



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Engagement with Statutory Committee:  
Office of the First Minister and deputy First  
Minister

5 March 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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

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

**Witnesses:**

Mr Neill Jackson	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Dr Malcolm McKibbin	Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

**The Chairperson:** We are joined by the head of the Civil Service, Malcolm McKibbin, and by Neill Jackson from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Malcolm, thank you very much. I think that this is your first appearance before a Committee as head of the Civil Service.

**Dr Malcolm McKibbin (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** That is correct.

**The Chairperson:** We will take that as a sign of the seriousness of the issue. I hand over to you and ask you to make some introductory remarks, please.

**Dr McKibbin:** Thank you, Chair. I am attending today's meeting at the request of the Committee, and I am very happy to do so. I am accompanied by Neill Jackson, who is the head of our Executive division with responsibility for liaison with the Committee and the Assembly.

Following our meeting with the Deputy Chair and you, I am aware of the Committee's concern about its ability to discharge its functions because of apparent shortcomings in the Department's compliance with the timeliness guidelines for dealing with correspondence and briefings. I have also seen the results of the detailed audit that you carried out on postponed or cancelled meetings, correspondence and so on, and I assure the Committee that I take those seriously. I saw, Chair, that you raised the same statistics with the First Minister during Question Time on Monday.

Before I set out some of the changes that I have put in place since our meeting, it is important to say something about the distinct nature of OFMDFM. I am aware that this will not be new information for the Committee, as it fully understands the nature of OFMDFM. However, it is a Department with two Ministers — the First Minister and the deputy First Minister — supported by six special advisers. There are, of course, the two junior Ministers and two further special advisers. That undoubtedly impacts on the speed of policy developments and decision-making, which is not surprising because it quite clearly is a more complex structure than that which operates in other conventional Departments with just one Minister and one special adviser, both from the same party.

In so far as officials who attend the Committee do so on behalf of both Ministers, they must be able to represent an agreed or shared perspective on the Department, as the First Minister alluded to during Question Time on Monday. I suppose that that is where the ongoing process interacts with the more structured process of weekly Committee meetings and your understandable and, indeed, statutory obligation to assist the Department, scrutinise policy, call for papers, deal with legislation, and so on. I fully acknowledge the statutory role of the Committee and am keen to try to help it and, indeed, help it to help us, if we are talking about policy development, and so on.

It is and will remain the case that Ministers will equally wish to consider the timing and content of the information that they provide. When the First Minister was talking to you on Monday, and last June, when the First Minister and the deputy First Minister attended the Committee, they both indicated that they would try to work with the Committee to improve things. I noticed in the stats that you produced that there have been 17 public meetings of the Committee since September, and I think that officials have been here on 23 different matters of business, so there is regular engagement. Perhaps it is not always as timely as you would wish, Chair, but there is clearly serious engagement with the Committee.

I want to try to ensure that the Committee is not fettered when carrying out its statutory duty. As a result of that, I have put a number of improvements into the system that I believe will help, and I have kept Ministers apprised of this. Since I met the Chair and the Deputy Chair, I have discussed this with Ministers, as I said I would. I made sure that they were aware of the performance metrics that you had provided to us, and, as I said, you mentioned those in the Chamber.

We have had a reasonable amount of staff turnover in OFMDFM, so the actions that we have taken reflect the need to ensure that those staff are up to speed. Since I met you, we have carried out bespoke, targeted briefing sessions with departmental staff on the role of the Committee, designed particularly to address any lack of awareness that staff have on how they should engage with it. We have also reminded them of the guidelines regarding the timeliness of responses to the Committee. Since I met you on 18 February, we have subjected around 50 of our staff to those briefing sessions.

I reminded and instructed all staff that, among competing arrangements, they are to give priority to the business of the Committee. We have considerably shortened our internal guidelines about getting papers to Ministers to try to give Ministers and special advisers more time in which to work with the programme and help to get briefing papers here on time. We are revising OFMDFM procedural guidance about how to deal with the Committee, and I have asked our departmental Assembly liaison officer (DALO) to meet formally with the Committee Clerk on a two-weekly basis as opposed to formerly, when it was every couple of months, although they were in contact much more often. They can consider the forward work programme on a rolling four-week basis. Following each of those meetings, our DALO will deal formally with our senior staff to make sure that they are aware of their obligations going forward.

We are also doing a little bit of what you have been doing in that we are now formally tracking in much more detail each request for information and item of business. I will bring those to my regular weekly stocktake meetings with my senior staff. Committee business will be to the fore at those meetings. Each month, we send out a team brief to all OFMDFM staff, and yesterday we sent one out that reiterated the importance of dealing with Committees and making sure that people are aware that the training seminars are available.

I hope that my appearance at the Committee, coupled with the action that we have taken since then, shows that I am taking the issue seriously. I see that, at last week's meeting, you noted that there was a significant reduction in the amount of outstanding business since we met, and I think that, during this week, there has been a further significant reduction in the amount of outstanding business. We will continue to work at that to try to ensure that we keep that to a minimum. I would be surprised if it ever got to zero, but we will try to minimise it as far as possible.

I am happy to take questions, Chair.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much indeed. I want to acknowledge the fact that not only are you here but there have been improvements, particularly in the backlog of information. It is also extremely important to recognise — I think that we all do — the unique nature of OFMDFM in the devolved Departments. As you say, you have two Ministers and multiple special advisers representing two political parties and the inevitable tensions and procedural issues that arise from that, Malcolm.

That said, we had to send officials away last week because the papers arrived very late. I think that there were over 100 pages in a briefing, and I did not feel that it would be sensible of us to engage on that. When you say that there is regular engagement, that is absolutely true, but the difficulty is that, if you engage without being fully briefed, does it come back to bite you six, nine or 12 months down the line? You will know the issues.

I will begin with the statutory basis for engagement. Section 29(1)(c) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 states that Standing Orders will make provision for these Statutory Committees on:

*"the powers described in paragraph 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement"*.

Paragraph 9 of strand one of the Belfast Agreement refers to Statutory Committees having:

*"a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role"*.

Is it possible that a dysfunctional relationship with these briefings, papers and all the rest could be regarded as a breach of the law?

**Dr McKibbin:** I do not regard the relationship as dysfunctional. In fact, as you can see, from what I have said to you and from the assurances that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have given, that we are trying to improve the relationship. I believe that the Committee can help us with policy development, and I am keen to assist it in order to assist us. I have no views. I have not considered the relationship to be dysfunctional in that respect, nor have I thought about the relevant legislation.

**The Chairperson:** I want you to think about the legislation as a broad matter of principle and about the relationship between not only this Statutory Committee and OFMDFM but a Statutory Committee and its parent Department, as it were. Is it possible that you could be in breach of the law for not properly scrutinising and developing policy and for not consulting?

**Dr McKibbin:** You are asking this question: would you be in breach of the legislation?

**The Chairperson:** Or the Department.

**Dr McKibbin:** The question that you asked me is this: would you be in breach for not scrutinising properly? I suggest that that is legal advice that you should seek.

**The Chairperson:** I am actually asking whether the Department could be considered to be in breach of the law by not assisting and not providing information in a timely and appropriate manner.

**Dr McKibbin:** I think that we are trying to provide information in a timely manner. As I said, there are unique aspects of OFMDFM that make compliance with guidelines regarding timeliness more difficult than is the case for other Departments. Indeed, I would argue that there probably should be different guidelines for OFMDFM because of the need to get additional information.

I was looking at a case to do with European matters yesterday. We have to go to 11 Departments to collect information for that, and it is very hard to get all the returns in on time to meet a 10-day correspondence limit.

I want to look forward to try to ensure that we have a proper working relationship rather than looking at a hypothetical situation in which somebody may or may not be in breach of legislation.

**The Chairperson:** Absolutely. I am just trying to plumb down into how serious this is in its potential outworkings and consequences.

**Dr McKibbin:** I think that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have both said — I agree with them — that it is important that the Department has a good, constructive working relationship with the Committee. The measures that we are trying to introduce are designed to do just that.

**The Chairperson:** The Department, obviously, has many stakeholders. How do you want your officials to view this Committee within that league table, as it were, of stakeholders?

**Dr McKibbin:** Quite clearly, there is a statutory responsibility on us to engage with the Committee in a positive way, so that puts you on a different level to the vast majority of our stakeholders. You are clearly extremely important to us, and I hope that we are extremely important to you.

**The Chairperson:** Absolutely. You hinted that there is now a new regime of awareness, training or whatever words you want to use to describe that. What happened previously?

**Dr McKibbin:** There has been staff turnover at both senior and more junior level. We have tried to ensure that all new staff, in particular, are made aware of their obligations in how they deal with the Committee and issues such as our timeliness guidelines so that we are more focused on Committee business than we have perhaps been to date.

**The Chairperson:** Am I reading into that that, previously, it was possible to come into the Department and not receive any kind of briefing or awareness procedures about this?

**Dr McKibbin:** This is the first time that we have done bespoke training on how to deal with the Committee. Guidelines exist on a number of different functions that we carry out. People are expected to use their initiative proactively to ensure that they are aware of how they should deal with the Committee if they come to a Committee meeting. We are trying to ensure that there is greater awareness and that people are aware of how they should behave and prepare for the Committee.

**The Chairperson:** If we are as important as you just said we are, surely that would have happened as a matter of course.

**Dr McKibbin:** What I said was that there are guidelines on, for instance, the OFMDFM website that people can access if they are going to engage with the Committee. It would be the same if somebody were going in front of the Public Accounts Committee: there are specific guidelines for how people do that. That is a slightly different Committee, as you well know.

I think that, rather than trying to tell us off for not having done it previously, I would rather look forward and say that we have done it now, we are trying to improve the relationship, and we will continue with the training and roll that out to more staff.

**The Chairperson:** I hope that you do not feel that I am telling you off; I am just trying to establish facts. When did you first become aware that there was an issue?

**Dr McKibbin:** I became aware that it was of considerable concern to the Committee when you wrote to me in late summer last year. I wrote back to you, and you said that you were going to raise the matter with Ministers, which, I understand, you did. I note that the First Minister has agreed to meet you again, if you so wish, as a result of Monday's question for oral answer.

**The Chairperson:** For the record, the Committee discussed it and decided that I would start with unofficial approaches, which I did, to special advisers, the junior Ministers, the principals and then you. At all times, we took the informal route as the preferred option because we want a solution, rather than trying to tell people off.

You said that the relationship between the Committee Clerk and the DALO will become, in some sense, more formalised.

**Dr McKibbin:** Yes. The DALO and the Committee Clerk discuss issues regularly and frequently. I would like them to meet every two weeks to look at the rolling four-week programme ahead of them. We would then, hopefully, be able to give you an early indication if we foresaw problems, and it might be possible to rejig business so that you are not light on business in one week and overburdened in another. It would also allow feedback to be given to my officials from the DALO, again on a more formal basis, following those meetings.

In other Departments that I have been in, there has been a more regular formal engagement between the DALO and the Committee Clerk, and it has been helpful. If we find that things get back onto a more even keel, it may be possible to decrease the frequency of that engagement, but it is worth trying to see whether it does effect an improvement.

**The Chairperson:** I do not know whether I speak for the Committee here, but I would have thought that informal contact has its value, in that it can provide a heads-up on whether things are going to happen or whether they are not looking likely.

**Dr McKibbin:** I was not suggesting that one replaced the other. The informal contact will undoubtedly still continue because I imagine that there are times when the Committee Clerk and the DALO speak daily.

**Mr Maskey:** Malcolm has given us some helpful information today. Obviously, the problem for the Committee has been that we do not want to have a bad relationship with the Department, but, equally, we have an important statutory role and responsibility, which is what the Chairperson is getting at. Obviously, at all times, we will try to iron out any difficulties. We know that it is a unique Department with two parties as well as the apparatus. The Department's uniqueness is in the fact that it cannot tell another Department what to do; it has to work and coordinate with them. We know that there are difficulties.

We have sought and have received assurances over the past year or more — I suppose that that is paying dividends at the moment — but all the parties share the frustration that we need to make things a wee bit better. Perhaps we need to understand the nature of the Department and the fact that things do take longer so that we need to schedule better. The relationship between the DALO and the Committee is essential, and I know that it works very well in the Department for Social Development (DSD), and we invariably know what is happening, good and bad, fairly well in advance. It helps a lot, so if that could be tightened up, it would be important.

We are not looking to pick rows with the Department; that is not in our interest. We want to work with the Department to shape policy. This is a view that is shared by all the Committees, if you remember, in the Chairpersons' Liaison Group report, which was laid before the Assembly. All the Committees looked at the issues of timeliness and access to officials at the right time and all the rest of it, so the issue has affected all Committees to some extent, or at least to the point at which the Chairpersons of all the Committees held a shared view, which was tabled for debate in the Assembly.

**The Chairperson:** Thanks, Alex. I agree; we have to be sympathetic, particularly to those issues that are politically sensitive, such as the development of the Maze/Long Kesh. There is no point in continually calling for briefings when the issue is that there is no ministerial agreement on the way forward. However, Malcolm, the notoriously outstanding request for information was to do with the implications for the Department of the common funding scheme from the Department of Education. It took 299 working days to get a response, despite the fact that, months ago, the Minister of Education went to consultation on changing the scheme. It seems to me that anybody could have written the response in two minutes, basically to the effect that, because the Minister of Education had gone to consultation, we can no longer answer your request, yet it sat and sat and sat.

**Dr McKibbin:** As I said, we have cleared a significant number of outstanding issues — probably 14 or 15 — in the past three weeks. I hope that we can continue to ensure that we will reduce that number.

**The Chairperson:** Do you accept that that sort of thing can give rise to a perception of the Department not being fully respectful of the Committee?

**Dr McKibbin:** There is certainly no deliberate intention to disrespect the Committee in any way. It is sometimes difficult to get agreement, and it can take longer than we would wish, but we try to get there in the end.

**Mr Spratt:** Thank you for the briefing, Malcolm. As head of the Civil Service, I assume that you also have responsibility for other Committees across the board. Will you give us some idea of whether the training, and so on, that you told us about will be rolled out? I chair the Regional Development Committee, and there are some problems. A number of briefing papers and correspondence — some 14 items since September — have not been forthcoming. At 2.00 pm yesterday, briefing papers for

Committee scrutiny of a private Member's Bill had not arrived, so I had to cancel a briefing with officials this morning.

In fairness to Committee Clerks and Assistant Clerks, that does not give them enough time to work on a Department's suggestions. The same applies to the Research and Information Service (RaISe), which plays such a prominent role during Committee Stages. The issue is not unique to this Committee and affects others as well. I can speak only for the Regional Development Committee. There are no problems with information to that Committee having to be cleared by so many officials. Information has to be cleared by only one Minister, one special adviser and one set of officials. So we are not coming up smelling of roses in other Committees either, particularly in the Regional Development Committee. It may be that that problem has happened since you left, Malcolm. I am not quite sure.

I assume that the training, and so on, that you told us about, and issues with the DALOs, apply across the board for all Committees in order to make sure that none of us falls between stools in the future.

**Dr McKibbin:** I will raise that at our permanent secretaries' meeting this Friday, and I will make them aware of the OFMDFM training. I will copy them the relevant slides, and so on, and suggest that, if they are having a problem with their Committee and believe that it would be helpful to roll that training out —

**Mr Spratt:** The permanent secretary will be before the Regional Development Committee next week, and we intend to raise some of these issues with him. The problem is not only in OFMDFM but in other Departments.

**The Chairperson:** On that theme, Jimmy, the Chairpersons' Liaison Group has been asked to produce similar research to that produced by the Committee Clerk for us, so that we have not only an evidence base but a benchmark. From those raw statistics, however, we will not be able to define how many of our issues are due to the fact of a joint Ministry. I accept that it is only another step and not a complete picture.

**Dr McKibbin:** That will give you numbers only. It will not tell you whether a delay was reasonably justified because of the complexity of an issue and the number of parties involved, which are further factors that need to be considered.

**The Chairperson:** If, however, the numbers are broadly similar, that will tell a tale.

**Dr McKibbin:** Across the other Departments? That would be —

**The Chairperson:** That would be interesting.

**Mr Cree:** I have been on this Committee for a year, and it has been a revelation to me. I have been on many other Committees, and this is certainly an experience that is not to be cherished. It is not good enough when officials — it is not as though they have been pressured — say that they will have something by a certain date and then come along the night before and say, "Forget about that; it will be whatever date". People then sit where you are sitting and shrug their shoulders in answer to a question. That is not professional. However, I am encouraged by what I heard from you today, and, being an eternal optimist, I look forward to happier days ahead.

**Dr McKibbin:** Good.

**The Chairperson:** That was a comment rather than a question. I can suss that.

**Mr Attwood:** I apologise that I was delayed. I hope that I do not go over well-trodden territory, but apologies if that is the case. Jimmy Spratt spoke about the permanent secretary coming to his Committee next week. I have been on this Committee for a shorter period than Leslie Cree, but it seems to me that the head of the Civil Service should come to the Committee routinely, given your responsibilities in OFMDFM and generally, to account for particulars and on general issues. It might be worthwhile to have the head of the Civil Service here every six months, for example, to question you on certain matters. If that invitation was forthcoming, would you be eager to take it up?

**Dr McKibbin:** Eager? *[Laughter.]* I would be happy to consider it is, yes.

**Mr Attwood:** I do not know whether you should consider it. I think that you should be saying that you would do it.

**Dr McKibbin:** I am happy to consider it if there is a business reason for doing it. When you asked the junior Ministers the same question either last week or the week before, the same answer was forthcoming. We are trying to deal with this consistently in OFMDFM.

**Mr Attwood:** I presume that there would be only a business reason to ask you to come to the Committee. What other reason would there be?

**Dr McKibbin:** I am unsure of the business reason that you are referring to at the moment. I am quite happy, Chair, to consider an invitation when it comes, and my inclination would be to accept rather than to decline.

**Mr Attwood:** I think that a stocktaking session with the head of the Civil Service every six months about matters that are relevant to the Committee's brief —

**The Chairperson:** We will discuss that afterwards, by all means.

**Mr Attwood:** I am struggling with an issue from Question Time on Monday. At an official level, there is no reason or inclination for disrespect to be shown to the Committee, but the First Minister showed disrespect to the Chair of the Committee in his initial answers to a question that was legitimately asked about the very matter of the failure to communicate properly with the Committee. That was the character of the First Minister's reply initially on Monday to a question from the Chair. So there is an issue of disrespect, but not at your level.

I ask this question neutrally, and I am not implying anything. In an earlier answer, you said that 13 or 14 matters have been dealt with over the past two or three weeks. Regardless of any political issues in OFMDFM that may lead to further delay in the release of papers or letters, could you not also draw the conclusion that the speeding-up over the past three or four weeks is a consequence of the fact that the Committee asked to see you? Is there any reason for the Committee to conclude that there has been a casual approach on the administrative side on information coming to the Committee as opposed to the understandable and, at times, less than understandable reasons for delay on the political side?

**Dr McKibbin:** I do not believe that either Ministers or officials have shown intentional disrespect to the Committee. Yesterday, I had discussions with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and both were keen that we effect improvements in how we interact with the Committee. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister were here in June last year, when they both reiterated the point that they wished to work in a constructive way with the Committee and respected the Committee's statutory role. At Monday's Question Time, I noticed that the First Minister was happy to agree to meet the Chair. In that same answer, which is the one that you are referring to, he said that he also believed that the deputy First Minister would equally be content to meet the Chair to discuss these issues. As I said, at yesterday's meeting that I had with them, they were both keen that we effected improvements in the system. Indeed, they have been encouraging us to, as you said, give an even greater focus to the Committee's business.

I mentioned that there had been staff turnover in OFMDFM, and I believe that the training that we have carried out will produce, and has produced, a greater awareness of these deadlines. I believe that additional procedures that we will bring in should improve things in the future. I do not believe that you could describe OFMDFM's approach in the past as casual, and I believe that it will be slightly more formally focused in the future.

**The Chairperson:** On the question of whether the First Minister showed disrespect to me, let me say that Alex's interpretation is his and not mine.

**Mr Attwood:** Maybe this is moving beyond the questions that you have been asked to answer today, but, as the head of the Civil Service and with your role in OFMDFM, does it not concern you that any third-party organisation that has responsibilities to OFMDFM would, a short time after its establishment, formally alert the relevant authorities with its concern about how business has been conducted? That happened with the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS). My question is more general. Does it not concern you that, given your responsibilities for OFMDFM and its functions,



including those for victims and survivors, so shortly after the establishment of the office, somebody thought that the relevant authorities had to be formally alerted with the concerns about how the VSS was operating?

**Dr McKibbin:** I would be concerned if anything that we did impacted adversely on our reputation, but, following this engagement, you are scheduled to deal with the Victims and Survivors Service. I do not intend to go into that, as the commissioner and, indeed, her officials will be here to deal with it specifically.

**Mr Attwood:** So, do you not have a view on that?

**Dr McKibbin:** I said that, if anything that the Department did or did not do were to damage its reputation, it would, of course, concern me.

**The Chairperson:** Malcolm, twice you mentioned staff turnover as an issue. Should we be concerned, and should we be asking you what your concerns are about staff turnover in OFMDFM?

**Dr McKibbin:** No, I think that staff turnover is a natural function. People are moved from one area to another for career development moves or for promotion reasons. We will see two fairly major SCS competitions, which will conclude this side of the summer. That is likely to result in more turnover. I think that it is prudent —

**The Chairperson:** Can you spell out what "SCS" means, for the record?

**Dr McKibbin:** Sorry. It means Senior Civil Service. For some of our critical activities, when we see staff turnover, we have to ensure that, when we are inducting new people into whatever Department, we pick these issues up.

**The Chairperson:** You mentioned that you have a senior management team and that you meet it weekly.

**Dr McKibbin:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** What would your tolerance be of people not turning up, not having the work done and not having the papers prepared?

**Dr McKibbin:** It depends. First, people do not just not turn up. If they do not turn up, they send a deputy so that the messages from the meeting still go back to the relevant division or branch. On the question of tolerance for not having work done, it depends, obviously, on the priority that that work is assigned. It depends on what other work is ongoing. It is not just a question of saying, "This is important and must be done". The nature of government work now is quite dynamic, so you are always juggling priorities.

**The Chairperson:** I have a final question to ask about the 299 days. We did not think that the question was political in dividing the Department. We send in a written request for information, and it is supposed to be answered within 10 days. In this case, for 299 days, it was down the back of the departmental sofa. So, what happens when the letter arrives?

**Dr McKibbin:** Do you mean procedurally?

**The Chairperson:** Yes, what is the process?

**Dr McKibbin:** Procedurally, any letter — not the particular one that you are talking about but generically — will be forwarded to the relevant official, who will prepare advice for a Minister. Perhaps they will offer meetings on the subject, and, depending on the nature of the query, perhaps they will engage with special advisers. At that stage, negotiations would continue until the Department adopts a shared view.

**The Chairperson:** How many pairs of hands would it need to pass through, as an absolute minimum, to get an answer?

**Dr McKibbin:** As an absolute minimum, it would normally go to an official, through advisers and then to Ministers.

**The Chairperson:** So, three.

**Dr McKibbin:** The private offices would also be involved.

**The Chairperson:** Four.

**Dr McKibbin:** Sometimes it is one person, and sometimes there is more than one person.

**The Chairperson:** I am saying minimum.

**Dr McKibbin:** I am not sure where you are going with this, Chair.

**The Chairperson:** I am just trying to get a picture in my mind's eye of how it can take 299 days to get an answer to a relatively apolitical —

**Dr McKibbin:** I do not think that it is necessarily to do with the number of people that it has to go through; it is more to do with the issue. I am not completely familiar with the issue that you are referring to, but, depending on the complexity and political sensitivity, as well as the number of third parties that are involved in a response, it can take much longer than 10 days.

**The Chairperson:** This was about the implications of the Department of Education's common funding scheme for your Department. I spoke to people about this, and everybody expressed surprise that the letter was still down the back of the sofa. They said that they would go and find it and retrieve it, but it still took a long time.

**Dr McKibbin:** It certainly took a long time.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you. OK, members —

**Mr Spratt:** Chair, could I just come back on that? I think that it is worth putting this on the record. Fair enough, we may have been raising individual cases, and, of course, we raised the very worst case scenario, which was the 299 days. Let us face it, however, questions on that policy were being answered in other places, such as at the Education Committee and other Committees. So, it is not exactly the case that it was not in the public domain. I think that we are being a bit pedantic, if you like, about that particular issue.

On the whole, officials do a very good job in producing stuff, coming along to the Committee and answering questions etc. I think that it would be unfair as well, given that you are here, Malcolm, not to say that the departmental Assembly liaison officers do an excellent job for all the Departments on a day and daily basis, as do the Committee staff. Although there is some criticism, there should also be quite a bit of praise for a lot of the folk who are bringing stuff forward.

This list, and the fact that it has shortened, shows that there is movement on some of the stuff in the difficult area of OFMDFM. However, let us not get carried away. We should remember the good work that is done on a day and daily basis.

**Dr McKibbin:** Thank you very much for that.

**The Chairperson:** I echo, as I have said previously, that the DALO is the messenger and should not be shot.

Malcolm and Neill, thank you very much indeed.

**Mr G Robinson:** Can I put it on record that I agree entirely with what Jimmy said? Officials have been in front of us quite often, and, as far as I am concerned, they give us a good service.

**Dr McKibbin:** Thank you very much for that.

**The Chairperson:** Gentlemen, thank you very much.