



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Programme for Government: Progress
Report from the First Minister and deputy
First Minister

26 June 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Progress Report from 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 Leslie Cree
Mr Colum Eastwood
Ms Megan Fearon
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Alex Maskey
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr Martin McGuinness	deputy First Minister
Mr Peter Robinson	First Minister
Mr Jonathan Bell	junior Minister
Ms Jennifer McCann	junior Minister

The Chairperson: I welcome all four Ministers from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and their teams.

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): We have a full supporting cast with us today. Thank you very much indeed, Mr Chairman, for the invitation to brief the Committee today. Members will be aware that the deputy First Minister and I play a personal role in driving progress on the Programme for Government as co-chairs of the programme board. We take that role very seriously, and I am therefore very pleased to brief the Committee on the significant progress that has been achieved, as well as to highlight some of the challenges that we face in taking the programme forward to successful completion.

Our role, of course, is to provide both a challenge and support function, examining areas in which difficulties have arisen, identifying issues affecting delivery and then attempting to direct the efforts and, where necessary, direct resources to drive progress. That provides us with a good overview of the work that is being taken forward under the programme. I know that officials will be briefing you next week on the detailed delivery plans, and I am sure that you will want to question them on the

detail of those plans. Today we hope to give you a more strategic overview of the work that is under way and a flavour of the breadth of progress.

A suite of activities with the level of complexity and ambition of the Programme for Government cannot really be summarised by one or two numbers or by the simplistic categorisation of results through traffic light indicators. When you hear that, you know that I am about to do it. That said, a very good performance has been achieved against 84% of the commitments. That is an encouraging indicator of broad progress across a range of commitments. To understand the magnitude of the progress, it is worth looking at some of the most important achievements.

We had made five big commitments, the first of which was to contribute to rising levels of employment by supporting the promotion of over 25,000 new jobs. I am sure that you will be pleased to note that 13,914 jobs had been achieved up to March 2013 against a target of 13,300. So, we have exceeded that target. I think you will also know that, after that period in March, we had an influx of new jobs announced.

We also committed to increasing visitor numbers to 4.2 million and tourist revenue to £676 million by December 2014. Based on the available figures and in comparison with previous years, we are broadly on track to meet those targets for the end of the year. That will mean 3.47 million visitors and £519 million revenue.

One of the most important commitments was to reform and modernise the delivery of health and social care. That is a hugely important action, given the extent to which we all value our health and well-being and the level of expenditure on health and social care, which I think at the moment is approximately £5 billion per annum. We have gone to great lengths to ensure that those resources are used to the best possible effect. The Transforming Your Care consultation closed in January, with over 2,400 responses received. Implementation plans are being put in place, and issues identified in the development of those plans will be managed to ensure timely delivery and a positive impact on improving public health and patient care.

In addition to the "big five" commitments, significant progress has been made across a range of other commitments with an economic focus. For example, where the economy is concerned, air passenger duty rates for long-haul flights from Northern Ireland were reduced to zero from 1 January 2013; 143 additional science, technology, engineering and mathematics student places in further education colleges have been put in place; and 99.8% of children whose parents engaged with the process until the end obtained a funded preschool place last year. That is a hugely important development in promoting child development and in contributing to economic development by enabling parents to participate in employment.

One of the characteristics of the Programme for Government is that we made a very clear decision to integrate the economy and social objectives, in particular through OFMDFM's Delivering Social Change framework and an associated package of £28 million for the signature programmes. Essentially, a strong economy can help to promote an inclusive society and vice versa. Targets for the provision of new social and affordable homes have been exceeded, with more than 1,300 social and 500 affordable homes in 2012-13. An advisory group on hardship was convened and has presented us with a report making recommendations that we are considering. Some £2 million has been invested in programmes to tackle obesity, potentially impacting on the future health and well-being of people across Northern Ireland. A draft financial capability strategy has been prepared for consultation and will include key measures to improve people's skills in managing their financial future.

Through the Programme for Government, we have sought to go beyond the need for a vibrant economy and an inclusive society to protect and enhance the environment. Specific achievements include the following: a levy on single-use carrier bags has been introduced, and policy development work for the extension and increase of the levy in 2014 is in hand; and a statutory marine management scheme for Rathlin Island has been produced.

A strong dimension of the Programme for Government is the emphasis on tackling crime and addressing its causes. People need to feel secure, and we are determined that our actions will lead to improvements in real terms and in the perception of crime rates. One tangible example of that approach is the cross-departmental reducing offending strategy framework, which was published back in May. Furthermore, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Justice are preparing the new strategy for domestic violence and sexual violence. The target for finalising that strategy is January 2014. Following consultation with the Lord Chief Justice,

the age and vulnerability of the victim are included as aggravating factors in sentencing guidelines. Policing and community safety partnerships have all now been fully established and are operational.

Transport is a crucial element of the programme. Phase 1 of the upgrade to the Coleraine to Londonderry line was completed by the weekend of 22 to 24 March 2013, which was ahead of the April timetable. A new timetable of services is up and running. A programme to deliver phase 2 of the project has now been agreed, and a procurement strategy is being taken forward. Water quality and waste water standards that were set out in the programme have been met.

The promotion of a strong and united community is one of the most challenging issues that we face. We are a single community, and, despite the challenges of our history, it is crucial that we work together to achieve that aim. On 9 May, we announced a historic programme of activity and support called Together: Building a United Community, including a United Youth programme for 10,000 young people not in education, training or employment; four new urban villages; 100 shared summer schools; the acceleration of 10 shared housing developments; the initiation of 10 new shared education campuses; and a target to bring down all peace walls within 10 years. Programmes for the development of major sports stadiums are progressing well. Progress on reform and modernisation of the Prison Service has been maintained.

Before I hand over to Martin, I think that it is important to say that, as would be reasonably expected, a small number of commitments are affected by issues that could result in a delay to delivery. We appreciate that the Committee does not want a sugar-coated report focusing on areas where performance is very strong but ignoring other realities. Where commitments require extra momentum, they remain firmly in our sights as targets for strong remedial and supportive action. Some of those issues are not entirely within our control, of course. For example, export figures for the year to March have been disappointing as a result of the downturn in demand from traditional export markets, such as the Republic of Ireland or, indeed, the European Union more generally. Growth in emerging markets, which we have been encouraging, has been strong but from a low base, and it has not been sufficient to offset the traditional markets that have fallen.

Of course, that is not an excuse for inaction. It is a matter of public record that we have made tremendous efforts to grow our export markets and to promote inward investment by engaging with countries such as Brazil, India, China, and so forth. The recently secured economic package agreed with Her Majesty's Government will provide more support for business and crucial infrastructure development. It will provide guarantees for a start-up loans and a £20 million stimulus for research and development investment plans. Guarantees, which we have secured on additional borrowing to build shared housing and schools, are vital to ensuring that we can deliver the central tenet of our Programme for Government. They will be absolutely crucial in moving Northern Ireland from the economic and technology margins into the global mainstream.

On that note, and with your agreement, Mr Chairman, I will hand over to Martin.

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Thank you, Peter. I also thank the Committee for the opportunity to update members on the progress that has been made on the Programme for Government. The word that best summarises this programme is "ambition". We are beginning to see the fruits of this with a level and breadth of delivery that, when you see it in its entirety, is genuinely impressive.

We are making progress across the most important and challenging commitments in the programme. I agree with Peter that, in scrutinising the detail of the plans, it is important that we do not lose sight of the wood for the trees. For example, I can see the need for members to feel that the Committee is being treated with respect, and, in that context, I understand the concerns about late papers. Those are legitimate concerns, although it is important to set them in context.

We need to ensure that our administrative systems are open and transparent, but we also need to ensure that they deliver outcomes on the ground: qualifications; jobs; and an improved quality of life. Those and similar outcomes are what people want and need. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that we work together to deliver those outcomes. So, our focus needs to be on delivery.

With that in mind, and with the agreement of the Committee, I would like to take it through some of the most important results that have been achieved so far. First, it is worth looking at our "big five" commitments. Members will recall that we committed to achieving some £1 billion worth of investment in the economy. That sum includes £375 million as a result of foreign direct investment; £400 million from indigenous businesses supported by Invest NI; and £225 million as a result of the jobs fund.

Members will be pleased to note that, in fact, some £783 million has been achieved to March 2013 as against a target of £550 million. That investment will benefit people, families and neighbourhoods. It is important, therefore, to note that we gave a commitment to supporting young people into employment by providing skills and training. Over 68,000 such placements were achieved to March 2013, as against a target of 65,000.

We have also put in place a suite of measures to raise educational standards, with particular focus on our most disadvantaged pupils. For example, members will be aware of work that is under way to appoint 230 graduate teachers to improve levels of literacy and numeracy under Delivering Social Change. Indeed, increased numbers of pupils are leaving school with five or more GCSEs or equivalent, A* to C, including GCSEs in English and maths. Significant efforts are also being made to achieve improved educational outcomes. By March 2013, almost 140,000 qualifications, against a target of 105,000, had been delivered to upskill the working-age population, including further education, higher education and essential skills qualifications. The commitments in the Programme for Government have been designed to ensure that everyone gets a chance to grow and develop to their full potential. We have worked hard through the Delivering Social Change framework to encourage Departments to work together to tackle multi-generational poverty and to improve children and young people's health, well-being and life opportunities.

The most visible outworking of that was the announcement of the six Delivering Social Change signature programmes totalling £26 million. Those include: additional literacy and numeracy measures; the establishment of 10 family support hubs over the next two years; additional high-quality support through positive parenting programmes to new and existing parents living in areas of deprivation; the rolling-out of an additional 20 nurture units in addition to the seven nurture units that the Department for Social Development is already rolling out; the development of approximately 10 social enterprise incubation hubs servicing areas of multiple deprivation over a two-year period; and the scale up and roll-out of a pilot intervention for 500 families to support young people not in education, employment or training so that they can develop skills and be linked to the employment market.

The social investment fund (SIF) is a key part of the Delivering Social Change framework. We are progressing projects that are coming out of the strategic area plans that have been developed by nine social investment fund steering groups. We are also developing a childcare framework, which we plan to put to the Executive providing an evidence base for investment of the remainder of the £12 million childcare fund. In 2011-12, some £322,000 was allocated from the fund, and decisions this year will allow further allocations of up to £4.5 million.

Almost 9,600 households have benefited from the warm homes scheme, and some 7,400 approvals were issued to boiler replacement scheme applicants. Around 8,900 double glazing installations were commenced in social homes, and some 4,100 inefficient heating systems have been replaced.

Commitments to ensure no increase in water charges and student fees have been delivered. In addition, £4 million has been invested in programmes to tackle rural poverty and social and economic isolation, and significant work is under way to relocate the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's headquarters to a rural location.

Those commitments have been complemented by a range of actions to improve the environment. Measures that have been taken include the following: 15 new areas of special scientific interest have been declared; and household recycling and composting rates have increased. The latest figures suggest that the 2012-13 target of 41% has been exceeded, and the most recent figure for July to September 2012 is 44%.

The current action plan for domestic violence and sexual violence is operational until September 2013, and many of the actions in it are in progress, including the development of a programme for alleged offenders of domestic violence in conjunction with key stakeholders; the provision of an advocacy service for victims of domestic violence — a pilot court-listing process for cases of domestic violence; and enhancing legal professionals' awareness of domestic and sexual violence.

The action plan for antisocial behaviour, which was developed following agreement of the community safety strategy, has been agreed by the regional steering group for community safety and by the Justice Committee on 17 January this year. Key actions that will be delivered within the first 12 months of the plan include: promotion of best practice in tackling antisocial behaviour; clarity around roles and responsibilities; and securing effective partnership working. Over £300 million has been invested in sustainable modes of transport. Peter mentioned our desire to build a united community.

There is no doubt this that represents a huge challenge for all of us. The 'Together: Building a United Community' document represents the most ambitious good relations strategy ever produced here, and it is also our best chance of leaving a legacy of good relations to future generations.

Going beyond the strategy and the associated actions, there are a range of important commitments in the Programme for Government that can promote social cohesion. For example, the 2012 Irish Open championship was highly successful, demonstrating the capacity to host international-standard golf events here. Recent announcements indicate that the return of the event in future years is a strong possibility. Events such as that promote confidence among the whole community that things are changing. In addition, 15 public realm schemes have been completed at an approximate cost of £7.48 million to promote private sector investment in towns and cities. Again, such measures promote confidence, as well as creating genuinely shared physical spaces.

In relation to shared physical spaces, if you are looking for an example of how an area has transformed people's attitudes on the foot of a strategy to develop in a way that brings people together, you need look no further than three weeks ago in my own city. At the Ebrington site, a former military base that is now a public realm shared space area, 45,000 to 50,000 young people, of all religions and none, from every part of the North of Ireland had the most fantastic three days imaginable. There was not even a hint of trouble. I think that that is a first-class example of how we can move forward in a way that brings our young people together. I also think that our young people are ahead of the posse when it comes to where they want to go in that they want to move forward in a united way. That is not to mention the success of the Return of Colmcille and the overall success of the City of Culture celebrations, which, over the first six months, have been absolutely extraordinary. There is every likelihood that the next six months will be even more extraordinary.

To continue to deliver at this level, we need to keep up the pressure to achieve public sector reforms. It is important to note that the new local government district boundaries have been approved and that the Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill has been drafted with a view to early introduction in the Assembly. Furthermore, online access to government services has increased significantly, and a number of new projects have been taken forward or are on track for delivery later this year or early next year. That includes OFMDFM's social investment fund grant-management system, the Department of the Environment's retailer registration system and the Department for Finance and Personnel's (DFP) online genealogy search-and-payments system.

I hope that you will agree that those developments collectively represent a huge level of progress. However, as Peter noted, not all commitments are proceeding as smoothly as we would like. There are a number of areas where further work is required to agree our policy position, such as in the scope of the proposed legislation to tackle age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services, and in the publication of a sexual orientation strategy.

Although people might understandably be quick to criticise debates about the implementation of policy, I think that the public has the maturity to understand the value of honest discussion to reach an honourable shared position. It is important to stress that while discussions are under way, a great deal of work is ongoing by officials to ensure that those issues can be progressed. As Peter said, outside the areas where we are taking action to improve, performance delivery against the commitments has been strong. I believe that investments in preschool places, tackling obesity, tackling rural poverty and isolation, and avoiding increases in student fees and water charges are delivering real benefits for people now and will help to address serious social issues in the long term. So, we are confident that the progress that has been achieved to date provides a strong platform for the delivery of the Programme for Government over the remainder of the period. We are committed to continuing to drive progress and to playing a leadership role in responding strongly to any emerging issues that might affect progress.

So, we look forward to discussing all this with the Committee. Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you both very much indeed.

I will begin with the relationship between the Committee and the Department. I want to pick up on something that the deputy First Minister said in the context of something that the First Minister said with regard to the challenge and support function. The Committee's role is to scrutinise, and that is not the same as criticising. Scrutiny can lead to support as easily as criticism. As the deputy First Minister acknowledged, there has been an ongoing issue with delay in responses to the Committee from the Department. Some are over six months old. For the period 2012-13, 63 of 74 responses, which is 85%, were late as per the guidelines. We get late papers and have cancellations of briefings.

I believe that one briefing was cancelled at eight minutes to two. So, you get the picture. Do you take a view on it?

Mr P Robinson: Obviously, we want the best possible relationship between the Department and the Committee. This Department, and, therefore, this Committee, is unique in its form of government in that it is a joint Department. That means that there are significantly more hoops to jump through and significantly more hurdles to get over. The guidelines, which were probably set up for "normal" Departments, as I will describe them, sometimes make it very tight for our officials and the Ministers to meet those deadlines. However, as I said about the various goals in our Programme for Government that are falling behind, we will continue to look at those issues and at how we can speed up responses and ensure that our officials and Ministers give the best possible service to the Committee.

Mr M McGuinness: As I acknowledged in my comments, on previous occasions, delays have affected the provision to the Committee of papers relating to the Programme for Government. In large part, that has been as a result of the evolving process of information-gathering and management for the Programme for Government. I think that now having established a robust and efficient system for monitoring and reporting, we are confident that information will be available and will flow to the Committee much more promptly. The appearance next week by officials I think might present an opportunity to establish a schedule to allow the Committee to plan the forward work with greater certainty. So, we are absolutely committed to trying to improve a very obvious difficulty that puts the Committee at a disadvantage. We acknowledge that.

The Chairperson: I appreciate the commitment.

Mr Eastwood: You are all very welcome. Thanks for your briefing. There is so much to talk about, but I have a couple of specific questions. Martin, you touched on the sexual orientation strategy. The previous time that you were here, the First Minister said that that strategy would be published by, I think, last December. What about the age discrimination legislation and the goods, facilities and services legislation? Can you take a view at this point on whether young people will be included in that? Finally, will the extension of the Assembly term, of which we are all aware now, have any impact on the Programme for Government commitments and timelines?

Mr P Robinson: I will take your last question. The junior Ministers will probably want to comment on the other issue, because they are directly dealing with it.

You asked about the extension of the term. We are probably in a fairly privileged position with the kind of system that we have. We might not always see it as such, but because the same parties, largely, will come back, it does not stop us from looking beyond the immediate Programme for Government, which was a four-year programme. We hope that, within the four years, we will have reached the targets that we have set and, therefore, will be looking to set another range of short-term or interim targets as we move forward. Again, we will look for any advice and comment from the Committee on how we handle that transition, because we had set up for a four-year Assembly and produced a Programme for Government on that basis. Therefore, we have to consider whether we look at something for one year or do something that takes us beyond that, without the knowledge of who will be returned after an election to deal with it.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Do you want me to take the question on age discrimination?

Mr P Robinson: It was on sexual orientation, was it not?

Mr Eastwood: Either one. I asked a question on both.

Mr Bell: You got both issues into one question, which was quite clever. I will take them in order. First, the shared future strategy, Together: Building a United Community, includes a commitment to publish a sexual orientation strategy in 2013. A consultation document that will inform the public consultation on the strategy is under consideration in our Department. The strategy will be published once the 12-week consultation process has been completed. Our officials continue to work with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender forum, which has put forward proposals for the strategy and the required supporting actions.

On the age discrimination and goods, facilities and services legislation, there has been extensive engagement with Age Sector Platform and the Pensioners' Parliament. There was a long-standing lobby for something to be done to extend the legislation on goods, facilities and services to cover age discrimination. We included a commitment on age discrimination in our Programme for Government.

England provides an interesting comparison. It has already commenced the process of extending the legislation and its benefits to older people. We sought and continue to seek to learn from the passage of that legislation.

As you rightly point out, Mr Eastwood, a new secondary lobby has emerged that seeks an extension that will also include younger people. That would, I think, be a huge departure from the existing provision in this jurisdiction, and from provision in the UK and Europe. That should not, however, be a barrier to progressing novel and socially innovative legislation, but the Committee should also understand that doing so, given the scale, nature and number of provisions required, would be hugely time-intensive. We will continue to consider the issue, looking at where there is international best practice and discussing the subject with those who have expressed a sectoral interest in it.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I just want to make a point about the goods, facilities and services legislation. We have engaged extensively with the older people's sector but also those representing the younger people's sector. The view is that the legislation that we will introduce on goods, facilities and services should not allow discrimination on any basis. There is no view among any of the sectors that we have met that the legislation should not include older and younger people.

Mr Eastwood: Without getting into a debate, what is the Department's view? Has it a settled view on whether the legislation should include young people?

Mr M McGuinness: The scope of the legislation has to be agreed. The issue has been discussed by the Delivering Social Change — the equality and human rights framework — project board, and a Bill team is being put in place to undertake preparatory work in anticipation of agreement being reached. We have to be up front and honest about the fact that we have not yet reached agreement, but I think that the team will assist in expediting the issue. I hope that we will achieve agreement on how we move forward, but it is still a work in progress.

The Chairperson: Mr Bell, if I heard you correctly, you said that a consultation document on the sexual orientation strategy will inform the public consultation.

Mr Bell: Yes.

The Chairperson: So there will be another —

Mr Bell: There will be another 12-week public consultation after that consultation document is agreed.

The Chairperson: You will not be surprised to hear me say that you told the House, last year, that you expected that out by the end of that calendar year?

Mr Bell: I imagine that, when I said that in the House, that was my expectation at that particular time, but we are still working on the consultation document.

The Chairperson: So what happened to change your expectation?

Mr Bell: We continue to work on it. We have to agree the consultation document before we can put it out to public consultation. It is a work in progress.

The Chairperson: Has something frustrated your expectations as articulated that day in the House?

Mr Bell: We have not got agreement yet on the consultation document.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentations. How vulnerable are we to world economic factors in seeking to deliver against the Programme for Government targets? What approach do you intend to take, given the delay in progress on the A5 road scheme?

Mr P Robinson: Any economy in the world is subject to world economic factors. No one knows that better than us, with the global economy and the recession that we have had. Clearly that has had an impact. We could rightly have expected to have had a very considerable peace dividend, but we have ended up, because of the global recession, having to manage a decline. Therefore, it has been a major factor, and we have had to cope with the very significant impact of what has happened in the Irish Republic. We are a close neighbour, and anything that happens there will have an impact here. The cut in expenditure in the United Kingdom has had an impact on what we can do. As I indicated at the very beginning, one of the export targets that we set has been hampered because not only the traditional routes into the Republic of Ireland but those into Europe are restricted. People simply are not buying as much as they used to, so it has a big impact.

As far as the A5 is concerned, we were exceedingly disappointed that the issue effectively had to start all over again, but there is an absolute determination on our part, shared by Executive colleagues, that the project should go forward. Of course, it was to go forward in partnership with the Government of the Irish Republic, and they indicated to Martin and me, at the time when that they were facing their difficulties, that they would come back in the autumn of 2013 and see whether they could make a further contribution. We took that up with the Taoiseach when we met him during the G8 informal discussions. Again, there is an opportunity perhaps to get some of the stuff that we had set to the side because of the difficulties that the Irish Republic was facing to allow us to have a larger scheme than just the various stretches of road that we had in mind initially. However, there is an absolute determination that we will go forward as soon as we can get the legal difficulties resolved.

Mr M McGuinness: There has been a lot of discussion since the court made its decision on the A5, and there appeared to be some notion among some elements that the project was dead in the water. It is quite obvious, from the position that we have taken, that that is not so. We now have to go through a legal process, and the Department for Regional Development is charged with the responsibility of taking that forward. The entire Executive are absolutely conscious of the fact that the A5 is a major Programme for Government commitment.

It is also part of the decision-making process in the North/South Ministerial Council. Peter is absolutely correct that, every opportunity that we get to meet the Taoiseach, such as at the G8 in Fermanagh and again at the British-Irish Council meeting in Derry last Friday, we reminded him that there was a commitment that, when the Irish Government review the state of their finances later this year, it just might provide an opportunity for them to signal publicly that their end of the bargain will also be fulfilled. That could fit in neatly with the time frame for the legal processes that we have to go through, which we estimate will probably take between 18 months and, at the very outside, two years. We have agreed that, in the event that the green light is given for the project, the funds will be available to ensure the commencement of what is a very important scheme. It is important not just in the context of the road to Dublin. It is an important road to Belfast, given that many people west of the Bann in Fermanagh and, in particular, County Tyrone would have their travel time to Belfast considerably shortened by the improvement of the road. There is a double gain in all of this: a far better road to Belfast from the west and a top-quality road linking us to Dublin in a way that I think would send a very powerful message internationally that we are getting our act together on vital infrastructure, which is badly needed if we are to attract foreign direct investment.

Ms Fearon: Thanks for your presentation. Apologies for being slightly late.

You both spoke about the need to stimulate economic growth. Obviously, that is hugely important. What are your thoughts on what role or impact the economic pact made between the Executive and the British Government will have in helping us to deliver against the economic targets in the Programme for Government, and in real terms for people on the ground?

Mr M McGuinness: It is a very positive development from our perspective. There is no doubt that the economic pact will bring considerable gains to us and allow us much more flexibility and the ability to progress schemes that, ordinarily, we would find very difficult to progress. One of the less-spoken-about aspects of the economic pact, which surprised me given that the First Minister and I had, over the course of some considerable period, flagged it up, was our concern over whether the coalition Government were going to fulfil the commitment to the peace dividend that was agreed with the previous Administration in Downing Street prior to the establishment of these institutions in 2007. I take, as I am sure that Peter does, considerable satisfaction from the fact that the pact now clearly represents getting that back on track. Why is that important? It is hugely important for the construction industry, which has taken a very severe hit owing to the economic downturn over the past

number of years. The assisted areas strategy is also very important, given the huge role that Invest NI plays in attracting foreign direct investment. Look, for example, at the fact that during a time of world recession, we were able to attract more foreign direct investment jobs into the North than at any other time in the history of the state. That clearly shows the importance of the assistance and aid that is given to those major companies, some of which are world brands that have decided to locate here. In doing so, they present a very positive message. Apart from that, there is the Peace IV money, and the extra £50 million on top of that. All of that is of huge importance. There is no doubt whatsoever that the economic pact will give us considerable tools to push the economic platform that we have placed at the front and centre of our Programme for Government.

Mr P Robinson: Perhaps the first thing that I should say is what the economic pact will not do on its own. That relates to our view that we need to have the ability to set a lower level of corporation tax. The pact does indicate a process. That is important, because that was not there when first we met the Prime Minister on the issue of the economic pact. He agreed that the Government would take a decision in 2014, after the Scottish referendum. What has since been added, because of pressure from this end, is that, if that is a positive decision, the Government will implement it during this parliamentary term. We all know that there will be no guarantees about what Government might return and what their view might be on these issues.

The economic pact is a long document. It really is worth reading, because there are a number of even small issues that mark ongoing work that could turn out to be very valuable. There are some things that do not have a price tag beside them, and therefore the press miss them. Those, again, can be very valuable, and I suppose that an example is the issue of reaching an agreement with the Republic of Ireland over the use of a visa into the Republic of Ireland that can also be used to go on to visit Northern Ireland. You and I know that no one is standing on the border to ask for people's passport and to see what their visa says and that people could come up if they really wanted to. However, foreign travellers, I think, will keep very much to what the procedures and protocols are, and if we can have an arrangement that they can plan and book ahead to make hotel reservations, or whatever else, that allows a lot of people more freely to come rather than have to go for two visa applications, which is a bit off-putting. We are hoping that, in the longer term, the biometrics that would allow that more free travel throughout the islands will be sorted out between the UK Government and the Government of the Irish Republic.

The other thing that is important to us is the potential to increase reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing. The specific level of increase is to allow us to look at the shared future projects. We have some misgivings, and I will put them out at the early stage, because it may be a defence for me at a later stage. Our concern is that we all know how long it takes to get a process under way before you can get on the ground and start building, never mind start paying for what has been built. To have the RRI borrowing increase for the period up to 2016 means that the various Departments will have to work very hard and very fast to be able to meet those kinds of deadlines. There will be deadlines with planning, deadlines with procurement and deadlines that will occur with the whole of the tendering process, particularly if European tendering is required. Therefore, it will be very tight for us to be able to spend the money in that period, although we have a very clear direction from the proposals that we have announced on what we would like to spend it on.

Mr M McGuinness: Some people might be concerned about some of the remarks that Vince Cable made on corporation tax. Those caused some confusion last week, but it was very fortunate that Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister, was in Derry for the British-Irish Council, at which the media asked him about this issue. Peter and I were very pleased that his answer was in accord with David Cameron's approach that this will be dealt with in the aftermath of the Scottish referendum. Obviously, we would like to see it happen before that, but they have made their decision. We are still absolutely committed to fighting for this, because, in our opinion, it is a game-changer for attracting more foreign direct investment jobs. The Vince Cable comments did throw a bit of a spanner in the works, but it was made very clear by his party leader that he is in accord with David Cameron on the issue. That is good news.

Mr P Robinson: One other factor as I think about it is, as you will remember from conversations in the past, the £18 billion shortfall from our capital budget. One of the things that has been encouraging is that, although there is a penalty on the revenue side, the Treasury has been increasing capital sums to us. With the Budget, the pact and the announcement today, you can see the capital figures going up. It looks as if, if they retain that same trajectory, it is certainly possible for us to meet the figures that had been initially promised.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Ministers for their very impressive and very positive presentation. I have a couple of points to make. First, what process is followed to ensure that commitments that are not meeting their targets are brought back on track? That question is for the First Minister.

Mr P Robinson: The whole purpose of our having the process that we are engaged in is so that we can identify where there is a problem in the system rather than just leaving it in a Department. It, therefore, gives the deputy First Minister and I the ability to see what the cause of the problem is and work along with the Department that is facing the challenge that has slowed down the progress. Officials will then monitor that much more closely as they move forward. If it is determined that it is something that requires more resources, it is clearly something that we will bring to the Executive to see what additional support can be given.

There are, however, some areas in which it is really out of our hands. If it is because of an impact from the global economy, civil servants and Ministers can spend day and night trying to resolve the issue, but we are not going to be able to get the same hold that would allow us to turn the situation around. We have all the systems in place with our central team, and it is the team's responsibility to identify and mark the progress. We had a review meeting last week or the week before at which we went over each of the commitments. We went into detail about problems that were being faced by the ones that were not in that 84% and looked at how we can assist in reaching the targets. On many occasions, we can see a way of speeding up progress, but I would be dumbfounded if we ever produced a Programme for Government and met 100% of our targets. In fact, if we ever did, I would be questioning whether we were sufficiently stretching ourselves in the targets that we had set. Equally, if we are, and there are already some indications that we are not just meeting but exceeding some of the targets in the time frame in which we are operating, again we will continue to look at whether we should set more robust targets.

I do not want to discourage Departments from making a full-blooded attempt to meet targets by indicating that, if they do, we will make it harder for them, but the whole purpose is to keep stretching officialdom here to do better and better. I have to say that we are very well-served and perhaps they do not get sufficient praise. In fact, they probably do not get any praise at times, so let me give it now.

Mr G Robinson: I have a supplementary question. Do you believe that any of the commitments in the Programme for Government need updating in light of the experience of the first year of delivery?

Mr P Robinson: As I indicated, we were ahead on some of the delivery targets. There are none that we are particularly looking at exceeding. I know that the delivery oversight group has been attempting to ensure that the necessary actions are taken to avoid any recurrence where there is a difficulty, but it would be a very nice problem to have if we had to up targets.

To go back to Colum's question from earlier, if we are going to stretch our Programme for Government for a further year, clearly we have to look at targets again in almost every area.

Mr G Robinson: I have one more question, which concerns the G8. We all remember that it was the most peaceful G8 in its history. Do you think that that can help us in any way from a tourism point of view?

Mr M McGuinness: When Peter and I were in Downing Street for the announcement of the economic pact, I predicted at the press conference afterwards that my sense was that it would be the most peaceful G8 in history.

From our perspective, it can do nothing but good. The publicity around it, the message that it sent out about how this place has changed — you could not buy that publicity. I think that it sent a very powerful message to the international community that we are open for business and that we are a society that is moving on.

There was huge interest at the G8 from the leaders. Peter and I were at Lough Erne and had a very real engagement with all the leaders, including Angela Merkel, the French president and President Obama. The French president and Angela Merkel were hugely interested in the role that we are playing in the field of conflict resolution, given that representatives of many of our parties at this table have been to places such as Havana, even in the past couple of weeks, contributing to the Colombian peace process. We have had people in the Philippines and people in Burma. They were hugely interested in all of that, and I think that that sends out a very powerful message.

Even this week, Peter and I went to the Global India Business Meeting (GIBM) in the Europa Hotel. There were 150 senior executives from India having their conference in the Europa, with all the baggage that the Europa has had down the years. I think that that tells you how things are changing. All those people will go back to their own country with a very positive message about what we are trying to do. All of that also vindicates our strategy of not being inward-looking. If there are opportunities in China, India, North America or Canada, my attitude is that if you do not go, there is no chance of getting. Moreover, of course, the Japanese prime minister came to Belfast and issued an invitation. One thing that is for sure, particularly with the venture into China, is that the Chinese appreciate it when you come back. If you go on a one-off trip, you just do not register on the Richter scale for doing business with them. Therefore, I think that the G8 was an enormous success.

Mr G Robinson: A win-win situation.

Mr M McGuinness: Absolutely, and I want to pay tribute to everybody who contributed to that. There was a whole range of people involved in government and our emergency services who contributed to it. I also want to pay tribute to the protesters, because they were protesting about things that many people around this table are concerned about — conflict in the world, world hunger and things like that. The fact that they were peaceful, with, I think, one minor infringement, speaks volumes for the way in which they were prepared to respect the success of our peace process.

Mr G Robinson: And our police force as well.

Mr M McGuinness: Absolutely. I said the emergency services, and I include the PSNI in that.

Mrs Hale: Welcome to the Committee. Thank you very much for your very positive report. We are very good in Northern Ireland at looking for the doom and gloom and finding a negative aspect, but George is right in saying that it is very positive.

Given that the report was published in March, can you give us an update on the performance in the intervening months? Have any of the poorly performing areas improved? First Minister, you touched briefly on the fact that, owing to the economic climate, there has been a slight decrease in exports. What role do you believe OFMDFM can play in helping Invest NI attract foreign direct investment? I know that the deputy First Minister touched on that briefly.

Mr P Robinson: First, the one thing that we do not want to get drawn into is trying to predict what the next set of figures might look like. We have put in place what I believe is a very independent process for evaluating the progress that has been made against each of the targets that we set. I indicated in my earlier remarks that, for instance, for jobs coming in, the figures that we have given, which themselves have exceeded the target set, were from before we got many thousands of additional jobs over the past number of weeks. Things are looking good on that front, and perhaps that relates to George and Colum's questions on whether we upgrade some of the targets, although if Alastair Hamilton hears that, he will be on the phone very quickly.

We will not try to predict what is going to happen, but you are right to say that it is a hugely positive report. We do not close our eyes to the fact that there are some areas in which we are not reaching the targets that we had set for ourselves, and we therefore have to look at how we can get socks pulled up in those areas. As I have indicated, there are some areas in which things are largely out of our control. You may want to deal with the other part of the question.

Mr M McGuinness: I referred earlier to the importance of engaging with people who may be interested in foreign direct investment here, but it is also important to promote the export of our manufacturing goods to areas that, perhaps, are not as tied in to foreign direct investment here as, for example, North America and the United States.

Our role is to support, whenever possible, the work of Invest NI. Almost all of our trips are in conjunction with the work that Invest NI is doing in different locations, whether in India, China or North America. It is hugely important that we give political support. The message that always comes back from the trade delegations that go out there is that they think that they are taken much more seriously if political support is seen to be there in the countries that they visit.

I know that there have been critics of the foreign trips, but the best defenders of those trips are the business community. Of course, during the Japanese Prime Minister's visit, we had a very important announcement of over 400 new jobs at Larne. All of that clearly argues for a very close and tight

working relationship between Invest NI and our Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who does sterling work travelling the world advocating for more jobs with considerable success. Even over the course of the past six weeks or two months, there has been a fantastic number of announcements.

The unemployment figures have dropped in each of the past four months. I say that while being very conscious that something could jump up and bite us next month or the month after, but our hope has to be that that is a trend. If we can continue to bear down on the unemployment figures and put people to work in meaningful jobs with good wages, we can be proud of that, particularly if we are doing it now against the backdrop of what has been a very damaging world recession.

In short, the link between Invest NI and us, through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, is hugely important. Our job is to play a supportive role for them.

Mr P Robinson: It might be worthwhile, from the point of view of the Committee's workload, to point out that we are already working on an international relations strategy. You will have heard our comments after the visit to China that we were given clear advice by the Chinese authorities that we should, for instance, focus on a particular part of China and look at setting up an office in Beijing.

We are looking at where Invest NI has a presence and the shape of that presence, and at what presence the Executive should have in various places around the world. We are a country with 1.8 million people, and if we want to have real economic growth, we cannot sell goods to one another. We have to go out well beyond our boundaries, and export growth is what this economy requires. That means us having a presence elsewhere and sending Ministers out. Even when Ministers go out on behalf of their Departments, they should be looking to see what role they might play in selling and marketing Northern Ireland as a location to visit or as a place with which to trade or invest in.

The Chairperson: Most Committee members have been at the Executive's office in Brussels. In fact, the last time we were there, we bumped into the Invest NI rep, who, as you know, has a presence there. No one disputes the value of having, perhaps, a presence in Beijing along those lines.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Ministers for a very positive report. I was pleased to hear the First Minister talking about the Londonderry line and the fact that £27 million had been spent that was going to be lost from the deferred A5 project. I am glad that it was opened in good time and earlier than we expected for the City of Culture events. The procurement stage is now on for the loop, which should mean increased travel and services on that line. That is a good news story for tourism.

With regard to the amendments that were agreed to the Planning Bill in the past couple of days; do you believe that they will have a positive role in helping to deliver against the Programme for Government targets? In my Committee this morning, one area that was red related to the money that has not come in from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. However, the very positive aspect to that is that the Executive have allowed spend by the Harbour Commissioners on the new terminal for the tourist ships and all the rest of it. The figure is around £20 million each year for a two-year period, which would be £40 million. The actual spend for Northern Ireland and the Belfast area is anticipated to be £50 million or £60 million each year as a result of the new terminal — additional jobs and all the rest of it. That is a good news story that has not really got out there.

I think that we need to be positive in all these things and see not the negative spin that is sometimes put on things by the press and other people, but that, fair enough, you did not get £20 million in, but you are actually megabucks ahead for jobs, the new terminal and all the rest of it, and that will go on year after year.

Mr P Robinson: We have not given up on the fact that the harbour is an asset and should be an asset for Northern Ireland. It does a tremendous job and it is a first-class facility. The Port of Belfast is a very important link for our economy. Therefore, nothing we do should damage its civic potential. Nonetheless, the economic pact recognises that there are ways that we can realise some benefit for the wider community from the profits that are gained by the harbour. It is not simply a port facility, and we have to recognise that. There are two or three thousand acres of land, so there is a very significant development aspect to it, and it is only right that the wider community should get some benefit, particularly at a time when funds are difficult.

With regard to your first point about planning, I have read some of the hoo-ha in the newspapers about how people have managed to twist for political purposes the nature of what was being sought through

the planning amendments. Martin and I spent about an hour yesterday with a local company that wanted to extend its business and provide an additional 130 jobs in a much-needed part of the Province and had been sitting waiting for two years and four months for the permission. Now, if you want to be serious about getting jobs into Northern Ireland, even from our local businesspeople, we really need to look at planning and ensure that we get the right outcome.

I have been in many parts of the world and have spoken to people who were looking to invest in Northern Ireland and who have been put off by our planning experiences. It is internationally recognised that Northern Ireland has a poor planning outcome. If you have that out in the international community, a message has to go out to the international community to say that things have changed. I believe that that is the kind of message that will be sent out by what we have done. Far from it being a power grab, it is already our power. There is nothing that we have done that we could not have done by circuitous means.

We have been open and honest in the process. We have a responsibility for dealing with any cross-cutting issues. This is a cross-cutting issue between the Department of the Environment and DETI and, therefore, we have a particular responsibility for those matters. We have had legal advice and, as far as we are concerned, we could challenge various issues within planning and have them brought to the Executive for decision. I do not think that that was the route to take.

We have not inserted ourselves into the process. There will be no planners in OFMDFM; we will not be operating the planning system. The Department of the Environment will do that, and it will continue to do that under the amendments. All that will happen under the amendments is that we will have the ability to identify zones. We do not have the power to grant permissions within those zones; that will have to be done in conjunction with the Minister who is responsible for the Department of the Environment. If there is not agreement between us, the Assembly will take those decisions. What could be more democratic than that? That is what will happen in district councils up and down the country. Are we saying that our Assembly Members are less capable of deciding these matters than councillors?

There has been a lot of hoo-ha that I think was politically driven. The reality is that we need to speed up our system and have some certainty about what the outcomes might be. It will not throw things wide open. We are not going to be building factories in the middle of scenic areas. That is not what it is about, and everybody knows that. It will be a sensible process to ensure that the wee man who came to see us yesterday can get a decision at the end of the process, and can know whether he has to put his business somewhere outside of Northern Ireland or whether he has to lay people off because he cannot continue to grow. Those are the kind of decisions that this country needs to take.

At the end of the day, this is about whether you are on the side of those who would slow down every process that is available, or whether you are on the side of those who want jobs and who want to get out of poverty. Unless we can grow our economy and produce jobs, that is exactly the road that we are heading down.

Mr M McGuinness: There was a lot of scaremongering during the debates in the Assembly this week. There is no question or doubt that that was for political grandstanding purposes. It came from a Minister who has always protected his independence from the Executive. He is not a team player; he has his own political agenda.

I concur with everything that Peter said about the arguments that were made about this being a land grab by OFMDFM; it is absolutely nothing of the sort. All sorts of other arguments were used to try to undermine the work that we have been doing in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. He even had the audacity to raise the issue of the past. Of course, I do not ever recall that same person being willing to major in that during the years 1999 until 2002, when the first Executive was in place under the stewardship of the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists. Sometimes people have an absolute brass neck about how they approach these debates.

Look at the work that we have been doing. Apart from Peter in his introductory remarks, we have not yet touched on the issue of Together: Building a United Community, although I expect that someone will raise it, and the effort that we made to bring all the political parties together to work out who the independent chair of the body will be. I have to say, with great disappointment, that the SDLP briefed a journalist about the outworking of that discussion, in a way that I think undermines our effort to get a person of huge calibre to chair such a body. I think that the SDLP did a great disservice in briefing that journalist.

The Chairperson: Deputy First Minister, clearly the Minister is not here to answer the original points that you made. On the issue of the briefing or not of the media, you appear to have knowledge that I certainly do not have. I think that it is probably appropriate to offer Colum, if he wishes —

Mr Eastwood: I do not have any knowledge of anybody briefing —

Mr M McGuinness: I did not accuse Colum of doing it.

The Chairperson: No, but he is the only representative of the SDLP here. He is the brief writer.

Mr Eastwood: I have no knowledge of that. I cannot answer an accusation that I know nothing about.

Mr M McGuinness: I do not expect you to answer it. What I am saying very clearly is that I have a major responsibility, along with Peter and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to bring forward a hugely important piece of work to deal with contentious issues such as the past, parades and flags, symbols and emblems. Representatives of all the political parties came together in a very serious endeavour to work out a mechanism for how we would put in place a list of people who we would seek to chair that body on an independent basis. The names of some of those people were leaked to the media in an article that quite clearly had SDLP input. I cannot go past the conclusion that that name was deliberately leaked to the media and, in doing so, did a grave disservice to the hugely important work that we are engaged in.

The Chairperson: As you in a position to indicate a likely time frame for the appointment or an announcement of the chair of that all-party group?

Mr M McGuinness: It is a work in progress —

Mr P Robinson: A person is being approached.

Mr M McGuinness: Yes; absolutely. However, I think that people leaking stuff to the media makes it harder to get people to agree to do these jobs.

The Chairperson: The point has certainly been made and noted.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for your presentation, Ministers. I welcome the progress that has been made in some of the key areas in job creation and growth in the key sectors of the economy: tourism, ICT and the creative industries. There are some key social and economic issues that people have serious concerns about.

I did not think that we were going to rehash the debate on the Planning Bill. However, I think that the point that was made on the Floor of the Assembly during the debate was that no one disagrees that there needs to be increased certainty and speed in the planning system, but if you are looking for that, OFMDFM is the last place to send it. I would be interested to know whether you think that there are other issues that contribute to a less than adequate planning system, such as staff and resources, and whether there are any likely changes or additional resources that are going to be available in that regard.

I want to take some of the key issues. Why do you think that the childcare strategy has been delayed for so long? What are the outstanding issues that continue to hold up the childcare framework? The Committee received evidence that Northern Ireland is in the region of 10 years behind the rest of Europe on childcare provision.

Ms J McCann: There is no doubt that there is a gap in childcare provision. For some years, we have been involved in engaging with the sector. We have engaged with parents and carers and those who represent childcare organisations. We brought forward the proposals that are now out for consultation.

As you will know, I engage constantly with those sectors, and the feedback that I am getting is quite positive. We have a £12 million budget for the childcare strategy. Some moneys have been spent, albeit very small amounts. I do not know the exact figures so I do not want to give them, but a substantial amount of money will be going out over the next few months to the projects and programmes that have come forward.

It is like everything else: you have to engage with people whom it directly affects. A lot of the issues that come back, particularly for parents and carers, relate to the fact that women are the primary carers for children in our society. Many of them work different hours than 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, so our childcare strategy has to be very flexible. We are looking at shaping it in that way. It has to be child-centred and have a focus on employment and training opportunities for people. We have had to take all of that into consideration. We have also had meetings with people who have come to the likes of Bronwyn to discuss rural childcare. That has been a big piece of work, but we are on board in trying to ensure that it will be brought forward very soon after we get the reports back.

Mr Lyttle: Is there a timescale for finalising the framework?

Ms J McCann: To be honest, Chris, I would not like to say an exact date now because I am not certain of it, but we predict that you will see a lot of progress made on that sometime this year.

Mr Bell: I think, Chris, that you are looking at weeks. As everybody knows, health and education had this responsibility during previous Assemblies and it has only come into OFMDFM. So, OFMDFM took up the mantle after there had been no agreement in previous Assemblies. We have looked at a number of excellent childcare features that are in place in Northern Ireland. In 2011-12, £322,000 was allocated. Recent decisions by OFMDFM will allow another £4.5 million to be allocated to childcare. We are delivering against the objective and vision of high-quality childcare being accessible and affordable for every child aged 0 to 14 by 2020. Key to that is trying to ensure that parents can get quality and approved information on childcare provision by enhancing the FamilySupportNI website and developing an app to allow parents greater accessibility. The increased provision of childcare services, particularly school-age childcare, in which research and information indicated there had been a significant shortfall. We have also improved the uptake of the available financial support to meet the cost of childcare.

We have taken on tackling the situation of children with disabilities and particular needs, as well as childcare in rural areas. Some of the money allocated has gone to our most peripheral rural areas. We have developed workforce skills in children, in addition to allowing some money for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to look at the registration of childminders, so that we have the proper quality, standards, Access Northern Ireland checks and everything else in place to ensure that childcare provision is there. When you see the document in the next number of weeks, against the background of an additional £4.5 million on top of the £322,000 allocated, you will see the process accelerate.

Mr Lyttle: On education, you mentioned the Building a United Community strategy. The president of the United States recently used his speech to refer to his concerns about Catholic and Protestant children having their own school buildings and his fear that that may encourage division. The First Minister also made a strong statement, with which I agree, that it is fundamentally wrong that our education system separates our children on the basis of religion at such an early age. In what way will the proposal to have 10 shared education campuses help to address those concerns? Is that adequate to meet the wider Northern Ireland community's apparent ambition? Why is there no detailed mention of the role that integrated education could play in addressing that issue?

Mr P Robinson: Let me touch on that. I am not sure that there is any difference between where, from your point of view or mine, we want to see things finish. At the first ever DUP conference, I put forward a motion on integrated education. It was supported at the conference. I moved to a new concept of shared education. It was not accidental, and I did not indicate that I had given up the hope that, sometime in the future, our children would be educated together throughout the length and breadth of the land. It is borne by the reality that we have to deal with the logistics of where we are at the present time. We have a school system with a number of sectors that you simply could not change overnight. It will have to be a process.

When you looked at the 'A Shared Future' document, the strategy itself, you will have seen the careful language that this was a process towards one single school system. That is the aim. Martin and I have talked about that on many occasions, and we have used the analogy that if we were starting afresh and determining today on a clean piece of paper what we would do, we would never do what is the status quo in Northern Ireland. We would have a fully integrated school system. We need to get from where we are to where we want to be, and we need to do it in a way that we can bring people along with us.

The shared future projects allow shared classes, shared schools and shared campuses, all of which, though not the answer in themselves, are on the road to the answer. So, nobody has gone cold on the ultimate objective. We recognise that we need to make a good start, and we believe that that is a good start.

For instance, I met with the people from Lisanelly. They have ambitious proposals, and they are very determined that this is the right way forward. You will see when we designate the campuses that they will be among them. I went down to meet the people in Moy, and I met the principals of the two schools. They are looking to move into one school building. I cannot help but think that although, in the initial period, the ethos of the existing schools will be there, somewhere down the road, whether it is this year, next year or five years from now, the two principals will not say to each other, "We are spending resources on having two geography teachers. Is there Protestant geography and Catholic geography? Surely, it makes good sense to have classes being educated on that together." You can go through a whole range of the curriculum. Bit by bit, we will get to exactly where you want it to be. I just do not think that the cost can be borne by the state to do it in the one-step process that some of us would like, nor do I think that we would get the necessary co-operation, and you must bring people along with you in this process. If you force it on people, you will have difficulties.

The one area where I think that you could detect a deficiency in where we are at the present time is that there are a number of integrated schools that have the will and capacity to take on more pupils but are not being given the permission to do so. That is something that we have to look at, but we have to look at it in a way that does not do violence to other schools in the area.

Mr Lyttle: First Minister, you mentioned bringing people with us and cost. Is it your assessment that the ideas in Together: Building a United Community are ahead of the wider community view in relation to educating children together and that 10 shared education campuses will cost less than setting targets or policies to introduce more integrated education?

Mr P Robinson: Let us be clear: 10 campuses is the start. It is not going to resolve the problem of a divided educational sector. It is a process that must go on. We must continue with this process until we get to where we want to get to. As to whether we are in front, behind or alongside the wider community, I believe that this is consistent with the wish of the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland who want to see division at educational level broken down. This allows us to do it in a way that will not have stand-up resistance to the process in which we are involved.

You mentioned processes, and there are other things that can be done. We have not stopped the journey of building a shared education system in Northern Ireland. That goes on, and there are other things that can and will be done.

Mr Lyttle: One other quick question —

Mr M McGuinness: Are you going on to a different question?

Mr Lyttle: I would be glad to hear from you on the previous one, deputy First Minister.

Mr M McGuinness: I do not think that there is any difference between where Peter wants to go on integrated education, where you want to go, and where I want to go. However, people sometimes have a simplistic notion that you can just flick a switch and integrate the education system overnight. That ignores the reality that we are dealing with a legacy of history.

Over the past five years, we are on record, not just here in our own country but when we are asked about this when we go to other places, as saying consistently that, if we had a blank sheet of paper, there would not be a hair between where we are coming from in respect of our preference for an integrated schooling system. However, life is not as simple as that. As a result of history, we have ended up with a state-controlled sector and a Catholic-maintained sector. Even today, I read that Bishop Donal McKeown is criticising a poll — I do not know who did the poll, but it was in the 'Belfast Telegraph' — because he said that the questions were loaded.

The trick is to bring about a situation in which people agree in principle that we absolutely need increased contact between our young people, heading towards a fully-integrated system. We can do that only if the major elements and major stakeholders in education are prepared to sign up for that. I take tremendous encouragement from what I am hearing now. The Lisanelly project experienced some difficulties over a judicial review with one school, for its own reasons that I respect, not being

prepared to come on board. That school has now signed up to a memorandum of understanding with the other five schools. That really liberates the situation as regards putting in place a shared campus at Lisanelly, which I see as an iconic project.

Even down in Armagh, very important discussions have taken place. We are going in the right direction. We are not going to do it at the flick of a switch. We can do it only through making a very powerful case. I think that we are doing that through the decisions that we have taken in the last short while about the need for increased sharing in education. We must do it by bringing everybody into the tent and ensuring that they recognise the importance of moving in a direction that sees our kids integrating for the first time in history.

Obviously, there is impatience in the integrated sector. I was Education Minister from, I think, December 1999 until October 2002, a very difficult period when the institutions collapsed on three occasions. I am very proud that the first big decision that I took then was to authorise the commencement of two new integrated schools. There is a considerable consensus between politicians about where we need to go. I hope that those in the educational arena will recognise that it is absolutely and eminently in the best interests of all of us that we have an accelerated rate of sharing and integration in our education system.

Mr Lyttle: The challenge and difficulty is that what we are discussing is not about a flick of a switch but a long-term strategy that has set a particular direction.

Mr M McGuinness: Yes. However, when you listen to some commentators and people who are asked about this, you almost think that they think that, within six months or a year, you can move from the type of education system that we have now to a fully-integrated system.

Mr Lyttle: I would certainly not say that.

Mr M McGuinness: It will not happen like that. It will happen through a process of education over time and through people working in a spirit of co-operation to make it happen.

Mr Lyttle: I understand that a deadline of December has been set for the outcomes of the working group on flags, parades and dealing with the past. It is also my understanding that there is an ongoing review of the flags protocol working group. Have there been any recent meetings, determinations or proposals from the flags protocol working group that will be of use to the additional working group that has been set up?

Mr P Robinson: Whatever discussions there are, we can make available any thinking that there is on the issue. At the end of the day, flags protocol working groups will not solve our problems for us; we will have to solve them ourselves. That will mean sitting down, having what are described as uncomfortable discussions, and looking to see where we can reach common ground. We may not be able to reach common ground on issues or, indeed, all parts of each of those issues, but we have to keep trying. The fact that we have not succeeded to date indicates how hard it is to reach agreement on these matters. There are matters that touch on issues such as identity, which fire up communities when they feel that they are under threat. Those matters have to be handled sensibly.

It was for that reason that we agreed two things. First, we agreed that we will have an independent chairperson who will have a responsibility for bringing forward a report on the widest level of consensus that it is possible to reach within our own all-party group. The all-party group would be able to bring in stakeholders to discuss the matters with their particular expertise. For instance, within the last few days, I spoke to a group of victims who want to have a role in discussions on the issue.

This will tackle it in a different way than before, and I trust that we will get some progress. If you are running down to Paddy Power, or whoever is about these days, you might not want to put your house on it. However, we have to make progress in hope. If the people around the table make a genuine attempt, they will certainly be able to reach agreement on a wide range of issues, though perhaps not on every issue.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the fact that you have taken the Alliance Party's proposals for an independent chair and inclusion of wider stakeholders. The Committee also met the victims group, and I agree that their inclusion in this type of process is essential.

The Chairperson: Before I bring Leslie in, I want to go back to something that Jimmy brought up, namely the Belfast Harbour. If a sale or long lease were deemed to be the best thing to do, would there be any ideological barrier on either side of the House to that course of action?

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure that ideology is the issue that will determine it. Quite frankly, in the harbour we have a jewel. Selling it, particularly at a time when we would perhaps not gain its true value, may not be seen as taking the widest long-term view. There is also the issue of whether we sell it as a core harbour or whether we sell the development lands and separate what is at the harbour. Along with your colleague and mine, the Minister for Regional Development, we have looked at a range of options. Further work is being done on that.

Mr Spratt: I raised the £20 million aspect. It was a matter for the Programme of Government that that £20 million has now turned into a benefit to the Northern Ireland economy year after year in the form of extra jobs, the new terminal and stuff like that. So, in actual fact, I was complimenting the Executive and Ministers on how they looked at that money, the legal aspects of getting it, and how it is being better spent in the overall economy.

Mr P Robinson: I think that we should remember how this whole process began. It began at a time when we had a Budget review group, comprising representatives from political parties, sit down to consider the issue of where we could get some money in if our Budget were to be cut by the Treasury.

This was one of the areas identified. It was a Northern Ireland asset that was making a significant profit; so, surely, at a time of hardship, it could make a contribution.

The Assembly passed a Budget predicated on the basis that £20 million would come from the harbour. If, over the period of the Budget, the harbour had given over the £20 million, no consideration probably would have been given to changing the way it operates. However, because they "lawyered up" and went public to indicate that this could not be done, we took legal advice. The Attorney General made it very clear to us that we could do this and now the economic pact has indicated that the United Kingdom Government, if necessary, are prepared to give us the support.

There was the view that we could not do it and that it would have to be done at Westminster. Now, it is very clear that we can make progress, and I hope that we can resolve things. As I said earlier, the port is a credit to Northern Ireland. It is doing a good job, and it would be a shame to start shaking it up and turning it around and not being quite sure what was going to come out at the end of it. However, we need to have some wider responsibility to the Northern Ireland community beyond the fiduciary responsibility that they tie themselves to at present.

Mr M McGuinness: On the ideological approach, the previous Assembly had an all-party group that objected to the privatisation of the harbour. I think that that group felt that selling the harbour would not represent value for money. If you look at the activities and operations that are currently taking place at the harbour, not least with the turbines and so forth, you will see that it is a success. When you are driving along the M2 into Belfast in the morning, it is quite stark to see the massive operations that are taking place.

For us, as Peter said, it was about how the harbour would contribute to the shortfall in our Budget as a result of the cuts that came from London. We have not given up on that, and we will continue to explore how we can get the best result possible so that we can move forward. It has particular relevance for the Department for Regional Development, in whose domain the harbour sits.

Mr Cree: Thank you very much, gentleman and lady, for your answers so far, which have been forthright. On that last point, I hope that the Minister for Regional Development gets the hole in his budget plugged, because that is a problem for him.

I have three quick points to make, if I may. Reference has been made to the economic pact, and, in that, there was reference to the possible devolution of further fiscal powers. Can you share with us what those might be? One of the difficulties that small and medium-sized enterprises currently have is cash flow, and DETI has a loan fund of around £50 million, which is intended to provide liquidity for small businesses. That has been delayed. Can we have an update on that? Will it still go ahead, and, if so, when?

Finally, on an issue that I have a particular interest in, we have a major problem with the current Budget processes. Over two years ago, a lot of work was put into developing a new process that

would be clear and accountable and provide direct read-across and allow better scrutiny of all the numbers involved. It was approved by the Committee, the Minister and, indeed, by the House when it was the subject of a debate. I understand that it has been stuck in the Executive for the past two years. I may be wrong, but I understand that some other Minister who is not a team player is holding that up. Is it possible to try to move that forward in the interests of having a better system?

Mr P Robinson: Let me deal with one or two of the earlier points, and Martin will take the latter one. On consideration of the use of other fiscal powers, there have been discussions on things such as aggregates tax and stamp duty. It is nearly a tongue-in-cheek point to say that you could also consider a tax on harbours and ports.

Obviously, those are things that you could consider. We have a regional rate as opposed to the kinds of tax-varying powers that Scotland has, although has not used. The bottom line on this is the fact that, generally speaking, when people want you to have the power over various taxes, they want you to have the powers so that you do not exercise them at all. They want you to bring them to zero, as is the case with air passenger duty (APD). The likes of RRI borrowing looks for us to bring in additional income so that we pay off whatever the additional borrowing is from additional income, rather than paying it off from the block grant. So, we need to ensure that we do not simply have fiscal powers so that we can bring them to zero and not take any advantage from it.

What was the second matter that you raised?

Mr Cree: The £50 million liquidity package.

Mr P Robinson: We started a fund for small and medium-sized businesses. Indeed, I do not think that we even restricted it to them. It was for businesses that were having difficulty in being able to access borrowing from the banks.

It is a very popular scheme, and the most recent time I spoke to the Invest Northern Ireland chief executive, he was talking about perhaps having to get it topped up next year. That says something about our banking system, does it not? The one aspect of the pact that we really have to push is the willingness expressed by the Prime Minister to look at the banking system in Northern Ireland.

Effectively, we are a prisoner to banks that are not Northern Ireland-based, and that puts us in a very weak position, particularly during a recession, when there is an inclination to draw back. Obviously, we have difficulties because the National Asset Management Agency has hold of a number of very significant properties in Northern Ireland and because the Presbyterian Mutual Society has a number of properties tied in.

All of this causes a drag on our system. So, from our point of view, we have been looking at various ways in which we can get additional borrowing. There are certain guarantees that the Government are willing to give, but unfortunately, the kinds of schemes that they are looking at are very significant major schemes of which we do not have that many in Northern Ireland. They have to be what the Government refer to as being of national significance. So, we are not talking about a small area where you are building houses or even, perhaps, a hospital. We are looking to see whether we can get something that is of regional significance to us to be considered to be of national significance to them.

Mr M McGuinness: On fiscal powers, we are considering with the Government how best to maximise all of this in order to bring maximum benefit to our Executive. I think that it is very important that we are all open-minded about how we can do that. The fact that we have had the APD power devolved to us and that we are arguing for the "biggy", which is the ability to lower the rate of corporation tax, means that we have shown ourselves to be an Executive that are open to ideas on how the devolution of fiscal powers can enhance our prospects on developing our economy.

You can correct me if I am wrong, but the last issue you raised was a reference to an issue between the Department of Education and the Department of Finance and Personnel. There are ongoing discussions around that. It centres on the view of the Department of Education that the strictures put in place by DFP in some way impinge on its ability to manage its own budget. I hope that that can be resolved shortly.

Mr Cree: I hope so, because it does not affect anyone else, apparently.

Mr M McGuinness: That is right, but the Minister of Education is 6 feet 4 inches, and Sammy is —

Mr Cree: I will back you up.

The Chairperson: Leslie is now leaving for an Assembly Commission meeting.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Ministers and their team for the presentation. It has been good in so far as we got an update on the delivery of the Programme for Government. It is very helpful.

Quite a bit of information has been given to the Committee early on, at least we were reminded early on, even in your opening remarks, First Minister, that a lot of the work has been done across all the Departments, most of which never sees the light of day because of the prevailing negative narrative out there.

However, you were honest in acknowledging that some of the commitments have not been delivered because of political disagreement. It is important that we acknowledge that. It is not surprising that it is the case, but it is good to know that we are continuing to make further progress and shortening the time frame for decisions.

Further to that, I want to address a couple of issues. I share the remarks that I have heard in commentary recently in that I think that some remarks from some parties have gone well beyond party politics; they have damaged the body politic. It is important, therefore, to see a welcome step change from OFMDFM, which, as Peter said earlier, has taken on a unique role. It is not just a Department, it is the leadership of the Executive, and it has the very important role of co-ordinating and driving the corporate Executive project along. So, I see what I hope will be a step change in driving that agenda with the recent announcements on the planning amendments, even though there is some controversy around that.

It is an important initiative. Taken in perspective, it is quite reasonable, and there are a lot of protections built in. The decisions on 'Together: Building a United Community' are very important. I welcome all that progress and what I see as a step change in the approach. It is needed. One criticism, which, to some degree, you will acknowledge has some merit, is that the period of following through on actions has sometimes been too protracted. Will there be a framework within which 'Together: Building a United Community' will be delivered and driven by the Executive as a whole? It cross-cuts a number of Departments.

There are big issues such as the Maze/Long Kesh site and the conflict resolution centre. Are we sure that there is a process in place to drive 'Together: Building a United Community' and to make sure that the big commitments such as the Maze/Long Kesh site are continued? It is important that we continue with what most people see to be very progressive and economically advantageous developments.

Mr M McGuinness: The publication of 'Together: Building a United Community' was a very important initiative on our part. It came about because we were not prepared to wait until a point when we had total agreement in all the political parties. Some parties had different views about how that should be taken forward, and we had to try to get as much consensus as possible.

We have put forward a document that has been well received, and the reaction to it was very interesting. Some commentators derided it, but those people who will gain the most from it — people at grass-roots level — were very welcoming of the initiative. I take comfort that people at grass-roots level in communities see it as a very important piece of work to bring our community together. That could be through the opportunities for the 10,000 young people to work in environments that they are not normally in or through the 10-year project to bring down the wrongly named, I think, peace walls. They are hideous things that we all want gone as quickly as possible, with the consent and full support of the local communities. We will continue to drive forward with that in a way that clearly shows that we have the ability to deliver on all the objectives that we have set ourselves in that paper. It has been well received, but we are very determined to deliver on that in the future.

I will now turn to the issue of Maze/Long Kesh. Peter may also want to say something about it. I look at the pioneering spirit of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society, which is overseeing the first major project on that site, and the enormous success of the Balmoral show this year, with something like a 20% increase in attendance. Obviously, the public had no difficulty whatsoever in associating themselves with the site, the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society's very ambitious programme to develop its operation and, around that, all the other opportunities that we have to develop our agrifood industry.

It is an absolutely marvellous site, which will include the peace building and conflict resolution centre project.

Given the number of groups from all over the world that have come here to learn from our experiences, it is quite obvious that such a centre is absolutely essential. It is disappointing that there is some opposition to it. The other day, we were speaking to Daniel Libeskind, one of the world's great architects, who designed the new world trade centre in New York, which is going to be an absolutely fabulous piece of work. It has gained overwhelming support in New York after initial reservations had been expressed. The powerful thing that he said to us was that when he designed the new Jewish museum in Berlin, there was massive opposition to it, but that, once it was constructed, the opposition disappeared. When the building opened, there was nothing in it, but people came in their droves and spent €10 just to see it. That appears to be the type of building that he is seeking to establish on the Maze/Long Kesh site.

I have no doubt that it will be an overwhelming success once people see it in place, and once they see that we are being very sensitive about how we deal with the nature of the content of the peace building and conflict resolution centre. We are taking on board the reservations and concerns expressed, including by people who, at the moment, are hostile to the development. We all have to be very sympathetic, empathetic and compassionate to one another. The last thing that we want to see on that site is a shrine to anything other than peace and peace building. That is achievable, and I think that people should give it a fair wind.

Mr P Robinson: First, I appreciate the remarks that you made at the beginning about the nature of OFMDFM. I do not think that too many people recognise the role that is played by the Department. It is not like other Departments, which have various functions assigned to them and they operate those functions, administer them and take decisions in relation to them.

When everything else gets gummed up in the system, it comes to this Department. Therefore, it is unfair of people to say that there are delays in OFMDFM. We get the problems that other people cannot resolve. When a Minister cannot get sufficient support for a strategy or a Bill, it comes to us to try to resolve the issues and work our way through them, because we have that particular role. When you give us all the difficult stuff to do, do not be surprised if it takes a bit longer for us to work our way through those things. As was indicated, the Department plays a unique role.

I could go on for a very long time about the Maze/Long Kesh project and wear out the Chairperson's patience. I have no doubt that republicans, unionists and, indeed, others in between will all have a different angle of vision and will look on the proposals and the site in a different way.

It is important to recognise how I was confronted with it. When I came into office, decisions had already been taken about that site. A panel, led by the former chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party had brought forward a report that required, not just that the buildings be listed, but that they be listed speedily. Not only had the panel asked for that to happen, but it had asked that the peace-building and conflict resolution centre be based on the site. It had proposals for a range of other things, but, unlike what other people are trying now to suggest, there was no conditionality about one thing being required on the site or else the whole game was off. There was a proposal on the site that, in timetabling, two things should be brought forward together, but there was not conditionality about what should be on the site.

As soon as that report was endorsed by the then First Minister and leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, a decision was taken by the Government to proceed on the basis of that plan. When devolution was set up, there were very considerable levels of opposition raised, mainly from the football community, but not solely from it, about the placing of an arena on that site. Regrettably, some people chose to widen that argument to an attack on the site; I was not one of them. However, the reality was that there was not sufficient consensus to have the sports that were being designated using an arena on that site, and it was agreed that we would help to fund arenas in different locations for those three main bodies.

As a result of that, we still have all the rest of the elements, and you cannot undo the decisions that were taken unless there is cross-community agreement. So there was cross-community agreement for changing the nature of having a stadium there, but no cross-community agreement for any other aspect of the site being removed. In the system that we have, we need to have support from both sections of our community in order to go forward, and, at the same time, in order to make a change, you have to bring both sections of the community along with you.

So what I am indicating is that, the moment I came into office and had to deal with this issue, there were two clear choices to make. You either had to run, or attempt to detoxify, some of the initial proposals that came forward from the panel or else you just simply had to lock up the site, let the tumbleweed blow around it, do nothing with it whatsoever, forget that there could be thousands of jobs for people who could be employed in there and the economic growth that could be gained for our economy as a whole by having that fantastic site, well-located, opened up for more commercial use. Those were the two choices I had. I am glad to say — and I think it was the right decision to take — the view was taken that we should attempt to make the facility one that the whole community could buy into. As we went along, there was a recognition on the part of Sinn Féin that, by moving away from the original Ulster Unionist-led proposal — which was to have the peace-building centre in the middle of the retained buildings — we could get a higher level of support and consensus. I think that that was a wise decision to take and it showed that we were prepared to try to reach agreement on those matters.

The Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) came in very strongly. It showed a vision of what could happen on that site, and we have only seen part of the vision of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society. As Martin has indicated, over 100,000 people, more than at any time before, attended the Balmoral Show this year. That indicates that there is no cold factor around the site for the general public. The RUAS will be just as close to the retained buildings as the peace centre will be.

However, there is an issue that seems to conflate the peace centre with the retained buildings. What we have been careful to do in OFMDFM is to retain certain decisions that will be taken on a cross-community basis by ourselves jointly to ensure that we have the maximum degree of consensus as to what goes on on the site.

When we listened to Daniel Libeskind who gave us a presentation, he showed us what it was that he wanted to have in the peace building. There is nothing in that presentation that anybody out there would be in the least bit concerned about. There are no museums in it, and there is no exhibition space in it. It is an international peace centre such as you would see in other parts of the world, with research facilities and an amphitheatre in order that people can discuss these issues and have lectures on the subject of peace creation. It will have break-out rooms, a library and catering facilities — it will have all those things. It is not a museum or visitor attraction. It is precisely what Martin indicated that it is. It is to help people from around the world where there are conflicts to sit down and share experiences so that they might be better able to resolve those problems. However, it is not just for those from around the world, because we have enough difficulty still continuing in Northern Ireland to employ it full time ourselves. We still have reconciliation to get within our communities, so there is still ongoing work to be done in that peace centre.

All the scaremongering that is going on out there, and I have had it before — I have had it before in my more recent political career when we tried to deal with policing and justice. We had people saying that the first Justice Minister would be Gerry Kelly, that Martin McGuinness was going to be hiring and firing judges and that the matter was going to be a subject for the North/South Ministerial Council. All of it was bogus, scaring people out there as to what might happen. As soon as we took the decision, not a problem was raised thereafter. We had an election immediately after we took that decision, and it was not raised once on the doorstep. That is why I go forward to this project in confidence, because I believe that people who have seen the RUAS show see the fantastic opportunity that there is on that site. As soon as we get a partner for the commercial elements and investment element of it, I believe that people will open their eyes wide at the prospects that we have of job creation on that site.

When we have a peace centre, people will say, "What on earth was all the talk about?", because there is nothing in that peace centre that will offend anybody. The very name of it would suggest that, far from being a shrine to terrorism, it is something to show that there is a better way to reach agreements, to try to avoid violence and to try to avoid terrorism from occurring, and that has to be the way forward.

People should be very careful in what they say and do about this centre in the weeks and months ahead because I believe that time will prove that there was nothing to fear, that this is a facility of benefit to the people of Northern Ireland and that it will advance what we are attempting to do in Northern Ireland in building our peace and in growing our economy.

The Chairperson: As First Minister, you have put your thoughts on record in the Hansard report in some detail. I think that it would only be fair to say that, first of all, David Campbell would contest your assertion. He believes that when he chaired that committee — he used this word — "selectivity" was agreed by all parties; that nobody would buy into anything other than the whole proposal. For the

record, Edwin Poots represented the Democratic Unionist Party on that development panel, chaired by David Campbell.

Secondly, on the Ulster Unionist position on the retained buildings, I would direct you to the minutes of a planning committee meeting of Lisburn council on 12 February 2004, chaired, as it happens, by Edwin Poots, when the Ulster Unionist Party put down its opposition to any of the buildings being retained at the old HMP Maze. That is just for the record.

Mrs Hale: Sorry, Chair, just with your indulgence; I sit here as a Member for Lagan Valley, and Maze/Long Kesh is right in the middle of my constituency. Can I just say that when I canvassed previously and when I canvass now, there is no local opposition to the Maze or the buildings within it.

Mr Spratt: Except the nutters.

Mrs Hale: The Ministers have both said that the people of Northern Ireland not only voted at the ballot box but with their feet, and they voted with their pockets when thousands of them paid money to go into the Maze — nobody dragged them in.

Can I just say also that we talk about responsible journalism. We are in a position where we must be responsible politicians, and to scare people at home and to fabricate issues that may or may not arise is not responsible politics at all. We should carry that responsibility very seriously.

You are talking about Lagan Valley. It is my area. It would bring jobs for all of Northern Ireland and put us on the world stage.

The Chairperson: Let us not conflate the development of the Maze site, which I think is a great idea —

Mrs Hale: I do not take that very well: we need to look forward and at how we are moving Northern Ireland forward. The Maze is a vehicle for that. Either we all get on board or we can leave —

Mr P Robinson: Mr Chairman, you cannot get away with the argument that you are attempting to put forward, which is not to mistake the development of the site with the position of the retained buildings or the peace-building centre. That is a totally inaccurate and, as you know, impossible position to adopt.

The Chairperson: Let me ask you this, First Minister —

Mr P Robinson: The decision to place the peace-building centre there had already been taken. The decision to retain the buildings had already been taken. Those are facts. That could not be changed unless there was a Damascus-road experience on the part of Sinn Féin, and the SDLP for that matter.

The Chairperson: I have one last question because I do not want to get bogged down in this.

Mr Spratt: Not like you.

The Chairperson: Jimmy, some of your interventions, such as calling the people who are against the peace-building centre at the Maze "nutters", have not been helpful.

Mr Spratt: I did not say that.

The Chairperson: I heard you.

Mr Spratt: Well, we will debate that, Chair. I would ask you to take what you have just said off the record because you are spinning again.

The Chairperson: I am not spinning, Jimmy.

Mr Spratt: It is your normal way of trying to do things. You will not spin me or spin stuff that I am supposed to have said, that I did not say, in the context of the way in which you are trying to spin it.

The Chairperson: I ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister; does the peace-building and conflict-resolution centre have to be built on that site?

Mr P Robinson: The then chairman of the Ulster Unionist Party asked for it to be built there. The then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party agreed that it should be built there. The Government then decided that it should be built there. Therefore, it will be there unless there is cross-cutting agreement between the deputy First Minister and I that it should not be. Does anybody think that that is going to happen? Therefore, the only choice that we had, if you wanted to stop the peace-building centre being built at the Maze, was to lock the gates. I ask you, if you had my decision to make, and you had either to lock the gates or make the best that you possibly could of the arrangements that had been agreed, which would you have done?

The Chairperson: I am interested in where we are —

Mr P Robinson: You tell me: what would you have done?

The Chairperson: I am asking the deputy First Minister —

Mr P Robinson: So, you are not going to answer me?

The Chairperson: Does it have to be built at the Maze?

Mr P Robinson: You are not going to answer.

Mr Maskey: Chair, can I ask a question?

Mr M McGuinness: Hold on, Alex. Hold on a wee second. The reality, Chair, is that this peace-building and conflict-resolution centre will be built on the site of the Maze/Long Kesh. We are absolutely determined that the first bricks will be laid on the site in the autumn of this year. When that happens, all those who, up until that point, have been opposed to it, will need to re-evaluate their position, because I think that there will be overwhelming support for it. I think that the public will understand that it is not part of any sneaky deal or underhand agreement to, in any way, create difficulties for any section of our community. This is a very genuine attempt to put in place a peace-building and conflict-resolution centre on the site of something that is known worldwide and to send a very powerful message to the world about how the place where we live has changed. I think that that makes sense. It makes sense to Daniel Libeskind and his wife. They have never been as excited about any project that they have been involved in as they are about this one. It was he who raised the issue of the Jewish museum in Berlin, which he designed, and the fact that there was massive opposition to the building of it. Once the bricks were laid and people saw the building, they came to it in droves, even at a time when there was nothing in it, because they came to see the building.

Now, we need to be smart about this. People, particularly in the political arena, know in their hearts and souls that there will not be any reversal of the decision. Too much work has gone into it and there is too much to be gained as a result of it. What I appeal to you and others to do is to recognise the importance of working with us. I think that if you work with us, you will get a pleasant surprise about our attitude to how this is managed and how it is delivered in a way that can bring maximum cohesion in our community.

Why would I be interested in supporting a project that is going to be in any way used by anybody as a divisive tool to create difficulties in this society? For the past 20 years, I have worked to try to build the peace process. I have stood against the forces out there that believe that they have the right to plunge us back to the past, and I have been threatened for it, but it is not going to stop me. My absolute determination is to work within these institutions. Their strategy is to divide Peter Robinson and I, but we are not going to allow that to happen. Every single deed that they engage in makes us stronger, more dedicated and more committed to standing together with all the parties in our Executive to ensure that we do not slip back to the past.

The message that the centre will send internationally about how this place has changed will be as powerful as the coming to Fermanagh of some of the most important leaders in the world last week. That is the message that I want to see go out. There is no other message I want to see go out. The centre can only be a shrine to peace, peace building and how conflict can be resolved. We know, and you know better than anybody else, the amount of interest that there is in the international community

for our people to go to different parts of the world to explain what we did, without us going to those countries on the basis that we have a solution to their problems. We had to find our own solution to our problems and come to our own agreements. All that we can do is to outline for them the approach that we used.

At the moment, there is much talk in the media about the US Administration having been talking behind the scenes to the Taliban for the past three years. Now, within the next couple of days, formal discussions are going to take place. That is where the world is going. The world is moving decisively — and I think President Obama is part of that — in the direction of how we can resolve conflict as opposed to perpetuating conflict. We have a role to play and I think that, through the centre, we can play a very powerful and very responsible role and assist in the ending of conflict, which causes the loss of life of tens of thousands in many other places throughout the world.

Mr Maskey: I asked the question because we are here to discuss the progress of the delivery of the Programme for Government, and this is a very important element of that. I have listened to the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and I am well satisfied that they fully understand that there are very important and significant sensitivities out there. As we have rehearsed here this afternoon, we need to take all those matters forward with a lot of compassion and sensitivity, but, nevertheless, we still have to deliver those things.

Our job as a Committee is to scrutinise how the Programme for Government is delivered, not just unpick it, which is what people keep trying to do. I think there is a fault line in the Assembly, and sometimes it is reflected in here, which is fair enough, because people are entitled to have opposition to different things, but there is a Programme for Government, whether people like it or not. It is there. Our job is to make sure that it is delivered by holding the Department to account for the delivery of it, not to tear every commitment asunder because we do not like it. It is a re-run of the Programme for Government arguments. It has been agreed.

I respect you, Chair, because you have complained on a number of occasions, and you have quite sensitively made the point privately to my party colleagues. You have not abused your position as Chair to argue against delays with papers, and so on and so forth. However, by the same token, our job is to robustly hold the Department to account for delivering the commitments, not to unpick them every time we get an opportunity.

I think that parties in the Assembly have to reflect on their current positions, because there is a Programme for Government, which has been agreed. That is the process that we have here. We now have to hold the Departments — all the Departments — to account for delivery of that. That is our job, not to unpick those arguments every day of the week. We do not have that luxury. Our job — I think Brenda made the point earlier — is to work together to get those things done. That is what our job is. I am satisfied, from what I have heard today, that the big-ticket issues are being delivered and that the kind of problems that have been associated with the Department — some justifiably, some not — are being addressed. We are now shortening the time when decisions are being taken, and I hope that continues to be the case as we move forward.

The Chairperson: We will have just one more question. I know that you have been here for a long time, and we appreciate it.

Mr P Robinson: You sound like somebody who is about to take the pin out of the grenade. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: You are supposed to think that.

My question relates to the social investment fund. Obviously, that has not gone as originally planned, and I know that there are good reasons for that. I want to know where we are now. To be parochial, in Strangford — I know that junior Minister Bell will know this — there is a feeling among the south-eastern zonal advisory panel that Lisburn cleaned up with regard to capital projects, and it is now sitting looking at the next wave of proposals. The advisory panel felt that it would have been very helpful if the statutory people were brought on board those panels, because the voluntary and community members of the panel believe that it is only the statutory people who have the expertise, the data and the research that would enable them to feel confident that they would have more success in the next round than they had with the capital projects. Can you give us an update on where you think we are with SIF?

Ms J McCann: May I answer your last question first? The statutory bodies were not brought on board at the beginning because it was always meant to be an area-based plan and that the community and voluntary sectors should feed in what their communities wanted. It was always felt that they were best placed to know what their areas needed to include in their area plans and, once those plans were identified, they would look at bringing the necessary statutory organisations on board. There was no point in having a whole raft of statutory organisations, and that may not have been what that area was asking for. That is why it was structured in that way.

With regard to how it is going, the final plans have now come forward and are subject to the review. Work is ongoing with OFMDFM officials who are working on the strategic investment fund. They are looking at all the business cases and making them ready. I take on board what you said, because I heard you mentioning a particular area in the Assembly. It was the job of the social investment board that was set up in those communities to decide and put together actions plans and bring forward the business case, working in conjunction with consultants and officials in OFMDFM. As you can imagine, there would be quite a number of community projects and people will want to access money from the social investment fund for those projects; therefore, priority projects will have to be picked. It was always going to be the responsibility of those community organisations and the SIF board to put forward the projects that the community wanted. That was always how it was envisaged that it should be rolled out.

I assume that you are talking about the top 10 projects that have been brought forward in specific areas. Those projects were brought forward by that SIF board, so it is really up to that SIF board at local level to decide the projects that it wants brought forward. I suggest that that is where that needs to be brought back to and cleared up.

Mr P Robinson: The list came forward — it was certainly cleared in my office last week — with the names of the business and statutory representatives. As has been indicated, the whole purpose behind the social investment fund was to get grass-roots involvement and to have people deciding for themselves what they wanted to happen in their area, rather than them being told by statutory bodies and others what should be happening in their area. Therefore, if you had put the statutory bodies on at an early stage, they would have applied some influence, I am sure, to the process and where the money should be spent, and you would not have got the true feeling of the local communities. I think that holding them back was the right thing to do. It has now been cleared.

With regard to where we are now, I am glad that all the zones brought forward their agreed area plans; they were received by the date that we set, which was the end of February. I understand that — literally within days — we are expecting to get the evaluation of them from our officials. As I understand the process from then, a certain number of them will go forward for business case to the Department of Finance and Personnel. That is largely the course and the timetable that we had set, and it seems that it is now being met. Later on this year, it is hoped that we will see actual money being spent on the ground and the improvements taking place that local communities want.

The Chairperson: I thank all four of you very much for your time.

Mr Spratt: Point of order, Mr Chairman, and I would like it written into the record. You made reference to a word. I was speaking with my colleague, and you made reference to and tried to spin, as an independent Chair, something totally out of context of what was said. I want you to apologise to me for doing that. It is the usual way that you try to spin things in the media and everything else to suit your own agenda. I certainly was not calling anybody in this room, nor, indeed, people who have opposition to the Maze, nutters. So get your facts right before you try to spin and to make statements in the future. If you have any guts at all, you will apologise for not independently chairing the meeting at that point.

The Chairperson: I know what you said, Jimmy. You know —

Mr Spratt: Well, let us see Hansard; let us see Hansard.

The Chairperson: You know what you said.

Mr Spratt: No. You do not know what I said.

The Chairperson: I heard what you said.

Mr Spratt: You do not know what I said, and I am not going to let you spin it any more because you are absolutely pathetic in how you try to spin things on a regular basis. So I want no more comment about it —

The Chairperson: I am chairing the meeting.

Mr Spratt: I did not make the comment in the context that you were trying to make it.

The Chairperson: I am chairing the meeting, Jimmy.

Mr Spratt: You might well be but you are not going to —

The Chairperson: I am responding to you —

Mr Spratt: You are not going to speak me down by trying to spin something that was not meant in that way. End of story. We will see whether it is on the record in the Hansard report.

The Chairperson: For the record; I heard what you said.

Mr Spratt: It is your usual spin.

The Chairperson: You know what you said. You know the context.

Mr Spratt: You be very careful what you are saying.

The Chairperson: We will move on.

Mr Spratt: You be very, very careful what you are saying.

The Chairperson: We will move on.

Mr Spratt: You can move wherever you like but you be —

The Chairperson: We are now moving on, Jimmy.