



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Sustainable Development

26 January 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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 Tom Elliott (Chairperson)
Dr Stephen Farry (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

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

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott):

We will receive a briefing from Jim Sutherland and John Bradley, officials from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), on the final consultation report under the draft sustainable development implementation plan. Jim and John, you are very welcome here. The session will be recorded by Hansard. I invite you to give us a presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which members will be invited to ask questions.

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

Thank you, Mr Chairman. I will give a very short introduction on where we are. Thank you for the invitation to participate today.

Members may recall that in our previous appearance before the Committee we discussed the preparations leading up to the publication of our sustainable development strategy. I am pleased to say that the strategy was published in May last year. That has, subsequently, allowed us to focus our efforts on creating and delivering the accompanying implementation plan. The plan, as it is emerging, is clearly based on the principles of collaboration and co-operation. We hope to use this opportunity to update the Committee on the progress that we have made in developing the plan.

The public consultation on the plan ran from July to November last year, and, as you can see from the documents that we have provided, that generated a great deal of interest and many comments. That has, in itself, presented us with challenges, in reviewing the feedback and soliciting input from Departments and stakeholders. However, I hope that today's meeting can provide members with a degree of reassurance that the content of and actions in the plan are on the right track.

I am happy to be able to say that the plan as presented has met with high levels of approval. It is fair to say that it is being viewed as practical in its approach to delivery and, by and large, sufficiently challenging in its ambition. We are continuing to work with the Minister-led steering group, Departments and stakeholders to finalise the content of the plan. We are keen to hear and take on board the views of the Committee to help us to deliver a document that is meaningful and constructive in driving sustainability forward in and beyond government.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. It is quite a large document so, as you will appreciate, it is quite difficult to wade through at times. How good is the overall co-operation with all the Departments in Northern Ireland? What do you see as the future outworkings of that?

Mr Sutherland:

Over the course of the discussions that we have had with Departments over the last number of months, from our perspective of trying to bring the plan together, a degree of co-operation and collaboration is clearly beginning to emerge. How much of that is by design is up for debate, but we are picking up on the things that many Departments are doing to contribute towards sustainability. A lot of our work has been to highlight that to other Departments, to allow them to make contact with their counterparts and really stitch the thing together. We are certainly progressing as far as that work goes, and I hope that the final plan will convey that there is collaboration and co-operation across Departments.

The Chairperson:

Are you saying that some Departments are much more advanced in their thinking and with the

practical outworkings than others?

Mr Sutherland:

There is certainly a range.

The Chairperson:

Do you want to name any that are doing things well or poorly?

Mr Sutherland:

Not particularly.

The Chairperson:

Go on.

Mr Sutherland:

I do not want to name them. However, some of the things that we are doing suggest that there are Departments that are very heavily involved in this and some Departments that are more on the periphery of the agenda. We are trying to work out how we can encourage them to embed the work deeper into their business planning.

Dr Farry:

I welcome Jim and John. Jim, you said that you felt that the strategy was well received, but on page 4 of the final consultation report there is a statement from the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC):

“Some departments have willingly amended their intended actions as a result of stakeholders’ views; others have been less amenable.”

So, to start, I want to ask which Departments are playing ball and which are not, because that is a matter of public interest.

Mr Sutherland:

I think that some Departments are considering their ability to contribute to the plan in the future, inasmuch as the budgetary situation in which we found ourselves at the time may have caused Departments to consider how they can contribute and whether they can sign up to things.

Dr Farry:

Is sustainable development viewed by Departments as a drag on public resources or as beneficial to their budgets in respect of savings in the medium or long term?

Mr Sutherland:

If you had asked me that question two years ago, I probably would have said that Departments saw less incentive to embrace it. However, I feel that, over the time in which we developed the sustainable development strategy, we have formulated a picture of the sustainability agenda for Northern Ireland. Because of the work that we are doing on the plan, I certainly feel that sustainability is becoming more embedded in the natural thinking of Departments.

Dr Farry:

How does sustainable development filter down through Departments? For example, in education and health, the issue is not so much what the Departments are doing, but what schools, hospitals and health centres are doing. How far down does this trickle?

Mr Sutherland:

As it stands, and as has been the case for a while, each Department has its own sustainable development action plan. We found that many of those plans are very good, but they tend to focus on the Department as a whole. We are looking at how to make them more outward facing and how to ensure that the activities in one plan can complement the activities in a different plan.

Dr Farry:

I will continue with what the Sustainable Development Commission said:

“The result is an implementation plan which, in our view, is imperfect but represents a marked improvement over the initial version.”

“Imperfect” does not sound too good. It continues:

“SMART targets have still to be incorporated into the plan and this will pose a real challenge to departments”.

So, we still do not have specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely (SMART) targets in the plan.

Mr Sutherland:

No. We are in the process of developing the SMART targets. Those have to come towards the end of the process because we spent the past number of months identifying the actions that each of the Departments will contribute. We held a meeting yesterday of the sustainable development implementation plan steering group, which is co-chaired by the junior Ministers. That was the first meeting at which we began the analysis work on the metrics. We have arranged another meeting of the group for 11 February to continue that work, so it is very much in progress.

Dr Farry:

Finally, what impact does the winding up of the Sustainable Development Commission have on the delivery of the plan or even on its finalisation?

Mr Sutherland:

We certainly acknowledge that we have received valuable support from the SDC. It is no secret that we are disappointed with the decision that was taken by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the first instance. I do not anticipate that the loss of the Sustainable Development Commission will negatively impact on the delivery of the plan. We have to look at ways in which any potential structures that we put in place are able to deliver.

The Chairperson:

I notice quite a number of areas on which there is no response, although some of them may not need a response. Page 94 of the final consultation report states that the Consumer Council:

“will undertake research on the role consumers can play in achieving a sustainable future for Northern Ireland.”

However, it is concerned about the funding implications. It has asked the Department for input, but there does not seem to be any response from the Department. Do you have any comment to make? Will funding be available?

Mr Sutherland:

We have received comments about some of these things since we presented the paper to the Committee. I do not know whether we have anything about that specific comment.

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

Not specifically on that one as yet. We are still in conversation with colleagues in the relevant section of OFMDFM to bring forward a response to that.

The Chairperson:

As a matter of interest, how long will we be expected to wait on those comments?

Mr J Bradley:

We are in the final stages of getting those together. I think that more than half of the outstanding responses have been addressed since the report was sent to the Committee. We expect the others to be addressed in the coming weeks.

Ms M Anderson:

Thanks for that presentation, Jim. I have three questions. In relation to Ilex and Derry City Council,

about 500 of us have been involved in the city regeneration plan, at the heart of which we embedded sustainability and equality. Should we engage with the sustainability policy unit around the roll-out and the implementation? The plan has been out for consultation, and there is now an equality impact assessment (EQIA) going on. We hope to have it developed and completed by the end of February. We are trying to be realistic about what can be achieved: there were 89 projects in the city for different visions, but there are now 11 catalyst projects. Would it be worthwhile for any city or place that embeds sustainability in its regeneration plan to engage with the Department's sustainability policy unit?

How can the document that went out for consultation contribute to equality and good relations and change people's quality of life? What areas of the plan could help to bring that about? Picking up on what Stephen said, the paper states:

"the Implementation Plan must provide robust and challenging targets for individuals and organisations in, and beyond, Government."

Will you explain that to us?

Mr Sutherland:

There is certainly a role for the sustainability unit in OFMDFM to provide advice on the Ilex projects. We will provide any advice that we can about the development of the catalyst projects. We have gathered a degree of expertise in the operational and policy side of things. Through the work that we have done on the strategy and the plan, we have developed a very strong expertise network across government in particular areas. We may be able to facilitate contacts —

Ms M Anderson:

To allow people to navigate their way through as to whom they should contact?

Mr Sutherland:

Yes. That is certainly one of the positives to come out of the work over the past while.

We used an EQIA to screen the sustainable development strategy, and no negative impacts were identified. We have done the same with the plan, and, again, we are fairly clear that no negative impacts have been identified.

Ms M Anderson:

Are there any positives, such as promoting equality of opportunity? As opposed to just avoiding doing the bad, how can you promote doing good?

Mr Sutherland:

Some of the activities that will be contained in the implementation plan are derived from some of the departmental strategies. The first one that springs to mind is the volunteering strategy, which obviously contributes to good relations and social cohesion. Those are the sorts of things that we are seeing. Yes, it will contribute positively, but, equally, it is because we are bringing together a lot of strategies that are already in place that we can say with some certainty that that will be the case.

Your final question was about targets.

Ms M Anderson:

You referred to individuals in government, outside the Executive, to whom there would be challenges.

Mr Sutherland:

One of the key comments that we received prior to the development of our implementation plan was that the previous plan was very much government-focused. However, sustainability goes beyond government, so we have to consider how we can engage with organisations and stakeholders beyond government. That has been a focus for us in putting the new plan together.

We created a sustainable development steering group, which was based around bringing people from outside government, from across the various social, economic and environmental sectors, to advise us and to contribute towards the development of the plan. That has been really useful, as we have now engaged actively with organisations outside government and they have come back to us saying that they feel that they have a role to play and would like to be incorporated into the overall work of the plan.

We have received very good feedback from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), for example. We have spoken to NILGA, and it has had a series of events in which it brought together its representatives to discuss their priorities, and that has informed its response to the plan. We feel that we are really starting to make inroads into such organisations. We now need to try to help them deliver on their commitments to the plan. The plan is materialising in such a way that it involves a much more interactive relationship, rather than government being at the centre. A much more dynamic relationship is starting to emerge.

Ms M Anderson:

Will you monitor that partnership as it rolls out, after you complete the implementation plan and particularly when it is in place, to ensure that we get the outcomes?

Mr Sutherland:

In the OFMDFM implementation plan we have a commitment to monitoring progress against the plan on an annual basis and working with contributors to the plan to ensure that progress is being made and being measured.

Mr Kinahan:

Thank you. I want to follow up on what Stephen and Martina have said. Budgets will be important in deciding what happens in the future. We are in the middle of a Budget process. Will we get a report that shows what each Department is doing or is able to do and what is going to have to be put off until next time? That way, we will get a clearer picture of what we are going to achieve with this.

Mr Sutherland:

The discussions that we are having with almost every Department focus on the idea that if we are looking to commit to particular sustainability actions in the long term, we have to be sure that we can resource those actions in the future. By their nature, some of the sustainability actions are long term; for example, climate change involves looking at a 20- or 30-year period. We have to make sure that we can resource that. It goes back to the metrics issue that was raised. We are really trying to focus on saying that it is not acceptable to tell us that you will do something by 2020; we need milestones within that. I suggest that those milestones should align with business planning cycles in many respects. However, our focus is certainly on tracking this over a period. That is the crux of our present discussions.

Mrs D Kelly:

Thanks for your presentation. I think that, looking at some of the actions, it would be fair to say that some of this is not rocket science, and other parts of it, such as the deadlines, are driven by EU legislation. However, how confident are you that, if that EU legislation did not exist, there would be a willingness across all Departments to embed sustainable development?

Mr Sutherland:

I agree that parts of it are not rocket science. Sustainability, by its nature, is driven by good behavioural practices. The Departments may be driven by directives, and that will always be the case. However, we are saying that there must be a balance between what we have to do and what we want to do.

Mrs D Kelly:

And what is the right thing to do.

Mr Sutherland:

Absolutely. We are looking at whether we can push this further forward and encourage people to go that extra step to embed sustainability. Those are the sorts of discussions that we are having about procurement. What can we do to further embed sustainability into the thinking of the people who procure projects? The Department of Finance and Personnel, for example, is now taking the lead in developing training for people who are involved with centres of procurement excellence. That type of behaviour will progress the agenda. If were to look at where the plan is in four or five year's time, I think that we would see day-to-day behaviour that is more sustainability focused.

Mrs D Kelly:

I wish to follow up on Stephen's earlier comment. The note from the Sustainable Development Commission refers to the OFMDFM Committee's scrutiny role in the absence of a watchdog. Earlier, you would not name the Departments that are not stepping up to the mark. How can Committee members be assured that they are getting good, timely and accurate information that allows them to perform their scrutiny role?

As regards the absence of SMART targets, a lot of it is about having a carrot and stick approach. I have not seen any targets other than those that are set by EU legislation. For example, a Marine Bill must be in place by 2012, but that is not even at Committee Stage never mind before the Assembly here in the North. We are way behind other regions in the delivery of that. There seems to be a lack of willingness to comply with anything unless it is EU-driven. The government ought not to be setting that example for the other sectors here.

Mr Sutherland:

Through the many discussions that I have had with Departments, I have picked up that there is a willingness to engage on this. One of the things that this plan does, which I have not seen in any other plan, is identify which Department will lead on each of the 34 strategic priorities. However, to contribute to the delivery of a particular action, three, four, five or six other Departments might need to be involved. It will be necessary to look at cross-departmental working, and that is a real positive step forward for us.

Mrs D Kelly:

That does not address any of my other concerns. There are no deadlines or time frames other than those set by the European Union.

Mr Sutherland:

The deadlines and time frames that we are developing with the metrics will slot into the plan. What we will see in the plan for each strategic objective is an incremental change by a particular point in time, and that will fit into each of the strategic objectives.

Mrs D Kelly:

I understand that there has to be attitudinal change. However, are we now being told that we have an incomplete plan and that additional material on actions, lead partners and time frames will be coming before this Committee?

Mr Sutherland:

I do not think that you have an incomplete plan; you have a plan that we are still working on. We are in a position where we will present the final plan to our Ministers, the Executive and the Committee. The plan will contain the actions that we have identified at this point in time and the metrics that will identify the time by which particular strategic objectives should be delivered. The basis of that is still under discussion. However, as I said earlier, we cannot add the metrics into the plan until we have an idea of all the actions that Departments will contribute.

The Chairperson:

Have you any idea of when that will be, Jim?

Mr Sutherland:

Our Ministers are keen to see the document published. We hope that we can take something to them in March. As I said, we have arranged a further meeting of the implementation plan steering group on 11 February. At that meeting, we intend to work through the remaining metrics that we did not cover yesterday. Then, there is a process by which we will have to go back to each and every Department.

The Chairperson:

Am I right to assume that there will not be a great deal of progress before the Assembly mandate comes to an end on 24 March?

Mr Sutherland:

I hope that we will have progress by that time. I hope that we will have a draft implementation plan in place.

The Chairperson:

OK.

Mr Kinahan:

Will you give us a date in March by which we can have that document?

The Chairperson:

Yes; can we have a target date? Everything from here on is working to targets.

Mr Sutherland:

The target date that we have in mind is 24 March. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs D Kelly:

You do not have a very sustainable argument.

Mr Sutherland:

That is what we have to work to and what we are trying to progress on. I recognise that it is very difficult for us to —

The Chairperson:

I think that a new Committee, rather than this one, will be picking up most of these issues.

Mrs D Kelly:

I am disappointed. I cannot see why an action plan would not have dates for delivery. When the metrics are complete, I would like to see it come back to this Committee.

Mr McElduff:

There is a sustainability unit within the Assembly that is presided over by the Assembly Commission. Has the Department worked closely with that unit? At a recent Chairpersons' Liaison Group meeting, we received a very good presentation from Louise Friel and Stephen Welch on their plans, which were very good.

Can you tell us about accreditation schemes? What type of recognition is there for an organisation or Department that aims high and achieves good results in that regard? What structures will replace the commission, which is being wound up, to carry on its work?

Mr J Bradley:

We have had a number of meetings with delegates from the Assembly Commission to discuss the contribution that the Northern Ireland Assembly will make to the implementation plan through the

actions that it can deliver on. A number of those have been included in the draft implementation plan. I think that they include the Assembly's ambitions for sustainable development and management accreditation, as well as in a number of other areas. We have incorporated those actions along with the contributions of the other stakeholder organisations that have been involved in the development of the plan. In so doing, we have enabled the Assembly to develop its sustainable development action plan to complement our implementation plan. They have been done hand in hand, and the actions outlined in the implementation plan reflect the Assembly's contribution.

The Chairperson:

All that you have shown us so far are the responses to the consultation process, as opposed to any part of an implementation plan.

Ms M Anderson:

Is it not part of the process for the Department to inform the Committee of the responses to the consultation before it develops a plan? Surely we would be challenging the Department had it done that the other way around.

The Chairperson:

I accept that, but, to be fair, it appears that there are still quite a lot of responses to come in. There are a number of issues to be confirmed, so I gather that the consultation is not near completion.

Mr J Bradley:

There are quite a few responses outstanding, but none of them concern issues that we anticipate taking a long time to resolve. We have been talking to the Departments that have yet to come back on those issues, and we anticipate having their responses shortly. At that point, we will have a complete set of actions for the implementation plan. As Jim said, we are working on the metrics at present, and that process will take place over the next few weeks. When that is complete, we will have a set of actions and a set of metrics for determining the degree of progress that we are making on those. At that point, we will be very close to having a draft implementation plan that will be available for consideration.

Ms M Anderson:

How many Departments are you waiting on?

Mr J Bradley:

I think that we are down to just two. We have had a further four or five responses. Rather than guessing, I will tell you the right answer.

Dr Farry:

Which two are you waiting on?

Mr J Bradley:

I do not know. I know that we have had further responses from six: the Department of Education; the Department for Employment and Learning; the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; the Department of Finance and Personnel; the Department for Regional Development; and the Department for Social Development. I cannot say for certain which Departments have one or two remaining answers to give, but those Departments have given further responses since the ones that you saw.

Mr McElduff:

Are there structures for replacing the commission? When the commission is wound up, who will carry on its valuable work? I am sure that its loss will be felt.

Mr Sutherland:

We are awaiting final agreement on the proposed succession model, and, without pre-empting the ministerial decision, the focus of the transition model is on utilising internal expertise and resources, strengthening existing networks that we have developed over the past two or three years and optimising efficiencies. We presented several options to Ministers for initial assessment and, subsequently, we met Ministers and advisers on several occasions to refine some of the detail. We are fairly close to having a final plan in place. Certainly, the Ministers have indicated that they are keen to have the succession model in place in time for the formal winding down of the SDC, so we are looking at 1 April.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for that update, although I assume that it will not be this Committee, as it is currently composed, taking the matter further, so I wish you well with it. Obviously, the process is quite long and frustrating, but, hopefully, we will get an implementation plan in the near future.

Mr Sutherland:

We are eternal optimists.