



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Programme for Government

7 December 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)

Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson

Mr Phil Flanagan

Mrs Brenda Hale

Mr Trevor Lunn

Mr Conall McDevitt

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr Daithí McKay

Witnesses:

Mrs Katrina Godfrey) Department of Education

Mr John McGrath)

The Deputy Chairperson:

It is necessary to welcome you back again.

Mr John McGrath (Department of Education):

Should we go out and come back in?

The Deputy Chairperson:

You could, yes. *[Laughter.]*

Members' packs contain a briefing on the draft Programme for Government (PFG), a briefing paper on the PFG from the Assembly's research and library services and a letter to the Department highlighting issues that members wish to raise today. I have already made known the Committee's views on the delay with the papers, so I am not going to go through that again. If you would like to make a presentation, please begin.

Mr McGrath:

The Executive published the draft Programme for Government on 17 November for public consultation. It was part of a trio of documents; it was published alongside the draft investment strategy and the draft economic strategy. Consultation ends on 22 February. After that, the Executive will finalise the Programme for Government for 2012-15, taking account of the views received in the consultation. The paper that we have provided gives details of the two pre-consultation events with education stakeholders that were held in May 2011 and of the organisations that attended. The issues raised and the comments made by stakeholders during those two events were reported back to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and helped to inform the education input to the draft Programme for Government.

The draft Programme for Government sets out a series of commitments that the Executive intend to deliver between April 2012 and March 2015. There are seven commitments that, subject to consultation, will fall to the Department of Education (DE) to deliver, and, no doubt, we will go into the detail of those. As well as the commitments that fall to DE to lead, there are several commitments to be led by other Departments. Those commitments either carry with them implications for DE or will require a contribution from the Department. We have initiated work within the Department to develop a more detailed work plan for each commitment. The work plan is designed to set out the actions that are needed to secure delivery of the commitment and associated milestones. Clearly, those work plans will be finalised only when the consultation has been completed and the final Programme for Government agreed by the Executive and voted on by the Assembly.

At that point, Chair, I will cease and wait for comments or questions.

Mr McDevitt:

Thanks, John. I wish to ask about a couple of the specific commitments. Under the heading of “Early years education and care”, priority 2 is a commitment to:

“ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it”.

You told us last year that you had delivered that already.

Mr McGrath:

It is certainly what we were aiming to deliver, and we are not that far off. The issue, which we rehearsed previously, is not so much that we do not have enough places but that we do not necessarily have all the places in the right places, if you follow me. There is an issue of mismatching that we need to deal with, and we will actively take that forward. We will look at that now, because that was the Department’s extant objective anyway.

Mr McDevitt:

That is not what that priority says. Governments are great being held to account for what they put on paper. What you say is that you will ensure that:

“at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it”.

You claim that that is the case already, so what is the commitment?

Mr McGrath:

Clearly, some families and parents did not have access to places or were offered places that were not handy enough for them. We also may have an oversupply in some places. We need a better match, within a reasonable definition, so that each family that wants a pre-school place can get one.

Mr McDevitt:

Will you reword that to make a commitment to provide a free pre-school place to every family that wants one within x kilometres or miles of their home?

Mr McGrath:

Conall, that is the Executive's commitment. It will go out to consultation, and the Executive will decide whether they wish to fine-tune it.

Mr McDevitt:

Yes, but this is about the Minister's input. I am trying to figure out whether the Minister's ambition extends to doing what he professes to have done in the past.

Mr McGrath:

We know that there have been issues over the past couple of years in that some families were offered places that they said were too far away, or they did not continue through the process. Therefore, at the minute, clearly not everyone who wants a place has a place. We can go over the semantics of the statement. However, the Minister's intent is to try to iron out the difficulties that we have had in the past few years. If we have to reprofile provision to follow the families rather than the providers, we will look at that.

Mr McDevitt:

Why will you not make a commitment to bestow on every child a statutory right to a place?

Mr McGrath:

This is the Minister and the Executive's commitment. I will not comment on what it should be instead. The Committee may wish to make representations on that.

Mr McDevitt:

I will. More broadly, the early years strategy is not mentioned in the commitments.

Mr McGrath:

No, but it remains one of the Minister's key objectives. He made it clear in his statement in September that he wants to advance the early years strategy. We are looking at that in the context of both the Programme for Government and some of the other childcare objectives in that programme.

Mr McDevitt:

The special educational needs (SEN) review is not mentioned in the Programme for Government either.

Mr McGrath:

No, but the commitments in the Programme for Government are high-level commitments. They are not all the Minister of Education's priorities. The SEN review is high in his priorities, and I think that the Committee will see some progress on it in the new year. He remains very committed. The Minister made it clear that dealing with SEN and the early years strategy is his next priority, so the suite of high-level policies can be completed.

Mr McDevitt:

Finally, under the heading "Literacy and numeracy", priority 1 is a commitment to:

"increase the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who achieve at least five GCSEs at A* - C or equivalent GCSEs in Maths and English".

The commitment is 42% in 2012-13, 45% in 2013-14 and 49% in 2014-15. What is the target for 2011-12?

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department of Education):

I should know that, but I honestly cannot remember. However, the figure has been provided to the Committee previously. In fact, the 42%, 45% and 49% targets are milestones leading to the 2020 targets. Our focus is to make sure that that figure goes up year on year. We are very aware of the challenges in doing so, particularly when you consider the long-term nature of embedding learning. It is a point that you have made frequently, Conall. It is about focusing on primary level and feeding the really good literacy and numeracy base in primary level through to the fifth year of post-primary. We have a suite of targets that I know we have provided.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Do you know the answer to the question?

Mrs Godfrey:

I told him that I cannot remember. There are targets right the way through. As can be seen from the data that were published a couple of weeks ago, we in fact exceeded the target for last year, which was 30%.

Mr McDevitt:

My point is that those are not new targets; they are the existing targets for 2020 that have been in place for the past three years

Mrs Godfrey:

These are the 2020 targets, which remain extremely challenging and which we are very determined to deliver on.

Mr McDevitt:

That is OK.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Just before Daithí comes in, I will ask a quick question. Are you confident that there will be sufficient money to deliver the Department's PFG commitments?

Mr McGrath:

I think that we are fairly confident that that will be the case. A lot of the commitments are not about simply money. It would be wrong to assume that literacy and numeracy are dependent on more money being pumped in rather than on improving the quality of teaching and learning in the system as it sits and on improving aspiration and achievement. It is not just a matter of putting money in at one end, and that is what the Every School a Good School policy is about.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I take your point. However, are you confident that, where you need the money, you will have it?

Mr McGrath:

We know what money we have. That has been set out. The Minister has made it clear that he is

not relenting on any of the targets for improving standards or those on, in particular, improving the life chances of kids from disadvantaged areas, whatever the Budget might say. We face challenging times. We also face increasing dialogue with schools where we say, “Look, the kids are there and are funded for 12 years. It costs the same for a child to come out with five good GCSEs as it does for them to come out without five good GCSEs”. So, the issue is about getting value for money for the kids and the taxpayer out of the money that we already have. We still have the lion’s share of £2 billion.

The Deputy Chairperson:

That is the answer that I wanted to hear — that you are confident. It is down here in black and white.

Mr McGrath:

We have made significant progress in recent years.

The Deputy Chairperson:

You are going to deliver on it, and that is what a Committee likes to hear.

Mr McGrath:

In recent years, we have moved a lot to focus very much on the absolute core of raising standards; everything is about that. We have driven that forward now. However, we have faced some obstacles and difficulties. People still think that if we do not put additional money into schools for literacy and numeracy we have somehow given up on them. However, why do kids go to school and spend so many hours there every day except to improve their literacy and numeracy?

Mrs Godfrey:

The focus is very much on the core budget being used, first and foremost, to improve standards in literacy and numeracy and outcomes for pupils. A lot of the evidence we have seen shows that, when there is effective teaching in the classroom, which is just part of what you do in schools, you get the best results. It is not about things being parachuted in; it is about getting the basics right in the classroom.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I asked the question, and you answered it. I am sure that the Committee welcomes your answer and will be supportive of your managing the targets throughout the next 12 months. That is basically what we wanted to hear. You set those targets, not us, so good luck with them. I think that that is what we wanted to say.

Mr McGrath:

Thank you. We welcome that.

Mr McKay:

I think that you are right, Chair: some of the targets are quite ambitious. I very much welcome the target to increase in the next years by 42%, 45% and nearly 50% in 2014-15:

“the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who achieve at least 5 GCSE’s in grades A* - C”.

Those targets will be challenging. I do not think that there is any doubt about that. Of course, given the present economic situation, it would be good if even the present standard could be maintained.

I am aware that the Education Minister met the Finance Minister to discuss the financial challenges that we face and how they can be met over the coming period. How did the Department of Finance and Personnel respond, and has it given any commitment to support the Department of Education? Obviously, the health budget was ring-fenced, but the education budget was not, so the Education Department may require the Finance Department’s assistance in future to meet any additional challenges.

Mr McGrath:

The Minister of Education met the Minister of Finance and Personnel last week largely to share with him the scale of the challenges that he faces and the scale of the actions that he is taking. I think that he went over the broad numbers, the scale of the savings that we have to make, the elements of the savings delivery plan, and the clarity about that over the four years, which every other Department does not necessarily match.

He also took him through the recent changes to the schools budget that the Minister announced and through the information that has gone out about that. He made it clear that he was taking every step possible to manage from within a very challenging budget to protect front line services. He also made it clear that the scale of the challenges and the impact on front line services, particularly jobs, should not be underestimated. I think that there was a good and useful exchange and some understanding between the two Ministers. The Finance Minister welcomed the transparency of the information.

My Minister did not say, “Please can I have more money”, as he knows that the money is not there. However, he wanted the scale and the sharpness of what is facing the education sector to be understood, especially in comparison with and in contrast to other sectors. It was a good dialogue. The Minister did not ask for more money, nor does the Finance Minister have any spare money at the minute. However, it was important that he understood the scale of the challenges, and I think that the engagement was useful.

The Deputy Chairperson:

He found a £40 million contingency fund in some locker. You did not tell us about that, John.

Mr McGrath:

I did, and you complimented us on having a contingency fund.

The Deputy Chairperson:

You did not tell us that it was £40 million.

Mr McGrath:

I did. I pointed to a line in the distribution table and explained where it came from, and you complimented us on having a contingency fund.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I am all for contingencies. However, I also recall the Finance Minister — I am sure that Daithí will remember this too — eating the face off Daithí and me for suggesting that there should be a

contingency fund anywhere.

Mr McGrath:

We had a contingency fund to meet clear pressures, which the Minister did. We can return to that at any time in the Budget. However, as it sits at the moment, the Minister has a reduced contingency fund of £8 million for next year. That is not much to provide for either uncertainties or any hit on the block. We are very open about our budget, and we prefer to be open and transparent.

The Deputy Chairperson:

You are open only when the light is shone on you. Shine some more light on him, Daithí.

Mr McKay:

The main point is that, for area planning, PEDU and shared education, there is more of a need to accelerate and realise those savings. That is the message that we need to get out there. We need to get on with those areas of work to ensure that more money goes to front line services.

Are there any dates or a timetable for establishing the ministerial advisory group on shared education? Are there any estimates for the wider goal of having a proportion of children involved in shared education programmes by 2015?

Mr McGrath:

Obviously, we are looking at those. The Minister will not establish the ministerial group until the Programme for Government is finalised, but he will give some thought to the specific terms of reference for that group and about how to populate it. He does not want to move too quickly and to be seen as pre-empting the consultation. That is always a difficulty. We will obviously look at the commitment on shared educational programmes and the sharing of school facilities to see whether we can get the right handle on it.

Mr McKay:

You will have looked at those goals in the context of the benefit that they will provide to the community. What about the economic benefits? Obviously, the benefit to the community is the

primary goal, but what about the economic benefits?

Mr McGrath:

It will not surprise you to hear that the first thing that we will look at is the educational benefits that sharing will provide. There will be some of those. When Jo-Anne questioned us earlier, we talked about sharing. We will look at the wider benefits that that can provide both for the community at large and children for their wider development. We need to be careful. We are in a tight budgetary constraint, so we want to make the best use of facilities and use sharing as an economic driver, as well as to get some of the softer advantages.

Miss M McIlveen:

Thank you, Deputy Chair. The areas that I was going to look at have been covered. I concur with the comments about the absence of early years in the Programme for Government, given that there was a focus on it during the previous mandate and that it was highlighted at the stakeholder event that it will pay dividends for future budgets and so on. Daithí commented on the benefits of shared education for the community and on building on that. Are your milestone outputs for 2012-13 for the delivery of recommendations a bit tight, given that no work can be done until after the Assembly has agreed the Programme for Government?

Mr McGrath:

They may be challenging. As I said, if we had comfortable targets, the Committee would ask why we were not stretching ourselves. Therefore, the milestones are challenging for an issue such as this. Sometimes, if you do not get on quickly with something, you do not get on with it at all.

Miss M McIlveen:

There are concerns because of the length of time that it has taken previous work groups to, first, agree terms of reference and, secondly, agree a report.

Mr McGrath:

Your point is well made. To get advantage out of this, we have to get the group set up, do a piece of work and reach some conclusions that are to be acted upon.

Mrs Godfrey:

It also fits into the second commitment. It seems very clear to us that the group's work will inform the delivery of the second commitment, so you really would not want it to drag on for a desperately long period. You would want to get recommendations that could start to be acted on, because, clearly, they will link into the second commitment, which is about actual participation and sharing facilities.

Miss M McIlveen:

Do you understand that we have been here before with area-based planning and so on?

Mrs Godfrey:

Absolutely.

Miss M McIlveen:

Therefore, we do not want to have to repeat those mistakes. The paper that was provided on the commitments in the PFG states that, by 2015, you will:

“substantially increase the number of schools sharing facilities”.

Is there a specific target for that?

Mrs Godfrey:

The key element will be to ensure that there is a common understanding of what we mean by “sharing facilities”. You are absolutely right that we will need a baseline for that measure. We could set a target, but, if we do not know where the starting point is, the target would, arguably, be meaningless. The advisory group will be very important in getting that definition, which will allow us to get a baseline and set the targets on that basis. The important thing will be that the targets are challenging but informed by a clear starting point.

Miss M McIlveen:

The Deputy Chair commented on the budget, and we are aware that a budget will probably be

required for sharing education so that the challenges do not become too onerous for schools.

Mr McGrath:

At the minute, I am not sure that we would go as far as having specific budgets. We do not have any spare room. Bearing in mind the conversation that we have just had, this is about using and getting better value out of the mainstream budget by allowing schools, both within and across sectors, to come together and share facilities. We will not be creating facilities just for this matter.

Miss M McIlveen:

Obviously, there are also challenges for schools to deliver on sharing.

Mr McGrath:

Yes. That is why, as Katrina said, it is important that we get this right. The implication of shared education is that there will be sharing across different sides of the community. The second part of the sentence to which you referred is about the number of schools that share facilities. Lots of schools share within sectors. That is not the specific objective that we interpret from this, so it is very important that we work out what the currency for this is. Lots of schools are involved in lots of sharing, but it is not sharing across any divides; it is sharing within sectors. That is fine and dandy for its own reason, but it is not what this is about. Therefore, we need to work out what we are aiming to get here.

Miss M McIlveen:

I accept that.

Mr McGrath:

That is why we want this work to move forward pretty quickly. I also take the point, which I will reflect to the Minister, that, rather than allowing the issue to meander on for some time, there would have to be a fairly tightly focused piece of work to bring back something fairly quickly.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I want to pick up on Michelle's points and line of questioning. Katrina, you said that, before you

can answer that point, you need to reach an understanding of what is meant by sharing. How long do you think it will take before that understanding is reached?

Mrs Godfrey:

Hopefully, not very long, Chair. You will see that it is in the draft Programme for Government as one of the first milestones to be achieved. As John said, there is a sense of defining the objectives and the starting point. For the very reasons that Michelle articulated, that should not be a long, drawn-out exercise, but it needs to be transparent and clearly communicated and easily understood. Those will be the challenges that we will have to work to deliver.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Do you mean within the next three months, or the next six months?

Mrs Godfrey:

It is difficult to put an exact timescale on it until the Programme for Government consultation is complete. That is because there is a possibility that it could flesh out and evolve a bit further as a result of consultation.

The Deputy Chairperson:

On what basis was the meaning behind putting this milestone in as it is? What was your interpretation of the meaning? This addresses nothing if you do not have a meaning behind it. I understand why you do not have it, but what was your interpretation of the meaning?

Mr McGrath:

I think that it is safe to say that there has been a fair amount of debate about this in recent times that was prompted by the First Minister's remarks about shared education. This emanated from a political process. We are the recipients of it, not the shapers. It may be the product of the dialogue on the First Minister's remarks and the suggestions that there should be a commission to look at shared education or a single education system.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Do you think that the Department is likely to follow the First Minister's suggestion to have a

commission?

Mr McGrath:

No. My Minister has been very clear, and he is on the record as saying that he thinks that, too often in the past, people looked to outside bodies to offer views or advice on issues that are the responsibility of the local institutions. The Assembly, the Executive and the Minister are responsible for taking forward such things. He was very open about that when the integrated movement suggested that he set up a commission.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Do you think that you could come back to the Committee to give us some advance warning of when you might have a meaning for that?

Mr McGrath:

Yes. We would —

The Deputy Chairperson:

The whole connotation of this matter opens up a massive debate. You have put it down that you are going to do something without a meaning. How on earth you did that or why you did it is beyond me, but, nevertheless, you have no meaning to back it. I asked you that to get the debate out about the meaning. You referred to the First Minister's comments, and the Hansard report will tell us what you said.

Mr McGrath:

I referred to there having been a debate in recent times, and I am surmising —

The Deputy Chairperson:

I asked you whether the Department was likely to follow his idea of a commission, and you said no. That is where we get in to the debate, and I think that the point is to prime the Committee and the wider public for that discussion. That is why I am trying to tie you down as to whether you think that it will happen in three months, six months or nine months.

Mr McGrath:

I cannot give a timetable for that, because it is up to the Minister. Clearly, however, one of the first things will be the terms of reference for the advisory group, which will have to begin to address the subject matter. I imagine that the Committee will want to have sight of those terms of reference when they are developed.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I am looking for an indication, because sometimes something has been identified as being so important that it might not happen for a year's time. That is when things start to go astray. If it is important, can we not do it? That is the point that I am making.

Mr McGrath:

OK.

Mr Lunn:

I am interested in the notion that the First Minister kick-started the discussion on shared education, but I will let that pass.

Mr McGrath:

No, I simply said that there had been a debate in recent times.

Mr Lunn:

I did not say "the comment"; I said "the notion", which you referred to. It was on the agenda for quite some time before he decided to say anything about it.

On the same topic, I think that you said in the previous discussion, John, that shared education perhaps came about as a result of necessity rather than aspiration. You said that it may have been necessary for schools to share facilities and classes because of the entitlement framework and so on. That is a fair enough development. The Department has a commitment, as I understand it. I forget the actual words, but it is along the lines of promoting and facilitating integrated education. There is nothing in the proposals about that.

Mr McGrath:

No. There is a similar duty for the Irish-medium sector, which is not there, either.

Mr Lunn:

I will add in the Irish-medium sector, which I am perfectly supportive of as well. There is nothing about it, yet there is quite an ambitious commitment to shared education. I accept that it is good for children to participate in shared education, but I guess that it would also be more expensive if the schools have to co-operate in that way to provide the full entitlement framework.

I wonder why there is such a commitment to shared education but no mention whatsoever of integrated education. Will the ministerial advisory group not surely explore and bring forward recommendations about shared education in the current context and about sharing facilities between schools and sharing classes, or will it look at the possibility of schools coming together as one, whether that happens on the current integrated model or another one?

Mr McGrath:

As I said, it will be up to the advisory group to advise within its terms of reference. I cannot say what the ambit will be, but I know that different interests would perhaps suggest that it should go beyond sharing facilities and that we should start to think of different models of schools, such as shared faith schools. However, we are at the start of a process here, and we have to draw up the terms of reference for it and see how ambitious it will be. This issue came out of a political process, and we are surmising the genesis of it. We are in the foothills of this issue, and we will need a political steer on it.

Mr Lunn:

When you are establishing the terms of reference for the ministerial advisory group, would it be possible to include a reference to the consideration of an integrated, as well as the shared, model?

Mr McGrath:

I will bring that point to the Minister's attention.

Mr McDevitt:

For information, is the Committee proposing to hear from the Minister on the Programme for Government?

The Deputy Chairperson:

Yes.

Mr McDevitt:

So, is that scheduled in?

The Deputy Chairperson:

If you had been here last week, you would have known that.

Mr McDevitt:

Is that scheduled for January?

The Deputy Chairperson:

Yes.

Thank you very much for your time over both sessions, John and Katrina. We will be in touch. If we do not see you before the festive season, enjoy it.

Mr McGrath:

Thank you.

Mrs Godfrey:

You too.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I was waiting for that. Thank you.