



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Social Investment Fund: OFMDFM

19 February 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

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

**Witnesses:**

Mr Lawrence Hyland	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Ricky Irwin	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Joe Reynolds	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

**The Chairperson:** We welcome to the Committee Ricky Irwin, Joe Reynolds and Lawrence Hyland. Ricky, before you make your opening remarks, will you tell us when you were aware of the First Minister's intention to make the announcement last Monday?

**Mr Ricky Irwin (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** After the announcement was made.

**The Chairperson:** Have you any idea why the First Minister was left in the embarrassing position of telling the House that the information was on the website when it was not?

**Mr R Irwin:** No.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Over to you.

**Mr R Irwin:** OK. Thank you.

Chair and members of the Committee, thanks very much for having us here. We are here to take questions on the ministerial announcement of the initial tranche of 23 projects under the social investment fund (SIF) worth over £33 million. This is a milestone and an important achievement in the

delivery of this significant programme through OFMDFM. The announcement provides an early indication of the scale of the projects, both revenue and capital, that will begin to make a difference to the most hard-pressed communities across Northern Ireland.

Chair, you will understand that I want to avoid discussing the detail of the individual projects as we continue to work through the finer arrangements to appoint some of the lead partners and make offers to the organisations that will be responsible for delivering the projects. Our colleagues in the finance and governance division of the Department are visiting potential lead partners and are conducting verification and pre-contract checks on those organisations to determine their governance and capacity to deliver the contracts ahead of potential letters of offer being issued. It would be premature to discuss details until the visits have been completed, but we expect that process to happen by the end of this month.

The announcement marks progress on clearing the internal stage of approvals for the projects that have been prioritised by the local steering groups. We are still working on a further 29 projects across the nine social investment zones and hope that Ministers will be in a position to make announcements on those later this year. At that point, we will have 52 projects worth a total of £80 million to be delivered over the coming years.

The Committee asked about the security of the funding for the programme, and I can assure you that the commitment by Ministers to deliver £80 million through the project remains total. The release of funding to this initial tranche of 23 projects represents over 40% of the programme fund. The remainder will be announced as soon as we can complete the internal approvals for the remaining projects. As I said, we hope to complete that process before the summer.

This is good news. However, I understand that some people may be disappointed. A decision to fund 52 projects means that around 40 projects put forward by the steering groups will not be affordable in the current programme. No one should doubt that many of them are valuable and deemed to be important to local communities. However, any programme of this type and scale will inevitably attract more applications than it can afford. Where possible, we will work with local steering groups and project promoters to see whether it is possible to deliver those projects and support them through other interventions, such as the Delivering Social Change framework, and collaboration with colleagues in other Departments.

Chair, as I said, I am very grateful for the opportunity to be here, and I am happy to take any questions. I think that this is possibly my fifth appearance before the Committee to discuss the SIF. We have brought good news today and are happy to try to answer any queries members have.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much. Stephen Moutray is keen.

**Mr Moutray:** I just want to say that this is a good news story. It has been long awaited and some were concerned about the timescale. However, at the end of the day, you have got there. I know that people in the area I represent are very thankful, and I pay tribute to you all for your work.

**Mr Maskey:** To follow on from your point Ricky; this has obviously taken a while to resolve and, thankfully, we are moving quite a way along the road. There will be groups in some areas who will be saying, "What about us?" They might feel that they have not got anything, and some of that is very understandable. Will you give us a sense of the readout from your discussions? I know that it is kind of subjective as it is your opinion, but what is your assessment of the state of play in the panels as far as the results so far are concerned and the expectations as we move into the next phase?

**Mr R Irwin:** I have not been personally involved in the discussions. Joe and Lawrence have been involved, and I invite them to give you a sense of those discussions.

**Mr Joe Reynolds (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** As indicated, the steering groups are happy to see progress, and I think that there is a sense of relief that we have reached this stage. They are anxious for that progress to continue through the additional support we are putting in place to help lead partners deliver the projects.

Other members of the team and I attended meetings of each of the nine steering groups between late November 2013 and the early part of this year and asked them to look again at the priorities they had afforded to the projects in the area plans. They were very cognisant of the fact that the number of applications received meant that the programme was heavily oversubscribed and that the onus was

on them to reflect local need in the priorities they afforded to the projects. In most cases, they confirmed the decisions they had made around this time last year and recognised that lower order priority projects were unlikely to find funding in the current round.

Some steering groups looked at ways to find funding from other sources. That was always their plan, and some have been successful in doing that. In other cases, there was a realisation that their assessment of need will have changed over time and that some projects may no longer have the priority they had last year.

As Ricky indicated, it is a bit of mixed bag. The steering groups are happy to see progress, are disappointed that they could not have done more, but realise that there is only so much funding you can apply to these things.

**Mr Maskey:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson:** I want to pick up on something that you said, Joe. I think that you said that you and Ricky went around the steering groups, the nine zonal advisory panels, between December and January.

**Mr R Irwin:** I did not.

**The Chairperson:** Right.

**Mr Reynolds:** I and other members of team did that.

**The Chairperson:** Right. OK. That would seem to be referred to in the Hansard report of the evidence given on 4 December when you last appeared before the Committee and when Ricky stated:

*"We are in the middle of detailed discussions with all the steering groups".*

Was that the same process?

**Mr Reynolds:** Yes. Exactly.

**The Chairperson:** Ricky when on to state:

*"when those are complete, we will write to the Committee with their detailed outcome."*

I do not believe that we have received a letter.

**Mr R Irwin:** I believe that a letter was issued last week.

**The Chairperson:** There is a letter in the pack today.

**Mr Spratt:** I am not as worried or concerned as others about letters and reports coming to the Committee. The important thing is the announcement, Ricky. I want to put on record the thanks of a lot of people in the community to the officials in the Department who have worked very hard on the whole thing.

Another thing needs to be put on record. I know that you and Joe, in particular, have worked very closely with the steering groups. The folks on those steering groups from all sections of the community worked together very actively and in a very proactive and responsible way to try to bring this to fruition.

I understand very well the reasons why you probably cannot speak to us about the schemes and all the rest of it. That would probably be commercially sensitive information, as we would be told in some other Committees.

I think that, through you, the Committee should put on record its thanks to the steering groups. I know from my own area that some other folks have come on to the steering groups recently who will be extremely beneficial to them, particularly those from the business community.

It is certainly very welcome in some areas that I represent in South Belfast and people are very thankful for how it has come about. So, thank you.

**Mr Irwin:** On the back of that, I offer you my thanks and take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the small team that Lawrence and Joe lead that, as you said, put a lot of time and effort into getting us to this point.

I also want to comment on the commitment that has been maintained by steering group members. I was involved in setting up the steering groups back in the summer of 2012, which was quite a while ago, and the commitment is still there. I have been heartened by the positive feedback we have received since the announcement was made last week.

**The Chairperson:** Jimmy, are you OK?

**Mr Spratt:** Yes, I am happy at this stage.

**The Chairperson:** On the question of steering groups, when we spoke in December, we discussed statutory members and the business community. What was the outcome? Did they ever get appointed?

**Mr R Irwin:** That process is ongoing. Some are on board. I do not think we are in a position to give the full outcome of where we are with each of the steering groups, but we are bringing other members on board.

**The Chairperson:** What progress has been made since December?

**Mr Lawrence Hyland (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** Letters have been issued to those nominated, and we are waiting for replies from some. They have been invited, and some have attended recent steering group meetings.

**The Chairperson:** How many businesspeople are sitting on how many steering groups?

**Mr R Irwin:** We do not have that detail with us, unfortunately.

**The Chairperson:** But 40% of the funds have been allocated.

**Mr R Irwin:** The steering groups will continue to have a central role when we move into the delivery phase, which we are doing now.

**Mr G Robinson:** My thanks go to the team as well. From my point of view, I thank all involved in the social development money that is very much needed on the ground. It is being well received. From 52 projects, I think 29 are still being worked on. When do you anticipate the full roll-out of all the moneys?

**Mr R Irwin:** First, thanks. We are continuing to work through the economic appraisals for the remaining 29 projects, and we hope that we will have the remainder of them through that process by the summer. At that stage, Ministers will be in a position to make a further announcement.

**Mr G Robinson:** A big thank-you to everybody involved in it. It is very, very welcome money, and it has been well received on the ground.

**The Chairperson:** When we last spoke, some projects had gone through two iterations, some had gone through three and, exceptionally, some had gone through four. Have any dropped off entirely?

**Mr R Irwin:** No, I do not think so; no.

**The Chairperson:** So, you still have £130 million of proposals for the £80 million pot.

**Mr R Irwin:** That is right.

**The Chairperson:** At what point does that —

**Mr Reynolds:** To be clear, the £130 million-plus represents the 10 projects in each of the area plans for the nine zones. As Ricky said in his opening remarks, we are now working specifically on 52 projects that are considered to be affordable within the £80 million available. We have business cases for the balance of that — the 40-odd projects that Ricky referred to. We are holding those, because if, between now and the summer when we complete the economic appraisal of the 29 projects, any of them are deemed to be not viable or we are not able to progress with them for any reason, we will move down the prioritised list, as I said earlier in answer to the previous question, that the steering groups have identified for us. We will simply move to the next in the order of priority that they presented last year and confirmed in the negotiations around the Christmas period just passed.

**The Chairperson:** To be clear: you had £130 million; you have now narrowed it down to £80 million, as you —

**Mr Reynolds:** No, it was always £80 million. There was £130 million worth of applications. The fund was always set at £80 million.

**The Chairperson:** Out of that £130 million of applications, you have identified —

**Mr Reynolds:** 52 projects.

**The Chairperson:** Worth £80 million.

**Mr Reynolds:** Correct.

**The Chairperson:** You have given a green light to 40%, of those and are now looking at the rest. If any of those fall, for any reason, you will go back to the projects that represent the £80 million to £130 million in that list.

**Mr R Irwin:** Yes, in conjunction with the steering groups.

**Mr Attwood:** As I said before in respect of this or any other funding programme, if there are good projects that deserve funding, they should get funded; if there are bad projects that should not get funded, they should not be funded. We will work out if all of them are good projects or if some of them are bad projects. Other than that, I think the jury is out. I agree with Mr Reynolds; whilst there may be some commentary about these being well received, I was in my constituency today, and in Derry yesterday, and I can tell you in what groups the announcements were anything but well received.

I will rattle through my questions, because you will have an opportunity to answer them fully in Assembly questions, if that is not a contradiction in terms — that is, Assembly questions being answered fully. I might yet be impressed and surprised by the answers to various questions submitted. Will the £80 million budget, that is being re-profiled over the various spending periods, actually be spent, in part, after 2018?

**Mr R Irwin:** No, that is not the intention.

**Mr Attwood:** What is the intention?

**Mr R Irwin:** It is to spend the money over the period 2014-18.

**Mr Attwood:** The letter of 13 February states:

*"SIF expenditure has been re-profiled over 2014-2018 and beyond."*

What does that mean? Is it beyond 2018, or will it all be spent before 2018? The question that arises is this: how do we have a programme that needed an £80 million budget in 2011 when we are now in the situation where it will be maybe 2018, or even beyond, before it is all spent?

**Mr R Irwin:** We expect the substantial amount of spend to be in the next two financial years. It was the intention to spend £80 million from 2011 to 2015, and, last year, Ministers extended that period.

**Mr Attwood:** Is it a two-year period or a three-year period? The letter relies on three years for significant spend. Is it now two years?

**Mr R Irwin:** It is over this year, next year and, possibly, into the year after. We are in the process of profiling the projects, which have been announced, in detail. When the projects were submitted, they were submitted for two-year and three-year periods, and some of them were for beyond three years. So, there is scope to go from 2014 to 2018 specifically on the SIF projects.

**Mr Attwood:** Not beyond 2018?

**Mr R Irwin:** I do not intend to go beyond.

**Mr Attwood:** This has always been a bit of a moveable feast, so we will rely upon those words.

Of the projects announced today, how many are required to be tendered under the European requirements?

**Mr R Irwin:** I do not have the exact number with me, but I can come back to you on that. Some of them, given their scale and size, will have to go to the Official Journal of the European Union under market tendering requirements. I do not know the number.

**Mr Attwood:** Will you come back on that so that we know what all the hurdles are before we get to the question of whether the money has ever been spent?

**Mr R Irwin:** Absolutely.

**Mr Attwood:** You said that officials are now carrying out what you referred to as governance and capacity checks. So, three years after the scheme was announced, you are now checking whether organisations can or cannot deliver them.

**Mr R Irwin:** Yes; when we are at the point of having approvals in place for the projects, that is when we need to instigate the due diligence checks on the lead partners proposed by the steering groups. That is where we are now.

**Mr Attwood:** This reminds me of the DEL and Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) procurement for Steps to Work in 2009, in which announcements were made in August 2009 for the award of Steps to Work contracts to various contractors, one of whom at the time had one member of staff in Northern Ireland with a mobile phone. That contractor was given two weeks to prove whether it could deliver the programmes. There seems to be a bit of suck it and see here.

**Mr R Irwin:** We have been carrying out the due diligence checks over the past few weeks, and, as I said earlier, we plan to be finished by the end of February. That will tie in with finalising the letters of offer, which will go out shortly after that.

**Mr Attwood:** On the basis of your checks over the past two weeks, have you identified any problems in governance and capacity with respect to any of the proposals?

**Mr R Irwin:** No.

**Mr Attwood:** None?

**Mr R Irwin:** None.

**Mr Attwood:** Were there discussions with DEL on the employment programmes announced?

**Mr R Irwin:** There were.

**Mr Attwood:** On all of them?

**Mr R Irwin:** On all of them, yes.

**Mr Attwood:** Did DEL sign off on all of them?

**Mr R Irwin:** DEL has done so; yes. DEL is content. In the current announcement, there is £16 million, which equates to six employment projects. The outcomes will be thousands of people going through work placements, training placements, skills development and mentoring support. It will all lead to better employability prospects, and DEL is fully supportive.

**Mr Attwood:** It has signed off on all of the schemes named so far.

**Mr R Irwin:** There is not a requirement for DEL to sign off on the schemes. They were submitted to OFMDFM. We have been in very close contact with DEL right from the area planning process in October 2012.

**Mr Attwood:** When will we know who the lead partners are in respect of each scheme?

**Mr R Irwin:** Very soon, if the Committee asks for it. Once we have completed the due diligence process that I talked about earlier and the letters of offer are issued and accepted by those lead partners, we will be in a position to give that information.

**Mr Attwood:** I look forward to that information, because that will give an insight into what is good and not so good. Which of the capital projects require planning permission?

**Mr R Irwin:** I do not have the detail of the projects with me.

**Mr Reynolds:** As the member knows, we are dealing with an Assembly question in respect of those that were announced last week, and we will be providing that information. Not all the capital projects required planning permission, and we are satisfied that planning permission is in place for those that did.

**Mr Attwood:** Already?

**Mr Reynolds:** Yes.

**Ms McGahan:** Well done. If there are projects sitting at, say, nine or 10 on the list, and organisations such as Sport NI may be advertising funding fairly shortly, what do those projects do? If they are sitting at nine or 10, they are in limbo.

**Mr R Irwin:** That is a good question. We have been advising those projects that, if funding becomes available, they should not miss the opportunity of trying to avail themselves of it.

**Mr Reynolds:** In fact, our advice is even stronger, in that, in most respects, applicants were expected to come to SIF when they had exhausted other available avenues.

**Ms McGahan:** Which they have done.

**Mr Reynolds:** So, if funding is available from other sources, they should go to those sources.

**The Chairperson:** And an organisation will know where it sits in the league table of one to 10 in its zone.

**Mr R Irwin:** It will, through the steering group.

**The Chairperson:** But will it know where it sits in the grand scheme of things?

**Mr R Irwin:** What do you mean by "in the grand scheme of things"? It will know where it sits within the affordability of that particular zone.

**The Chairperson:** But do you have an overall list? You have obviously got those that are within the £80 million and those —



**Mr R Irwin:** You mean separate lists. Yes.

**The Chairperson:** — that lie outside. Presumably, there is one that is the least likely ever, within that £130 million —

**Mr R Irwin:** Oh, do you mean like a ranking from one to 90?

**Mr Reynolds:** There is not a one to 90; each zone has a one to 10 of its own.

**The Chairperson:** If you were sitting at ninth or tenth, would it be reasonable to assume that your chances are slim?

**Mr R Irwin:** Not if you were in —

**Mr Reynolds:** It depends which zone you are in.

**Mr R Irwin:** — the south-east zone.

**The Chairperson:** Not if you are in the south-east zone: why would that be?

**Mr R Irwin:** Because all the projects there are within the affordability of that zone, which is, of course, good news.

**The Chairperson:** Very good news if you happen to represent an area covered by the south-eastern zone.

**Mrs Hale:** Which includes Lagan Valley.

**Mr R Irwin:** I declare an interest; I live there as well.

**The Chairperson:** Well, I declare an interest: I represent Strangford. Is there any more that we can squeeze out of you in that regard?

**Mr R Irwin:** What do you want to know?

**The Chairperson:** Everything.

**Mr R Irwin:** We have been fairly open today. If members come up with other questions —

**Mr Reynolds:** When we attended the Committee at the beginning of December, we provided you with a list of the projects that were within the range of affordability in each of the nine zones. So, that information has been provided.

**The Chairperson:** And they are still in play.

**Mr Reynolds:** Absolutely.

**Mr R Irwin:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** Good.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thanks for the update, gentlemen. Like Alex Attwood, I welcome any investment in any projects that are likely to address dereliction and deprivation, so I hope that that will be the case for some of the projects that have been announced.

Apologies, Chair, I almost forgot to declare an interest as a member of the east Belfast area steering group. Thank you for the reminder; I must take you with me every time I speak on this. I, therefore, welcome the investment. My questions will not relate to the details that you said that you would like to avoid, as do I, from a steering group point of view.

On the budgeting and the figures around the fund, I understand that the reprofiling has created a Delivering Social Change fund of £118 million, which is made up of the original social investment fund's profiled expenditure for 2011-15, I think it is —

**Mr R Irwin:** That is correct.

**Mr Lyttle:** — of £80 million. The childcare budget for 2011-15 is £12 million, and the budget for the social investment fund from 2015-19 is £26 million. Is that the case?

**Mr R Irwin:** Is it 19?

**Mr Lyttle:** That is what it says in the letter, but the letter also said that it was to 2018 and beyond, and that has been disputed as well.

**Mr R Irwin:** I have not seen 19 mentioned anywhere.

**Mr Lyttle:** It maybe said that it was the next comprehensive spending review (CSR). So, is there no definitive deadline?

**Mr R Irwin:** I will be clear on this. This has been raised by the Committee before. I will say again — I have said it many times — that £80 million remains ring-fenced for the SIF programme. The central Delivering Social Change fund has been established and includes SIF and the £12 million, and there will be a run-in to the next CSR period for delivery of those projects. When the £26 million was announced for the signature projects under Delivering Social Change, that was a reassignment of some of the SIF funding.

**Mr Lyttle:** So that is included in the Delivering Social Change fund. That is where it gets made up to £118 million then.

**Mr R Irwin:** That is right.

**Mr Lyttle:** How much of the £80 million that was profiled for 2011-15 is likely to be spent within that time frame?

**Mr R Irwin:** I could not answer that now. We are still looking at the reprofiling of the projects that have been announced, and we will then need to look at the further 29 projects once they go through the appraisal process. There will need to be detailed profiling for those as well.

**Mr Lyttle:** Let me ask you about that to see if you can clear up some of this. There is some of the best Orwellian newspeak I have ever come across here on that subject. It says that the:

*"financial profiles will be updated to reflect ... delivery realism".*

What does that mean?

**Mr R Irwin:** It is just about deliverability of the projects.

**Mr Reynolds:** May I add to that? In the process that we are going through at the moment, we will have an initial take of the profile spend of the projects for which approval has been given so far. As we work through the remaining 29 projects, the balance will change between capital and revenue projects. This might also refer to the question that we were asked earlier about the timescales over which spend will take place. Where a business case is approved, particularly for revenue projects, spend may well be predicated on a project running for a period of up to three years — usually not more than three years — and our business case and the spend will be profiled from the date at which that spend begins to be incurred. Given that we are still working on 29 projects and that the letters of offer for them may not issue until the summer or after the summer, the spend will not start until after that. So, for a business case that has been approved for that duration, we will reprofile the expenditure from that point onward for the duration of the project.

**Mr Lyttle:** How much of the £80 million for 2011-15 being spent would look like success?

**Mr R Irwin:** Until we do the profiling for the 23 projects that are announced, it is difficult to determine and answer that question. We are at the point of issuing the letters of offer and of starting to spend money, and we should focus on that and try to maximise delivery where we can and make sure that we work closely with the communities to get the money spent in the right way on those projects.

**Mr Lyttle:** OK. However, you will accept that, to a member of the public or of the Committee looking at a fund that was ring-fenced to address dereliction and deprivation in the midst of a recession, the amount of that money that got spent or did not get spent will be of material concern. We need to look at that closely.

**Mr R Irwin:** Absolutely.

**Mr Lyttle:** I will move on to projects meeting HMT green book standard. The letter that was sent to the Committee says that 24 projects have passed the OFMDFM appraisal, two of which have gone to DFP for review. What is the status of the review at DFP and is that a normal ratio for that type of process?

**Mr R Irwin:** Those two projects are cleared by DFP. We agreed a sample size with DFP at the start of this when the approvals architecture was agreed with our finance division and DFP. They were content to ask for a sample of two. Lawrence and the team have been in close contact through our finance division about queries that came back on those projects, and they have been satisfied now, so they are content.

**Mr Lyttle:** The issue of the establishment of need has had significant coverage. Again, the letter states that at the forefront was the use of scale in the identification of need in each zone. There were three measurements, two in relation to traditional super output area measurements, and the third was:

*"independently verified and robust evidence of objective need".*

Were projects passed that utilised that measurement of need? If so, can you give us specific examples of what independently verified and robust evidence looks like?

**Mr R Irwin:** No, because I do not have the detail with me. There may have been, but I have not been as close to the projects as others, so we would need to come back to you with that.

**Mr Lyttle:** OK. Can you give us any update on the gateway review process?

**Mr R Irwin:** For SIF, a third gateway review was completed just today. Denis McMahon, as senior reporting officer (SRO), has received the report. I have not seen it. I do not know the outcome, so I cannot comment further.

**Mr Lyttle:** For the purposes of public understanding, what is a gateway review?

**Mr R Irwin:** A gateway review is a mechanism that provides an assessment of delivery confidence to the senior responsible owner of the project. The process is that two or three people who are deemed to be independent are procured through CPD, and they interview a number of stakeholders about that project over a two-day window. On the third day, they write a report, which they give to the SRO, based on the information that they have. It will have a number of recommendations. It will then be up to the SRO to implement those. They will be prioritised in terms of critical now, essential or can be done later. We went through two before. They were very helpful. In fact, the last one was so helpful that it really got us to the point where we are today in announcing £33 million worth of projects. So we will continue to use the gateway process at key milestones.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you.

**Mr Attwood:** Given that you indicated in the correspondence that it was decided that the last gateway report would not be shared, are you prepared to share the conclusions of the two to date and the third now or to seek approval at ministerial level for their release? They are deployed very often where there is a novel approach or policy initiative or where there is deemed to be some level of risk, so it would be useful to know the conclusions. I say that because we did a gateway review on the Housing

Executive, which we shared with other Departments at the time because we thought that it was so useful.

**Mr R Irwin:** OK. I could not answer that, because I think that it is a matter for the SRO. The report is given in confidence to the SRO, and that is really a matter for Denis. I will need to take that back.

**Mr Cree:** I also welcome the project. It has been a long time, but it is good to see money being spent on the ground.

Last time we met, Ricky, you told us that the time frame approved by the Ministers was 2016.

**Mr R Irwin:** Yes.

**Mr Cree:** Now I am not quite sure whether we are talking about 2018, 2019 or infinity. What has been approved by the Ministers by way of that absolute time frame?

**Mr R Irwin:** The Committee has the letter that says that the money has been reprofiled over the 2014-18 period, so I would take that as —

**Mr Cree:** It is approved to 2018.

**Mr R Irwin:** Yes, but that will be subject to securing the additional money at the start of the next CSR period. However, Ministers have given a public commitment that the money is ring-fenced and will be there.

**Mr Cree:** But that next CSR period is likely to be one year only.

**Mr R Irwin:** You are saying that it will be, or are you asking me?

**Mr Cree:** I am telling you what, hopefully, is a fact that the CSR period ends at the end of this mandate, so you have one year possibly outside. That is a question that Joe got.

**Mr R Irwin:** All that I can say is that the letter is quite clear. The projects will be delivered during the time frame in which the money is there for them. It has been profiled up to 2018.

**Mr Cree:** OK. I am glad to have that on the record.

Arising out of that, the question of sustainability comes into my mind. If you have those projects that are definitive, is there any issue about sustainability in any of them?

**Mr R Irwin:** There are issues of sustainability in all of them. It is a consideration of the economic appraisal process. Sustainability has to be looked at in detail. There has to be a judgement about whether a particular project is sustainable, and that determines whether the project is viable. All of them have been considered for sustainability.

**Mr Cree:** So they have to be sustainable; is that what you are saying?

**Mr R Irwin:** They have to be sustainable. There has to be a clear exit strategy in some of them. They are all very different. I do not want to get into individual —

**Mr Cree:** No, but you can see where I am coming from. It is a question of extra money.

Finally, at the last meeting we had, you also mentioned the possibility at that stage of other projects still coming forward. Is that still an option?

**Mr R Irwin:** Is that outside of the 52?

**Mr Cree:** Of what you have, yes.

**Mr R Irwin:** I cannot answer that. That is going to be a matter for Ministers and will depend on whether it is affordable.

**Mr Cree:** If some drop out, of course —

**Mr R Irwin:** If some drop out, what we would do, as we said earlier, is to go back to the steering group and say that that particular project is not viable. We would propose to go to the next one on its list of priorities and ask whether it was content with that.

**Mr Maskey:** I have a couple of points. At this time, there is a wee bit of frustration. It is important to put on the record again — certainly from where we are sitting — that this has been a very difficult project and process for some time. I think that officials have been extremely hard-working and officious in doing their job. I commend you all for that. It has not been without its difficulties from the start. There have been political difficulties around it. We have had all sorts of slurs on the programme. It has been described as a slush fund and as a sectarian carve-up. People have been pulled every which way possible. In every single area you could talk about there are several competing demands. There is no question about that. I know a number of organisations that have not come through in this particular round and they are all very disappointed.

By the same token, I think that there is a two-way process, because the steering groups actually set the priorities and they are very representative. That is the nature of them. We heard disgraceful criticism around so much money being spent on consultancy, but that was all spent to support the steering groups. I have not heard too many members. In fact, we have a steering group member here, Chris, the Deputy Chair, who is querying you about what the criteria for funding are. If you do not know, why were you on the steering group and why were you deciding on priorities? I think that it is disingenuous to sit in a room and ask questions like that, when, actually, you are on the panel deciding the priorities, but you are not prepared to defend the process thus far, commend yourselves for what you are doing and take responsibility for decisions that you have taken.

I mean that for all the steering groups. I know that it is not easy for a number of people in some of the steering groups to basically say in their own community that, actually, they are part of the process and to have to take responsibility for it. I just think that it is important, and I do not think that throwing out notions that officials might have adopted a suck-it-and-see approach merits justification, given the backdrop against which the officials have had to work. You have come here and given briefings when you have been able to. At times, you have had to sit there and basically say, "I can't tell you any more" because you did not have the political authority to do it.

I want to put on the record that I think that it has been a difficult process for the officials to front up, come here to explain themselves and — rightly so — take on board robust questions and challenges. However, I also think that it is important for people, when there is a good-news story for communities out there, to actually acknowledge that. If people are on steering panels, they should declare that and should take responsibility for the decisions they have taken. I accept entirely that it is impossible to say from this point how all those programmes will benefit those communities in the long run. We all hope that they do, but remember this: millions of pounds were spent in previous incarnations of the programme, through Executive funds, and you could not even remember what some of them were spent on, but they were spent with good intentions.

**Mr Attwood:** Go and look at the cancer unit and tell us that.

**Mr Maskey:** They were spent with good intentions, and my ministerial colleagues were on the Executive at the time taking those decisions. Chairman, let me finish. I am not taking issue with any project. I am simply saying that Members, across all the parties, have taken tough decisions in the past. Not all of them have been right, but they have taken decisions. A lot of money has been spent, and the projects have not always worked out in the way in which we had hoped they would. The same thing could happen with this programme. All that I am saying is that there are people in the Assembly who have been prepared to make criticisms, which may well have been fair, but I think that it is also important that the people who are taking these decisions, such as the members of steering panels, should be man enough to say, "I'm part of that process, and we take responsibility for our decisions".

**The Chairperson:** The point is made. I do not think that anybody in the Committee would disagree with the notion that it is a particular Department that poses specific challenges.

**Mr Maskey:** But it is producing the goods.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Thank you. Does the Deputy Chair wish to comment?

**Mr Lyttle:** Yes, I think that it is worthwhile, Chair. I thought that I had declared interest. I felt that the officials had interacted with me in a fairly constructive manner, in line with the statutory responsibility that I have to scrutinise and work with the Department. You can supplement my contribution, if necessary. The role of the steering group is to consult local communities to identify priorities and to work up proposals with the assistance of appointed experts and consultants. We have no role whatsoever with regard to the criteria on which awards are made or, indeed, making awards. The role of the Committee is absolutely to scrutinise that —

**Mr Maskey:** Sorry, if you are on a steering panel —

**The Chairperson:** Let Chris finish, please.

**Mr Lyttle:** That is the role of the Department. Therefore, I think that it is acceptable for members of the Committee to ask questions about it. I think that any other type of scrutiny is in line with responsibilities. I said at the outset that, of course, investment in projects to tackle dereliction and deprivation is to be welcomed, but I think that most right-thinking people will accept that it is legitimate for a member of a Statutory Committee to ask a question when, three years into a spending period, no funds have been spent on project delivery.

**Mr Maskey:** I am not taking issue with that aspect, but how under God can a member of a steering panel sit here and say that it was not for them to know what the criteria were? How did you judge and prioritise the projects?

**Mr Lyttle:** I did not say that.

**Mr Spratt:** He only attended a few meetings.

**Mr Lyttle:** That is false. One last thing: I did not say that I did not know what the criteria were; I said that it was not my responsibility to set the criteria or to make the award.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Everybody has had the opportunity to air. If we are going to have a discussion, we should let the officials go. Thank you very much for coming today. Obviously, we look forward to further engagement as the rest of the money is welcomed on to the ground. Joe, Ricky, Lawrence, thank you very much.