



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Draft Programme for Government

18 January 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)

Ms Michaela Boyle

Mr Jonathan Craig

Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson

Mr Phil Flanagan

Mrs Brenda Hale

Mr Trevor Lunn

Mr Conall McDevitt

Mr Daithí McKay

The Chairperson:

We will now deal with the response to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) on the draft Programme for Government (PFG). We had copies of stakeholders' responses to the draft Programme for Government in last week's information packs, and further responses from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) are in today's packs.

At last week's meeting, we considered a draft response to the OFMDFM Committee on the draft PFG. Jo-Anne suggested amendments, and other members wishing to propose changes

were to forward them to the Committee Clerk by Friday of last week. No further proposed changes were received.

You will find in your information packs an amended draft Committee response, and the amendments to reflect Jo-Anne's suggestion at last week's meeting are highlighted in red.

Mrs Dobson:

I have read the comments and I am happy that that proposed amendment be removed from the Committee's draft response.

The Chairperson:

OK. You are happy enough. Thank you.

Mr Lunn:

What is it that is being removed?

The Chairperson:

It is highlighted in red. It states:

"Pre-school education should be achieved through teacher-led nursery education to ensure the highest standards".

Mr Lunn:

Is that being removed?

The Chairperson:

Yes. It is being removed for the simple reason that we do not want the Committee to have made a policy decision. However, it is an issue of concern. I do not think that we are running away from the fact that there is an issue there, but we felt that the Committee should not be put in the position of having made a policy decision, which that would clearly be.

Mr Lunn:

Yes, and a clearly unrealistic one.

Mr McDevitt:

I apologise that, because of Policing Board business, I was unable to attend last week's meeting.

The Chairperson:

Yes, and we reflected that.

Mr McDevitt:

We might want to think about this. I think that we could capture something around the preschool nursery commitment that is in the draft Programme for Government without committing the Committee to a policy position. It might be reasonable to ask how the commitment in the draft Programme for Government to ensure that every child will have access to a nursery or preschool place will be realised. We might want to express our concerns that there is not a huge amount of detail in that regard — any detail in fact — in the draft Programme for Government, and make reference to the statement in the House yesterday morning. Not a huge amount of detail came through there either.

The Chairperson:

Given that we had the statement about preschool education, I think it is probably the appropriate time to ask the Department to come and have a discussion around that, because, although there was maybe not a huge amount of meat, there were issues in there that are already raising questions or causing concerns. In light of that and taking into account that Jo-Anne made a pertinent point, I suggest that we keep that so that we will come back to this issue when the Department comes to give us more expansive detail on preschool education. On 29 February, the Early Years Strategic Alliance will make a presentation to the Committee on the early years manifesto, and the Department will be here for an evidence session on early years policy. I think that we will put those together and write to the Department to say that we also want preschool provision to be included on that date. Is that OK?

Members indicated assent.

Mr McKay:

Point 9 refers to disadvantaged backgrounds and talks about:

“extending the term disadvantaged to include disability”.

I have no problem with disability being included, but I am concerned that that might confuse some people. People have the view that a disadvantaged background means more about social income than disability. I wonder whether including that and separating the two terms would be a better approach.

The Chairperson:

Do you mean just under another point?

Mr McKay:

Yes. Just reword it.

Point 13 is about how the Department will measure literacy and numeracy. I presume that the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) would do that, and that the boards, and ultimately the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), would have responsibility to deliver that.

The Chairperson:

Do you want the inspectorate referred to in point 13?

Mr McKay:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

The highlighted part states:

“for instance there is no indication as to how the Department will measure whether Literacy and Numeracy will have been improved or whether additional resources have been successfully targeted.”

Do you want us to add that that could be achieved through the inspection —

Mr Flanagan:

We could add, “in addition to ETI’s work”.

Mr McKay:

I presume, in fact I am nearly sure, that it is the case that that would be measured by ETI.

Perhaps it would be worthwhile getting clarification from the Department before we suggest that.

The Chairperson:

The problem is that this has to be finalised today. This is our response, but, at this stage, we can note that we made reference to the fact that this could be, in fact is, part of the inspectorate's work. Are you saying that you would just like that to be reflected there?

Mr McKay:

Yes, but it is not a die-in-the-ditch issue.

The Chairperson:

If there is a way to put it in, by adding, "for instance, there is no indication as to how the Department" or "This should be". Any comments as to what we could do?

Mr Lunn:

I take it that ETI does it on behalf of the Department?

The Chairperson:

Yes.

Mr Lunn:

So could we not just refer to ETI and the Department, and leave it at that?

The Chairperson:

What about, "how the Department and ETI"?

Mr Lunn:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

Yes. That would do. Thanks. Are members happy enough?

Members indicated assent.

The Committee Clerk:

Can we go back to Daithí's previous comment? Will you clarify that, Daithí?

The Chairperson:

You just want to clarify point 9?

The Committee Clerk:

The reference to “disadvantage” and “disability”.

The Chairperson:

Do you just want to keep that as one statement? It states:

“A wider focus in the PfG on improving the achievement of multiple underachieving groups, rather than just those from ‘disadvantaged backgrounds’. This could be achieved by extending the term disadvantaged to include disability”.

Mr McKay:

Rather than including disability, refer just to “disadvantaged backgrounds”. Then —

The Chairperson:

I see what you mean now. We are identifying one group: people with a disability. That was the proposal made by the Minister yesterday. He talked about extending the term. So, do you just want to draw a full —

Mr McKay:

It just needs to be made clear. In my mind, disadvantaged is normally associated with social background. It needs to be clarified.

The Chairperson:

We could just delete the last sentence, because I suppose that we cover it in the first part, is that right? That is the easiest way. So, we just take out completely the part that says, “This could be achieved”, OK?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Anything else, members? If not, are members content with those changes being made?

Members indicated assent.