with innovative proposals, so we just need to see how much we are talking about when we add up the projects that look as if they are feasible and achievable. We will obviously apply the criteria then. The Ministers have been very clear about the sort of overarching criteria and what the fund is intended to achieve. A project will have to be consistent with that.

Mr Lyttle: How will you monitor the delivery of those area plans? Will the area steering groups be retained as part of the monitoring process?

Mr Johnston: The intention is to keep those area steering groups in existence as we go forward into the implementation phase. I will elaborate a bit on what Denis said. One of the zones has bid for 42% of the available capital. So, there will be a process to manage expectations between what people have asked for and what they are likely to get based on prioritising within each of those zones.

There will be other issues to consider. For example, we have committed to set up a funders' reference group. There are issues with some proposals in that the differentiation between what is being proposed and what other people are already funding is not clear. If we look at some of the mainstream spends around advice services or employability, we see there is an issue there that we need to refine. We would also include non-statutory bodies in that group so that we have a more holistic view of what is being funded in those areas.

Mr Lyttle: Will you elaborate on the thinking behind permitting only members of the existing area steering groups to act as project managers in determining how the funding is delivered once it is received?

Mr Johnston: I think that was a suggestion; it is not a mandatory condition. I think we said "should", so that may not be the case. A number of plans are coming in with somebody else identified to take the lead. One issue we will be looking at will be terms of deliverability of those projects, so we will also be assessing the capability of lead partners and delivery partners to make the thing happen on the ground.

Mr Maskey: The steering groups are not presenting a wish list to anybody. They have to do a certain amount of work. Following on from Chris's question, it seems a wee bit odd to me because it is nearly like a conflict. We need to be careful where we are straying into.

Mr Lyttle: I am content that I fully clarified the two roles in delivering funding.

Mr Maskey: I understand and appreciate that. I am just making the point that the steering groups have a brief, a remit, which I thought was quite clear. They are not just presenting a wish list but have already done a certain amount of work. In other words, the steering group puts forward an area plan and has prepared the work around that. Obviously, the plan has to go for final approvals along the lines that Denis and Henry outlined. However, they are not projects that are plucked out of the air; they have to prove that they meet the criteria.

Mr Johnston: Could I just make a point about the difficulties that some of the partnerships had —

Mr Maskey: I am pointing out the problem that Chris had with that. I am not criticising you for —

The Chairperson: Chris said very clearly that —

Mr Maskey: I know that. That is why I am prefacing my remarks. I think we are in a wee bit of a difficulty and that is why, if you are asking for business cases, for example, on some of those projects, I think we will be straying into muddy water.

The Chairperson: I think my question was a broad one about business cases; it not specific to this.

Ms McGahan: Is spend for each steering group the same?

Dr McMahon: That has yet to be decided.

Mr Johnston: We have a number of options.

I just want to go back to the capital question. I said earlier that the position on capital was very clear. It is very clear for a number of projects, but a number of steering groups had proposals before them that they did not think were worked up sufficiently for them to come to a final decision on. A number of steering groups have put forward packages of potential projects that they would like to see funded to get to the stage that a definitive decision could be made on them. They need plans done and the cocktail of funding worked out. They have, essentially, put in marker bids and said, "Please, could we have some development funding for these potential capital projects?"

Ms Fearon: I am struggling to remember: are there nine or 10 steering groups?

Mr Johnston: Nine.

Ms Fearon: What was the rationale behind having four steering groups in Belfast alone, one in Derry then leaving three or four to cover the rest of the North?

Mr Johnston: The rationale was that, in Belfast, they were trying to build on historic patterns where people had been working together on plans. In the north-west, the One Plan was in place, so it seemed to be a sensible enough idea to make it coterminous with that, where a lot of investment and community engagement had gone on.

The division on the rest was done on trust boundaries. There was a feeling, particularly where we are expecting quite a lot of work around things such as early years and the operational tier of the children and young people's strategic partnership, that that seemed like a good way to bring that together. Councils and other statutory bodies would also be engaged with that. It was a boundary that seemed

to make some sort of sense around engaging the statutory sector and the community sector. That was the decision we came to.

Ms Fearon: I do not mean to sound parochial, and I am certainly not insinuating in any way that Derry, Belfast or other such areas do not deserve anything, because I know that there are socially deprived areas in those clusters. If it is yet to be decided whether each steering group will be allocated different amounts of money, there will be questions over how the money is spread out geographically.

Dr McMahon: There are some really big questions in the middle of all of that, and there are things that can be informed by technical analysis and technical options, but they will also require political input. For example, the issue about rurality is very important, and it is something that distinguishes the social investment fund from some other programmes. It is something that Ministers are aware of, but there are some challenging debates about how you divide it up. I suppose that all of this has to come together. There is a technical analysis and an analysis that says here is what we think is fair within that. Unfortunately, you cannot put it all into a spreadsheet and get the right answer. I would love to be able to do that, but, unfortunately, we cannot.

The Chairperson: This is an OFMDFM initiative. Does it need signed off by the Executive?

Mr Johnston: As part of the Programme for Government, it was signed off the Executive.

Dr McMahon: It was signed off by the Executive.

The Chairperson: These area plans, the actual spend, are signed off by OFMDFM?

Mr Johnston: It is signed off under delegated authority by DFP. Something like 10% of the business cases will have to be approved by DFP.

Dr McMahon: That will be a normal departmental process.

The Chairperson: It will not go back to the Executive.

Dr McMahon: There is no intention to put it back to the Executive.

The Chairperson: Next is commitment 33, which is on childcare. Members, I am conscious of the time, although I do not wish to rush through this. Denis, we thought that we might need a third session. Are you content if we continue and see how we go?

Dr McMahon: Sure.

The Chairperson: Earlier, I mentioned that I felt that a commitment for spend by March 2014 had disappeared. The overarching impression is that this is dogged by delays of various types, Denis. For a change, I will go to the risk block. The first key risk to be stated is:

"No improvement of access to affordable, accessible and good quality childcare".

On a scale of 1 to 5, you have probability of risk occurring as a 3. Is it not the case that it actually has happened? There has been no improvement as yet to access to affordable, good quality childcare. It should be a 5. It has happened.

Dr McMahon: That is a fair point, Chair, in the sense that the whole point of doing the childcare strategy is to get in place a series of initiatives that can address a problem that is there in the first place. In a sense, it happened before the strategy was ever agreed to as a commitment. Obviously, we have been working through a process of developing the strategy. Alongside that, as Fergus will have explained to you last week, Ministers have agreed a number of initiatives in parallel with the strategy.

I suppose the big thing is that there is a huge issue about childcare. There is no doubt that a strategy in itself will not solve the childcare problem. That will definitely not be the case. Maybe, instead of calling it a problem, I should be careful and say that it is an opportunity. There is a huge opportunity here to get people into the workforce and provide them with training and development and set them up

in a career ladder. There is also a huge opportunity for people being able to participate in the workforce because they have access to childcare. There is also a huge opportunity for children and young people to be given a level of development that maybe they do not have in their home circumstances for various reasons.

If we are looking at the levers that government have to try to make a difference, we see that childcare is right in the middle of it. You are absolutely right. To come back to your question: that is why it has happened, and that is why the childcare strategy is such an important initiative.

Mr Lyttle: I will try to brief. I realise that we are up against time. Can you give a bit of an explanation on why it has been delayed? The milestone for publication of the strategy was meant to be in December 2012, and implementation was meant to commence this month. Can you give us any insight into why there has been a delay?

Dr McMahon: There are a couple of points there. If you are referring back to the key actions, that is, obviously, a delay against what we had originally intended. Again, at the beginning we deliberately set very tight targets around that to make sure that we were going to get it in earlier than we had intended, if possible. That would have been ideal. To be very clear about it, it is one of those issues that, first, is complicated; secondly, there are a lot of stakeholders; and, thirdly, there are different views about what people want from a strategy. Obviously, there are various views within OFMDFM, but, also in the wider stakeholder group, there are different views about what people expect to see in a strategy.

One of the things that people have been saying to us in the consultation process that we have just had is that they do not want to see an absolutely final version of the strategy. They want to see a strategy with real commitments, saying what the Executive are going to do to promote more high-quality, sustainable childcare, but they are also saying that they want a bit of space to be able to influence the roll-out of any strategy. It is a trade off, to a certain extent, between trying to make sure that we are getting the policy right and getting it through on time. We are still working hard to try to ensure that we get the strategy published in the next month.

The Chairperson: Are members all content? Will you have to consult once you have got a strategy together, Dennis, is that the intention? I believe that a significant number of stakeholders have told you to come back to them, because they would rather be consulted on a strategy than on the process that you have just run.

Dr McMahon: To answer your question, it had not necessarily been our intention, but it was a serious consultation process, and Ministers are listening to what people have said and will want to think about that. Obviously, I cannot make a final commitment on how Ministers will want to go on that, but I can say that Ministers will definitely be listening to what consultees have said.

The strategy itself is obviously crucial, because it sets out what we are going to commit to and what we are going to try to do, but it is equally important that we get some early momentum for some of the actions. The key things are, at the very minimum, doing something quickly on information, so that people have good access to information on childcare, and then following on as soon as possible with a programme to improve capacity. That comes back to your original point. Depending on how quickly and effectively we could bring that programme together, that could lead to a significant amount of spend, over and above what has already been committed.

Ms McGahan: I want to make a comment about my concerns around the consultation that took place. None of those consultation events were held in rural areas, and I feel that that leaves a gap. Although I was told last week that people from rural areas attended some of those venues, I still do not think that that cuts it. I have a question mark in my head about that. I think that there is a serious gap there.

Dr McMahon: There are certainly things that we could do. We had one event in Enniskillen, for example, at which I do not think there was a huge attendance. We had, basically, one or two people. We need to look at that carefully. One of the comments that came back to us was about the time of day that we had it. We had it in the evening, thinking that that would help, but, actually, in that case, people were saying that it probably would have been better during the day, because people were doing agricultural work. We did try, but I agree with you that there needs to be more engagement. One thing that I can definitely say is that, in the consultation process, there was a huge issue that came out, right the way through, about rural access to childcare. That will definitely be reflected in the strategy.

The Chairperson: Members, Denis and Henry, I propose that we come back to the next two — 34 and 37 — and try to take everything under Delivering Social Change and child poverty as a whole at the end, if we have time, or come back to it at another point, and at this point move to 35, on the social protection fund.

The Chairperson: What can you tell us on that please, Denis or Henry?

Dr McMahon: It is probably difficult to discuss this one without touching on some of the work that has been going on under Delivering Social Change.

The Chairperson: Right; well, do you want to leave it as well?

Dr McMahon: I am happy to, if you want, Chair.

The Chairperson: OK. A topical commitment is 38, the age discrimination legislation, which was debated in the Chamber this week. That is at tab 10 in members' tabled papers. We will again start at point 3. We just have 4 actions.

Dr McMahon: Where we are at the moment is that the Department is considering the scope of the legislation. We have been doing as much work as we can on pre-consultation to try to bring as much information as we can together, so that we are in a position to move forward, develop proposals and get the legislation under way. A key decision must be taken about the scope of it, and that will be crucial to moving forward and meeting the commitment.

The Chairperson: The summary makes the point that this type of legislation would generally benefit older people and young people. Does that suggest that you always had in mind that it would affect the young as well as the old?

Dr McMahon: The Department has not got a clear view on that, and it must decide how it wants to proceed on this. Ministers will have to decide that.

Mr Johnston: Members can see that the updated plan no longer has that wee end bound around the equality implications.

The Chairperson: Does the fact that we are not yet delivering this carry any implications for our obligations under treaties and international law?

Dr McMahon: The main issue is that some of this would bring us into line with legislation in other jurisdictions. Beyond that, I am not aware of any treaties that we would be breaking. I am happy to follow up on that, but I am aware of nothing.

The Chairperson: OK. Specifically, your plan at 5(a) scores straight 5s on the risk management chart for the probability of risk and its impact.

Dr McMahon: We are undoubtedly at a crucial point in the timetable for the process and for just getting it through the legislative process. The situation might be different were we looking at accelerated passage; but, to get it through the legislative process, we need to come to a decision and get that work done fairly quickly.

The Chairperson: One of your risks and the mitigating action against it is:

"Develop good working relationships with the Committee clerk and chair".

[Laughter.] Do you mean us?

Dr McMahon: We need to work a bit harder on that, Chair, but we will do our best.

The Chairperson: I am stunned.

Mr Maskey: Would you do lunch? *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: So long as the consistent late delivery of papers is not an indication of your commitment, I am sure that we will work our way through this.

Dr McMahon: OK, Chair.

Mr Lyttle: I have a quick question. The development, consultation and proposals were meant to have happened by this month. Are we right to understand that the key disagreement is whether or not the legislation will extend to all ages, including under-18s?

Mr Johnston: Yes; that is correct.

Mr Lyttle: OK. Can you indicate how much more difficult extending it to under-18s would make the timescale for producing the legislation?

Dr McMahon: It, again, depends on whether we are looking at accelerated passage, but, even given normal passage, it would be tight as it stands. We are planning on including those age groups. I do not want to make any assumptions on how the Department will move on it. Ministers in the Department will need to agree this. There would be no point in us sitting back and deciding what information we need when we see what happens. Obviously, there is only so far we can take it without coming to a definitive view on that, and, in the meantime, we are pulling together whatever information we can and looking at that.

Undoubtedly, there are big issues when you get into nought- to 18-year-olds, in the sense that, depending on what legislation we put in place, it would be very easy, if we did not have appropriate caveats or controls, to find ourselves in situations with unexpected consequences. We need to plan for that, and we are doing so. I want to reassure the Committee that, depending on how the Department decides to go on this, we are trying to prepare either way.

The Chairperson: Members, we move to commitment 41, which is on the advisory group on alleviating hardship. Denis, can we begin with the five key actions at point 3?

Dr McMahon: The main thing to say on this one is that we have key actions. One of those is to publish the group report, and Ministers are considering that. There is a report, and it has been completed.

The Chairperson: The initial report was to be done by 30 June last year.

Dr McMahon: It took a bit longer than that, but we have the report. A number of the members of the group have had bereavements, and there have been other issues. A few things happened that were unexpected. The group worked hard to get the report together, and it has submitted that to Ministers.

The Chairperson: The group has signed off. It is happy with its report and have sent it to the Ministers?

Dr McMahon: Yes, the Ministers are now considering what to do with it.

The Chairperson: Is there any indicative timescale on the Ministers' decision?

Dr McMahon: I do not have a definitive timescale, but I know that Ministers and the Department are considering it.

Mr Maskey: Your paper states that the timescale for the report to be published is September. Is that September 2012?

Dr McMahon: Yes.

The Chairperson: In your risks, you include:

"Failure of Group to deliver to FM and dFM a Report which meets the required standard".

Is there a definition of "required standard"?

Dr McMahon: Looking back on that, the wording is probably not the most appropriate, but we stuck with that as a risk because that was the way that we had worded it. We are talking about a very experienced and knowledgeable group of people who were able to give us their experience. So, in a sense, we just wanted to make sure that there was a report that met the terms of reference. The wording should probably be drafted to reflect that the report should meet the terms of reference. The group did that and worked hard on it.

The Chairperson: There is not a lot that we can add until the Ministers sign off on it and we get sight of it. If members are content, we will move on to Programme for Government commitment number 67. I doubt that there is a particular interest in this one. It is:

"Publish the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy to build a united community and improve community relations."

Ms McGahan: Can go back to the previous one to make a point regarding rising levels of fuel poverty? That is one of the issues that the advisory group is to take account of. I sit on the Dungannon and Coalisland neighbourhood renewal group, and I am finding that that is a massive issue. I have recent experience of dealing with pensioners whose windows were in for 40-plus years. Obviously, they cannot afford to have electric heating running all day because it increases their utility bills. There is a grant available under exceptional circumstances. I contacted the Housing Executive about it, and it came out, and the pensioners were turned down. That seriously needs to be looked at. There are pensioners who have had their windows in for 40-plus years. They cannot really afford to heat their home, yet they did not meet the criteria of exceptional circumstances and were turned down. There are serious question marks around that, especially when there is a grant there, but they were turned down despite the fact that their windows were in for 40-plus years. I do not get that at all.

Dr McMahon: That is one of the issues that the group identified. They were maybe not able to go into it in as much detail as they would have wanted, but they did identify that fuel poverty was absolutely crucial to all of this. I am sure that the group would agree with your comments. We just need to make sure that they are fed in.

Mr G Robinson: I had the same experience.

The Chairperson: Commitment 67 is to publish the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy.

Dr McMahon: A lot of work has taken place to develop a draft report. It committed to weekly meetings, and there were a lot of meetings. A lot of the meetings were politically driven in the sense of political engagement. We now have a draft report, so that is really as far as I can go at this stage.

The Chairperson: There is a draft report?

Dr McMahon: There are drafts.

The Chairperson: Thorough?

Dr McMahon: Nothing is agreed or finalised in the Department as yet.

Mr Lyttle: The delivery plans state that a draft of the strategy has been prepared and presented to the First Minister and deputy First Minister as of 30 September 2012. Is that right?

Dr McMahon: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: The target for publication of the strategy was spring 2012?

Dr McMahon: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: OK. Fair enough.

The Chairperson: In fairness, there is probably very little that officials can say on this. With regard to point 5 and the risk management matrix, the areas that you identified are a potential delay in finalising the text of the CSI strategy and the potential that it does not deliver an improvement in good relations. You have probability of risk occurring as 3 in each case.

Dr McMahon: It is fair that we would probably want to look at the probability of risk occurring. Having said that, in developing the delivery plans and in the process of the original updates, there was a huge amount of work, in fairness to all concerned.

The Chairperson: I do not deny that.

Mr Lyttle: Is there any indication as to the potential for publication of this strategy from the First Minister and deputy First Minister?

Dr McMahon: There is nothing more I can say about it, to be honest.

The Chairperson: I know, Chris, that it has been discussed at party leader level. I suppose there is a straight choice about whether you go for full buy-in or publication.

Mr Maskey: The key thing here is that we cannot press the officials on it any more. Everybody knows the nature of the problems.

The Chairperson: Absolutely. OK, let us turn to the Programme for Government commitments that are broadly under the umbrella of Delivering Social Change and child poverty. Those were 34, 37 and the social protection fund, which is 35.

Dr McMahon: Would you like to look at the key actions again, Chair?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Dr McMahon: This came from the Committee's original response to the consultation on the Programme for Government. One of the things that influenced it was a realisation that we had to try to work differently and more effectively across Departments. Ministers looked at that and the problems that they were facing — that we are all facing, I suppose — and decided that the delivering social change framework was a way of saying, "OK, here is what we are going to try to do, and here is how we are going to try to work together across Departments."

You had a session with the junior Ministers, when they explained the amount of work that they had been putting into this personally, and that continues to be the case. It is hard to capture on a piece of paper like this just what that has meant and how it has evolved. However, it is really important that Ministers have engaged much more effectively through this framework. It has allowed them to take a step back and say, "Instead of worrying about whether we are meeting 200 different targets and actions plans, what are we actually trying to achieve?" There have been those sorts of discussions at ministerial level and senior official level within the framework.

The programme board has been established. It is up and running. It has met very frequently, chaired by the junior Ministers, and it has had good attendance. Below that, we have programme boards for various aspects. For example, there is a programme board for the social investment fund underneath that, and it meets regularly, if not monthly. We have more frequent meetings of what is called the strategic programme board, which has special advisers on it. There is a lot of work going on that is probably hidden behind the scenes.

There have been number of key developments as a result of that. The first thing is the identification of the signature programmes and the £26 million funding. I will not detail those again, but those commitments were made and are under way. Secondly, a number of the elements of the first key action have been met or delivered using that approach. It is more a way of doing business. I am not saying for one minute that all these things are perfect. However, the Victims and Survivors Service is up and running. The inquiry into historical institutional abuse is under way. We have some other actions that, as we have referred to here, are not so far on. However, we have had some good progress in there.

The other big difference that you will probably have noticed is the consolidated Delivering Social Change fund. That reflects the fact that the Ministers are saying that it is important that we proceed with the social investment fund and use the approach that we are using but we cannot rely just on that, particularly if the process has slowed down. We need to make sure that there is momentum. The Ministers are very clear that they want to bring that money together and use it effectively. An awful lot of the problems that we are looking at come back to the same root causes. For example, we have various strategies covering various different aspects, such as children, disability or child poverty. However, when you look at it, you see that an awful lot of the problems are caused by the same issues. It comes back to multigenerational poverty, particularly in certain geographical areas.

The idea behind the consolidated fund is to bring the resources together and ask how we can direct those resources to meet those needs most quickly and most effectively. The key actions should reflect that. The project boards are being set up again. It does not sound that exciting when you say that project boards have met. However, that is actually quite a difference in culture especially, given the fact that all those project boards have both politicians and administrators on them, which would not necessarily have been the case in the past. The ministerial subcommittee meeting is very well attended.

A lot of the work has been developed on the poverty outcomes model. We are working with the National Children's Bureau and awaiting a report from it. That will not necessarily be about creating a whole load of new data sources. It is about looking at all the data that are out there, deciding on the two or three measures that we really want to focus on and then saying, "This is what we are going to change." The difference in educational achievement between those who get free school meals and those who get non-free school meals, for example, is critical. There will be others as well.

The next stage will be to take that a step further and ask what that means for medium- to longer-term planning. Where do we need to go? We can do so much through the consolidated fund and the different projects and signature programmes. However, some of these issues are very intractable and have been there for literally hundreds of years. What sort of structural changes do we need to make to ensure that those things are dealt with in the longer term?

I do not know if I have missed anything there, Henry.

Mr Johnston: You mentioned the importance of the child poverty outcomes model. It is able to be distilled down to a very small number of easily understandable indicators. However, that is not to say that we will stop collecting the other material that we have to collect. We have a commitment under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to collect a lot of information, and we continue to do that. The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership is also collecting a lot of material for its operational planning purposes. What we are asking is how we can get down to three or four things that people can internalise, so that we can see what difference we are making on the ground.

Dr McMahon: I do not know whether all that is helpful, Chair.

The Chairperson: It is. It is critical that, as a point of principle, we pick two or three issues, even if there are 20,30 or 40, get success on those and develop momentum. It seems that this is a bit of a pioneering initiative that is trying to work horizontally rather than in the traditional, vertical silos of government.

Mr Johnston: Success will not really be about using the Delivering Social Change fund. It will be about influencing where the mainstream spend goes in the near term and the longer term. The structures sound very boring. That is why it is so important we have the key stakeholders and Ministers heavily engaged in the process and a tremendous alignment of people's agendas and views.

The other thing, which Denis mentioned earlier, is the European centre for delivering social change. We also need to make sure that we do not just stare at our navels. We need to both export our good practice in a number of these areas and import best European practice and leverage what the academic community is telling us. In the past, we, in Northern Ireland, have been very good at running pilots but very bad at learning from those pilots and rolling them out to scale.

The Chairperson: Are Members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: I have one last point of information about the risk management matrices. We noted one that had straight 5 ratings; i.e. the likelihood of the risk happening is almost certain, and the impact is also rated 5, in the catastrophic category. However, on Paul's 20% drawdown commitment, the ratings were all 1s. Are those ratings done discretely, or does someone take a helicopter view, benchmark it and say that there is too much of a discrepancy?

Dr McMahon: I can assure you that the central team does look at it. Nine of the commitments are mine, and, to be honest with you, it crawls all over them and challenges every one. However, you are right: there is an element of subjectivity in these things; there is no doubt about that. We could maybe look at those again and ask what level of consistency there is between them.

Mr Johnston: Paul alluded earlier to the difficulty that he has in capturing all the competitive drawdown. We are doing a couple of other things. We were relatively successful in the material that we captured in the first year of the target period. Chair, you alluded to the Barroso task force and the special way in that it has given us. There is also the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum. We are trying to engage with a wider set of stakeholders who are successful or aspirational in these European projects. We think that we could do better, as Paul said, in getting on as junior partners but then having the confidence to move forward and be a lead partner. We would like to do more. We think that, in the round, we are doing a fair amount of work. That is why Paul's view is that the risk is relatively low and he was not challenged to make it any higher.

The Chairperson: Henry and Denis, thank you very much. We will write to the Ministers and suggest that we formalise these sessions into set plays over the course of the year.