



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Programme for Government 2011-15
Delivery Plans: OFMDFM Briefing

12 September 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Miss Megan Fearon
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Alex Maskey
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Mrs Linsey Farrell	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Henry Johnston	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Dr Denis McMahon	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Ms Maggie Smith	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Chairperson: From the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), we welcome Denis McMahon, Maggie Smith, Henry Johnston and not Frank Duffy but Linsey Farrell. Denis, I presume that you will lead.

Dr Denis McMahon (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Thank you very much, Chair. I very much welcome the opportunity to come back to the Committee to speak about the plans. When we came to talk about the Programme for Government (PFG), we gave a commitment that we would come back to talk about the plans, and we are very keen to do so. I will try to explain a little bit about the relationship between the plans because, at first sight, it looks as if there is an awful lot there. Actually, we are probably talking about the same things in each case.

The Chairperson: At second or third sight maybe, too.

Dr McMahon: The issue is that OFMDFM has 11 commitments in the Programme for Government, nine of which fall to my side of the house. The others fall to Noel Lavery's side of the house, and he will come back next week to talk about those. Of the nine commitments, we have seven delivery plans, each showing how we will deliver one or more of the commitments. The reason why we also have to have a departmental plan is that, frankly, our primary purpose is to deliver the Programme for Government. That is clear from the Ministers' public statements on the Programme for Government, and the head of the Civil Service and the Ministers are very clear that they expect to see us delivering.

That is our primary function as a Civil Service. Each Department is expected to do that but OFMDFM as much as any.

As you would expect, the Programme for Government commitments are also at the centre of the departmental plan. The departmental plan is built around that. In addition to that, it includes personnel and other issues that we need to take into account. However, at its heart are the Programme for Government commitments. In fact, speaking personally, I have to say that my own job plan is very clear that the Programme for Government commitments are in there as well. That is what I am required to do. In a way, the Programme for Government commitments cascade to the work of the Department and the work of individual divisions, individual branches and individuals in the Department. Everybody should know how they are contributing to the Programme for Government targets.

This issue is a top priority for Ministers. A lot of work on delivery has been initiated and is under way. We would be very happy to talk about where we are with that and take any questions and views that the Committee has. One of the things that we found in developing the Programme for Government was that we got a very detailed response from the Committee. That was useful and changed some of the commitments in the final Programme for Government. Therefore, we are very happy to engage with the Committee on an ongoing basis to get feedback and, if we need to, change some of our delivery plans to reflect some of the views expressed.

I will now hand over to Henry, who will talk about some of the general issues associated with the plans.

Mr Henry Johnston (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I will talk a wee bit about the context of the OFMDFM plans and the overall delivery plans for the Programme for Government, which I touched on the previous time that I was in front of the Committee. All 82 commitments in the Programme for Government have delivery plans. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister have an oversight responsibility for the delivery of all those and will report any changes to the Executive. Those 82 commitments are already out there and have published annual milestones. The intention is to make those available on a new portal on NI Direct. That will be used as the basis for an external report of progress against each delivery plan, including OFMDFM's own plans. The intention is that the first time that information will be gleaned from Departments will be at the end of quarter 2 (Q2), which will be around October time. We will be requesting information from everybody and from ourselves. We have a dual role to look at the overall delivery of the PFG and at how OFMDFM is doing against our plans, and Denis's seven plans in particular.

The Chairperson: Just try to keep it as easy as possible, Denis. You have a Programme for Government, which, by necessity, is high-end aspirational: "We want to achieve" something. Then, because it falls to OFMDFM, it comes down to you to put that into the departmental plan. We have the 2012-13 departmental plan. The vision is on the front, and if we turn over to the next page, we see a quadrant with the headings "Results", "Customers", "People & Organisation" and "Business Processes". Will you tell us how we are supposed to read that and how the Programme for Government aspirations have migrated down?

Dr McMahon: If you look at the quadrant, you will see that, for most of these, we have used the same wording as is used in the commitments. In my copy, most of them are highlighted in yellow. Are they highlighted on the public version? I am not sure; perhaps not. However, I can point them out to you. Under "Results", look at R1, R2, R3, R4 and R5. Those are all straightforward Programme for Government commitments. Similarly, under "Business Processes", BP1 to BP5 are all Programme for Government commitments. Under "Customers", C1 to C5 are all Programme for Government commitments. Under "People & Organisation", PO1 is also a Programme for Government commitment. All those are worded as they are in the Programme for Government.

Look at the next page. I will use as an example one that I am doing. R4, on the left-hand side, states:

"Provide £40m to address dereliction and promote investment".

That is really the Programme for Government commitment repeated again. You can see which Programme for Government priority it fits into, which is priority 2. Then, under "2012/13 Targets and Actions", it has the specific milestone for this year. Therefore, for this year, we have to:

"Produce Strategic Action Plans and establish a monitoring framework and baseline targets".

For this financial year, that is our goal. You can see my name against that. That is how that works. Obviously, behind that are the delivery plans. The delivery plans show how we intend to achieve that goal. That is the commitment, through the business plan.

The Chairperson: Are members content to date?

Mr Maskey: Could you do any of those before the date?

Dr McMahon: The aim is to get them all done as quickly as we possibly can. That is what we are trying to do. To some extent, there is an issue, because some of them are around developing things. For example, there is a childcare strategy in there. Obviously we have to get it right, but there is a trade-off in making sure that we engage with enough people and get their views built in. I can certainly assure members that Malcolm McKibbin will take the view that these are the minimum that we should be achieving and that we should go further.

Mr Maskey: Denis, overall, given your remarks about 2013 — this may be my own fault — I am not sure how we have agreed to monitor this as we go on. Do we have a system that states, in January 2013, that we are flying here, we are well on time for this, or —

The Chairperson: We are going on to this, though, are we not?

Dr McMahon: That is really the purpose of the delivery plans. As you say —

The Chairperson: We will work through this, Alex, OK?

Mr Johnston: To return to my first point, that is also the purpose of that external tool, in that the intention will be that, every quarter, we will externally report progress against each of the 82 commitments, based on information that is coming in from the various Departments and us to the central team, which is, essentially, Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and OFMDFM staff working together to report how things are going. Again, the intention is that Ministers and senior officials will focus only on things that are not going as planned, as opposed to worrying about things that are proceeding OK.

Internally, the delivery plans may have slightly more challenging targets, but the overall objective is to achieve that externally published and mandated target. For instance, on the one that Denis has just referred to — the social investment fund (SIF) action plans — the hope is that by January, rather than March 2013, those plans will be available for the nine investment zones.

Mr Lyttle: I have a number of points to make and questions to ask, but some of them concern the relationship between the plans. Is it OK to bring those in at this point, given that that is what we have just discussed?

The Chairperson: Are you jumping into 6.2, 6.3, 6.4 in the Committee papers index?

Mr Lyttle: No, I am not. I will deliberately withhold doing that.

First, I welcome the plans that are before us. We have been waiting to get to this point for a year or so. I think that determining whether a Government have delivered on their commitments for their citizens is a crucial issue. I do not think that there is anything more important in the Assembly. I will also have a go at seeing whether I understand the relationships. You have the Programme for Government, the departmental plans and then the delivery plans, which focus on certain individual issues; for example, the childcare strategy. In the letter to the Committee, you say that the scrutiny of the Programme for Government will take place by way of Committees scrutinising quarterly reports. Is that of the delivery plans or the departmental plans? How will that work? For the purposes of dates and timescales, is today considered a quarterly report to the Committee? Will we have another quarterly report from you on these plans so that we can keep track of progress against them?

Mr Johnston: This is not a quarterly report. The decision was taken that we would start quarterly reporting in Q2. Therefore, we will be looking for progress and our own internal progress —

Mr Lyttle: When is Q2?

Mr Johnston: The end of September. We will be seeking information and providing information ourselves at the beginning of October on where we are on progress, to be cleared through Ministers and sent to the central team. Information on where we are against those published commitments will then be made public.

Mr Lyttle: When you say "made public", do you mean brought to this and all other relevant Committees? This is obviously a model for all Committees.

Mr Johnston: That information will be made available to all the Committees. The intention is also to publish it on a public website so that citizens can see how we are doing.

Mr Lyttle: That needs to be an additional commitment, though. I get a bit concerned about what you mean when you say that it will be "made public". The final report for the entire Programme for Government for the previous term was made public through a written statement on the day on which a multimillion pound roads investment across Northern Ireland was announced. It is important that this Committee form an opinion of how exactly it wants to be involved in the scrutiny of the reports, and then makes its demands clear to the Department.

Dr McMahon: I will finish the other point, which was about the relationship between the plans. To be clear, the Programme for Government is obviously the Executive's commitment. The departmental plan is the Department's specific commitment within that, which includes Programme for Government targets but also some other things that we need to do to support that. The delivery plans are the "how to" plans. That is the bit that the Committee will be most interested in scrutinising.

Mr Lyttle: Nevertheless, OFMDFM is responsible for the delivery of the entire Programme for Government, and, therefore, we should be aware of our scrutiny responsibility as well. There is an issue as to how that is scrutinised, but I will park the issue for now.

The Chairperson: Denis, are the departmental plans templated? Will we be able to look at all Departments doing it the same way?

Dr McMahon: All Departments are using the same templates for their delivery plans, yes.

The Chairperson: OK. We will move on to the summary details for the Programme for Government delivery plan 2011-15 for the social investment fund. Perhaps you can talk us through those. We are looking at the £40 million from the SIF to address dereliction.

Mr Johnston: You have the actual individual plan there for the delivery plan.

The Chairperson: That is the next one in our packs. This is at the next stage down in the quadrant.

Mr Johnston: As Denis said earlier, there are slightly fewer delivery plans than there are commitments, because this brigades two commitments. The SIF had two commitments: one related, essentially, to physical expenditure; and one related to revenue expenditure. You can see that at the top of this plan under the heading "PfG 2011-15 Commitment". The first one is to:

"Provide £40 million to address dereliction"

and the second one is to:

"Invest £40 million to improve pathways to employment".

That covers the four pillars of the SIF. I will come back in a couple of weeks to talk about the SIF in more detail.

You will see the commitment reference number, which references the order in the published document, which, helpfully, was not numbered. Again, it is a standard template, so it shows the lead Department, the relevant permanent secretary and the senior responsible officer (SRO) — in this case, Denis — for that.

It identifies the partner organisations and gives the date of the delivery plan, which in this case is 28 March 2012. There is some general text at the bottom that sets the context for the plan, and that is followed by the more detailed information, which is not here.

The performance indicators are on the next page. One of the important changes was to focus much more on outcomes and to have much more robust indicators for the new Programme for Government. The indicators for the SIF will depend on the action plans that are being developed for the nine investment zones, which will not be available until the turn of the year.

That section will be filled in at a macro level, to indicate what we hope to achieve for the PFG as a whole. It sets out the stall for our priorities.

There is also a section that describes how we will get there through key actions; when we hope that they will be done; and who will be responsible for them. These ones are very dull and all pertain to OFMDFM, but many of them indicate which lead agency will take them forward and from where the resources for delivery are coming.

That is followed by a section detailing the management arrangements. The plans will be managed under the auspices of the relevant Department and SRO. We will perhaps come back and talk about how a number of Denis's commitments are being managed under a single framework. The section goes on to describe some of the risks and actions to mitigate their likely impact. There is also some text describing the standard implications that we want to be concerned about, including equality, good relations, poverty/social inclusion and sustainable development.

That is followed by key dates in the development of the plan as it was envisaged in March. That has changed somewhat since then, given the views of the delivery oversight group and the programme board on how they would like to see the plan work in future. Then there is a declaration by the senior responsible officer that the delivery plan will do the things that it says that it will do.

The other commitment is that the budget will be available for that. The intention was for people not to enter into commitments where they did not have the prospect of budget cover to deliver on them. As part of the dialogue on the final commitments, there was quite a lot of pushback in the individual Departments about whether they had the resource to honour the commitments or whether that was part of a bidding document.

That is a general preamble using the SIF action plan as a working example.

The Chairperson: Can I raise of couple of points? Can the delivery plan not be more specific about the partner organisations? It states:

"Executive Departments, Statutory agencies, voluntary and community sector organisations, business and political."

Do you mean all Executive Departments? Do you not know yet? Is that still in development?

Dr McMahon: There are two points to make. First, I will give a bit more detail. Where it says "Executive Departments", it means Departments with a particular interest in this. Obviously, it will involve DFP and the Department for Social Development (DSD), because we want to make sure that what we are doing fits with and complements the work of other Departments. We are also engaging with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education. One of the things that we will be coming back to later is the fact that this is part of a bigger framework within delivering social change, whereby we engage across all Departments. This is one of the projects within that.

The Chairperson: You have identified three. Should the names of the Executive Departments not be in there at some point?

Mr Johnston: No, because there are actually more than that. Against the SIF, there are four strategic delivery objectives. The first one is on pathways to employment. The second one is on systemic issues around deprivation. Another one relates to dereliction, and the fourth one is on new facilities.

The Chairperson: Why is that not in there, Henry? That is all that I am asking.

Dr McMahon: The key point to make is that we have tried. You made the point at the start that these are quite long in their own right. A lot of additional information on them will be published and needs to go out. Work is under way on the social investment fund around providing guidance, setting up groups, and all that. All of that needs to be published anyway. It is important to say that it would not just be this information. A lot of documentation will go out on each of these areas. We are certainly happy to look at the format, and if there are things that we think —

The Chairperson: It might make it fairer to you, because if something is not delivered, it might not be OFMDFM's fault but that of one of the partner organisations.

It also states:

"The Social Investment Fund is one of a number of initiatives which form part of a wider delivery framework, being led by OFMDFM, called Delivering Social Change".

This is where it now becomes difficult to follow the trail, because we have hit a fork in the road.

Dr McMahon: The only thing that I would say about that is that the commitments are very clear and what we have to deliver is very clear. We have a very clear understanding that this is what we are expected to deliver. Delivering Social Change is not a whole new additional initiative. It really reflects the fact that, in delivering each of these, we have to set up proper project arrangements, such as a project board, with project directors and all the machinery that goes to getting such things done in government.

What has happened in the past is that every time that you do something like this, you set up another group, and then you end up with more and more groups and everybody loses track of them. Therefore, we thought that we would have one overarching group, chaired by the junior Ministers, with all the relevant Departments represented on it. Below that, we will have project boards that will report to the group. I know that the Ministers were in talking about Delivering Social Change. Obviously, the Committee very interested in the content. If you think about it, this is the content within that programme.

Mr Johnston: A piece of content, because there are a number of programmes that sit under that Delivering Social Change umbrella. A lot of the stakeholders, such as external Departments, and so on, are the same, so you are asking the same people — the same Minister and the same senior officials — to come along to those meetings. Delivering Social Change is a really good way of ensuring that you get good engagement and participation both from relevant Ministers and relevant senior officials.

Dr McMahon: Believe it or not, it is actually a way of simplifying it. It may not look like it, but, in reality, that is what it does.

The Chairperson: I do not want to hog this, but the section of the delivery plan that deals with performance indicators, including employment levels, health levels and education levels states at the top that there are "Further details in the Measurement Annex". Are there very detailed descriptors of how you will put in the baseline health levels and the 2012-13 levels?

Mr Johnston: They will be. Those are not there yet, but they will be there.

Dr McMahon: The reason for that is that Ministers were very keen for the social investment fund to be community-led so that the groups would come up with the plans. Ministers did not want us saying in advance what they would include, although if those plans do not include something around employment and health levels, there will obviously be a problem.

Mr Johnston: Again, this is a standard template. There was previously a concern that people had indicators, but you were not too sure what they were and what the baseline was. That was to ensure that the measurement index was very clear as to where the figures were coming from and how you would measure changes.

Ms McGahan: I represent a neighbourhood renewal area — Dungannon — where figures for child poverty have increased instead of decreased. There is a lot of money pumped into that area. I am

just wondering how you deal with that. Some of the stuff does not seem to be working. I know that I am putting you on the spot by giving you a specific example, but I have a concern about that.

Dr McMahon: I think that Ministers had the same concern. That was one of the reasons for the delivering social investment fund. I think that there was a feeling that a lot of money has gone into various areas, and we are not sure how much of it has had an impact or to what extent it has had an impact.

I suppose that Ministers wanted two things. First, they wanted a fund that was flexible and at the centre so that it could pull together other resources. The idea is that for any money going into an area through the social investment fund, we want to see the various statutory sector organisations putting in money as well to complement that. Secondly, Ministers felt that it was really important that it should be community-led, because there was a feeling that, in the past, we have perhaps put out money under a very rigid framework, and it has not gone to where people in local communities would say that it needed to go. That is what Ministers are trying to do through the SIF.

Mr Johnston: The other thing, which other bits of the Delivering Social Change programme are trying to address, is a big problem. When you go into an area, people are very clear about what the need is. They have good evidence of that, both statistical and from simply talking to people on the estates. They can tell you what the problems are in the area. When you engage with people at planning events, they are very good at telling you what their vision for their area is. However, people have been very bad at working out how you get from here to there. We have generally been very bad at getting good ideas in one place and replicating them in the other. We have been very bad at communicating to people that we have a problem and at asking what other people have done.

One of the key things around Delivering Social Change, and the SIF in particular, will be to try to garner that good practice, tell people what it is and get the stuff rolled out to scale by engaging with local communities and making it happen. That is a learning point from previous programmes, where, again, there was a fair bit of money put in, but progress on the ground was not as good as you would have hoped. The intention is to work very closely with DSD and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to ensure that, when we roll it out, the SIF works in partnership with the programmes that those Departments are rolling out on the ground, as well as with some other key stakeholders who are putting serious money into some of the issues here around skills, parenting and educational achievement.

The Chairperson: If everybody is content, I will move on to the section on risks and contingent actions. I have one question. It gives figures for the probability of risk occurring and the impact of risk on a scale of 1 to 5. Which is which? Is 1 low or high?

Dr McMahon: Low.

The Chairperson: We are looking at:

"Delay in Executive and business case approvals affecting ability to make programme operational and spend allocated Budgets."

The probability is 4 out of 5, which is pretty damned high, and the impact equally so.

Dr McMahon: In fairness, there are two things to say about that. The first is that we were quite deliberately raising any risks that we thought needed to be brought to Ministers' attention so that everybody was clear about what we needed to do. We have been working very hard, and advisers and Ministers have been working very hard, to ensure that those risks are managed effectively. We have had a whole series of programme board meetings with advisers on that. We have got decisions through. However, there are no two ways about it: Ministers were very clear in saying that they did not just want to put the money out; they wanted this to be something that was really going to make a difference. Therefore, there were some real decisions to be made and discussions to be had among and between Ministers about how that would be done; for example, about the structure and make-up of the steering groups, the areas and how we target money within those areas. All those things required discussion and engagement.

Mr Johnston: That happened over a number of weeks and months, in light of the public consultation. It took until May to get agreement as to what the key elements in the programme would be. It was

only once those were nailed down and agreed that we could proceed to completing the outline business case and seek DFP approval to spend the money.

Dr McMahon: It would be fair to say that, as the decisions are being taken, the probability is dropping.

The Chairperson: Of course, but it is a high starting point.

Dr McMahon: We thought it better to start high and be open about what the risks are. Then, hopefully, we will manage them down. That is the intention.

Mr Maskey: Thanks, folks, for your presentation so far. It is very important and welcome to see. I know that it is very comprehensive and complicated looking, but I do not think that there is any way around that. You all know the discussions around the Programme for Government: whether it should be a thick document or a thinner document, and all the rest. The commitment was that the detail would be in the implementation and delivery plans. In my opinion, that is as it should be. That is what we have anyhow. Therefore, it is important that we have this process. It looks cumbersome, but I do not think there is any shortcut to take.

On the particular issue of the SIF, to say that the risks are high is an understatement. The risks are high, and we know that. We have already heard evidence, and we all have our own experience, whereby in some cases, a lot of investment has been put in, but you did not get the outcomes that you thought you might get.

Anybody who has been here long enough will know that those types of things have been going on for years and years. Sometimes, you say to yourself, "What was all that about?" Sometimes we did put money in, but it may not have been used wisely, or whatever. I just think that setting the standards high is exacting and setting ourselves up for a slap. Inevitably, some things are not going to be met. I still think that that is OK, because it is important to do. However, if we are not meeting something, there has to be a rationale for that. For me, the key in all this, in general terms, is that we need to find a process of monitoring, as Chris referred to earlier. We need to get to a point at which we have that ingrained in ourselves. I suggest, Chair, that we raise that point at the chairpersons' liaison group. We need to try to get a uniform way of monitoring this across the Assembly. While you are doing the work — getting a risk register, setting up programme boards, and all of that — we, from an Assembly scrutiny point of view, need to be working with you to make sure that that is delivered. That is where our robust challenge comes from. We have to do a bit of work on how we are going to do that. I know we have a number of the delivery plans in front of us now, but, at 4.30 pm, we are not going to do justice to them all.

The Chairperson: Alex, we just want to make sure that we understand our way through one template. We have been given several, but we are not going to go through them all.

Mr Maskey: I appreciate that. That is very helpful.

The Chairperson: However, you make a very fair point that we, as Committees, equally have to be consistent in how we assess, in the same way in which we expect the Departments to be.

Mr Maskey: The danger is that if we do not, we will go through the year — indeed, go through the mandate — in the same way. This has to be one of our essential pieces of work.

The Chairperson: That is what I am saying. Personally, I would welcome as much detail as possible about the partner organisations so that if there is a failure to deliver, you could ask whether it was OFMDFM, another Department or a statutory agency that has let you down. Obviously, that will vary depending on where you are going.

Mr Lyttle: We have established that the model for monitoring progress against the Programme for Government is the scrutiny by Assembly Committees of departmental and delivery plans. We have OFMDFM's departmental plan and delivery plans in front of us. I want to ask a couple of quick questions about some of the major issues, which continue to be raised on the Assembly Floor.

The delivery plan states that consultation on the childcare strategy was scheduled for three months ago, June 2012, and junior Minister Bell said that consultation could be expected at the end of the summer. Is it possible to update us on that?

Dr McMahon: There is a draft consultation paper. We had hoped that it would go to the Executive at the start of the summer, but the view of Ministers was that we really needed more engagement with the sector. That is the point that I was making earlier. It was in my mind that we had to go back and engage with some of the community and voluntary sector organisations and other key organisations in the area on a pre-consultation basis, because we thought that if we just signed it out, we may not get the reaction that we wanted. So we have done that, and Ministers are now considering it. A point that Ministers have made to us time and time again is that they do not want to see just paper — it must be meaningful and make a difference on the ground. That is why we are where we are with the childcare strategy.

The Chairperson: Are you aware, Chris, that the Committee will be briefed on childcare in a fortnight's time?

Mr Lyttle: OK. The delivery plan states that Executive approval for the full and final operation of the social investment fund will be sought in April 2012. What is the current position?

Mr Johnston: In May, Ministers agreed how the social investment fund would roll out operationally and that they would change the consultation document in a number of regards. The first thing that they agreed was an increase in the number of investment zones from eight to nine. Secondly, they included all of Northern Ireland as a potential recipient of the social investment fund, based on an agreed definition of objective need, leading with deprivation indices but also looking at other evidence bases that could be relevant, particularly in a small locality, perhaps at village level. They also agreed the composition of the steering groups and that each of the nine investment zones would have a 14-person steering group, with four political representatives based on the d'Hondt system.

The Chairperson: Have they been appointed yet?

Mr Johnston: Nearly.

The Chairperson: That is a no.

Mr Lyttle: Correct.

Mr Johnston: One party has not yet come back with nominations, and a few other parties have still to submit a few.

The Chairperson: Shocking.

Mr Johnston: We ran a series of public consultation events on community representation, at which something like 80 people put up their hand for the 36 community places. Ministers are close to agreeing who those 36 will be. However, there are a couple of issues in a couple of areas. In one area, only three people put their hand up, and we need four. As for statutory representatives, Ministers have agreed that, in each zone, one seat will be reserved for a local council official, and a number of those have been put forward. The northern and western clusters were keen to find out who the community representatives and political representatives were, so that when they put forward the official, they covered the geographies in those quite large areas. We are very close to being able to establish all those steering groups.

The Chairperson: Do you feel at liberty to disclose the zone in which only three people came forward?

Mr Johnston: South Belfast, where Ministers will have to decide how to fill the fourth place.

The Chairperson: Was that for community representatives?

Mr Johnston: I think that perhaps everyone thought that everyone else was putting their hand up. I do not know what the problem was, but it was a bit of a surprise.

Mr Lyttle: This is very helpful, and it shows the need to drill into that level of detail regularly. There is a lot of work to be done to make sure that all those projects are being delivered to the best level and in a timely fashion because, at the moment, the targets are not being hit.

Dr McMahon: That is right in relation to the individual milestones in the delivery plans, but it is important to make a distinction between the commitments in the Programme for Government and the milestones in the delivery plans. The point was made earlier about the need to be more ambitious, rather than just doing the bare minimum on the commitments. We have been deliberately more ambitious in setting the milestones because we want to make sure that if there is a bit of, for want of a better term, "fat" to put into it, we do that at the end.

Mr Lyttle: The milestone for the childcare strategy is March 2013. It has been in genesis for years.

Dr McMahon: That does make it more difficult and challenging to get that through in time for that milestone. I do not deny that at all. Nevertheless, there are two priorities. One is, obviously, to do it in time and fulfil the commitment; the other priority is to make sure that we do it right and to the Minister's requirements. It is about trying to get that balance right in each case. That is why there has to be a little flexibility in the milestones, but not in the commitments. We are tied to the commitments, but with the milestones, we have to be a little more ambitious and move them back, in the same way that, with the risk register, we have to start off by setting the risks at the highest level so that we do not ignore anything, but, at the same time, manage them down.

The Chairperson: I want to go back to the zonal panels. I regret asking, because I do not mean for this to be pointed at the particular zone mentioned, but I take it that none can move forward until all nine are ready to move?

Mr Johnston: I am not sure. That is a decision for Ministers. I cannot really see the resolution of those issues taking that long.

The Chairperson: Do you anticipate money hitting the ground in this financial year?

Mr Johnston: Yes.

Dr McMahon: That is our intention, absolutely.

Mr Lyttle: A financial year without the use of the funds has already passed, so it would have to hit the ground this year.

Mr Johnston: To date, the money for the strategic investment fund has been ring-fenced and rolled forward. I do not know whether that will happen again.

The Chairperson: Do members have any more questions or comments, or need any further clarification?

Mr Lyttle: I have a proposal for how we might recommend to Committee Chairs that we get a model for quarterly reporting. Although it does not need to be raised in front of officials, it can be. It seems to me that there is an available mechanism. Perhaps we could seek clarification on whether the quarterly reporting against the delivery plans could be brought by every Department to its relevant Committee and considered in that way. We could ask for that to be formalised with OFMDFM, because I do not think that it is a formal arrangement at present.

The Chairperson: When might you be in a position to come to the Committee to report on quarter 2? On 1 October, 2 October?

Mr Johnston: I will talk a wee bit about the process. The role of the central team is that we will receive responses from all Departments on the progress of all their delivery plans against the 82 commitments. Those responses will provide a fair amount of detail about any changes to the delivery plans. They will, by that stage, have already sent us revised plans. There are a couple of important elements to that. First, agreed text from each Department will outline, for each commitment, what the public position will be. They will say that it is "in progress", "broadly on track", or if the text is that there are "difficulties with x, y and z", they will say that they hope to overcome them, or something like that.

In support of that will be further detail to allow the central team to say, "That looks reasonable." The aim is to square off any differences between what is stated in the delivery plan, the published position and an explanatory text: the phrase "broadly on track", for example, may look a bit odd when compared with the problems that seem to have been encountered.

We hope to go through that process relatively quickly. It would be inappropriate for us to mark our own homework. Therefore, the central team will assess every Department, except the Department of Finance and Personnel and OFMDFM: DFP will do ours, and we will do DFP's. The process of validating that information will take a little time.

Mr Lyttle: Can those quarterly reports be presented to the relevant Committees?

Mr Johnston: We need to check with Ministers how and when they want that material published. We anticipate that the first reporting cycle, which is Q2, might take a little longer, because we are sure that the Ministers will want to see in some detail what is being done and how. We hope that, thereafter, we will get into a smooth cycle of getting the information in, validating it and getting it out.

When the central team last worked with Departments, there were serious complaints and problems. About three reporting quarters ago, we were arguing about what the reporting status should be, and so we have done a couple of things. We have, for example, moved away from public reporting of the red, amber, green (RAG) status. Instead, the Departments can use text, with which they may be happier.

Mr Lyttle: I found the RAG status useful.

The Chairperson: Do your own.

Mr Johnston: We have not discarded it entirely. However, we think that it would be more helpful to the public if we explained the situation in plain text, so that there are no problems with people using or interpreting nuances of languages such as "nearly there" or arguments about whether the status should be amber/green, green or whatever.

Mr Maskey: My comments are in the same vein. One half of me is assured by the intention to be very robust in challenging the Department. However, the other half of me is a bit sceptical. I appreciate that it is about trying to find a balance somewhere along the line and that we are starting a process of doing that. I want a formal, structured approach because, for me, this is one of the most important bits of work that we will do in the rest of this mandate.

By the same token, I do not want to be bombarded with every bit of information because I would stop reading it. We would all end up looking at the headlines and forgetting the detail. When we get the reports, we need to be able to focus on the targets that are not being met. However, I do not like it when someone writes to me using a term such as "broadly on target". I appreciate what you said about there being a lot of explanatory text below that in your report. However, phrases such as "broadly on target" or "getting there" do not mean anything. Whatever terminology is used, it must be a wee bit more qualitatively indicative than that.

The Chairperson: Denis, Henry, Linsey and Maggie, thank you very much indeed.

Dr McMahon: Thank you very much.