



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Programme for Government Delivery
Report**

16 September 2009

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kennedy (Chairperson)
Mrs Naomi Long (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr Colin Jack) Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr John McMillen)
Mr Jim Sutherland)

The Chairperson (Mr Kennedy):

The Committee welcomes Mr John McMillen, Mr Colin Jack and Mr Jim Sutherland from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). They are here to make a presentation to the Committee on the Programme for Government delivery report. Members received a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Library Services at last week's meeting, and a copy of the delivery report and a copy of the research paper. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has also tabled a briefing on the delivery report.

Gentlemen, thank you for your attendance. Please make an opening statement to the Committee and leave yourselves available for questions. This section of the meeting will be

recorded by Hansard.

Mr John McMillen (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

Thank you. I have no opening statement to make, Chairperson.

My name is John McMillen, and I am joined today by Jim Sutherland — *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson:

Are there any issues of concern in relation to outcomes and delivery that are not being met?

Mr McMillen:

Certainly there are some targets which are red and some which are — *[Inaudible.]* — giving a negative impact on the performance of the Department.

The Chairperson:

Can you give the Committee some examples of that?

Mr McMillen:

Around sustaining development there are two reds — *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson:

Where is the blockage in that? Why has there been no progress?

Mr McMillen:

[Inaudible.]

The Chairperson:

Therefore, you are blaming the politicians?

Mr McMillen:

[Inaudible.]

The Chairperson:

Are there any other issues that you, as a senior civil servant, are concerned about?

Mr McMillen:

No.

Mr Elliott:

I noticed in one section of the report that progress on the development of the Maze/Long Kesh project had been given a green marking, whereas we are all aware that nothing, or at least very little, has happened — in the Chairman's words. In my words it was something very different. *[Laughter.]* How does something like that project receive a green marking when the entire programme and project has clearly fallen apart?

Mr McMillen:

That project received an amber/green marking — *[Inaudible.]* The rating itself, which is done by the economic policy unit, working with the performance and delivery unit (PEDU) in the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), recognises that the target is not that smart — *[Inaudible.]* There are no dates there — *[Inaudible.]*

The mark does reflect the fact that there has been progress on the site, with work taking place to clear the site, and demolition and remediation. *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Elliott:

So really nothing has happened, but the project still received a green/amber marking.

Mr McMillen:

As I have said, considerable work has taken place on the site to prepare it for future development, particularly in the areas of demolition and remediation — *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Elliott:

Yes, but clearly the entire project that was earmarked and developed by OFMDFM has fallen apart. Would the Department not have anticipated a red mark as a result of that?

Mr McMillen:

[Inaudible.]

Mr Elliott:

The child poverty targets are of interest to us. One received a red marking, in fairness, but the other, as I recall, received an amber mark. Perhaps we could have some further explanation of that.

Mr Colin Jack (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

The severe child poverty target received a red mark because, to date, there has been no definition or agreement on how to measure severe child poverty. The concept is still in the process of being defined. There is work under way to achieve that definition.

The Chairperson:

That was always the case, Mr Jack, was it not?

Mr Jack:

Yes. That has been the case for some time. The targets were set, and measurement strategies were worked out subsequently. This was always going to be a difficult target to measure.

The Chairperson:

In other words, it was a target that could never be realistically achieved, but it was set nonetheless.

Mr Jack:

It is an aspirational target. The concept of severe child poverty is something around which there is a political consensus. It is something that would be desirable to achieve. However, the process of defining “severe child poverty” is under way. On the other target, which has been given an amber rating, we have recently got information through about how things have moved in relation to absolute poverty, and we believe that that target is reasonably well on track. We have also made good progress on what is defined as “relative poverty”. That reflects the distinction between the two different targets. The definition issues mean that we cannot report achievement of the severe child poverty target. Nonetheless, progress is being made in addressing child poverty.

Mr Elliott:

You will appreciate my frustration about this system of marking. It is unsatisfactory.

The Chairperson:

The Committee produced a fairly detailed, well-researched and well-received report on child poverty, which highlighted the fact that the way in which poverty is measured generally is a difficult area. It is frustrating, in the absence of those definitions, to have to accept that the original target is now only an aspiration. There seems to be an absence of detail about how we can move forward towards the elimination of child poverty and identify the best measures.

Mr Jack:

The setting of those targets predates the Committee's report. I can arrange for more information to be made available to the Committee.

Ms Anderson:

Go raibh maith agat. Although there are difficulties flagged up in the paper, I welcome the fact that we have the kind of monitoring in place that we did not have before. It exposes the need for us to drill down further and look at how the public service agreements (PSAs) deliver outcomes. We can build on the work that has already been done. I share the concerns that have been expressed. I take the point that was made about the Committee's report being published before recommendations had come through. Will the definition that is being worked on take account of the child poverty report? We should engage with groups and organisations that have a clear definition, such as Barnardos, and who can assist in that definitional process. Can we have an update on that process? That would assist us.

Have you seen the CBI's recommendations? It, also, welcomes the fact that there are ways of getting that report. The CBI makes a number of recommendations on the report, and I have no problem with that. However, we need to ascertain whether you have considered those recommendations. The Committee has had a paper from the CBI, and that may not have been shared with you.

Mr Jack:

Is that the CBI report on the overall PSAs?

Ms Anderson:

No, on the delivery report.

Mr McMillen:

[Inaudible.] It is a big departure from the previous Programme for Government —
[Inaudible.]

Mrs Long:

I do not want to paraphrase what we have heard so far. There have been two answers to the delivery or non-delivery of the targets, and one has been that the target was very aspirational and not realistic. The other has been that the targets were vague and had no dated around them, so, even though, to the naked eye for everybody else, it has failed miserably so far, it can still be graded because of some groundwork has been done around it.

My criticism is that the delivery report — *[Inaudible.]* In terms of outcome, it tells us nothing as to what is being achieved that a person on the street would actually notice. There are a lot of things about committees, working groups and processes, but not a lot of stuff about what we want to see as regards the outcome. It varies from Department to Department. Some are more process-driven than others. Some are much more measurable and have dates attached. As other members have said, I do not feel the green markings as a member of the community in terms of how it has affected people's lives. I do not think that people get a sense of that level of delivery. They might use the delivery report in the sense that it looks good, but I am not sure whether, in the substance of delivery and change and outcomes, it has been effective with regard to delivery.

With regard to performance management, if a target is made up of two parts, one of which is that you could achieve something and the second part is that you could achieve it by a certain date, how can it be green if it is achieved late?

Mr McMillen:

It should — *[Inaudible.]* — or green/amber if it is achieved within six months. *[Inaudible.]*

Mrs Long:

I want to pick up on one other thing, which I raised last week. The targets for water and sewerage infrastructure are all green. That suggests one of two things. I am going to be generous and say that probably all the targets that were required to deliver the service people want were 1%. Therefore, if all the targets required for the infrastructure have been delivered — *[Inaudible.]*

One of the key things is about the capital realisations for 2011, and it is red. I can understand some of the reasons why it is red. Is there a plan B for generating that money for investment in infrastructure? More generally as regards those things that are red/amber, what is the process for assessing those particular PSAs for their relevance or achievability, or their replacement with better and more focused targets in the current economic climate?

Mr McMillen:

Any change would have to be taken through to the Executive Committee and to the Prime Minister. There is a methodology to doing that, but only — *[Inaudible.]* — Ministers through the Executive Committee. That is an improvement on the previous system, when Departments were changing them — *[Inaudible.]*

Members may be aware that Ministers, in recognition of additional — *[Inaudible.]* He is just completing a report for Ministers on the way forward. It is fair to say, and I am sure that members will agree, that the sorts of realisations that we are forecasting for — *[Inaudible.]* That will have to be fed back into DFP as part of — *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Attwood:

I want to go back to the answer that you gave to the Chairperson's last question. He asked whether there were any issues of concern besides sustainable development, and you said no.

Mr McMillen:

I think that, within the report, other than the — *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Attwood:

Therefore, where we are with science, technology, engineering and mathematics, tourism, regeneration and positive growth is not an issue of concern for the Department?

Mr McMillen:

Chairman, I thought that we were here to deal with OFMDFM PSA targets — *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson:

Are you not prepared to answer?

Mr McMillen:

Can I ask the member to repeat the question?

Mr Attwood:

It may well be that sustainable development is with OFMDFM, but the report, which I presume that you have read, flags up a number of areas that are of concern to the point that there are going to be accountability meetings. You should give a flavour of that in your answers to the Committee.

That aside, you referred to the PSA delivery board. Is the PSA delivery board looking at how targets can be better measured and judged against? For example, the CBI report to which Martina referred says that there should be an action register with clear, concise actions, dates and responsibilities, at least for the red-listed items and the accountability meetings.

Is the PSA delivery board, which I presume is a board of officials, looking at doing that in

relation to the child poverty fiction that we heard today — and it is a fiction to outline a target, then say that it is aspirational and that you could not even aspire to it because there was not an empirical base against which to judge it. That seems to me that you are putting words on paper for the sake of putting words on paper. That aside, is the PSA delivery board looking at better ways to measure performance, especially around that action register as outlined by the CBI, which seems to be just common sense?

Mr McMillen:

Certainly, on the PSA delivery boards with which I am involved — *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Jack:

The delivery boards for the PSAs with which I am involved, which would be primarily 6 and 7, also consider the methodology and the baseline for Departments and are actively looking to refine where there is already an agreed framework for measurement. There is challenge in the meetings about whether figures that underlie the ratings are robust and stand up to scrutiny.

Mr Attwood:

Given what Naomi Long said, I think that it would be useful to look at the issue of an action register. You said that there is challenge in the meetings; is there anybody from outside the Civil Service at those PSA delivery board meetings?

Mr McMillen:

No; not that I am aware of.

Mr Attwood:

That might be useful in order to build a greater sense of accountability, rigour and challenge.

The head of the Civil Service has said that the economic policy unit of OFMDFM has responsibility to co-ordinate the response to the recession. He told me that that was its primary purpose. It is to be expected that you might have been able to comment on issues around the PSAs on productivity growth and tourism. That aside, given OFMDFM's responsibility for co-ordinating the recession response and the fact that figures confirmed today that unemployment in Northern Ireland is growing more quickly than in any part of Britain, do you not think that an OFMDFM accountability meeting should be convened in relation to the employment PSA targets? *[Interruption.]*

The Chairperson:

I ask members to switch off mobile phones. Hansard is recording the session and phones interfere with that. The ringing of mobile phones is a weekly occurrence, and I appeal to members to switch them off.

Mr McMillen:

Members will be aware of the overall delivery — *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Shannon:

It is almost like a game of snooker when you refer to the reds, the yellows and the greens of your colour-coded scheme. The red is worth only one point, but the colours score better. There are a lot of reds here, so the score for these games is not too high at the minute.

My question relates to child poverty. Your scorecard refers to making people's lives better. Target one, to work towards the elimination of severe child poverty, is red; that is a one-pointer. Target two, to work towards the elimination of child poverty in Northern Ireland by 2020 and reduce it by 50% by 2010, is amber; that is a two-pointer, double what we had before. Can you tell us how far you are towards reaching the 50% reduction? In September 2009, are we 25% of the way there, or is it 45%? You must have some idea. If you have given it an amber status and it has moved from the red, we must have achieved something. Can you tell us what we have achieved?

Mr Jack:

My understanding is that we are at around 30% at present. The view is that we are probably on track to achieve the 50% target reduction, not by 2010 but by not too far beyond that.

Mr Shannon:

Is it achievable? From what you are saying, I think that perhaps it is not possible to reach the 50% reduction by 2010.

Mr Jack:

I have not been personally involved in the detail of work on that particular area, so I —

The Chairperson:

That is not the answer to the question, Mr Jack.

Mr Jack:

I would want to get more advice on that point and bring it to the Committee.

Mr Shannon:

I would appreciate that. I tell you one thing —

The Chairperson:

I am sorry to bang on about it, but the Committee has spent a considerable amount of time on this subject. Targets were established, commitments were given and promises were made; now we are told that either they are unattainable or they are not achievable. That is not satisfactory: either those targets should not have been created in the first place or you should be open and honest and say that we cannot make it.

You should say that you would love to make it, you want to make it and it is your desire to make it, because that is also our desire. I do not like being fobbed off with a reply that you will have a look at it and write back to us. This is a public session. We are the elected representatives, and those promises and commitments are made as much in the name in the Executive as they are of Assembly Members. We bear the brunt of the criticisms. I am not satisfied when we get an answer that will be buried deep in paper when it comes back. For a start, you should be honest with us, as a Committee. Let us be honest with the sector that is involved and the people generally. If those targets are not attainable, tell us, and stop waffling.

Mr Jack:

I am not in a position to answer that today, but —

The Chairperson:

When will you be in that position, Mr McMillen?

Mr Jack:

I will seek to get some further information to the Committee within the next couple of weeks.

The Chairperson:

I suggest that that should happen within the next week.

Ms Anderson:

Rather than getting another bit of paper, which will mean an awful lot of paperwork, I suggest

that we call back the officials to deal with that specific issue. We spent months carrying out a child poverty inquiry and made recommendations. We really do not want a piece of paper that we cannot interrogate or investigate.

The Chairperson:

We will make available a slot for next week.

Mr Shannon:

I want to back up the Chairman's and Martina's comments. You should not underestimate the Committee's frustration, or our energy that has gone towards making the process happen. With respect, it is more important to have the officials back with a book, or whatever the information is, so that we can then question you as a Committee. This will be the longest game of snooker that there has ever been.

Mrs Long:

I have two issues that I wanted to mention earlier. The first is under "Making People's Lives Better", which is PSA 7. There is an amber against:

"We will identify the best measures to ensure we are targeting those most in need."

That is currently not on track to be achieved. How can you be moving on many of these things if you have not yet established the best measures to identify that your targets are even accurate or in the right places, or that you hit the right things? You know that you are doing stuff, but you do not know whether it is working. Essentially, that is what that target is telling me. All of the other greens in the PSA 7 section are fairly meaningless because you say that you have not established whether you have the best targets to be able to measure how you make people's lives better.

The other issue is the gender pay gap. What was the gender pay gap in 2007, and what is it now?

Mr Jack:

I can give you the gender pay gap in 2006, which was the baseline for the measure. There are different figures for the four different measures. The baseline figure for female-to-male full-time median hourly earnings was 98% in 2006. The figure for female-to-male part-time median hourly earnings was 96%. The figure for female-to-male full-time median gross weekly earnings was 93% in 2006, and the figure for part-time median gross weekly earnings was 112%.

Mrs Long:

What about 2009?

Mr Jack:

I do not have the precise figures for 2009, but my understanding is that the fact that the measures have been rated green implies that those targets have been met.

Mrs Long:

Chairman, it would be helpful for us to have the 2009 figures so that we can see what exactly has been achieved to cause that part to go green.

I want to return to the question of how we ensure that we are targeting those who are most in need. How do you feel that impacts across the whole of PSA 7? If it is not being achieved, how can you know that you are measuring the right thing?

Mr Jack:

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency has undertaken work to review deprivation measures. Members will be familiar with the Noble indicators, which are used to identify disadvantage. The Noble indicators are an update of previous measures and are being reviewed. That is the key to that target.

Mrs Long:

The point is that it is not on track.

Mr Jack:

I understand that it is taking slightly longer than was originally envisaged, but work is under way.

The Chairperson:

Mrs Long's fundamental point is that the overall measurements are inaccurate or flawed in some way. That is not reflected by the green lights that you give yourselves on other PSA 7 targets.

Mr Jack:

Those green indicators refer to other targets. The green light on delivering a strong independent voice for older people, for example, relates to the appointment of the Older People's Advocate and does not directly flow from that target. Indeed, the targets on child

poverty are at red and amber.

Mrs Long:

We are talking about specific targets. If we are to be sure that we are doing work that makes people's lives better, it is fundamental that we know that we are measuring it properly. Unless we can measure it, we will not know whether that is what is happening or not. The colour of the reports is meaningless unless we know that we are measuring the right things. We can support work such as the review of the Noble indicators to ensure that they are accurate and reflective of the quality of life of the individuals who are suffering from deprivation. That is dragging behind, which suggests that it is very difficult to measure everything else in a real way. The point that I am trying to make is that it is fine to make a box green or red, but that tells us very little of the impact that it is having in the community. That fact is key in trying to ensure that we set future targets that are meaningful, measurable and realistic.

Mr McMillen:

Chairman, I am happy to — *[Inaudible.]*

Mr G Robinson:

This is my maiden speech. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson:

It is nonetheless most welcome.

Mr G Robinson:

My question follows on from Naomi's point. Would it not be better, when the officials come back, that they provide percentage scores rather than targets?

The Chairperson:

That is what we are asking for.

Mr G Robinson:

Some of us may be colour-blind.

The Chairperson:

Particularly when it is green, is that what you are saying?

Thank you very much for taking part in that interesting question-and-answer session. No one should take these things personally, and we look forward to next week's briefing.