



## **Committee for Social Development**

# **OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)**

## **Draft Programme for Government and Corporate Plan**

**26 January 2012**

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Social Development

### Draft Programme for Government and Corporate Plan

**26 January 2012**

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

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)  
Mr Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Gregory Campbell  
Mrs Judith Cochrane  
Mr Michael Copeland  
Mr Mark H Durkan  
Mr Alex Easton  
Ms Pamela Lewis  
Mr Fra McCann  
Mr David McClarty

**Witnesses:**

Mr Will Haire	Department for Social Development
Mr Stephen McMurray	Department for Social Development
Ms Karen Robinson	Department for Social Development

**The Chairperson:** We move on to the briefing on the corporate plan and the Programme for Government. Will, you are still on the oche. With us today are Will Haire, Stephen McMurray and Karen Robinson. You are all very welcome. Will, the floor is yours.

**Mr Will Haire (Department for Social Development):** Thank you. As we move towards the end of the financial year and the completion of the Programme for Government, we are keen to get a more detailed corporate plan for the Department. That will set out what we want to achieve and deliver within the context of the Programme for Government over the next three years. We have had some initial discussions with the Minister, and, as we said in the paper, we are keen to talk to the Committee. We are also speaking to other stakeholders, including our three non-departmental public bodies, about their take on the issues that affect them and how the Department works with them. In the week commencing 6 February, we hope to discuss with the Minister the feedback that we have received. In that context, we want to get some initial feedback from the Committee on the priorities that it sees the Department having over the next three years. We cannot finalise our work until the Executive have made their final decisions, so by the time that the Programme for Government is finalised, we aim to finalise our document. The Minister will then come to the Committee in April for a final discussion before we put it absolutely to bed. That is the process that we will follow.

I hope that the paper gives you a sense of where we are, what the issues are and what the background is. I want to particularly stress the key themes that we are looking at. One major issue on which the Committee will work with us is welfare reform, which, ultimately, is about tackling poverty and

disadvantage. The questions for the Department are how to ensure that welfare reform keeps to that purpose and how to maximise the opportunities from the social fund, for example, to ensure that the system is as customised to our needs as possible. We will also need to decide what policies we will use in the Department, such as neighbourhood renewal, and how we can work more effectively with other Departments, the voluntary and community sector and local government to achieve the goal of tackling poverty and disadvantage. In that, we must also decide how we integrate housing, and the Minister will come forward with views on the strategy for social housing, including the wider issue of reform and the best ways to deliver social housing. We must ensure that the system really works for the tenants and, more widely, protects those in the private sector. Those issues are integral to ensuring that we tackle poverty and that we have a system that works. We also have the issue of urban regeneration. We must ensure that we create dynamic urban areas that work, and that we connect communities, estates and those who live in poverty with the process.

You will be familiar with those themes. However, we have a real opportunity to step up, to be more focused in our work, to connect more effectively and to connect across Departments. Those are the themes that we want to capture in our corporate plan.

As you know, each year we develop an operating plan that sets out, in detail, what everyone in the Department must do. When we visit the Committee in April, we will have the operating plan for that financial year, and we will be able to give you greater detail. That is crucial. So much of our work and what we want individual members of staff to do relates to that plan. It is key that everyone knows how they fit in and has clear targets of what they are to achieve. That is what the whole process is about. I hope that that gives you some background.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you for your remarks so far. I accept entirely that the draft document is, I do not want to use the word "scant", but it is basic. It is a high-level report that highlights the key issues and themes that need to be addressed by the Department, as you said.

I have a couple of points to make before I bring members in. I think, and I am sure members would agree, that there is a clear view that we are not dealing in the abstract with the welfare reform programme. We know that there is a welfare reform programme, whatever the final detail in the operating plan, and, as Gregory said earlier, whatever end of the spectrum people's views are on, we know that there will be significant implications for this community. There will be quite a considerable reduction in money available to people, so there will be more people in greater need. Is there a clear sense in the Department that the future strategies and policies have to address this in a holistic manner? In other words, we are not just providing social housing; what we are doing with social housing is tackling poverty and disadvantage against a very difficult backdrop. Is that driver active in the Department?

Secondly, I am mindful that the Finance Minister recently said, understandably, that in light of these ongoing discussions, it may well mean a further adjustment to other Departments' allocations. I am concerned that, although we are dealing with these at a high level, when you are getting ready to finalise the Programme for Government discussions and draft your operating plan, there needs to be a driver at the heart of the Department to get your best foot forward across all those key themes.

**Mr Haire:** We are doing a lot of work, and one issue we are looking at is the question of what poverty is and what the roots of poverty are. We need to identify the key issues that we are trying to address, what we can ameliorate in our programmes and how we can help, though working with other people, to find ways of tackling some of the key scourges that cause poverty. Obviously, one of those is the lack of work. We are trying to ensure that we are helping people to get work and to make that system work. That is a key element of it, but there is a whole range of reasons why people are in poverty. That is an issue that we are debating very strongly in the Department. As you know, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has a role in relation to poverty and we are very actively discussing those issues with that Department to make sure there is a coherence in what we are doing. We are very conscious of the fact that there will be significant pressures on everybody's budgets, and we have to demonstrate that we are using all the resources we have effectively and connecting them to achieve that end, in what will be a very tough climate.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you for that. Members, we have a report and the headline of the draft corporate plan in front of us, so can you draw attention to any omissions in that? This is not a replacement for the consultation on the Programme for Government; it is not a detailed discussion on that. Are there any important things missing from the draft corporate plan that we have in front of us? That is the kind of discussion we need to have this morning, rather than rehearsing the issues that are very rightly on the minds of members on a routine basis.

**Mr Copeland:** I hope that this in some way relates to what the Chair said. The phrases repeated in relation to welfare reform are: "into work" and "back to work". Have you had any discussions with other Departments to establish the number of jobs available? I find this statement quite hard to understand:

*"Aim for a percentage increase in those working age customers in receipt of work focused benefits to support them to move into work".*

I have read that a couple of times, and maybe it is just me or it is too early in the morning, but I cannot get my mind around what that means.

**Mr Haire:** We are talking to our colleagues in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and in the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) about that issue. You will have seen that, in the past, Invest NI has focused on high-skilled jobs in that process. We have emphasised that a lot of people will come here from this process who are seeking jobs, but there is a lower skill element. Hence the jobs fund offered by Invest NI, which you will have seen. Our teams have been working closely with Invest NI to look at how to ensure that the jobs fund relates to the broader range of jobs that they are trying to generate in the system. We need to consider how we make sure that the people who live in our neighbourhood renewal areas have access to those opportunities and how we make sure that DEL's system works that way. We are under no illusions; the process will take place in a very tough economic climate, but there are opportunities to ensure that there are jobs. People are seeking those jobs, and there are better ways we can help some of them. That is a part of the process. However, the idea that we can suddenly end unemployment is false. We are not naive in that sense.

**Mr Copeland:** This is a plan. In basic terms, do you believe that the number of people entering the job market, balanced against the number of jobs available and being created, will be sufficient to allow a decrease in the numbers of those who are currently unemployed? In other words, will there be enough jobs created to satisfy the natural increase in demand and eat into the number of people in the categories of "looking for work" or "being helped back into work". You cannot help someone back into something that is not there.

**Mr Haire:** As part of welfare reform, we are taking away the 16-hour rule. That will mean that someone going back to work, even for five hours a week, will not lose out. That person will benefit financially from that process and from the fact that they will be building contacts and connections. The Department believes that that will create real opportunities that will help in the process, but we are not naively saying that that will miraculously change the overall level of unemployment. However, over generations, it can deliver a more dynamic labour market. That is what this is about.

You are right: we have to be very measured in the way that we present this issue. The reform is worthwhile and important, but it will not be instant. It will help in the long-term change process that will have to take place in the economy. We have to catch up.

This is not the corporate plan, it is just a briefing note that sets out the key themes. We are trying to tease out the correct words. It is important that we have a reasonably short corporate plan that we can hand to all members of staff and the public and say, "This is what DSD does for you." That is what we are trying to do and that is why we want clarity. We are trying to get the right form of words. It is a fair point: we have to get the language correct.

**Mr Copeland:** My second short question is: what percentage of the "8,000 social and affordable homes" will be social? Do we know yet?

**Mr F McCann:** It is 6,000.

**Mr Copeland:** So it is 6,000 and 2,000.

**Mr Stephen McMurray (Department for Social Development):** Additional moneys went into co-ownership, hence the reference to "affordable" homes.

**Mr F McCann:** Just on that question, obviously the figure of 8,000 looks a lot better than 6,000. You say that the houses are "social and affordable", but there needs to be a distinction between the two. The vast majority of people who apply for social housing are ineligible for mortgages, which are required for co-ownership. The two categories need to be separated.

The figure of 6,000 represents a sizeable drop, compared with what was achieved under the previous Programme for Government. At a time when waiting lists and pressures are increasing and people are losing their houses through repossession, we must always argue for an increase in the supply of new, modern, efficient housing. I know that discussions are taking place on the wider use of the private rented sector, but many of the houses from that sector that are used to deal with the demand are in poor condition. Some of them lack the amenities that people expect, and people are overcharged for them. They end up paying more for a less efficient house.

My other concern is just mentioned in the draft plan, and that is the whole question of maintenance. We must ensure that there are substantial amounts of money and grants available for maintenance.

Failure to deal with those two issues today stores up trouble for the future. They will cost more in the long run.

**Mr Haire:** We will take that element on board.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you. No other members wish to speak.

The Committee has yet to formally discuss the Programme for Government. We estimate that that may take place in the second or third week of February. That is to facilitate the fact that the OFMDFM Committee will try to collate all of the Committees' responses. This Committee will formally deal with the Programme for Government and what we think should or should not be in it. It is up to members to determine their views on that.

This morning was an opportunity to ask questions on the back of the presentation. Will, Stephen and Karen, your attendance was to give members an opportunity to say whether anything is missing that they want looked at now. I appreciate that it is not the operational plan, as you described it, which is very important because it will determine how those things are done and when they will be done. We just needed to establish this morning whether there are any glaring omissions, but nobody has drawn attention to any. I do not doubt that you are aware of all the underlying issues, and people have made clear their views on the deficits in all of this. Thank you, Karen, Will and Stephen, for your attendance.