



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Draft Child Poverty Strategy

9 March 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Allan Bresland
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Ms Orla Heatley) Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Joe Reynolds)

The Acting Chairperson (Mr Spratt):

Joe and Orla, you are both very welcome. I remind you that your comments will be recorded by Hansard, and that you will be on the record. You will understand that there is an ongoing debate on the Budget, and that members are nipping in and out. I have taken the Chair at the moment, but the Chairperson may come back during the proceedings. You have maybe about 10 minutes, and then leave yourselves open to questions.

Mr Joe Reynolds (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

Thank you, Chairman; I do not think that it will take me 10 minutes. We are grateful for the opportunity to attend this afternoon, and to take comments and respond to any questions that

Committee members may have. I want to address three aspects: the consultation process that we have gone through on the child poverty strategy; our analysis of responses; and the revised draft of the strategy. The Committee has received both documents. I should start with an apology for the lateness of providing the Committee with the papers. I understand that the Ministers only agreed this morning that the papers could be released.

As far as the analysis of the consultation responses is concerned, I am happy to report that, broadly speaking, there was reported satisfaction with the draft strategy that we circulated. It is important that we retain a strategic overview, and we have the opportunity to look at that strategic positioning of the strategy this afternoon. We also need to recognise the role of the delivery plan and the monitoring framework, both of which are still in development.

In our analysis of the responses, we identified six issues. Those are set out in the document, and I am happy to talk about those issues. In the analysis document, we have provided the Committee with a breakdown of the sources of the evidence that we considered in identifying those issues. We also provided our consideration of the impact that making changes to the strategy, or even changes in its emphasis, would have on the final strategy.

As far as the revised draft of the strategy is concerned, the responses to the consultation supported the framework that was originally proposed. We made some changes in developing the principles underpinning the strategy to include those on low income and low pay. We also acknowledged the recent changing circumstances, arising from the public expenditure outlook. As you say, I am sure that those will feature in the debate which is ongoing elsewhere in the Building at the moment. We also reinforced the view that this is very much a local strategy to address local needs, as well as performing a role, within the statutory framework, of contributing to the UK targets that were set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010.

I am happy to respond to questions or comments on the analysis of the consultation or the revised draft. Taking account of the timescales under which we are operating as we come to the end of the mandate, and also the statutory deadline that is set by the 2010 Act, I would be grateful if the minutes of today's meeting, and perhaps the Hansard report, would offer an initial Committee response, with further and perhaps more detailed comments, particularly on the delivery plan and the monitoring framework, following as we continue with the process of delivering on this important topic. Once again, Mr Chairman, thank you for this opportunity.

The Acting Chairperson:

Joe, the papers were only handed to us as we came into the room, and the bottom line is that no one around the table has had much opportunity to look at the draft strategy. Secondly, I am sure that I speak for everybody around the table when I say that the parties will need to discuss it, and they have not had the opportunity to do that either. On that basis — and we may come back to discuss it next week — I do not think that the Committee will be making many major recommendations.

Mrs D Kelly:

Time is running out for us, and the Chairperson is quite right that we will not be able to do it justice. Joe, a couple of key words that you used were “revised draft,” and the children’s champion sectors were very disappointed with the initial draft child poverty strategy. In fact, one comment was:

“NI has ended up with the weakest strategy in the four nations.”

Many others have commented that it contains no interim targets and that the signature projects do not include the social protection fund, for example, or state whether that should be linked, as a signature project, to the child poverty strategy. Maybe you can convince me that you have taken account of the criticisms of the draft strategy and the revised strategy.

Mr Reynolds:

I do not want to rehearse all of the data that we provided in the documentation, which, in fairness, you will not have had the opportunity to read, and I respect that. We are conscious of the timescale that we have to complete the strategy and lay it before the Assembly by the end of this mandate in just over two weeks’ time, but if the Committee wants to revisit the issue, we will be happy to come back to take more considered views.

The document in front of you sets out a range of statistical information about the number of events held and formal written responses we received as part of the consultation. We had to weigh in the balance some of those comments. I am not sure of the source of your specific quotation —

Mrs D Kelly:

It is in our papers; it was Save the Children.

Mr Reynolds:

We had to weigh in the balance all of those responses and try to find what we think is the best way to reflect all of the different views. As I said in my opening remarks, on balance, the vast majority of respondees indicated that they were happy with our strategic approach.

You are right. I have to agree that there are fair criticisms that more could be done in respect of the delivery plan and how we measure that. The 2010 Act includes targets. It may be something more than just a drafting point to consider whether we ought to rehearse something that is already provided for in statute by putting it into the strategy.

Mrs D Kelly:

One of the criticisms was that it was not Northern Ireland-specific; that the Department has just adopted what Westminster had legislated for or proposed. The whole point of devolution was to come up with our own solutions to problems. I welcome the inclusion of low-paid families, because we all know that there are greater levels of deprivation and more people here in low-paid posts. In my view, that is a serious charge.

Mr Reynolds:

The point is well made, and we accept it. Our response is that we are under a statutory obligation to provide a strategy which addresses those things that are set out in statute. We have attempted to do that, but we will go further. This is a strategic document, not the delivery plan. We recognise that there is further work to be done in preparing and presenting.

I have no doubt that we will be back before the Committee in the new mandate to look at what is in the delivery plan and, also importantly, what is in the monitoring framework. We need to look at those issues and to think about ways to develop the key indicators for the Northern Ireland strategy to meet local circumstances. Those aspects will feature in the delivery plan and the monitoring framework. The judgement that has been made is that it is not necessary to include those at this stage in the process. We are engaged in that process of taking statute through the formation of a strategic document into a delivery plan. At this stage, the judgement is that it is not for the strategic document.

Mrs D Kelly:

I must say that I am disappointed at that. This has been 12 months in the making. This legislation, this requirement, was passed at Westminster, and, frankly, we are running it into the sand and taking a less than holistic approach. However, I take on board your earlier comment. We have only been presented with it. I have not had the opportunity to tease out where I can pick out improvements in the revised draft, and I ask that we have a chance to further examine it at next week's Committee meeting. However, based on the Clerk's comment, if the revised strategy is going to the Executive next week —

The Committee Clerk:

On 24 March.

Mrs D Kelly:

Not until 24 March — that does not allow any take-note debate; is there is no chance of that?

The Committee Clerk:

No.

The Acting Chairperson:

And on the basis that we have just received the papers, it is my view from indications around the table, Joe, that members want to come back to this next week, when we can have a more considered approach, having discussed it with our various groups. I am sure that you will make yourself available for that.

Mr Reynolds:

Absolutely. I am not sure who will line up in front of the Committee next week, but officials will certainly be available.

The Acting Chairperson:

I understand that. That would be helpful, given that we have only just got the document. At this point, if members are happy enough, we will park the discussion there and go back to it next week after we have had a look at the revised strategy. I thank the officials for attending. The Committee Clerk will be in touch about next week.

Mr Reynolds:

Thank you.