



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

**Community Safety Strategy:
Departmental Briefing**

22 March 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Justice

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Seán Lynch
Mr Alban Maginness
Ms Jennifer McCann

Witnesses:

Mr Eamon Jones	Department of Justice
Mr Steven McCourt	Department of Justice
Mr Declan McGeown	Department of Justice
Mrs Sinéad Simpson	Department of Justice

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Declan McGeown, head of the community safety unit; Sinéad Simpson, head of the unit's strategy, implementation and research branch; Steven McCourt, head of the operations branch in the policing and organised crime division; and Eamon Jones, strategy, implementation and research branch. I advise that the evidence session is being recorded by Hansard and will be published on the Committee webpage. I invite Declan to brief the Committee, after which there will be questions from Committee members, if required.

Mr Declan McGeown (Department of Justice): We welcome the opportunity to update Committee members this afternoon on the development of the community safety strategy. On 20 October 2011, we briefed members on the outcome of the extensive public consultation exercise that we carried out. Today, we intend to update members on the work done since then, to talk members through the key themes of the strategy and to set out proposals for the way forward. Since October, we have worked to engage other partners across central and local government. We have been working with colleagues across the Department of Justice (DOJ), as well as with other relevant Departments and agencies, to consider the results of the consultation and to develop the short-, medium- and long-term outcomes and commitments that we hope to deliver over the lifetime of the strategy.

It is worth highlighting at this point that the strategy contains over 70 commitments, which have been endorsed by all members of the community safety forum, who all agree that they need to be delivered on if we are collectively to improve community safety across Northern Ireland. We have also taken the opportunity to brief a wide range of stakeholders on the key issues in the community safety strategy. The stakeholders include the community safety partnership (CSP) managers, the district policing

partnership (DPP) managers and the strategic reference group for community safety, which includes representatives from the voluntary and community sector as well as the private sector. We have also briefed, through a number of different fora, senior police officers.

Ahead of this afternoon's session, members will have been provided with a briefing paper and a copy of the draft strategy. I hope that the briefing paper was helpful in setting out the key issues that we are seeking to address. We will now take members through the various strands of the strategy and highlight some of the key outcomes that we propose for each strand. Following that, I will set out what we consider to be the next steps.

Containing over 70 commitments, the community safety strategy is intended to provide the overall direction for community safety for Northern Ireland over the next five years. It is also intended that it will help to guide the work of a range of bodies, including the Executive, local government, the voluntary and community sector, and local communities. The strategy recognises that addressing the challenges of crime, disorder and fear that communities face in towns and villages across Northern Ireland cannot be achieved by the Department of Justice or the justice system alone. Many Departments and agencies will have a role to play in making our communities safer. The community safety strategy should be read alongside a range of other strategies and policies, such as the strategic framework for reducing offending, the reforms of youth justice and prisons, and speeding up justice for victims and witnesses, all of which, when taken together with the community safety strategy, will deliver our Minister's vision of a fair, just and safer community. The strategy also aligns with wider government initiatives, including cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's rural action plan, and neighbourhood renewal, to name but a few. Furthermore, the strategy reflects wider Executive priorities and will contribute to the Programme for Government (PFG) commitments on antisocial behaviour, interfaces and crimes against older and vulnerable people. We will measure the success of the strategy against the targets in the Programme for Government delivery plan, but I will cover that in more detail in a moment.

The overall aim of the community safety strategy, as endorsed during the consultation, is to help build "Safer, Shared and Confident Communities". I will take each of these in turn.

Under "Building Safer Communities", we will intervene earlier to reduce the risk of individuals being drawn into offending. We will reduce the level of alcohol- and drug-related crime by supporting individuals who face addiction and substance misuse. We will tackle domestic and sexual violence. We will continue to reduce levels of antisocial behaviour in local communities, will increase safety in our town and city centres, and will help make our rural communities safer.

Under "Building Shared Communities", we will work closely with our local communities and across government to address community safety issues at interfaces. We will seek agreement with local communities to reduce the number of interface structures. We will tackle all forms of hate crime through prevention, awareness and education. We will support victims of hate crime in their communities.

Under "Building Confident Communities", we will support policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) to work with communities to identify the issues that matter locally and to develop solutions. We will reduce fear of crime and help older and vulnerable people feel safer, and we will give confidence to individuals to report crimes to the PSNI and others, such as Crimestoppers.

I will now deal with the next steps. The work that has been done to date with other Departments and agencies in agreeing these outcomes has given us a good foundation on which to build, but development strategy is very much at the beginning. The real challenge is delivering against the strategy. Therefore, we will need to work with other Departments and agencies, as well as with the PCSPs, to deliver on the commitments for each of the strands of the strategy. As to how we will do this and maintain the buy-in that is needed across Departments, we have already established a regional steering group on community safety, which, I am pleased to say, has already had one very productive meeting, with good representation from across government. Below the regional steering group, we are in the process of establishing a delivery group for each of the strands of the strategy, made up of all those from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors who have a role to play in delivery. It will be the job of the delivery group to agree the actions that are needed to achieve the

desired outcomes and monitor progress against those actions. It is intended that the delivery groups will report progress to the regional steering group. We will then report on progress more widely, including to the public, and we will be happy to brief the Committee on our achievements throughout the lifetime of the strategy. Through the regional steering group, we will also be developing a media communications plan in order to share best practice as we go forward and, importantly, to tell the public what we are doing.

I will talk briefly about the measurement of success. As mentioned earlier, there are a number of PFG commitments, which the strategy links into, around antisocial behaviour, interfaces and crimes against older and vulnerable people. We will measure our success — on antisocial behaviour, for example — by seeking to increase the percentage of people who agree that the police and other agencies are dealing with antisocial behaviour and crime issues that matter in their area. That figure currently stands at 38·4%. We will also measure success by seeking to reduce the percentage of people who perceive the level of antisocial behaviour in their area to be high. That is currently at 13%. Furthermore, we will have a suite of robust and well-established indicators in the delivery plan that will look at issues such as the number of antisocial behaviour incidents, perceptions of the night-time economy, levels of recorded business and rural crime, and the level of confidence in the police and other criminal justice agencies. Across many of the stands of activity in the strategy, we will also use the results of any PCSP surveys to inform our plans.

We hope that this has been helpful in providing members with a brief overview of the strategy. It is worth saying that we have been encouraged throughout the development of the strategy by the level of engagement by all key stakeholders and by the willingness of Departments and agencies to help contribute to shaping what will be a key document for everyone in Northern Ireland.

I am happy to take any questions that members may have.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you, Declan. Is there a particular reason or explanation for why the percentage reductions are not specific? There are no target figures.

Mr McGeown: I will hand over to Eamon, but what we have done is drawn very much from the Programme for Government.

Mr Eamon Jones (Department of Justice): On the Programme for Government targets on antisocial behaviour, Mr McCartney, the target is to have a "statistically significant" reduction. Therefore, for example, as Declan said, one of the targets is a reduction in the percentage of people who agree that the police and other agencies are dealing with antisocial behaviour and crime issues that matter locally. That is about local interest and local engagement. The advice from departmental statisticians and others is that achieving a statistically significant change within that is a challenge in itself, because the current statistic has sat at around 38·4% for a while. Therefore, making a change to that over three years will be a considerable target.

(The Chairperson [Mr Givan] in the Chair)

The Chairperson: Apologies, and thank you, Mr McCartney, for chairing the meeting.

Ms J McCann: My question is on the role of the community safety partnerships (CSPs) that are already there and the new PCSPs that will be developed. Can you give a bit more detail on the connection between the two and what the role of PCSPs will be in the strategy?

Mr McGeown: We see Departments and government agencies coming together at a strategic level to agree what needs to be done to help develop solutions to the problems locally, but we see the PCSPs as delivering on those solutions locally and working together and with all the key statutory agencies at a local level to find ways of improving their community. Therefore, the PCSPs will have a key role in delivery at the grassroots level, and that will build on the experience of the CSPs to date.

Ms J McCann: It has been brought to my attention that in areas such as West Belfast, very good community safety partnerships are already established. There will be a gap, almost, until the other

PCSPs are working when the strategy is rolled out. What is your view of what will happen with that gap? It might be only six months, but that will be a long time for local communities and community safety.

Mr McGeown: You are absolutely right. We recognise that the intention is to have the PCSPs up and running in April. They will be commenced in April, but they will take time to find their feet. Importantly, we do not want to lose the projects, programmes and schemes that have been going to date and that may find their way into future PCSP plans and continue to deliver local solutions for local problems. Our Minister agreed that there would be a transitional period of up to six months to allow that breathing space and to allow communities and, importantly, councils to bring forward ideas on projects that might continue until such times as the PCSP plans are fully adopted in that area.

Mr S Anderson: Thank you for the presentation. I will talk a bit about reducing the fear of crime. I have been involved in doing that in recent days, and, although statistics may show that crime levels are not very high, that is of little comfort to those who have suffered from fear of crime. In the short term, you are talking about improving your understanding of the fear of crime and to deliver tailored projects to reduce fear. Can you elaborate on that and on the projects that you are talking about? What you are proposing?

Mr McGeown: We do not want to prejudice the discussions that will happen locally through the PCSPs, and so on, but the types of projects will include, for example, inter-generational projects, where young people and older people will start working together, get a sense of what each person is about and start to interact a bit better with each other. That is one such type. The other types are projects that promote young people in a more positive light to take away that fear that communities have of kids hanging around on corners, and so on. Such projects will see young people doing more positive things and helping their community. Those are just a couple of things off the top of my head.

Mrs Sinéad Simpson (Department of Justice): We have mentioned the PCSPs, and we want to wait until those are operational so that we can engage with them and try to drill down. As you rightly say, the statistics at a Northern Ireland-wide level do not paint the picture that we saw during the consultation. The statistics may be low, but, when things happen in communities, there is a very real impact. We need to drill down to that local level, through the PCSPs, and get a better understanding of what it is that makes people feel vulnerable, what it is that impacts on fear and what we need to do to deal with that. We do not know enough about what the real issues are at that local community level to be able to talk about the programmes over and above what Declan has mentioned, but we will work with the PCSPs when they are operational to find solutions to those local issues.

Mr S Anderson: Did you say in your presentation that you have been working with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) on rural issues?

Mr McGeown: We have been working with DARD, yes.

Mr S Anderson: We suffer a lot in rural communities, and the fear of crime kicks in with isolated and vulnerable people, especially elderly people, some of whom live alone. It causes great concern and fear for individuals whom I know personally, and I am sure that other Members, other elected representatives and people in the community know such individuals. It is something that really needs to be brought to the fore in order to help those people. Gone are the days, sadly, when people in rural communities, or urban areas, could leave their doors open and feel safe. That does not happen any more. There is work to be done to help those people. I believe that fear of crime is sometimes worse than the crime itself, especially for certain people. It is something that we really need to focus on and work on. That is what has come out of the strategy. We have to achieve that.

Mr McGeown: Let me reassure you about our working relationship with DARD. DARD was represented on the former community safety forum and is now represented on the regional steering group on community safety. To reciprocate that, we have contributed to the rural White Paper action plan. We put a lot of actions into that. Therefore, we are working closely with DARD, and have been for the past few years. We will continue to do so.

The Chairperson: I want to pick up on one element. The report mentions domestic violence and the partnership with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). There will be a feeling among some that that issue is, at times, falling between the stools, and that one Department needs to take the lead in taking this forward, as opposed to taking a joint approach. Is that something that you looked at? Have you looked at whether DHSSPS should do it or whether DOJ should be the lead Department? Should it be cross-departmental in that respect?

Mr McGeown: There are certain elements of domestic violence that lean towards DHSSPS on the public safety side. Other elements lean towards the Department of Justice. In the three years that I have been in the unit, my experience has been that we work very well and very closely day to day with DHSSPS. Indeed, the regional steering group on domestic violence is chaired jointly by me and my counterpart in DHSSPS. I can say that everything that we have agreed along the way has been agreed in conjunction with that Department. We have regular discussions, at my level and at my team's level, on all issues relating to domestic violence. There is that good working relationship. However, if it needs to be improved on, that is certainly something that we will reflect on. The opportunity is there, because we are working towards a joint domestic violence and sexual violence strategy for September 2013. Perhaps those are the types of things that we need to look at.

The Chairperson: I have met a group that thinks that there it should be a joint approach, but there is an opportunity to respond to that.

Mr McCartney: I have a couple of questions. Declan and Sinéad, you mentioned discussions with the PCSPs. When do you envisage doing that? I take it that you would want to do that before you progress the strategy any further? I think it important that their input be included.

Mrs Simpson: We have already had conversations with CSP and DPP managers about what is in the strategy. As someone said, the PCSPs are critical to the delivery of the strategy. Therefore, we need to make sure that what is in the document is on their radar. It does, however, link to the strategic objectives that have already been agreed for the PCSPs. As Declan mentioned in his opening remarks, there is a regional steering group. We could not have 26 PCSPs represented on that, but, when we have them up and running, we will look to see how we can build the linkages between them and the steering group.

There will then be delivery groups for each of the eight outcome strands in the strategy, which include antisocial behaviour, domestic violence, sexual violence and fear of crime. Although we do want to talk to PCSPs about the best way of doing that, I imagine that we will probably take a thematic approach. We will go out and talk about what is in the strategy around antisocial behaviour, what the local issues are, what it is that we can do to help find local solutions, what we should be doing regionally and what issues perhaps need to be tested, piloted and then rolled out across the region. We do not want to have firm ideas on what the linkage will be between the strategy and the PCSPs, because we want to involve them in the process. However, we can already see a way in which that can be done. That does need to be done, because, as I said at the outset, the PCSPs are critical to the delivery of the strategy.

Mr McCartney: The reason that I said that is because what we do not want is, in six months' time, the PCSPs coming along to say that they do not feel that they were consulted enough and are being left to deal with a strategy into which they did not have proper input.

This may be a good exercise. On a previous occasion, the Committee was shown a new strategy. We were given a mapping exercise that set out the difference between the previous strategy and the new one. I just wonder whether you could carry out such an exercise. Therefore, if people say that the strategy is the same as the previous one or ask what the difference is, we will have it in front of us.

Mrs Simpson: I envisage that we will engage with PCSPs when they are up and running. The strategy has a number of underlying principles that I can see are different to earlier ones. It focuses very much on partnership-working across government and beyond the PCSPs. There is the early-intervention focus. Therefore, we envisage getting out and talking to PCSPs.

Mr McCartney: Perhaps your next correspondence to us will show us the differences, if that is OK.

The Chairperson: That is us. Thank you.