



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**Committee for the Office of the First
Minister and deputy First Minister**

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

**Programme for Government 2008-2011: Progress on
Delivery Report up to 31 March 2011**

7 March 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Alex Maskey
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr George Robinson
Ms Caitríona Ruane

Witnesses:

Mr Henry Johnston	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Dr Denis McMahon	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Jim Sutherland	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Jim Sutherland, Dr Denis McMahon and Mr Henry Johnston from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). Please make your presentation, after which I will open up the session for questions.

Dr Denis McMahon (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Thank you very much for inviting us, Chairperson. This is obviously very relevant, given that we are in the process of trying to analyse the consultation and finalise the new Programme for Government (PFG). I will hand over to Henry to talk about the report.

Mr Henry Johnston (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I will briefly outline some of the key points of the 2008-2011 Programme for Government delivery report. I will outline some further work that is under way to capture further progress between March and December 2011. Finally, I will outline how we intend to take forward the lessons learned in monitoring the Programme for Government 2008-2011 and apply them to the monitoring of the new Programme for Government 2011-15.

As the Ministers indicated in their statement of 14 February 2012 on PFG 2008-2011, some 67% of the total number of targets have been completed or are expected to be completed. Around 56% of the 66 targets in the key goals and commitments have been completed or are broadly on track for completion. For the 334 targets in the public service agreements for the various Departments, the figure is close to 70%.

Clearly, those average figures do not highlight all individual successes or, indeed, difficulties, but the fuller delivery report makes these plain. The report shows major progress across a wide spectrum, ranging from education through to the economy. Equally, challenges flowing from the downturn, in relation to health and changing people's behaviours and in carrying forward major structural reform, are also clearly exposed.

The Committee should be aware that a final wrap-up exercise on PFG 2008-2011 is being carried out to capture progress between March and December 2011 on outstanding targets. The Department invited returns by 17 February, and, once work on PFG 2011-15, the economic strategy and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) launches have been completed, those will be analysed and a final update report produced.

On reflecting on the lessons learned in monitoring PFG 2008-2011, it has been decided that a new and less bureaucratic process will be put in place for PFG 2011-15, as highlighted in the draft PFG 2011-15 report. That will focus on the timely identification of problems to allow for early collective action to ensure that the Executive as a whole maximise delivery performance.

Thank you. I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: That was brief.

Can you explain a bit more, Henry, about the new system?

Mr Johnston: As you will have seen from the draft PFG 2011-15, 400-odd commitments were to be monitored on a quarterly basis between OFMDFM and the various Departments. That was incredibly cumbersome. At that time, I was at the far end, and we were discussing whether or not we had achieved targets six months before. That was not a very good system. With, hopefully, a reduced number of commitments in the new PFG, it should be a much easier process.

The key thing with the new PFG is that, associated with every commitment, there will be a delivery plan, and those delivery plans will be published. It is those plans that will contain the real meat as to how a Department, or a collection of Departments, will deliver on those targets. There will also be a process of quarterly monitoring of performance by OFMDFM. New structures are in place, at ministerial and official level, for reporting back to the Executive, and we will be reporting publicly on the new PFG delivery — twice a year, we assume at the moment — with a final end-of-year report and a mid-year progress report based on the quarterly returns from Departments.

The Chairperson: Is it reasonable to say that, at present, we do not have a delivery plan for every area?

Dr McMahon: We are in the process of developing those for the targets in the draft Programme for Government. Obviously, those will need to be adjusted once the Programme for Government is finalised and published. We are in the process of developing those now. The idea is that we will have them ready by 1 April.

Mr Johnston: We will have them in version one form. Further work is required, particularly on indicators for a number of Departments. One of the early actions will be to finalise some indicators for measures of performance that will maybe track outcomes. The trick for Departments will be to focus on outcomes but to try to find early indicators of success, for example, around things like educational attainment, where the focus is maybe on five or more GCSEs, including maths and English, at grades A to C.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that you would have a delivery plan for, let us say, education? Or would that be broken down so that you could have four or five different delivery plans?

Mr Johnston: You could have four or five different delivery plans. There will be a mapping between every commitment.

Dr McMahon: Every commitment will have a delivery plan.

The Chairperson: Sorry; every commitment will have a delivery plan?

Dr McMahon: In the draft Programme for Government, there are 76 commitments. So, the idea is to start by having 76 delivery plans. The only issue about that, I suppose, is that, for a commitment such as the commitment not to implement water charges, it is not about setting up a big infrastructure to deliver on it; that is just a commitment, and it is going to be delivered. On the other hand, there are other things, such as trying to tackle problems around waste recycling, for which the idea is that a proper delivery plan would be needed to set out who is responsible, what they plan to do to achieve the commitment and what sort of milestones they will need to deliver at each stage of the process over the period of the Programme for Government. So, as I say, there will not quite be 76 of them, but there will, broadly, be one for each commitment in the Programme for Government.

Mr Johnston: There will be mapping from each commitment to a delivery plan.

The Chairperson: Will the traffic light system be designed towards the delivery plan?

Dr McMahon: The idea will be that each commitment in the draft Programme for Government — it will be the same in the finalised Programme for Government — will have three milestones or targets against it over the three remaining years of the programme. The report will set out whether those have been met. That is where the traffic light system will apply; it will indicate whether each milestone against each commitment has been met. The delivery plans go into more detail about how targets will be delivered. This needs to be an early warning system that allows the Departments and, importantly, the Executive to take early action if something is not happening that should be happening in order to deliver the outcome.

Mr Johnston: The draft Programme for Government tried to emphasise the fact that the focus is very much on delivery. In the past, the monitoring processes were seen as very bureaucratic processes that were, too often, after the fact. The intention this time is to make that engagement much more timely and to focus not so much on the greens, which are going fine, but on the ambers, and on whether a range of interventions with Departments will allow them to get those targets back on track themselves, or whether they will require additional assistance. The focus is on trying to ensure delivery across the board.

Mr Jim Sutherland (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): One of the strengths of the new approach is that we have introduced really strong project management structures around each and every one of the commitments. We have identified a methodology for that assessment. That was lacking the first time around, but we now have clear procedures and processes in place in the new Programme for Government to identify where we need to make early interventions and where we need to offer additional support and all the escalation processes that are attached to the delivery of the commitments.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that the new mechanism will not be as subjective as the old system? I assume that quite a lot in that system was quite subjective.

Mr Sutherland: In the old Programme for Government? Yes, there was a degree of that. That is one of the lessons that we have learned, having been through the process and having sat through the best part of 6,500 different reports on each of the 400 commitments in the previous programme. In preparation for this PFG, we are doing so much more work upfront to sit down with Departments to talk through the delivery plans, to iron out the ambiguities and to try to put down tangible outputs so that the people who assess the progress and the people who are charged with delivery have a common understanding of what we are trying to achieve.

Mr Johnston: The fact that we have advanced or articulated a lot of those intermediate milestones and have actioned things provides a clear evidence base for Departments to say that a target is green and to justify that. Last time around, there was quite a lot of discussion over whether things were green, green/amber or whatever. This new approach should provide a shared understanding of what is meant to be done and when it is meant to be done upfront, which should, hopefully, reduce that discussion backwards and forwards between OFMDFM, the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) and individual Departments.

The Chairperson: I am just looking at the commitment entitled "Continue to support delivery of an effective and efficient justice system within allocated resources", which gets a green light — I just picked it out at random; it could have been any commitment. That is extremely subjective, and I have no idea how you would ever determine that that has happened. I am not entirely sure how you would make a judgement on that. I assume that you cannot tell me because you are not from that Department. It is almost impossible to have a practical knowledge of how that can be judged.

Dr McMahon: That is a fair point, and one of the things that characterised the development of the new Programme for Government is that Ministers were very keen that we put the commitments in as they were worded. Obviously, there is always an element of ambiguity in any target that you set — maybe ambiguity is the wrong word, but there is always an element of interpretation. With some of the targets that involve policy development, it is not possible to say in advance what we will do. We can say something about the long-term outcome that we are trying to achieve. We may say, for example, that we need to develop a range of measures to tackle poverty and social exclusion, but the very fact that we are saying that we need to develop them means that we cannot say in advance exactly what we are going to do. There needs to be that mixture between, on the one hand, a bit of flexibility to be able to say what we are developing and, on the other hand, some mechanism that says, sooner or later, this has to end up with someone in the street being able to say that there is an actual, real-world result that is measurable. That is the thinking behind having a smaller number of targets. It means that you can focus on delivery plans that set out how each of those will impact on the real world and how they will be measured.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, gentlemen. You are welcome. Overall, I am a fan of the traffic light rating system; I use it in my constituency office to measure how well we are serving individuals, but I have only ever heard of RAG meaning red, amber and green. This system has red, amber, green and then a fourth category of amber/green in between amber and green. What is that about?

Mr Sutherland: I am not privy to the thinking behind that at the time of its conception, but I imagine that it was put in place to deal with some of the issues that the Chairman was talking about around the interpretation of some of the targets in the previous Programme for Government. At times, it was difficult to sit down with Departments and listen to their perspective on delivery and their interpretation of how they were progressing. Without having the knowledge or the intimate understanding of it, at times, it was almost a case of, "OK, let us put this in."

Mr Johnston: As someone who used to have to fill in the forms, I can add that it was very clear when a target was red or green. However, if your target had been to make 1,200 widgets by a certain date and you delivered slightly fewer than that, did that really warrant an amber rating?

Mr Nesbitt: Am I right in thinking that the three categories of red, amber and green are used around the world and have been for some time in the public and private sector?

Mr Johnston: You will see that —

Mr Nesbitt: I have never seen it, and I have had a good look.

Mr Johnston: I have seen amber/green in other places. I have also seen amber/red in a five-status system.

Mr Nesbitt: If I were to say that in this folder is the first written mention of using a traffic light system, would it use red, amber and green or would it have the fourth category? In other words, was the original intention to have the three categories?

Dr McMahon: I think that it started with three.

Mr Johnston: I think that it started with red, amber and green.

Mr Nesbitt: And then it became a system with four categories.

Mr Sutherland: The interpretation that is given for the category of amber/green is that it implies that progress is broadly on track and is generally meeting interim milestones.

Mr Nesbitt: Yes, I get that, Jim, but I am just asking whether it was always the intention to go with four categories or whether there were three originally. You have told me that it was three and now it is four.

Dr McMahon: The original intention was to have three categories.

Mr Nesbitt: The expression "constructive ambiguity" springs to mind. Peter Robinson, the First Minister, said that 67% of the total number of targets have either already been completed or are expected to be completed. Do you agree that, without that fourth category, the 67% drops to 55%?

Dr McMahon: It comes back to the traffic lights. Traffic lights are a useful indicator and a useful way of giving a very clear idea of where we are going.

Mr Nesbitt: But this is a specific question, Denis.

Dr McMahon: On the specific question, the line that you have read does not actually refer to traffic lights. I suppose that it is referring —

Mr Nesbitt: It does.

Dr McMahon: Does it? Sorry.

Mr Nesbitt: The First Minister said that, under those four categories, 67% — the total number — had either been completed or were expected to be completed.

Dr McMahon: Yes.

Mr Nesbitt: I am asking if you accept that, if you take out that fourth category, the amber/green category, that 67% drops to 55%.

Dr McMahon: If you take out any targets that are expected to be completed and say that an expectation is not enough, then the figure drops. That is the point really. Whether they are green or any other colour, the point is valid that, if the targets that we expect to complete but have not completed were taken out, the number would drop. That is really it. There is no way around that.

Mr Johnston: If you look at page 26, you can see the key goals and commitments. The traffic light system is only used for things that have not actually been completed, because the things that are completed are all banked.

Mr Nesbitt: I just have concerns that, basically, the measurements were changed midstream. I am a cynic, so I do question.

The Chairperson: There is almost a suggestion of gerrymandering there.

Mr Nesbitt: I want to ask about tourism, which is mentioned on page 14. Things seem to be quite bad. The box on public service agreement (PSA) 5 is not the only box that does this, but I want you to clarify it for me. The box on PSA 5 shows three for red, two for amber/green and one for green. That is six. What is someone who has just opened the document to make of that box in which it states that there are five PSAs when actually there are six? What does that mean?

Dr McMahon: To be honest with you, that is one of the problems with the system. The traffic light system is great for giving a quick idea of how things are going, but I am concerned about whether it is measuring like for like. Is one of those targets more critical than the others? That is the problem with having that number of targets and traffic lights.

Mr Nesbitt: If you go up one, to the box dealing with increasing employment, you can see that there are only three PSAs, but, of those three, two are red, one is amber, one is amber/green and eight are green. That is twelve from three. What is this, feeding the 5,000? What is going on?

Mr Sutherland: I think that is PSA number 3 in terms of the listing of them.

Mr Nesbitt: PSA number 3?

Mr Sutherland: Yes. The way it was laid out in the last Programme for Government —

Mr Nesbitt: I just find that all confusing.

Mr Johnston: On page 14, you will see that, under PSA 5, on tourism, there is an asterisk at the bottom to show that one completed target is included. If you flick on to page 35, you can see what that means. Three of the targets are marked red, starting with the target on delivering capital investment; two targets, one on signature projects and the other on developing local attractions, are amber/green; and one is completed.

Mr Nesbitt: So you are going to do it differently next time?

Dr McMahon: Yes.

Mr Nesbitt: My bottom line is that, although the 400 measures are fine, our citizens want to know whether they are better off. Are we better off in terms of reducing child poverty, providing social and affordable homes, and reviewing the number of Departments? There have been some big misses.

Dr McMahon: The reality is that that will be the case with any programme, particularly if you set stretching targets. There is always a criticism that we set targets that are too easy because we know that we can meet them. I suppose the other way of looking at it is that, if you set stretching targets, it will always be difficult to meet them all. Rather than looking at the traffic light ratings, I find it more useful to look at some of the targets themselves, because that gives you an idea of what they are about. A lot has been done, and a lot of it has not necessarily hit the headlines.

The issue of moving forward and to a new Programme for Government is about being able to use that approach so that people can see, in very simple terms, what it is that we are trying to do. I come back to the point that Ministers were very keen that the commitments in the new Programme for Government were worded the way that they wanted them to be worded and not turned into Civil Service, bureaucratic language that tries to include all the details and caveats. They really wanted to be able to say, "This is what we are trying to deliver for people." For me, the first learning point is about moving to a simpler approach so that people can understand what you are trying to do.

The second learning point is around asking what a monitoring system is for. When you have 400 targets, albeit with red lights and green lights, it is sometimes very difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff and be able to say, "Here are the things that we really need to change." The idea of having the delivery plans in the new system is that you are able to say that it is not just a case of a target being red or green. It is important to be able to say whether you succeeded or not, but it is more about being able to say, "That is where you expected to be in your plan against that commitment. If you are not there, what is the collective action that we need to take in government to make that happen?" That is really where we need to go. The lesson that we have learned is that it is great to have a very comprehensive plan and set of targets, but you may lose a bit of the clarity and straightforward understanding of what we are trying to deliver.

Mr Nesbitt: I will finish with a comment. You said that the reds are easy. I think that the greens are easy. Therefore, there is just one other category and that is the in-between category.

The Chairperson: Will we and other Committees be consulted on the delivery plans? I assume that that will come from the Department.

Dr McMahon: Yes.

The Chairperson: I assume that we will be consulted on those as Committees.

Dr McMahon: Yes.

Mr Johnston: That is the intention.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Tá fáilte romhaibh. I welcome the more focused approach, which is needed. We learnt a lot from the last time, and I see that you are taking those messages on board. Notwithstanding the points about monitoring, I think that we need tough monitoring now.

I do not want to add to your work, but we need more on race and disability. Every group from the disability sector or an ethnic minority background that has come up here has said that there is a gap in legislation. You will probably know that this Committee is doing work on that. That is my first point, and I ask that you take it on board.

I welcome the fact that goods and facilities are included. I also welcome the fact that special education and work targets have been set for Travellers and that a couple of Departments have to deal with those. That is one of the issues that OFMDFM needs to monitor in respect of equality duties and everything else.

I like the focused approach. The key part over the next while will be to monitor it. I welcome the fact that we have gone from a figure of 47% for those who are not achieving five A* to C grades to 40%. We need to get that figure down further, because 40% is still far too high. A lot of good work has been done, and there is a lot more that we need to do.

The Chairperson: Any comment? I know that those were comments from Caitríona rather than questions.

Dr McMahon: Ministers were very keen that there was a proper and genuine consultation. Ministers were very keen to keep the Committee informed through the reports on the consultation as we went through it. Ministers are very keen to listen to what needs to be done, and they are very grateful to the Committee for the work that it put in.

Mr Eastwood: I have to say that I am absolutely gobsmacked at the system that has been used to date. I am completely confused, and I do not know how anyone out there is supposed to understand whether targets have been met or not. That aside, you sound like you are learning the lessons from the system that was in place, but I am not sure that the first draft of the Programme for Government has learned the lessons when it comes to specific targets. You used the word "develop", but how do you monitor that? That comes up a number of times in the current draft of the Programme for Government. I hope that the lessons are learned. If we decide that we want to do something and that we want to do it by a certain date, people out there will want to see whether or not we did it. I hope that, when it comes to not only the monitoring system but the final Programme for Government itself, we understand that and learn those lessons.

Do you think it is good enough that 67% or 55% of the targets were met, or is there a major job of work to be done to try to get that figure up? Whether it is 67% or 55%, a fairly big percentage of targets in each of those PSAs has not been delivered. We hope that the next Programme for Government is not just aspirational. We need to have targets that are tough to meet, but we also need to meet as many of them as we can.

Dr McMahon: I would like to make a couple of very important points. There will, inevitably, be some targets to "develop". I suppose that that reflects the fact that we have not had enough engagement with sectors in certain areas. We need to do more work and have delivery plans that listen to what

needs to be done. Where that maybe will be grounded is if there is a commitment to develop something, or a series of measures, and the delivery plan does not look as if it is ever going to get anywhere near that. The thing that we really want to avoid — Ministers have said this to us, and we are very, very clear about it — is the sort of target with, for example, a commitment to set up a group, to look at an action plan, to develop a strategy and so on. You get about five layers down and never get to the real world. That is where the delivery plans come in. You just cannot do that in a delivery plan. It has to be a case of, yes, we are developing a strategy, but that strategy will need to tackle, for example, these six areas or six outcomes. That is the first thing.

The second thing is that Ministers have made it very clear that this is about delivery. The Programme for Government and, more importantly, the actions that come out of the Programme for Government have to be relevant to everyone. People have to see and experience that. Also, I know that Malcolm McKibbin, the head of the Civil Service, was very keen to press the point that that is our job. Our job is to deliver the Programme for Government. We are very clear on that.

Mr Johnston: A number of Departments have improved on their milestones. As Denis said, we want to test this through delivery plans, which will have concrete actions leading to delivery, with firm indicators, either now or to be developed, that can be clearly monitored for success or failure.

The other point, as Denis said earlier, is that some of the targets in PFG 2008-11 were quite stretching. Similarly, in the new draft PFG, there are significant challenges in delivery. A number of these targets are not easy for people to deliver; they are pushing the boundaries of what they can deliver. Hopefully, the vast majority of targets will be delivered, but, given the fact that they are pushing the boundaries, it is inevitable that some people will not achieve all that they set out to do.

Mr Eastwood: There are a number of targets in the draft that say "develop". For example, we want to develop the One Plan for Derry. There are 11 major projects within that that are not necessarily mentioned in the Programme for Government. I am happy enough if there is a general commitment to "develop", but it is about whether that is followed up, in a delivery plan or the Programme for Government itself, with specific targets and milestones. Otherwise, as this delivery report shows, it is impossible to monitor. Therefore, it suits any Government to have that ambiguity. I hope that we learn the lessons.

Mr Lyttle: Thanks for your presentation, gentlemen. As my colleagues have said, there can be no more important a task for a Government than to set clear, understandable commitments and to measure them in an open and transparent way in order to determine whether they have delivered for local people. This report points out the shortcomings of the Programme for Government when it comes to its comprehensibility. There are also substantive shortcomings in delivery against some of the key targets, some of which have been mentioned. Health is one of the most significant areas in which the number of targets met was very low indeed.

Perhaps one of the most worrying concerns was the fact that news of this extremely important document was conveyed to the public and to us by way of a written statement. On that particular point, what will the role of the Assembly and Committees be in monitoring the outcomes of the next Programme for Government? Will it be greater than it was for the previous Programme for Government?

Dr McMahon: I will go back to the earlier point. Yes, there will clearly be a scrutiny role for the Assembly and for Committees, as is the case at the moment. The difference would be that, with a smaller number of targets and specific delivery plans, questions can be much more incisive. It is not just a case of talking about the number of reds or whatever. It will allow the Committee to ask, "You say that you are going to establish this service or programme or deliver this milestone by such and such a date, but what specifically do you mean by that?" It should provide an opportunity for much more transparency, which is a good thing.

I know that people on this side of the table will be scrutinised, but, at the same time, it is quite good to be able to have a proper conversation about some of these things, because there are genuine issues that come up in the course of trying to implement some of the commitments. It is good to be able to get that input and say, "This is where we are, here is where we seem to be having a few

problems, and all ideas will be gratefully accepted". There is absolutely a role for the Assembly and for Committees, and the new process should help to bring that out.

Mr Lyttle: How exactly will that be facilitated? When will Committees get reports? Will there be a commitment to provide the Assembly with reports? I am a bit concerned that there is no detail around that. If memory serves me right, there was some sort of commitment in the previous Programme for Government to provide quarterly or six-monthly reports to this Committee. I am not sure whether that was delivered, so I would be eager to hear some concrete detail about how reports will be submitted to Committees and the Assembly to give us an opportunity to engage in the way that you have talked about. I think that this will be the first time that anyone in the Assembly or Committees will review this information in public fora, and I would be keen to hear some detail about how that will be changed in future.

Dr McMahon: There are two elements. Henry and Jim will talk about the plans for the broader delivery reports. I will finish the point about the delivery plans. There were nine commitments in my particular area of the draft Programme for Government. One of the advantages of that is that it is a much more manageable number, and you will be able to look at them and question us about them. Henry will say something about the broader delivery reports and the Programme for Government in general.

Mr Johnston: I will finish off on the delivery plans. For example, the two social investment fund (SIF) commitments involve single delivery plans; two will point at one. The intention is that the delivery plans will be available on 1 April. That will be quite a useful source moving forward. We will be monitoring on a quarterly basis how Departments are delivering against the milestones in the final version of the Programme for Government. Our current intention is to produce a public report at the end of the year as well as in-year reports, probably based on the availability of indicators from a number of places. So, instead of arguing the toss over whether it is green, green/amber, amber or red, we want to have an evidence base for an informed conversation with Departments that is based on what they have in the delivery plans and the milestones, which will also be in the delivery plans. That will be a much more constructive and focused dialogue, as opposed to people getting upset about whether a target should be marked green.

Mr Lyttle: How will you have that informed dialogue with Committees and the Assembly? Will those quarterly or mid-year reports be brought to them?

Mr Johnston: It is our assumption that they will be. Certainly, we assume that you will be particularly interested in the overall shape of the thing. We assume that you will want to come back regularly to the delivery plans and updates on commitments that fall to OFMDFM. Those will be living documents, and version 1 will appear on 1 April. As I said, some pieces of work will have to be refined, particularly around indicators. For some of our delivery plans, one of the first actions is to improve on indicators and to come up with indicators that chart progress in a way that is affordable and that can be tracked fairly regularly. Those are some of the things that we are trying to achieve. The benefits may be seen in a decade, but we cannot keep saying that things are going OK; we need to look at indicators towards success that we can report on.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you all for your presentation. I was interested to hear that lessons have been learned, and I hope that that is the case. If I picked it up correctly, you said that you want to talk more with other Departments about their delivery plans and that Ministers want their wording to be used in framing the aspirations. You also said that there are more tangible benefits out there and that people can see outcomes and outputs, and all of that is welcome. Colum is right: people need to be able to see and understand these things. I welcome all of that; we need a more focused approach, and so on.

Denis, you mentioned that the engagement with sectors could be better. What did you mean?

Dr McMahon: Yes. Sorry; I put it the wrong way. I will explain what I was trying to say. A good example would be the development of a childcare strategy, which is one of the commitments. You may ask why we should not just move straight to implementation: decide what we want to do, put it in the Programme for Government and do it now. However, I am aware that there is work that we need to do around that. We need to decide what interventions are required. We need to talk to the people who are delivering the commitment and to understand more about it before we design the interventions. In

a way, it would be good if there were no mention of any strategies in the PFG and we just said that we will deliver x, y and z on the ground.

Mr Humphrey: But engagement with whom?

Dr McMahon: Sorry; it depends on the commitment. For example, if —

Mr Humphrey: So it could be with the private sector.

Dr McMahon: It could be with the private sector, the community and voluntary sector or relevant statutory organisations, depending on the particular commitment. It really depends on what it is that we are talking about and trying to deliver.

Mr Humphrey: I listened to colleagues who are good at pointing out target failings in Ministries in which their parties do not hold the portfolio but who, funnily enough, do not mention their own Ministers' Departments. What effect did the removal of money from the block grant have on meeting or completing targets?

Dr McMahon: To be honest, I cannot answer that question straight away. I do not know if Henry has a view. I imagine that some of the targets are bound to have been affected, but I could not tell you specifically which ones.

Mr Humphrey: It will not have been just some of the targets; a huge amount was taken out of the Northern Ireland economy.

Dr McMahon: It is absolutely a fair point. The general point is that, undoubtedly, the context has made a huge difference, particularly the fall in capital receipts and in capital income to the block grant. That will have had a huge impact. It is difficult to be able to list the specific targets that were impacted, but, looking through this, we can see a whole range of projects that we know about, some high-profile ones, that depended on that. It is absolutely right to say that there will have been an impact, both because of the amount of money that was coming into Northern Ireland and because of some of the background economic conditions. I came from the Department of the Environment (DOE), where, at one stage, we mapped the level of waste that was being produced. It was quite interesting that the level of waste that was being produced in Northern Ireland correlated quite closely with the FTSE 100. Although people say that we are a public sector-dominated economy, and there is a debate to be had about that, that shows that we are very sensitive to the impact of events on the marketplace.

Mr Johnston: A number of targets have been impacted by the fact that Departments were in need of capital money. The other major impact was the downturn in the economy, which was behind some of those —

Mr Humphrey: That started in 2008.

Mr Johnston: Yes, the impact of that was coming through. You can see the impact that that had on the Department for Social Development (DSD), which had some difficulties with delivery. The private sector could not get schemes up and running. They either did not stack up economically, or, even when they were OK, you could not get banks to back them. That was a difficulty in achieving some of our targets, and, as Denis said, there were difficulties in getting capital receipts in across a whole range of Departments. Those receipts were sitting behind a number of investment plans for a number of Departments, and they could not get the assets sold for sensible money or sold at all.

The Chairperson: By capital receipts, do you mean capital receipts from the sale of Northern Ireland Executive property, or do you mean capital receipts from the private sector?

Dr McMahon: I was talking about capital receipts from the sale or the value of property or land.

The Chairperson: A number of those that were budgeted into the previous PFG did not take place. Is that what you are saying?

Dr McMahon: Yes, or the values changed. They changed quite considerably around the end of 2008, obviously.

Mr Johnston: At that stage, the thrust was to realise capital assets that could be sold off to the private sector and re-invest the returns from those assets. A number of Departments had quite significant investment plans based on that.

The Chairperson: Although I cannot say for sure, I do not recall significant capital receipts being accounted for in that Budget.

Mr Johnston: To take the example of DSD, because that is where I was, there were targets on the housing side based on the Housing Executive being able to sell stock and surplus land. On the urban regeneration side, there was also a good lot of surplus ex-development stock that was to be taken to the market but which, in the end, could not be taken to the market.

Mr Molloy: Thanks for the presentation. My question is on the general issue of setting targets. I am not picking on any particular Department, but there is a target for reducing the number of suicides by 15%. So many factors come into that, so how can you gauge whether you are successful or otherwise? There is a red against that but it could just as easily be a green. The issue is about how we set out how we will achieve that as much as it is about setting a target.

The new Programme for Government sets targets on the provision of services, including education and health, based on a rising population. What factors come into that to ensure that you are looking ahead to meet that situation?

Dr McMahon: Those are two hugely important points. One of the things that we have always struggled with is knowing when we have had an impact. Bureaucrats like us like to have things nice and tidy, because then you can say, "There are your inputs. There is the money going in. There are your outputs". You, therefore, know what you will get from that and what effect you think it will have. The problem with that is that some commitments fit into that better than others. With some, it is very difficult to say what the outcome will be as a result of taking a certain action. What we have to do in the plans is say that, if we take an action, be it reducing incidence of suicide or whatever, and we do it for so many people, we have to make some assumptions about what impact that is having. At least we are able to be open about what it is that we are assuming.

Another issue is that when we do business cases to justify spending money to meet commitments, we need to be very clear about what outcomes we want. You make a really good point; it is a very difficult one. I will not pretend that we have cracked it or that there will be a simple system, because all the commitments are so different. There are also other considerations. When I was in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), I remember talking about suicide targets, and people were saying, "How can you set a suicide target that is not 100%?" So, there are real issues around setting and measuring such targets.

Mr Johnston: You focused on a very difficult target. Trying to reduce the incidence of suicide is very challenging. You have those very sad clusters of suicides. How do you prevent that from recurring? I do not think that there is settled evidence on how you can do that.

In respect of the delivery plans more generally, we had some early engagement with Departments based on the draft PFG about where they are going with their delivery plans. We said to them, "There is your target. How will the senior responsible officer (SRO), the person whose name is against that target, deliver on it? How will he ensure that it is delivered? What are his control levers? If he is delivering it directly through a Department or an arm's-length body, how will he make the difference? Does he have the real tools to do the job?" That important bit of concentrated thinking on the delivery plans is going on. So, people are focused on that and are thinking, "I am signed up to a target, but how am I actually going to deliver on it? How will I get the resources in place? Do I have them in place? Do I know what best practice is in respect of making a significant change?" Depending on the nature of the commitment, be it around foreign direct investment (FDI) or increasing performance in schools or health, the levers will obviously be different. The good thing about the delivery plans is that

it gets people to focus on how they will deliver a target, what they will do to deliver it and how they will do that.

Mr Molloy: Does that type of information help you to at least gauge a quarter of the way through the year whether or not a certain target will be met? If there were an increase in suicides in a certain area for some reason, could you take action to try to deal with that? If there were a massive increase in road traffic accidents, for example, could you take steps part of the way through the year to address that instead of waiting until the situation worsens?

Dr McMahon: That is a key point. Our approach is about standard project management and about bringing some of that discipline to the way we deliver the Programme for Government. That is exactly the point. You are absolutely right: it has to be about scrutiny, traffic lights and making sure that people know whether or not something has been delivered. It also has to be about saying, "If we are not doing the right thing, can we change it or do we need some more investment to do so?"

The Chairperson: OK. The debate that we can have about this is limited because it is over and done with now. Francie made a good point when he asked whether the commitments should be looked at mid-term. When I was on the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development during the last mandate, we used to get those figures in front of us every so often. I think, Francie, we were in Committee together at that time. We debated the issues, but only the aspects relating to agriculture and rural development. We debated why the Department was not meeting its targets or, if it had met its targets, whether those were accurate. It might be useful for the Committee to look at the targets specifically relating to OFMDFM. Perhaps we can get a presentation just to see if improvements can be made to the way the delivery plans are tailored. I do not know if we need to do that in the near future. Obviously, if there is to be consultation on the delivery plans, that might be an opportunity for us to do so.

Mr Molloy: You can see the progress on financial issues. If the budget is not spent, it is a very easy calculation, but it is different when you are dealing with social issues. However, the same mechanism needs to be used for those issues as is used for budgets. It is about how you measure progress and what action you need to take to resolve the situation. It is more difficult.

Dr McMahon: That is absolutely right. I want to go back to the point about consulting on the plans. On one point of clarification for the Chair; no formal consultation is planned for the delivery plans, but we will obviously consult the Committee on them, particularly the ones that relate to OFMDFM. There is no formal public consultation, just because we have to start delivery very quickly.

The Chairperson: OK. Would the consultation with our Committee be about the commitments that are relevant to OFMDFM? Would, for example, the Health Committee be consulted on the commitments that are relevant to the Health Department, just as the Committee for Education or wherever it happens to be would be consulted on its Department's commitments? Would that be the case?

Dr McMahon: That is what we envisage; absolutely.

Mr Johnston: The delivery plan should be integrated in the mainstream business of Departments.

The Chairperson: OK, thank you very much for that.