



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Active Ageing Strategy: OFMDFM Briefing

5 February 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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

Active Ageing Strategy: OFMDFM Briefing

5 February 2014

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Leslie Cree
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Alex Maskey
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Ms Susanna Allen	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Dr Denis McMahon	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Ms Margaret Rose McNaughton	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Chairperson: I welcome to the Committee Denis McMahon, Margaret Rose McNaughton and — you are not Stephen Orr.

Mrs Susanna Allen (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): My name is Susanna Allen.

The Chairperson: The Department's correspondence from 30 January, which is at page 163 of members' packs, states:

"officials are happy to brief the Committee on the draft Strategy and Early Actions Plan on 5 February".

However, on page 161, the correspondence of 31 January states:

"officials are available to attend the Committee on Wednesday 5 February to update Members on the engagement and processes undertaken in the development of the Active Ageing draft Consultation document. However, as the document is embargoed officials are not in a position to discuss the content of the document in public session."

The Committee Clerk sought clarification on why the document is embargoed and was advised that, while there is scope to make changes on the basis of the Committee's views on the document,

Ministers wish to ensure that the key elements of the strategy are announced by them, as is normal given their role. She was told that officials would be happy to bring to the Ministers' attention the views of the Committee on the draft strategy prior to the public announcement and that, if the Committee wishes to discuss the document in closed session, the Department will be happy to accommodate that.

Our previous briefing on this was from officials on 14 September 2011. Today's briefing was at the request of ourselves, and we have not been briefed on the content of this draft strategy.

The OFMDFM website states:

"On 30 May 2013 the Active Ageing Strategy's Early Actions Plan was presented to the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament".

At that time, the Pensioners Parliament received "a short summary presentation" from OFMDFM on some of the proposed projects planned under each of the various strands contained in the draft strategy.

Paragraph 8.15, which is page 222 of members' packs, states:

"OFMDFM has communicated with key stakeholders throughout the development of the Strategy".

The long and short of it is that we might rightly feel under-consulted. We are being asked to go into closed session if we want to discuss any of the content of the draft strategy.

Mr Spratt: It is an embargoed document. There will be an announcement sometime in February, and we have been given a copy of the document, which nobody can use because it is embargoed. If we are able to get some deeper discussion on it in closed session, I propose that we go into closed session.

Mr G Robinson: I second that.

Mr Attwood: It is Hobson's choice: either we have no discussion or a discussion in closed session.

The Chairperson: It was my impression that, as a default position, the Committee was against closed sessions.

Mr Attwood: Are the officials not saying that it is a take-it-or-leave-it offer?

The Chairperson: Denis, why is it embargoed?

Dr Denis McMahon (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): We are very happy to talk about the issues around the strategy, its development and the general aims. The issue is that we do not have clearance from Ministers to talk about the detail of the document. It is nothing more than Ministers being keen on making the announcement in a planned way. They do not want the document to be going out in bits and pieces. That is the message that we are getting from the Ministers. We have worked very closely with the Commissioner for Older People on this, and the Ministers are keen to involve her in the launch.

I was at the previous session. I want to reassure the Committee. There was feedback during that session, and we received a letter afterwards. We used all that. In fairness, the Committee encouraged us to engage with the sector, and we have done that. It has taken us a long time to get to this point. There were many different drafts, because people were not happy with what we did originally and wanted to make sure that we did it again and again until we got it right. That is where we are now. It is nothing more or less than the fact that the Ministers wish to announce the strategy. I cannot talk about the detail, but I am very happy to talk about the general principles.

The Chairperson: You are happy to discuss the process in open session.

Dr McMahon: Yes, very happy.

Mr Spratt: Chair, there is a proposal on the Floor, and I think that you are obliged to take that proposal.

The Chairperson: Yes, I will come to that, but I am clarifying that the officials are happy to discuss the process in open session.

Dr McMahon: Yes, as we said in the response.

The Chairperson: However, if we stray into the content of the document —

Dr McMahon: We do not have the authority to do that.

The Chairperson: We have a proposal, which has been seconded, to go into closed session at that point.

Mr Maskey: I am nearly being provocative, but is Denis saying that if we go into closed session, we will be able to discuss the content of the document? I ask that question because, closed session or not, I am not confident that there would not be a public expression of what we were told, because it has routinely happened before. I think that that is a sad reflection on people's integrity, but there you go; that is what has happened.

The Chairperson: As I read it, we are going to have an open session on the process that has led to this document being drawn up. A proposal has been put forward and seconded that we then go into closed session to discuss the content of the document. So I ask members to indicate, by a show of hands, whether they are in favour of the proposal from Mr Spratt and seconded by Mr Robinson.

Mr Maskey: I am happy to have an open session and to take the limited information that we can get.

Mr Spratt: We will take the open session, because the bottom line is that there is a danger of the usual culprits trundling off to the press. If the embargoed bit, which is the content of the document, cannot be discussed, that prevents anybody trundling off and doing their usual tricks, something that we are well used to in the Committee now.

The Chairperson: So you are not supporting your own proposal.

Mr Spratt: I am withdrawing my proposal.

Mr Attwood: I do not like closed sessions, but, if that is the only way that OFMDFM is prepared to communicate with the Committee, we have to accept that option. The alternative is that we end up having conversations about any imminent policy. The height of the Committee's role is to discuss the process, not the content, of the policy. That is us fulfilling our statutory function. It is not satisfactory, but needs must. We do something in public, and we do something in private.

The Chairperson: We need to see whether we can have agreement. I think that we are all content to discuss the process in public. I am reluctant to go into closed session. Do we have a formal proposal that we do not have a session on the content?

Mr Maskey: I am more than happy to remain in open session and have a discussion. I am happy with that for today. I am not interested in going into closed session today. I am happy enough for a discussion in open session with the officials. They will be able to give us quite an amount of information. We can make up our minds after that, but, as far as I am concerned, I am happy with an open session today.

The Chairperson: A concern has been raised about leaks. Everybody has the document in their electronic pack. If they want to leak, they can leak. Is that not the case?

Mr Spratt: If you are up to doing that sort of thing, you might want to do that. Those with integrity probably would not do it.

The Chairperson: Mr Maskey made the point that the danger of a closed session is that there would be a leak. The document is already in the possession of —

Mr Maskey: I was only making the point that that has been the experience. All that I am saying is that I am more than content to fulfil my statutory duty today by continuing in open session with the officials. I am happy to take the information that we get today.

The Chairperson: I am not sure that that does fulfil our statutory obligation.

Mr Maskey: I am. I am satisfied; my colleagues are satisfied. I cannot make up your mind; we can make up our own mind.

Mr Spratt: Chair, you had a big preamble in your brief. I suspect that the decision was already made. Why was it not sorted out by the Clerk's office and you?

The Chairperson: The decision was to be taken by us as to whether we —

Mr Spratt: It did not sound like that to me in the preamble.

The Chairperson: You hear what you hear. The decision on whether the Committee agrees to the request from the officials to go into closed session has to be taken by the Committee.

Mr Maskey: I thought that your request was based only on whether we would go into closed session if we wanted to have certain information.

The Chairperson: Yes, if we want to discuss the content of the document, which I do. However, I would prefer to do it in open session. That is not an option, because the officials are not authorised so to do.

Mr Maskey: I propose that we continue in open session.

Mr Cree: Chair, I will try to be logical, even though I know that it is maybe not a good idea. The real meat is in discussing the document, but we cannot do it in open session. It has already been distributed, so if there are people who use that method, for whatever purpose, it is going to happen anyway. It seems to me that the two choices are to spend time dancing around the subject, because we have had discussions with officials before, or to get into the meat of the strategy, which is what I want to do.

Mr Attwood: I would like clarification on something, given that I have not been on the Committee for long. Has it happened before that, in advance of something being published, the First Minister and deputy First Minister have asked that it be discussed in private session only?

The Chairperson: I do not recall this happening before. The last time that there was a request for a private session was by the Victims and Survivors Service, because it thought that there was sensitivity to the data that it was bringing to the table. From memory, we agreed, and then we rescinded that decision. It was an open session in the end. I am not sure of the level of precedent going back, and I wonder whether we are setting a precedent going forward.

Mr Attwood: Is this a one-off, or is this a change of approach from OFMDFM?

Dr McMahon: I do not recall a similar situation, but that is not to say that it has not happened; it is just that I do not recall it, to be honest. I do not get a sense that there is a fundamental shift in policy. That is where we are on the issue. We have been given a level of authority to go ahead and talk about the process in open session, but the Ministers are keen that the actual document be discussed in closed session.

Mr Lyttle: Obviously, the Active Ageing strategy is eagerly awaited. It might be worth taking an opportunity to publicise the pending consultation, with which, I am sure, many people will want to engage and respond to, if it is possible, and at least to cover that part of the issue today and maybe return to the actual discussion.

Mr Spratt: The issue is that the announcement is being made, and I think that the officials explained it well. It is good that the announcement is being made, as is the fact that they want to include the commissioner. That is what I took from what you said.

Dr McMahon: Yes. We want to involve the commissioner.

Mr Spratt: It seems perfectly logical to me that they want this thing embargoed and not to discuss its full contents if they are going to make a public announcement. It makes a bit of a nonsense out of a public announcement. We are well used to waking up to 'Good Morning Ulster' and hearing somebody say that they were speaking on behalf of all the Committee on certain issues when that was not the case. I will leave the individuals on the Committee to decide who they might be. I can understand the decision.

The Chairperson: We appear to have one proposal, which is that we do this entirely in open session. The implication of that is that there will be no discussion of the content of the document and we will discuss only the process that led to the document being prepared for consultation. How do members feel about the proposal?

Mr Lyttle: I can see value in doing that, in that it could serve the purpose of publicising the upcoming opportunity for people to respond to the draft strategy. However, I take on board the concerns about why a closed session is needed to discuss the content of the document. I do not think that those concerns should block using today to get information into the public domain about what is soon to be an opportunity for people to contribute to achieving a good older person's strategy.

The Chairperson: I am taking a different view on it, Deputy Chair. I would be reluctant to go into closed session, but could I live with not discussing the content at all? That gives me a difficulty. However, the proposal is that we have an open session.

I ask for a show of hands of those who would like to proceed with an open session with the limitations that we have discussed.

Question put.

The Committee divided: Ayes 4; Noes 2.

AYES

Ms Fearon, Mr Lyttle, Ms McGahan, Mr Maskey.

NOES

Mr Cree, Mr Nesbitt.

The Chairperson: Where does that leave us?

We have agreed to proceed with an open session. I ask the Deputy Chair to take the Chair, and I will withdraw.

(The Deputy Chairperson [Mr Lyttle] in the Chair)

The Deputy Chairperson: The purpose of this session is to receive a briefing on the process that has brought us to the publication of the consultation document. As I said, Denis, perhaps in the midst of some disagreement around this session, at least information on the consultation, which will be launched shortly, could be released on how the public and organisations will be able engage with the draft strategy, whose ultimate objective is, I assume, is the achievement of a robust older person's strategy for Northern Ireland.

Dr McMahon: I will say a few words to start off. Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Committee. I am joined by my colleagues, Margaret Rose McNaughton and Susanna Allen, who work with me on this issue. We had a briefing session with the Committee in September 2011. Members raised a number of points at that stage, to which we have responded. There was a particular concern about the name of the strategy which, at that time, was A Good Place to Grow Old. There was an issue about looking at global best practice. We have been working with the commissioner on that, and the commissioner has been looking at international best practice.

The Committee asked the Department to consider whether there was a requirement to bring forward legislation for the provision of goods and services in relation to age discrimination, and there are proposals in the Programme for Government, although people will know that there are issues around defining the scope of that. Nevertheless, there was a response to the Committee's request. There

was a comment about the importance of the outworking of the implementation plan being robust and including targets that are measurable, challenging and achievable. The current draft certainly reflects a significant strengthening of targets. We have had to draft it and redraft it on a number of occasions because people felt that there was not enough in the earlier drafts. So we have gone through that process.

There was a view from the Committee that the views of stakeholders will be taken into account during the finalisation of the draft strategy. Whatever else about the process, there has been a lot of engagement with stakeholders, and although that has taken us longer than anybody would want, it has definitely benefited the final product. Even from the Pensioners Parliament, the message came back that people felt that we were going in the right direction.

I will say a bit about the background. This draft strategy was developed as a consequence of the review of the previous strategy, Ageing in an Inclusive Society. During that period, we had, first of all, the appointment of the Older People's Advocate, Dame Joan Harbison, and after the passage of the legislation, the Commissioner for Older People, Claire Keatinge, was appointed in November 2011. The commissioner agreed to chair the advisory group on older people's issues, which includes older people, representatives from groups representing older people and organisations with expertise in the area. The current strategy is the product of extensive pre-consultation, and we work closely with the advisory group and benefit enormously from its knowledge and expertise. I have already mentioned the Pensioners Parliament.

Without going into the detail of the strategy, it is worth saying something about the approach. In the 10-year period between 2002 and 2012, the number of adults here aged 65 and over increased by 20%. That is a huge increase, and that trend is expected to continue. The number of adults in the age group is expected to increase by 63% to just under half a million people by 2032. That is extremely good news for a lot of us. On the other hand, it brings challenges. We tried to get across in our approach — the commissioner has been very clear about it — the need to recognise that people reaching a certain age is not a problem. It is almost as if ageing has been treated as a problem up to now. There are certainly problems associated with ageing, but the good news is that we will have a very experienced older population and a much more active population than ever before. Older people are involved in leadership or membership of organisations and community safety through neighbourhood watch. They have skills and experience, mentor people and have business experience and experience in running organisations. They also underpin the viability of many local services through volunteering and contribute to childcare for their families, which can be a double-edged sword because, on the one hand, it is great that grandparents and older people are contributing and helping and promoting intergenerational experience, but, on the other hand, there is an issue about people perhaps feeling obliged to become involved in childcare in a way that is not helpful to them.

We need to address issues such as poverty and fuel poverty; the need for better and more adaptable housing; better access to transport and the continuation of free travel; health and social care provision; education; access to education; access to leisure opportunities; better employment opportunities; and a recognition that people will be employed much longer. Obviously, there is also the issue of freedom to live without fear of crime. Those are not necessarily new issues. The commissioner will have brought some of them to your attention, particularly the fear of crime, which, to some extent, is a fear that is not necessarily reflected in reality, despite the fact that there are very serious cases in which older people are the subject of crime. However, it is important to deal with the subject of fear and the concern that it raises.

Those are the sorts of issues that we are trying to address. We and the Ministers are saying that Active Ageing is the most effective way to maximise the benefits of people living longer and to minimise the problems that some older people will face. It is all about early intervention. If you look at the huge growth in people having lifelong conditions such as diabetes, heart conditions and chronic obstructive chest conditions, all those sorts of things need to be tackled earlier to ensure that people are healthier in their later years.

The strategic aims of the strategy are based around the United Nations principles for older people, which again reflect the Committee's previously expressed views. We will look to use the sort of approach that we have with Delivering Social Change, which is to try to find additional measures that make a difference, over and above the mainstream services, rather than long action plans with hundreds of objectives that restate what Departments are already doing. That is not to say that it is not important to address these issues through mainstream services, but it is also about making sure that we are adding a bit of value.

I will say a wee bit about the consultation. We expect the strategy to be launched later this month, and we will notify the Committee of that launch event and be happy for members to attend. We will promote the consultation and share details of the events through the Commissioner for Older People, Age NI, the Age Sector Platform and our advisory group, as well as umbrella organisations for rural and urban social and community groups. We carried out an initial equality screening exercise on the strategy, which will also be subject to public consultation. We are happy to meet groups to discuss the strategy at their request and to make documents available in a variety of formats. A shorter version of the strategy will be produced for ease of use by consultees. We also propose, if you agree, to report to you in June on the findings of the consultation.

Following consideration of the consultation responses, we aim to finalise the strategy for launch in the summer. When the strategic aims are finalised, we will identify appropriate targets in conjunction with Departments, and our statisticians will prepare a detailed document with the most appropriate indicators and measures to monitor the implementation and achievements against the strategy's targets. That is not to say that we have not done a lot of the groundwork already; we have. It just reflects the fact that there is scope for change today and once the consultation is under way.

The strategy will be monitored through the Delivering Social Change framework and by the advisory group that is chaired by the Commissioner for Older People. So it is not just a case of the group staying in place until the document is finalised.

The Ministers are determined that the strategy will make a real difference to the quality of life for older people here and that Active Ageing will enable as many as possible to enjoy the benefits and rewards of life for as long as possible. Obviously, anything that I have said does not pre-empt additional engagement with the Committee, should you feel that that would be helpful during the consultation period and that there are views that you would like to bring back to us. I again refer to the work that the Committee did with us on Delivering Social Change, whereby groups were brought in to look at issues. We are happy to participate in anything like that, if it is helpful.

I do not know whether that gives you at least a flavour of what we are trying to do and to achieve through the consultation.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you, Denis. The original consultation was expected around April 2012. Is that right?

Dr McMahon: Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson: So we are almost two years on. Will you explain concisely what impact that has had on older people? What benefit has been gained by extending the period by two years, and what is the reason for it?

Dr McMahon: As I said, one reason why we had to go back to the drawing board a number of times was that people were not happy that we had enough in it and felt that it needed more meat by way of getting additional actions and outcomes into the document. It is important to say that mainstream services have been running during that period: it is not that things have stopped and are waiting for the strategy to happen. I would not understate the importance of people saying through the commissioner, who has said it to us, that they feel listened to. That is an important point.

To be fair, part of the problem is that, with older people as a stakeholder group, expectations need to be increased. The commissioner has made no apology for working with older people on that front, because sometimes there is too much acceptance of what is there already. In fairness, I do not want to give that impression of the dialogue that has taken place with stakeholder groups. It is important and valuable in its own right. It is also worth saying that we have had a lot of engagement with Departments during the development of the process — for example, initiatives are already under way on benefit uptake. We have had a lot of engagement with the Department for Social Development (DSD), which has been working up proposals as it has been going along. So even the act of doing this influences what Departments are doing.

The Deputy Chairperson: Some of the umbrella organisations that you consulted during that time will have included groups such as the Pensioners Parliament. What is the view of the organisations that you engaged with extensively on the two-year delay?

Dr McMahon: I should have said this previously. I do not want to give the impression for one minute that a two-year delay is acceptable. It would have been absolutely great if we had got to a position whereby people had been happy with the document in the first place. I am happy to hear alternative views, but the feedback is that people would prefer us to get this right. That has been the message all along, and, in fact, the proposals were presented to the Pensioners Parliament. It had a voting process, and all the proposals received overwhelming support that we were going in the right direction.

The Deputy Chairperson: Given the discussions that took place in Committee, it would be remiss of me not to ask whether you think that the level of engagement with the Committee in that period of time was adequate.

Dr McMahon: We always look at doing things differently, and part of the problem was that we had been working on the basis that we hoped that we would be in the right position, and then we thought, "We will be coming back to the Committee". Each time, we thought that we had a substantive draft and were ready to come back to Committee. Had we got this done earlier, we would have been in a good position to engage with the Committee. With hindsight, maybe we could have fitted in an additional meeting with the Committee. In fairness, we are always concerned that we do not want to waste the Committee's time by coming back with something that needs to be developed further because we have more work to do on it. There is always a balance. Maybe we need to engage more with the Committee, and I am happy to sign up to that if it is helpful.

The Deputy Chairperson: You list some of the key issues and themes to be actioned, and I know, as, I am sure, other members know from engagement with the Pensioners Parliament, some of the key issues facing older people. We look forward to seeing the proposals to address those issues in a more strategic manner. Do you have a more specific date for the consultation launch, and how can the Committee support the launch?

Dr McMahon: Do we have the date finalised at this stage?

Ms Margaret Rose McNaughton (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): No, we are still in the process of finalising the date, but the Committee will be notified. We can offer an invitation to the Committee. We also need to get the venue resolved.

Dr McMahon: We expect it to be before the end of February.

Mr Attwood: Given that your defence for the delay is the input from various individuals, sectors and so on, in your assessment, indicatively or notionally, compared with earlier versions — say, the last time that the issue was discussed in Committee, whenever that was — is it 5%, 15% or 50% different?

Dr McMahon: I think that it is significantly better, whether you could say that it is 5% or 50%.

Mr Attwood: There is a bit of difference between 5% and 50%.

Dr McMahon: I will go nearer 50% than 5%. There is a lot more substance in the document. I would say that it is a good document.

Mr Attwood: I am sure that you would say that.

Dr McMahon: I know. I would say that, but, in fairness, I think that, given the challenges that we had, the document is a lot better. That is my point.

Mr Attwood: Will it be launched with the Commissioner for Older People?

Dr McMahon: The intention is to involve the commissioner.

Ms McNaughton: Absolutely, yes. That is one of the main reasons. We are keen to make sure that she is around for the launch.

As regards changes to the document, one thing that the commissioner will be very pleased about is that it is now written in a more user-friendly fashion. Previously, it was quite difficult to read. However,

this time around, the feedback that I am getting from some of the age groups is that it is now easy for them to read and understand what it is that we plan to do.

Mr Maskey: It is unfortunate that we end up in distraction discussions about timeliness, and so on and so forth.. To be honest with you, it is important that officials sit down with the Chair periodically to work out a more streamlined, respectful, and better engagement with the Committee. There has been some improvement. Clearly, what is most important is the outworking of the development of strategies, policies, and so on. However, the Chair and the Committee have complained routinely. I want some type of equality engagement between the Department and the Chair to tackle these things head on.

Dr McMahon: We are very happy to find any way that we can to improve the process. I reiterate that we very much respect the views of the Committee. We want to make sure that that comes through in our communications with the Committee. We apologise again if our communications have not been at the level that helps the Committee to do its job.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK, Denis. The older person's strategy is obviously an extremely important issue. You were present for the difficult discussion on the permissibility of discussing the content of the document. Perhaps you could take that away with you and consider whether it is possible to communicate with the Chair on how to rectify that situation. There is significant concern as to why it was necessary to have a closed session on the issue.

It is important that we have used today's meeting to publicise the forthcoming consultation and publication of the document. There is an opportunity for organisations, older people and other people to contribute to the consultation. I am sure that the Committee will want to play an active role in that. Perhaps we can consider inviting some of the key organisations along to the Committee to hear their views on the document.

If you could give consideration to how you could communicate with the Chair on the difficult issue of requiring a closed session today, that would be helpful. Thank you for your presentation.

Dr McMahon: Thanks very much.