



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Draft Sustainable Development Strategy

30 September 2009

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Naomi Long (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

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

The Deputy Chairperson (Mrs Long):

Damian, Jim and John, thank you for coming to brief the Committee. Perhaps you would like to make a short presentation before taking questions from members.

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

I have with me Jim Sutherland and John Bradley from the Department's sustainable development unit. The Committee was provided with a copy of our draft sustainable development strategy, and we welcome members' views and comments on it.

The Department wants to take the document to public consultation and is keen to first have the Committee's views on its content. However, the Department would like to move as quickly as possible and, subject to the Committee's views and to ministerial and Executive approval, we would like to schedule the start of public consultation for the week commencing 26 October.

The drive to produce the document came from a desire to have a sustainable development strategy that aligned better with the Programme for Government and that expressed in a local context the fundamental principles of sustainability across each of the social, economic and environmental dimensions. The key objective of the new strategy is to promote the view that sustainable development is an opportunity rather than an obstacle; it can help to drive economic prosperity, encourage social cohesion and support environmental protection.

The strategy is laid out in 10 short chapters. It is designed as a high-level enabling document, setting out the Department's principles, priorities and objectives for sustainable development. Twenty commitments underscore our core promise to make sustainable development relevant to everyone. The strategy document is not a prescriptive statement of detailed actions; rather, it is a platform on which we can build our implementation plan. That plan will be a detailed statement of the tangible and practical actions that will be carried out to deliver our sustainability objectives.

We intend to begin the development of the implementation plan in parallel with consultation on the strategy. To do that, we will work with representatives of our delivery partners and the wider stakeholder community. It is almost a year since we were last in front of the Committee to discuss this issue. At that time, you presented us with your views on what was needed to make the sustainable development agenda more effective and relevant. The Committee mentioned the need to raise the sustainable development profile, improve accountability for sustainable development performance and bring greater clarity to sustainable development targets. We think that the document addresses those issues and provides an opportunity to make meaningful progress.

Finally, the Committee urged the Department to address the appointment of a local commissioner to the Sustainable Development Commission. That appointment process is now under way.

The Deputy Chairperson:

When does the Department envisage going out to public consultation, and how long do we and the other statutory Committees have to respond to the Department?

Mr Prince:

We hope to go to the Executive on 22 October to get clearance to go out to public consultation in the week commencing 26 October. The strategy will affect more than one Department, so in taking the strategy forward, it is important that we have buy-in from all the affected Departments.

The Deputy Chairperson:

You spoke about the appointment of a commissioner. Will you update the Committee on the status of the memorandum of understanding?

Mr Prince:

We have not yet moved forward with the memorandum of understanding. However, we now have clearance from Ministers to do so. A lot has happened in the Sustainable Development Commission since last year. The organisation has become a company limited by guarantee and a lot of the articles of association have changed. Had we had a memorandum of understanding, we would probably have needed to change it any way. We will be embarking on refreshing and finalising the memorandum of understanding as soon as we can.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Why did that change happen?

Mr Prince:

The Sustainable Development Commission is owned by ourselves, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Scottish and Welsh Administrations. Our local commissioner sits on that organisation. The change was intended to give the Sustainable Development Commission greater independence so that it could become an executive organisation rather than simply an advisory one. It was primarily a case of giving it more teeth.

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

One of the driving factors was that the Sustainable Development Commission saw this as an

opportunity to put clear water between it and central Government and to allow it to act more independently. To move things forward with the memorandum of understanding, we face two options: we can refresh the memorandum of understanding now, or, equally, it may be more sensible to delay that until the commissioner has been appointed, so we can engage directly with him or her to see how he or she sees the Northern Ireland agenda for the Sustainable Development Commission shaping up.

Ms Anderson:

I welcome the fact that we have the strategy in front of us. The delivery report that we received a few weeks ago outlined, in red, that there was no delivery on sustainable development. In addition, I welcome the news that the commissioner will be appointed soon. Hopefully, “soon” does not mean that we will still be talking next year about that happening.

I am interested in what Damian said about the implementation plan, because I would like the timescale for it to be finalised. If the plan is to be implemented in parallel with consultation, will the consultation involve an equality impact assessment (EQIA) process?

Mr Prince:

Yes.

Ms Anderson:

I would have thought that the EQIA findings would inform targets, as opposed to the targets being set in advance of the EQIA, because we need to make sure that we give due regard to the consultees. There is a sense out there that people are not being listened to, and I feel that it is important to do that. I am interested to hear about the time frame.

Will you tell us about the leadership that is coming from Ministers, particularly with respect to the procurement process, which, in the North, is potentially massive? Social requirements are built into procurement contracts, but how can sustainable development be fitted into the procurement process?

Does each Department still have a sustainable development champion? Do those people meet, and who oversees them when they get together? How does that work? For example, do they have a Chairperson, or does each have an individual remit to work in their respective

Departments?

Mr Prince:

The time frame for the appointment of the commissioner is such that an advertisement should appear in newspapers next week, we hope to schedule interviews for the week commencing 9 November and the appointment recommendation should be made in the week commencing 16 November. The process involves the panel interviewing candidates and then making recommendations to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. When they agree, the decision will go to Whitehall for ratification, after which the commissioner will be fully in post. We would be disappointed if the commissioner were not appointed by Christmas.

The decision to run the development of the implementation plan and the strategy consultation in parallel is driven by a desire to move things along. The strategy is a statement of intent, and the implementation plan is where the rubber hits the road. Running those processes in parallel does not mean to say that we envisage each of them having the same end date. The strategy consultation should end with final publication around February 2010, which will leave approximately 12 weeks in the process to pick up on the comments that people care to make.

Ms Anderson:

Do you mean the consultation process?

Mr Prince:

Yes, and part of the consultation will be to gather information on the screening process surrounding the EQIA. We cannot finalise the screening in or screening out until the results from the consultation come back. After that, there will be another consultation on —

Ms Anderson:

Might you screen in?

Mr Prince:

Absolutely; we have no preconditions about any of the processes. However, when we get the implementation plan, or most of it, that will also go out to consultation, to ensure that we have heard people right, are doing the right things and are pointing in a direction that everyone agrees on. There is a great opportunity for engagement and for hearing views from the wider public, the

Committee and stakeholders. I have forgotten the next question.

Ms Anderson:

I also asked about the champions.

Mr Prince:

There are champions in each of the Departments, and we have proposed to bring them together around about the start of November. We will look at the implementation plan as a first conversation with central Government and discuss what they think the content should be and how many of the old actions — which are already in train — could be rolled forward to form the basis of any new implementation plan. We have continued to monitor the old actions, which were based on the old plan. The key areas of sustainable development that are addressed by the priorities and headlines do not change, so we will be able to carry forward a lot of that information.

Ms Anderson:

My other question related to public procurement; it does not seem to be reflected in your strategy.

Mr Sutherland:

Following on from what Damian said about the discussions with the champions, we have met with the Committee a couple of times now and have picked up on the message that it feels that targets need to be harder and more focused. We are trying to schedule a meeting with all the champions, and one of the key areas that we will be looking at is how to shape targets in the new implementation plan and how to manage to improve the way that we work across Departments. All those issues need to be taken up.

Procurement is such a huge area in the sustainability agenda, and we recognise that we will need to focus and dedicate a particular area of our plan towards procurement. It involves a lot of Departments, although the Department of Finance and Personnel will take the lead. We need to pick our way through how best to set up the key areas of the plan, not only with regard to procurement, but in respect of such areas as energy and climate change. We are in the early stages of trying to develop the plan, and we are focusing on those areas. Procurement is very much at the forefront of our thinking but, at this point, we have not sufficiently identified the targets that will help us to achieve those objectives.

Ms Anderson:

Should it not be in the strategy? You say that it is at the forefront of your thinking. There is a potential procurement value in the North of £20 billion over a number of years. Although that will not be fully realised due to the economic downturn, it is still a massive opportunity and I would have expected some kind of expression of that in your strategy.

Mr Prince:

The importance of procurement is acknowledged in page 25 of the strategy. If one of the Committee's recommendations is that we need to up our game with regard to the emphasis that procurement is given, I am happy to take that on board.

Mr Sutherland:

One of our key thoughts in developing the strategy is to separate it from a detailed action plan. We want the detailed action plan to be separate. In the guiding principles of the strategy, we talk about achieving a sustainable economy and promoting good governance. We then drill down further to talk about the priority areas for action and about driving sustainable and long-term investment in key infrastructure. Perhaps we could broaden that to take the procurement issues slightly further to the fore, and we could certainly look at the way in which we look at the priority areas within that.

Mr Shannon:

One of the six guiding principles of the strategy is environmental limits. Environmental limits are all very worthy but, sometimes, targets are set that are not easily achievable. What consideration have you given to setting challenging, but achievable, targets?

Mr Prince:

That goes back to the action plan. The last time that we were here, we were told that the targets in our previous action plan were woolly, hard to measure and unrealistic and that they spilled into time frames that made it difficult to hold anyone to account. When we develop the new action plan, we will engage with relevant parties who can tell us what is desirable, what is achievable and what the consequences might be. Many of the principles in the strategy build on principles that are widely accepted in the European Union and in national and international sustainable development. Setting the targets will be the difficult bit. We are compiling a plan that is specific

to Northern Ireland that will set out what we can achieve and will take account of all the impacts that will flow from that.

Mr Sutherland:

One of the things that we need to do with respect to environmental issues is to look at how some of the lower-level actions, relating to habitat retention or habitat improvement, can be built up to make higher-level targets. Several actions may be undertaken within and between Departments that contribute to higher-level targets being met. If we talk about improving the environment in Northern Ireland, for example, we must have constituent targets that allow us to measure how we are progressing towards that overall aim. A lot of work must be done. We must talk to Departments and stakeholder groups to see whether we can develop bigger targets. Making sure that the targets are measurable is of key importance.

Mr McElduff:

I ask the officials to detail their plans for a stakeholder forum: what will its role be?

Mr Sutherland:

The stakeholder forum has raised its head two or three times. We discussed it the last time that we appeared before the Committee and said that, as things stood at that time, we were not sure that we could identify a specific and unique role for the forum. However, as we have moved forward and as our thinking has developed in relation to the development of an implementation plan, we are beginning to get a picture of the kinds of structures that we need to move this forward.

The model that we are considering is that of a steering group, which I hope will be chaired at ministerial level and will be supported by working groups. We envisage that the steering group will comprise high-level sectoral representatives who will have a place on the group and who could bring information to the group, as well as taking information back from it to a working-group level, to try to bring everything together.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I want to check a couple of things with you. You mentioned that while you are going out to consultation on the draft strategy, you will draw up the implementation or action plan. How will you ensure that that process is not prejudicial to the outcome of the public consultation?

Mr Prince:

The preliminary work that we are doing is based on previous action plans. We will also be taking readings from stakeholders to help us to build that plan. It will not be finalised until all the results of the public consultation are in. You ask whether we might want to steer the public consultation so that it produces a plan that we already have in the bottom drawer. We do not have such a plan at present, so the consultation process will not be tainted by any such plan. However, that is something that we will be mindful of.

The Deputy Chairperson:

There are a couple of other issues that I want to ask about in relation to the time frame. You mentioned that you will send the strategy out to public consultation on 26 October. At this stage, you are looking for us to approve it for use in that consultation. We need to circulate it to the other Committees to allow them sight of it. I must make you aware that that is a tight time frame for their response. You may have comment on the document rolled in with the consultation response. Is it a 12-week consultation process?

Mr Prince:

Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson:

After the 12 weeks, how long will be given for the Committee to read all the responses and make its own response?

Mr Prince:

The timeline that I have is as follows: after this meeting, the Executive meeting will be on 22 October and the consultation period should start on 26 October; assuming that everything goes well and we have a fair wind, the consultation will conclude on 18 January 2010; we hope to get Executive clearance on the final document by 4 February. We hope that the Committee will be able to sign off at the end of that process.

The Deputy Chairperson:

That time frame does not give the Committee very long to review the responses that are received and to input into the process. As a Committee, we will want to do that because we have taken a

particular interest in sustainable development. I flag up now that you may wish to think about the timetable, particularly the back end of it. We do not wish to delay the publication of the document, but we want the opportunity to review the responses that you receive and to have some input into them.

Mr Molloy:

The locations in which public consultations are held are often limited to places such as Derry, Belfast and Enniskillen. Mid Ulster is an example of central location where consultation should be held. It is important that the locations be spread across the constituencies.

Ms Anderson:

For Executive clearance to be achieved by February 2010, the consultation responses will have to come to the Committee before then and we will have to respond to those before the strategy goes to the Executive for clearance.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Based on the date that you gave, we will have one week to look at the consultation responses and prepare our response. That is not a realistic time frame, and that is why I flagged that up. I do not want you to set a timetable that you cannot achieve, and I do not want the Committee to be unnecessarily accused of delay at the end of the process.

Mr Prince:

That is a fair point.

Mr Sutherland:

I make the plea that we work to that timetable. The consultation process on the strategy is being managed in tandem with the development of the implementation plan. Any delays to the strategy process will have potential knock-on effects on the implementation plan process. The Department is trying hard to get the implementation plan to the Executive before the summer recess in 2010. The chances are that, if any substantial delay were to take place with the strategy, the implementation plan would not be approved until after the summer recess.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I take that point on board, but it has taken the Department a considerable amount of time to get

the strategy to this stage. The Committee process should not suffer because of delays earlier in the process. It is important that the Committees get adequate time. You said that you wish the strategy to be robust and effective, and that requires the Committee to be involved. Having not had sight of the responses, one week would not give the Committee adequate time to consider all of the responses and input into the process. That aspect is important for the Committee and for the integrity of the process.

We do not wish to cause undue delay, but we want the responses brought to us in a timely fashion. Although we cannot rewrite the delays of the past, we can look ahead. If you are looking at a deadline of 4 February, a considerable amount of time would still be left before the summer recess. Therefore, the Committee's consideration should not unduly affect the process. We are not talking about delaying it for months; we simply want time to consider the information.

Ms Anderson:

I do not know whether the process allows for this, but if the Committee were to receive the information as it flowed, as opposed to all of the consultation responses landing on the Committee Clerk's desk at once, it might assist us in working with the Department towards a time frame. We still might not be able to consider it all in a week, but we could assist that way.

Mr Prince:

We are keen to do all that we can to get it right.

The Deputy Chairperson:

That would certainly assist the Committee in that we would have background information. However, we will have to collate all of the consultation responses and compile a report on the consultation. We will only be able to do that after the consultation process closes, although we would be able to get a flavour of it if we were to have sight of the responses as the consultation evolved.

I thank all three of you for your attendance at the Committee and for answering the questions that were put to you.