



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

**Programme for Government and
Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland:
Committee Responses**

8 February 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Programme for Government and Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland: Committee Responses

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Chairperson)

Mr Trevor Clarke

Mr Colum Eastwood

Mr William Humphrey

Mr Alex Maskey

Mr Francie Molloy

Mr Mike Nesbitt

Ms Caitríona Ruane

The Chairperson: We will now consider the Programme for Government (PFG). You will find in your papers a copy of the Committee's draft response to the PFG, which was considered at the meeting of 1 February. There are a few differences in the document: the commentary is in capitals, and the proposed new text immediately after section 2.4 is in a different typeface. Subject to members' views, that new text might form the basis for references that the Committee might make to other Committees' responses. In today's tabled items, there are further responses from the Committee for the Environment, the Committee for Regional Development and the Committee for Employment and Learning, bringing the total number of responses to nine.

You will be aware that the planned date for the Executive's debate on the draft PFG is 12 March. I certainly hope to have our response finalised by next week's meeting, because that will enable us to get our report printed and published for 22 February or 23 February.

Mr Eastwood: Is the deadline still 22 February?

The Chairperson: Yes. I think that we can submit the report and, if necessary, get it printed at a later stage.

At an early stage we considered the possibility of having a take-note debate on the Committee's report. However, I suggested that having a take-note debate too close to the main debate on 12 March would probably mean that it would not have the same emphasis. I know that there was an earlier indication that we would not go ahead with the take-note debate if the main debate were to come up in reasonable time. Are members still comfortable with that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Members, how would you like the responses from the other Committees to be included in the report? Do you want a summary of each one in just our report, or do you want them to stand alone in the overall report?

Mr Eastwood: We could append them.

The Chairperson: That is probably the easiest way. Are we content with that?

Mr Molloy: They are those Committees' responses.

Mr Eastwood: Given what we heard from the Equality Commission today, do we need to add anything about its point of view on disability and race?

The Chairperson: I was going to go through our own report, because I have a few wee suggestions to make as well, Colum. It may be useful if we go through it now. Is there anything in paragraphs 1.1, 1.2 or 1.3?

Section 2 covers paragraphs 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4. Clerk, is there anything on those that you need to comment on?

The Committee Clerk: The only thing would be that the numbering will change slightly, and the section that has text in a different font will become section 3. That is just a technical issue, however.

The Chairperson: OK. Section 3 is "Strategic Priorities".

I am sorry; we need to deal with the section in red about responses from the Statutory Committees.

The Committee Clerk: That is just in a different typeface in members' copies.

The Chairperson: Sorry, maybe it is slightly different in yours. The paragraph starts:

"At its meeting on 8 and 15 November 2012".

That is just saying that we will put the responses into appendices. Are members content with that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: I had a discussion with the Committee Clerk about paragraph 3.2, which states:

"The Committee would like to see further detail on how departments will be held to account for delivering their key commitments, particularly in cross-cutting areas."

I suggest that it may be useful for us to include examples of cross-cutting issues. The Committee Clerk came up with a couple of suggestions.

The Committee Clerk: The integrated affordable childcare strategy and measures to tackle poverty and social exclusion could be referenced as examples.

Mr Eastwood: The Ilex One Plan could also be included. That comes under our remit in a lot of ways, but there are 11 different catalytic projects in the Programme for Government that cut right across different Departments. The Programme for Government says that it wants to develop the scheme, but it is very much a cross-cutting plan for the city of Derry and may be one that you could throw in.

Mr Molloy: The other that one I can think of, which was raised several times at different Committees, is the issue of agricultural waste and energy from waste. That maybe needs a line about the cross-departmental roles across the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and others. In DARD, for instance, the next stage in funding for slurry holding tanks will be to fund anaerobic digestion. Maybe that comes under DETI or other Departments. I do not know where we would include that point, but there is a need to

discuss cross-departmental roles to ensure that waste, particularly agricultural waste, and the energy from waste is properly dealt with.

The Chairperson: Members, if other specific issues come to mind, maybe you would pass them to the Committee Clerk.

Mr Molloy: All Departments work in silos, and the only way that cross-departmental working will happen is if there is a collective line from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) trying to generate that thinking across Departments and gets them thinking outside their own Committee and box.

Mr A Maskey: On a general point, I do not think that the Committee has really decided on or thrashed out its views on the type of Programme of Government document that we want as an end product. There is an argument for having a shorter version for presentation and so on that covers all the general principles, but that has to be underpinned by all the necessary operations plans from each of the Departments, including those, for example, on delivery and setting specific targets, strategies, time frames and so on. I certainly favour a shorter version over a longer document that contains everything. In a way, I am easy with it, but OFMDFM currently seems to prefer the relatively shorter version. Of course, that is clearly on the understanding that it covers, as is illustrated throughout, the building blocks. More importantly, each Department wants a Programme for Government agreed on, and each Department has to come up with their strategies, policies, time frames and so on for implementation. I support that or something close to it. I have no difficulty at all with putting some things in by way of illustration, but we could still be in danger of wanting everything in the document.

For example, I do not want to misrepresent what Brendan McAllister said when he came to the Committee, but I thought that he said that he was generally happy with the Victims' Commission's discussions with OFMDFM but that the commission would have preferred much greater representation throughout the document. In other words, the commission needed to be named more often. I do not want to misrepresent what Brendan said, but, by and large, he said that the commission was, relatively speaking, happy enough so far and that it is having substantive discussions but that it would like to see its name referred to more often. Older people's advocates said something similar.

There is a presentational issue, which, I presume, could be dealt with. I have no difficulty in putting something in that illustrates our general points, but I would like us to draw attention to the issue that people are raising, perhaps in a preface to our response to OFMDFM. Some may be "relatively satisfied" with the substance of the Programme for Government, its direction of travel and its intentions. Evelyn said earlier that the Equality Commission thinks that it is going in the right direction but that it might want additional things to be included. Some of those additional things are presentational, and some are more substantive and need further consideration, such as the types of legislation that Evelyn mentioned. I am trying to work out how we frame our response, rather than just going through everything —

The Chairperson: In fairness, Alex, the draft response that has come here so far is pretty short. All I was trying to do was add a few examples to put a wee bit more flesh on the bones. We cannot go into the entire detail of a very substantial report.

Mr Eastwood: I like to see detail, and I like to see details written down, because our job as a Committee is to hold a Department or government to account. It is difficult to do that when a plan is produced that is not that detailed in some areas. It is important that we point that out. I do not know how many different parties are around this table, and I know that we will not all agree, but we have been given a number of examples from people who have given evidence to us. It is important that they are in the document. We will all thrash out what we think about it in debate in the Chamber, but I like to see details written down, to see them targeted and to see the money beside them. That is the only way that things will ever get done.

Mr Nesbitt: I am sorry, Colum, but I will appear to speak against you a bit.

Mr Eastwood: Go ahead, Mike, we are in different parties.

Mr Nesbitt: One of the difficulties the previous time was that there were more than 300 measures of the effectiveness of the Programme for Government. For example, if you are on the Victims' Commission, you report to OFMDFM as your sponsor body, but, clearly, there are other Departments that can help victims, including the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), the Department for Social Development (DSD) and DARD. As I found, the trouble was that, if you went to, say, the Health Department with an idea, it did not assess on paper whether that was a good or a bad idea. It looked at its targets, and if you ticked a box from its targets, you were in, and if you did not, you were told, "Sorry, you are out." The difficulty, Colum, is that there is a danger of being too prescriptive in saying, "Here are all the things, and here is all the money". I understand that you want to be able to hold people to account, but the danger is that you tie yourselves down for four years with no flexibility just to say that somebody has thought of a really good idea.

Mr Eastwood: That is fair enough, but I will go back to the example that I used earlier. The One Plan for Derry was launched with a great fanfare by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and it is great to have that support. It is a major document and a major plan. However, all it says in the Programme for Government is that they are going to "develop" it. I do not know what that means, and nobody in Derry knows what that means. Nobody in Derry knows what is going to happen to the 11 big projects that are supposed to be going on. People need to see a bit more flesh on the bones; that would be useful. That is one example, but obviously, there are others.

Mr A Maskey: I do not think that that is a great example. You said that there are 11 core components of the document. It is impossible to expect the Programme for Government to contain details on all those, including all the time frames and specific targets. Do not get me wrong: I fully support the One Plan and want to make sure that every Department, including the Department for Social Development, which I work with, fulfils their commitments in the Programme for Government on that. However, I do not want to see a document that contains all that detail. The One Plan represents Derry, and it is a hugely important development, but there are a whole lot of other developments.

The Chairperson: Hold on, members. We should not get too bogged down in this.

Mr Eastwood: I do not want every issue covered; I just want more than one word on the plan.

Mr A Maskey: That is a presentational issue.

The Chairperson: I made the point about that so that we could show some examples of the cross-cutting themes; I did not want to get into the overall specifics of the PFG. To be fair, paragraph 3.3 of our submission states:

"The Committee would also highlight the importance of producing detailed delivery plans for each of the commitments contained within the draft PFG."

So, we are saying that we would like to see detailed delivery plans for whatever is in the PFG. However, they do not have to be in the PFG, but they must be seen at some stage. Obviously, we are highlighting that. Colum, we are trying to ensure that the document is not something that is unworkable.

Mr Eastwood: I am quite happy with our draft response. I just do not want it to contain any less.

The Chairperson: Let us keep going through it. If there are any other issues about the cross-cutting theme, let us have them. I am assuming that you are content with the issues that we have highlighted so far.

Paragraph 3.4 states:

"[The Committee may wish to add further strategic issues following consideration of other Committees' responses.]"

We do not need that, do we, if we are just going to append those responses?

The Committee Clerk: If that is what members want to do. I know that members may not have had a chance to consider all the other Committee responses. However, we can take that bit out.

The Chairperson: They are their responses.

Ms Ruane: Did we name race and disability in the same way as age discrimination legislation?

The Chairperson: Where is that?

Ms Ruane: Sorry, I am jumping ahead.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 4.1 is the next one that I have to discuss. There was an issue at the end of paragraph 4.1, which states:

"However, the Committee would like consideration given to producing Northern Ireland specific targets, which could then be incorporated into the PfG."

I raised that as a concern with the Committee Clerk, because I assumed that you could not set your targets any lower than those in the UK Child Poverty Act simply because they were in legislation. However, the Committee Clerk explained that the issue of the Committee wanting its own separate targets was that, if the child poverty targets in the Child Poverty Act were reduced by 10%, that might mean that Northern Ireland would not reduce its targets at all if the reduction in the rest of the UK were large enough. That is OK by me, provided that is what is behind it.

Mr A Maskey: I think that the operative thing for me is the phrase "consideration given". As you rightly point out, by the stroke of a pen you could, in theory, virtually eradicate child poverty here without doing a damn thing. That is not what we want to do, and I presume that OFMDFM would not be entitled to do that. I am happy enough with that as it is at the moment. For me, the essence of it is that we will give consideration to it and see how and if that circle can be squared. You need some type of measure, whether it is the outcomes model or whatever. However, you need some device, so let us give consideration to it. I am happy enough with that.

Ms Ruane: We flagged up another thing. I have forgotten who made the presentation. Was it the group that discussed child poverty? The 10% can hide an awful lot. The child poverty rate in Belfast is 11%, yet it has some of the most disadvantaged areas in the whole of the North. We need to watch the statistics. I agree with Alex. We are only considering this; we are not saying that it definitely has to happen.

The Chairperson: OK. Do you understand the point I was making? I am concerned that we cannot set a lower target. I think that we may need to specify a reason for saying that, because it seems a wee bit bland to me. Alex, you said that the UK target for child poverty could be met without making any difference in Northern Ireland. We need to make that clear, because I certainly did not pick it up from my reading.

Mr A Maskey: We could maybe reference local circumstances.

The Committee Clerk: We can come back with some wording on that next week.

The Chairperson: OK. Paragraph 4.2 of our draft reports states:

"The Commission for Victims and Survivors felt that there was insufficient reference in the draft PfG to dealing with the past."

However, it did not make any suggestions.

Mr A Maskey: Chair, I think that that provides us with an opportunity to put in an expanded view that deals not just with victims. A number of organisations made similar points, and I think that we should relay to OFMDFM that a number of organisations explained to us that they believe that there is

insufficient reference to their needs. It is just like what is written in paragraph 4.2, but more organisations than the Commission for Victims and Survivors made that point.

I asked whether that was a presentational issue or a substantive point. We have to be concerned about the substantive improvements and the work that needs to be done. If that means making another two or three specific references, we should put them in. Surely they could be accommodated.

Mr Nesbitt: Those organisations were looking for reassurance.

Mr A Maskey: Yes. Maybe that is what we should do. Perhaps we should say something like a number of organisations, including the Commission for Victims and Survivors and whatever other organisations we want to reference from our notes or from Hansard, expressed to us that they believe that there is insufficient reference to their organisations or to their particular needs. We should ask whether reassurance on that can be given. We could say something like that.

The Chairperson: To be fair, Alex, paragraph 4.4 of the draft report states:

"The Commissioner for Children and Young People highlighted...significant gaps in the...PFG."

So that means that we have referenced some of those concerns.

Ms Ruane: Am I right in saying that paragraphs 4.2 and 4.6 seem to be repetitive?

The Chairperson: They relate to two separate issues.

Mr Molloy: As Alex said, we should say that a number of different groups made that point, instead of highlighting only the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, as is the case in paragraph 4.2. We need to relate that a number of different groups gave that evidence.

The Chairperson: We have tried to do that in a couple of areas, Francie. Paragraph 4.4 deals with the Children's Commissioner, and paragraph 4.5 deals with the Commissioner for Older People. We have tried to deal with all of them.

Mr T Clarke: Why not take them all out and make a general reference to all the organisations in one paragraph?

The Chairperson: I think that what we have is a bit more specific.

Mr T Clarke: They all said the same thing.

Mr Eastwood: No, they did not.

Mr T Clarke: The paragraphs are just repeating themselves.

The Chairperson: The only difference is that each organisation referred specifically to where they see some of the gaps.

Mr Molloy: In their own organisations.

The Chairperson: Yes. I think that that is fair enough.

Mr Eastwood: The difference between paragraph 4.2 and paragraph 4.6 is that paragraph 4.2 deals with the past, while paragraph 4.6 deals with victims and their families. There is a difference. Victims are supposed to be central to the issue, but there is a fairly big difference between them.

The Chairperson: Members, I want to bring you back to paragraph 4.3, which deals with the legislative programme. Is there anything more specific that we can put in there? I assume that the Executive have a list of pieces of legislation that are on board and ready to come through. Could we be more specific and ask them to detail at least the ones that they have agreed?

Ms Ruane: The commissioners said that they would like to see more legislation.

The Chairperson: They did.

Ms Ruane: They also said that they were satisfied that there is some legislation. I think that we should reflect that.

The Chairperson: Yes. However, when they were here earlier, representatives of the Equality Commission said that there was a lack of legislation on disability and race issues.

Ms Ruane: Yes, but they all welcomed that there was legislation on age and on goods and services. I remember Bob Collins opening up with that point, so that probably should be in the document.

The Chairperson: Although all the organisations indicated that they felt that there should be more detail on the legislation that is coming through.

Mr Eastwood: To be honest, I think that you have it right here. There are a lot of references to legislation in the draft PFG, and that is probably fair enough. Even if we know that legislation is coming, there is obviously room to put more in. I do not mind if they add that bit in about —

Ms Ruane: Yes, because they named that they had that in.

Mr Eastwood: That is fair enough just as long as the emphasis is not taken off the fact that they also said that there was little reference to legislation.

Ms Ruane: So, are we adding in that they welcomed that there is legislation on age and goods and services?

The Chairperson: I think that we should just ask whether they could be more specific on what legislation is agreed that could be included in the PFG. Those commissions and bodies said that that would strengthen the PFG. We do not want to know every piece of legislation that each Department has on board, but if they at least put in what they have agreed, that would show us those specific issues.

Mr A Maskey: In a way, we could include a whole lot. A lot of those organisations made presentations to ourselves, and we could include all that if we wish. We could just send it all forward. It is no skin off my nose, because it is just a few pages, so I have no real difficulty with that. For me, a number of Departments, including OFMDFM, will at some point have to bring forward legislation on the basis of having considered something or having decided to do A and B and then having to produce legislation for A and B. However, we cannot know that. At this moment in time, they are doing the Programme for Government. The Programme for Government will have to spell out the outcomes that we are going to try to get. If that requires legislation, that is fine, and if it requires just a policy change, that is also well and good. A full legislative programme could not be produced in a Programme for Government.

The Chairperson: I do not think anybody is suggesting that, Alex. We are saying that it would be useful if they highlighted what areas of legislation are agreed. To be fair, that may be only three or four pieces, but at least you would then have a commitment to a rolling legislative programme. We all accept that the Programme for Government will change and that it needs to change as time goes on, but at least a commitment could be given to a rolling legislative programme.

Ms Ruane: If I remember correctly, two pieces of legislation were named for age discrimination and the provision of goods and services. The Commissioner for Older People and the Equality Commission welcomed the fact that that legislation was included, and they said that they would like to see further legislation. So, I think that paragraph 4.3 needs to be reworded slightly or to have a sentence added, frankly. I do not think that it represents what people think.

Mr Eastwood: It may be useful to go back to the Hansard report just to see. Otherwise, I am happy enough.

The Chairperson: Is there anything else, members? The figures put out by the Commissioner for Older People, outlined in paragraph 4.5:

"highlighted that there was between £1.18m and £2.26m every week, in unclaimed benefits for older people".

Ms Ruane: Yes, that is right.

The Chairperson: I was not sure where those figures came from.

Mr A Maskey: Yes, because you will get different figures. We had presentations on benefits from a range of organisations, not least a couple of days ago from A2B, and you get a variation on figures. The general point, however, is that everybody believes that there is a considerable level of unclaimed entitlement. All the statistics, including those from DSD and the Social Security Agency, show that quite clearly. In fact, they are currently advertising to try to get people to maximise what they are entitled to. Whatever about those figures, that is the danger of us wanting to scrutinise every single line that we get from organisations. There is a clear understanding that there is unclaimed entitlement, so the issue is what you do about it. Maybe it is for the Department, not OFMDFM, to be dealing with that.

The Chairperson: Alex, I do not know whether your Committee has looked at it, but we have talked for some time about the possibility of having almost a one-stop shop. Once you put in a claim for benefit, a presumption could be made to support you and a check could be run.

If you were to make a claim for pension credit, a check would automatically be run to see whether you were entitled to any other benefits. So, if you did not get that benefit, you might be entitled to some other benefit.

Mr A Maskey: Mike and other members will know from the fuel poverty event that that features quite strongly in a number of organisations that say that there are cultural issues, particularly among a lot of older people, whereby people are afraid to touch the system, or they think they should not be entitled to it or they do not want to upset the apple cart. A whole range of stakeholders expressed the clear view that there should be some automatic enrolment or entitlement. For example, in the Pensions Bill, the Government argue that there should be an automatic enrolment into a pension programme, so why not have an automatic entitlement to a particular benefit? If you are going to introduce universal credit and so on, it must be doable. I cannot pre-empt the discussion on the Welfare Bill, which, as Colum said, we will probably not have until March, but I know that that will feature and that we will seek to put it into a Bill. So, let us have something on an automatic check. At whatever point of intervention, someone should be able to do a quick check. The idea of the Bill is to simplify the system, and, surely, if you do that —

The Chairperson: I am assuming that the Social Security Agency does not do that.

Mr Nesbitt: At Alex's night, there was a clear feeling at the OFMDFM table that the information is all on official computers but in different silos. If the computers could start talking to each other, you could do all that. The information is all there, so that work could be done very quickly and effectively.

The Chairperson: Can we put a line in there about that? I know that it really should be an issue for the Department for Social Development, but the Commissioner for Older People raised it with us.

Ms Ruane: Yes, maybe that is the place to put it in.

Mr Nesbitt: If we are talking about cross-cutting issues, departmental computers is one of those.

Mr Molloy: After welfare reform, the computers will be used to take more people off benefits than to put them on to them, unfortunately.

Mr Eastwood: There is a call to include:

"a specific commitment to maximise benefit uptake".

The specifics around that can be debated. However, that is more an issue for DSD.

The Chairperson: We could mention establishing measures to maximise benefit uptake.

Mr A Maskey: I like to use the term "entitlement". Sometimes people think that you are trying to milk the system, but that is what your entitlement is. What you should be trying to do is find some mechanism that triggers a check to ensure that people are getting their entitlement linked, if you know what I mean. As everyone seems to be saying, a system should be inbuilt whereby, if you are engaging with the Social Security Agency, a check should be done so that you get what you are entitled to. A specific reference to that would be helpful.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 5.3 refers to the commitment to:

"Implement an Integrated and Affordable Childcare Strategy".

Can we put a line in there to say that we would like more detail on the implementation of the strategy? Again, that is a cross-cutting theme. It is all very well saying that you want to implement it, but not if you do not know how to implement it.

Mr T Clarke: Is that not part of the next step? The aspiration may be that they want to implement something, but they might not have a programme together to do that.

Ms Ruane: I agree with Trevor. That would be us as a Committee saying that, at the appropriate moment, we would like a briefing on the childcare strategy.

The Chairperson: We can put a line in about that. It does not have to be in the Programme for Government, but we need to be sure that there is going to be an implementation plan.

Mr Eastwood: I think that it is saying that there would be an implementation plan. Caitríona mentioned what we heard about gaps in disability issues, and I think that I did too.

The Chairperson: Where were you suggesting that that go in, Colum?

Ms Ruane: Paragraph 5.6 or 5.7.

Mr Eastwood: Yes, somewhere around there.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 5.6, I would say.

Mr Eastwood: There is quite a bit. It might involve looking through the material that the Equality Commission gave us today. It highlighted a number of proposed legislative changes.

The Chairperson: You could put it in at paragraph 5.6 or paragraph 4.3, which states:

"The Equality commission highlighted the need for legislation in relation to disability and race".

So there is actually something in the document already.

Mr Molloy: They also pointed out that we are not keeping parity on some legislation. Bob Collins made the point that the legislation in England, Scotland and Wales was different to that here and that older people in particular were losing out on the equality issue because of that. He said that the legislation needed only a tweak to ensure that we get the same here. Parity works both ways, and where we are falling behind in parity, we should be catching up and filling the gaps in the same way as trying to keep up with it in some cases.

Ms Ruane: Francie, does that come under paragraph 5.6?

Mr Molloy: Yes, it probably does.

Ms Ruane: Maybe we should check back in case there was something more than that.

Mr A Maskey: If we go back to paragraph 5.4 for a minute, I wonder whether it could be expanded. It deals specifically with tackling poverty and social exclusion. I am satisfied that, throughout the document, reference is made to tackling disadvantage and to equality and so forth. It is all in there. However, if you are worried about it, you need to know where the specifics and the operational plans are. DSD has told us that it will be producing an operational plan to underpin all those commitments. I would like to see whether we could expand that out a bit.

The Committee Clerk: There could be a sentence at the end of paragraphs 5.3 and 5.4 to say something like:

"The Committee would welcome further detail on this as soon as possible."

Is that the sort of thing that you were thinking of?

Mr A Maskey: I certainly welcome the references in the document to tackling poverty and social exclusion, including the earnings disregard pilot, for example. However, I would be keen to see something further.

The Chairperson: We would obviously be keen to see the outcome of the earnings disregard pilot scheme as soon as possible.

Ms Ruane: So, we are adding a sentence into paragraphs 5.3 and 5.4 along those lines.

The Chairperson: The last sentence of paragraph 5.8 states:

"The Commissioner also raised the issue of the future of peace walls and that there was no historical back-drop in relation to this."

If we are going down that road, we should ensure that the communities that are affected are consulted as part of that.

Mr Nesbitt: Paragraph 5.7 refers the Commissioner for Older People's concerns about —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Mike. Are members happy with that reference in paragraph 5.8?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Nesbitt: The Commissioner for Older People was worried about digital exclusion. TV goes digital this year, so everybody who has a TV will be able to access that from their remote. Will that not make a significant impact on exclusion? You do not need a computer anymore; you can do it off your digital TV.

Mr T Clarke: That is assuming that the elderly can afford to have the television. So, they are still excluded if they do not have one.

Mr Nesbitt: Yes, but is it not likely to make a severe dent?

Mr T Clarke: I assume that it would make a dent, but it goes back to whether they have the technology to do that. The commissioner is saying that those people could be excluded if they do not have the technology.

Mr Nesbitt: Yes, but I suspect that the new technology will make a severe dent in the levels of exclusion.

Mr Eastwood: We may be debating beyond the issue, but how would that work if you have an old TV?

Mr Nesbitt: An analogue TV will not work anymore.

Mr A Maskey: We will be watching a black and black picture permanently.

Mr Nesbitt: Trevor's point is that they will need to be able to afford a new television or a hub box.

Mr Eastwood: It may be worth putting in something saying that, considering the changes —

Mr T Clarke: That has already been addressed by one organisation, whose name I cannot remember. However, it is still issuing grants for people to upgrade, provided they are in that —

Mr Nesbitt: I would just be concerned that we may leave ourselves open to the criticism of not realising that that will not be an issue after October or that exclusion will be significantly reduced.

Mr Eastwood: Can we get that checked? I do not know what the detail is.

Mr T Clarke: Whether or not that is reduced, it will still be a problem. The commissioner is identifying it as being a problem, and I think that is all she is doing. She is giving recognition to a potential problem, albeit one that could be reduced by what you said, Mike. However, it will still be a problem to some. So, we are only really referencing that we are not leaving those people behind.

Mr A Maskey: Maybe that could be written better. It talks about improving online access, but I think that it really means increasing online access. We are in danger of starting to unpick all this. I know the point you are making. You do not want to suggest that putting that in the document will solve the problem. Hopefully, it would make a dent in removing some barriers, but, as Trevor said, even all the barriers will not be removed. Maybe it would help if we just rephrased that.

The Chairperson: OK. Clerk, there is a challenge for you.

Mr Nesbitt: There may be figures on what impact that is likely to have.

Mr Eastwood: Does it mean that you access the internet through your TV as well? Is that what it means?

Mr Nesbitt: You can do, yes.

Mr Eastwood: Does that mean every TV that meets digital requirements?

Mr Nesbitt: They are all digital, so yes.

Mr Molloy: Would it help if you just took out the word "digital"? The statement links to one particular theme, but exclusion of older people is still the problem.

Mr T Clarke: That would work.

Mr Eastwood: I literally know nothing about it, but I am not sure that it means that every TV that meets the standard for digital TV will allow you to also go online on your TV. Is that it definitely the case? I do not know whether that is true.

Mr Nesbitt: You can put NI Direct online on the TV — yes.

Mr Eastwood: Can you do that if you have an internet-enabled TV? They are different.

Mr Nesbitt: No, just digital.

The Chairperson: Folks, we are getting a wee bit tied up in technicalities.

Mr T Clarke: If we removed the reference to "digital", I think that that would work.

The Chairperson: Let the Committee Clerk have a look at it and come back to us. OK?

Members, paragraph 6.2 relates to monitoring progress. In past times, I had a problem with the traffic light system. We are highlighting that problem in paragraph 6.2. The Education Committee, in its response, suggested a different way to measure monitoring. That response said that there could be:

"a quarterly report on progress against agreed performance indicators".

I do not know whether we want to go down that road, but we need either a different system or a different mechanism in the system for monitoring progress.

Mr T Clarke: Should we not wait until we get all the responses back in case there is something else? We could put a question mark beside that paragraph indicating that, although you are not satisfied with it, we will wait to see what other responses are first.

The Committee Clerk: Does paragraph 6.3 go in? That states:

"The Committee is keen...that the progress of departments in delivering their commitments is clearly demonstrated and reflects accurately what is happening 'on the ground'."

The Chairperson: I suppose that it is saying that the Executive need to find a mechanism and a way.

The Committee Clerk: There is quite a bit on that in the Committee for Finance and Personnel's response, if members want to have a look at that for next week.

The Chairperson: I think that the initial draft of our response says that we are not happy with what was there but that we have not found a mechanism that will make a difference.

OK, members. The only other point that I thought we should mention was the social investment fund. Maybe we need to put a bit of pressure on the Executive to ensure that there is a proper delivery of that and to maybe get more of an explanation about why half of it goes into the dereliction area alone. I am just not sure what is meant by that. To be fair, the Department is coming to brief us at some stage. I am just wondering whether we can put in a reference about that. We do not have to go very far aside from putting a reference in.

Are there any other points, members? All right, thank you. We will have a redraft by next week, and, hopefully, we will get the document finalised.