



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Building a United Community —
Community Planning: NILGA, NISMP

4 February 2015

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 Alex Attwood
Mrs Brenda Hale
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr David McIlveen
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Ms Jackie Patton	Mid and East Antrim Council
Ms Karen Smyth	Northern Ireland Local Government Association
Ms Mary Kerr	Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): With us are Karen Smyth, the head of policy at the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), Jackie Patton, a council officer for Mid and East Antrim, one of the new super-councils, and Mary Kerr, the housing policy and research manager for the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations. You are very welcome. Karen, you are in the middle, so are you opening?

Ms Karen Smyth (Northern Ireland Local Government Association): Yes. Thank you very much for the invitation to attend and for your interest in community planning. This is obviously very new for Northern Ireland, and councils are making the necessary practical arrangements to do all they can to ensure that community planning is successful. I have provided you with some background information in your briefing and want to take a brief opportunity to expand on some points.

Although the primary legislation is in place for community planning, we are still waiting on some subordinate legislation and statutory guidance to enable councils and their community planning partners to move forward with more certainty. A consultation about statutory partners closed on 12 December, and we are in the process of responding to a consultation on statutory guidance, which closes on 9 March. In November, councils and a number of relevant organisations were given a brief opportunity to comment on the draft guidance as part of a pre-consultation exercise. One of the issues arising from that pre-consultation was a weakness in the documents in the areas of equality and good relations, which was addressed prior to publication of the finalised consultation. We know that DOE officials were in contact with the Committee on the Administration of Justice, the Community Relations Council, the Equality Commission and OFMDFM to explore that issue and assist in

developing the guidance in that regard. It might be useful for the Committee to examine the consultation as it stands to assess whether you wish to make any suggestions as to content. I know that other Assembly Committees are keeping a close eye on the progress of community planning to ensure that they are aware of the opportunities it presents and have requested sight of that draft guidance document.

I also suggest that the Committee encourages the Department to liaise with the DOE local government division to establish whether it should send an attendee to the DOE community planning working group, which meets regularly. I know that DOE is looking at strengthening links with Departments that are not transferring functions within local government reform, and I respectfully suggest that, given OFMDFM's remit for equality and good relations, it should engage with the work at that level.

New councils have recently appointed community planning officers, such as Jackie, who are working closely with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in a phase of building an evidence base for decisions that will need to be taken after 1 April 2015.

I have also requested that Mary Kerr from the Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership joins us today, as that partnership, which also includes councillor members, has been very active in assisting in the evidence building exercise, and has produced a document focusing on community profiles for the new local government districts, particularly in relation to migrants. That community profiles document, which I think you have a summary of, is designed to support councils and their partners to engage with, plan for and deliver to communities that are becoming much more diverse, and, hopefully, to assist us all to maximise the potential within our communities. I have a copy of the full document for the Chair, should you wish to have a look at it. We are happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Thank you very much. That was most useful. In your briefing paper you referred to the political partnership panel, which was set up and met in December, and, actually, was due to meet for the second time yesterday.

Ms Smyth: It did, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): So, how did that go?

Ms Smyth: It went very well, by all reports. There were five of the Executive Ministers there, including Minister Hamilton, and there was obviously a huge desire on behalf of councillor members to have a discussion about finance, to begin discussions on community planning and to develop a work programme for that partnership panel.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Do you know which other four Ministers attended?

Ms Smyth: Off the top of my head, Minister Durkan chaired the meeting, we had Minister Wells, Minister Storey and there was one other — I am trying to remember who it was — but none of the OFMDFM Ministers attended. Obviously, Minister Hamilton was the other one.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Do you think it has the potential to be a very useful cross-cutting tool?

Ms Smyth: We have a lot of hope for it and indications are good at the moment. Obviously, it needs to show results quickly. We need some quick wins from it. We have already managed to have a good outcome in relation to a problem that the sector had with the code of conduct, in the fact that it was too onerous on members and was actually anti-democratic in some ways, limiting their ability to speak about things. It is early days, and we anticipate that it will become substantive over time, particularly in the run-up to the next Programme for Government. We would like to see complementarity between what local government is doing and what central government is doing.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): If you read the Smith Commission post the Scottish independence vote, or, indeed, the Command Paper on further devolution for the English regions that has come out of Westminster, you can see a consistent direction of travel that power should be devolved away from Westminster, out of Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, down to council and community level. Do you agree that perhaps the best thing for Stormont to do is set the vision, which might be a shared future, but then to devolve the actual mechanisms for delivering it to councils? Because how you might deliver it in Larne may be different from how you are going to do it in Dungiven or in east Belfast.

Indeed, how you do it on the lower Newtownards Road may be different from how you want to do it on the Upper Newtownards Road.

Ms Smyth: I certainly agree with that direction of travel. Community engagement, as already highlighted, is a fundamentally important part of the new community planning process. We are working with voluntary and community sector partners, to build their capacity, as well as the capacity of our elected members and staff in councils, to get things working as they should and normalise the situation here. Delivering that shared future is an important part of what we are trying to do.

I want to bring Jackie in. She was a good relations officer in Ballymena for a long time and has transferred to community planning. This is very much her area of work.

Ms Jackie Patton (Mid and East Antrim Council): Indeed. Chairman, thank you and the Committee for the invitation. I worked for Ballymena Borough Council since 1991 as a good relations officer — so quite a while. I have now taken the opportunity to work for Mid and East Antrim District Council on community planning, on a secondment basis.

My experience would suggest that all of the work is about civic leadership. It is about making sure that we have key people at the head of all the organisations. In Mid and East Antrim District Council, we are fortunate in that we have an excellent chief executive, Anne Donaghy, who is very much behind good relations and community planning, as are our senior management team and our councillors.

I have worked very closely with Sue and Angela over the years and, as has been said, it is about relationship building and making sure that we have those relationships. A lot of the discussion today has been about grants. In Ballymena council, our grant aid was something like £10,000 per year or £300 per group. It was a competitive process, and it was only for £300, yet a great amount of work was done. Again, it was about the staff getting involved in the committees at a grass-roots level.

In the Ballymena borough we have Harryville, Broughshane and a vibrant ethnic minority population, who we worked with in the early 2000s to create an inter-ethnic forum that has gone from strength to strength. David, I am sure that you will agree with that. You come to an awful lot of our events, and we are very fortunate in that.

So, the work is time-bound, and it is about grasping the opportunities that you have through the Peace funding. A lot of it is about people working together and creating a great capacity in their area. The area that I represent has been very fortunate to have that.

Ms Smyth: To build on that and to come back to your point, the ability of local government to work locally is incredibly important, and Tom was very clear on the importance of that sort of bottom-up approach. Although we need the strategy to be set at a central level, it also needs to be fed by what happens at ground level. So, that reciprocal relationship is incredibly important and can be worked out through the community planning process and hopefully and eventually through the partnership panel.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Mary, I want to bring you in. Your role is in housing policy and research. What sort of patterns are emerging?

Ms Mary Kerr (Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership): It is. Sorry — to clarify, I am with the Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership. When you introduced me as having responsibility of housing, I was just getting installed and misheard.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Sorry, the error is on our side. I withdraw that question. Will you repeat your function?

Ms Kerr: I am with the Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership. I am the policy officer there. We are one of the 11 partnerships across the UK that are funded by the Home Office.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): OK. How well do you think that your area is understood at a local government level?

Ms Kerr: It is becoming better understood. To date, we have been working very much at a regional level. We are relatively recently established partnership and have been in place for about three years. This issue is coming more to the fore in local government, particularly with regard to the new functions

of community planning, and is bringing governance closer to the people. There is also a recognition that "the people" are a much more diverse representation than previously was the case.

That is really why we developed the profiles. We were working at a regional level, and we realised that there was a need to work more at a local government level. Initial conversations, principally with good relations officers, showed that they did not have the data and did not know what their demographics were. That is why we developed the profiles for each of the new 11 councils to show them exactly who was living within their government boundaries, what kind of diversity they have, what languages are spoken and what pressures and possible pressures will be put on different services etc. So it will inform them, not just with the engagement aspect of community planning but also in terms of the content, so that they are serving the full diversity of their population.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Karen, do you think that there is a common understanding of what the term "community planning" means amongst councillors?

Ms Smyth: No. I do not think that there is a particularly strong understanding across a number of sectors about what community planning means. I think that there is a different understanding among different Departments about what it means. That is why the guidance is so important. We have a legislative definition, but how it is worked out in practice is going to take some time. We have at least a year, hopefully two, to get the first iteration of community plans up and running. During that time, that understanding of what community planning means in a local area will need to develop. I say that deliberately because, what community planning looks like in mid and east Antrim might be different to what it looks like in Belfast. There is some flexibility in the guidance as to the outworkings of it: whether there is an area-based approach, one based on strategic themes, or a combination of the two. That is what it is supposed to be. It is supposed to be local, but it has to be within the strategic setting of the Programme for Government, the local government response and complementarity to the Programme for Government.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I just wanted to ask about the political partnership panel. What is the make-up of it? My understanding is that it has local government reps from each of the 11 councils, NILGA reps and Executive Ministers. What sort of representation is there from local councils on the panel?

Ms Smyth: I do not have the exact political make-up of that with me. I can furnish the Committee staff with that later this afternoon. Certainly, there is a good cross-section of political parties across the panel. We have one representative, obviously, from each of the 11 councils, and there are up to five representatives from NILGA. The key function, apart from the strategic consensus-building that NILGA does, is to ensure that a political balance is provided. We know the importance of ensuring that smaller parties and quieter voices are represented at that table. So, the balance issue is an important one, and that is why we are on the panel in the first place.

Mr Lyttle: That is helpful. I just wonder how MLAs or Assembly Committees stay up-to-date with the work of the panel, given that it seems to be the one area of representation that is not covered on it. It seems like a useful framework to try to lead on issues.

Ms Smyth: I am sorry to cut across you. As you have already stated, it is very early days for the panel. It is working out what it is and what it is going to do. Also, the new councils will become operational on 1 April. Most of them will have an AGM in March, and their representation on the panel will probably change after that. That may have the effect of markedly changing the political representation on it, because people may have cottoned on to how important it is going to be, and that may impact on which parties prioritise membership as a position of responsibility.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): This could be my final question. If you were doing a SWOT analysis of community planning and its ability to deliver the T:BUC policy, what would be the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and threats?

Ms Smyth: The strengths would be bringing key players together and being able to work on themes or specific areas. We have weaknesses, in that we are not particularly happy at the moment with how the Departments are tied in to the process. Because the Departments are setting the policy and strategy — and I refer to all Departments — we are trying to ensure that their feet are under the table, specifically those Departments that have service-delivery arms. We are still trying to tease that out, and, certainly, the Minister is working quite hard to ensure that the statutory partners legislation is

written in such a way that Departments are fully tied in. Jackie could perhaps come in on the opportunities that she sees at local level. We are a bit worried that people are going to perceive it as some sort of panacea or magic wand that will solve everybody's problems. Specifically, we possibly have an issue in managing the expectations of the community and voluntary sector. It is an opportunity to completely change how local government, Northern Ireland and the community operate. If it works, it should be quite successful.

Ms Patton: Notwithstanding those weaknesses, we have a specific community planning directorate and a specific director in the structure that Anne Donaghy is purporting in Mid and East Antrim council. Good relations is going to sit under that department. That is very welcome. As Sue said earlier, it is the case in certain councils that good relations was not to the fore as perhaps it should have been. I was a good-relations officer for many years, and I very much welcome that.

In Mid and East Antrim council, we are at the start of the process of engaging with our statutory partners and the community engagement aspect. We are currently working to the foundation programme's themes. As you will be aware, one of those is safety and good relations. I would be very surprised if safety and good relations was not one of the key themes. I certainly think that it augurs well in terms of opportunities. It is good to get it out there and to have the community consultation. The themes that we will be looking at will be very specific to safety and good relations.

Another aspect of the operational point of view is the example of the policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs). When I worked in Ballymena council, I worked closely with the officers there in terms of community safety and the district policing partnerships (DPPs), but I did not necessarily have a seat at the table. I welcome that opportunity; it will, hopefully, be more joined up.

It is very early days. I have been in post only since October. This is obviously new for all the councils. It is about taking time at this point in terms of trying to set up the structures as best we can, but we realise that we will make mistakes. We need to try to learn from those as we move forward. I certainly very much welcome the opportunity in terms of good relations. Again, it is good that it is well referenced in the statutory guidance. That is certainly to be welcomed. One area that perhaps could be enhanced is race relations. Perhaps Mary wants to speak a little bit about that in terms of the statutory guidance.

Ms Kerr: The racial equality strategy is forthcoming. We welcome that; we look forward to seeing the final document. How can community planning help to deliver T:BUC? T:BUC is a very strong strategy in terms of its vision. When it is broken down into the implementation side and the project, it becomes less of an inclusive document and more of an exclusive document. It goes back to the two-community model, whereas, when it sets out its vision, it is a very inclusive model. I perceive that as a possible weakness when we are looking at promoting good race relations and looking at community planning as a vehicle for that. The emphasis in T:BUC is still on looking at one particular fault line in the community at the expense of another, lesser fault line that is growing. If that is not addressed now, greater need will have built up 10 years down the line. It is very important to coordinate those documents and to spell out how the racial equality strategy is going to coordinate with T:BUC and how they are both going to be supportive of and supported by community planning.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Is the racial equality strategy missed out on the ground?

Ms Kerr: Yes. It is very ad hoc; people are firefighting a lot. The organisations working on the ground are very client-facing. We work in a very strategic area, but we talk a lot to organisations that have much more of an operational role. They really feel that there is a lack of strategic direction. They are very much looking forward to the racial equality strategy. The gap where the racial equality strategy has not been has been filled by community groups really working to their capacity and beyond. There is a lot of coordination among the community and voluntary sector because those gaps have been there, and they had to be filled. With the absence of the strategy, it fell back to that sector to do a lot more because there was no overarching framework for it to work within.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): So, is there a danger, Mary, that the strategy could become obsolete because people have had to make decisions about how to live their lives, and the T:BUC strategy, for example, might shape relationships, before the strategy comes out?

Ms Kerr: We hope that the strategy will be informed by the consultation responses and that it is not merely going to take up where the previous strategy left off. We hope that it will acknowledge how groups and organisations have moved forward and how relationships have developed. We

understand that the final strategy will be available by the end of this financial year. We hope that it will acknowledge the work that is done in T:BUC. T:BUC acknowledges that there is a racial equality strategy and that the two will be working together, but it does not spell out how that is going to happen. The good-relations indicators are very much focused on the two-community model. Without seeing the racial equality strategy, how that is going to be measured and how these indicators are going to be brought together, it is very difficult to say how the two strategies will work together. However, as there is an acknowledgement in both that there is a need, we need that to be spelt out a little bit more.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): 18 March is a key date for the Committee, because that is when we are due to have a briefing on the strategy. One would like to think that that indicates the policy is about to go to the printers.

Ms Smyth: Chair, may I come back on a more general point? It goes back to something that Alderman Ekin said earlier about having a conversation and looking closely at what we want to achieve and what we want the outcomes of all of this to be. I have seen the Programme for Government for Scotland, 'Scotland Performs'. They can get their entire Programme for Government on two sides of A4 because they have very tight outcomes, which everybody is working towards. Councils and the Scottish Government are working towards them. I think that that is the way we want to go. Community planning, T:BUC and all the strategies should be working together and feeding into a document like that so that everybody — the whole region — is clear about what we want to achieve.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): The Scottish Government's Programme for Government is two pages?

Ms Smyth: The summary of it is on two sides of A4.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): I like the style.

Mr Spratt: What has NILGA done to try to lobby and put the point that has just been made, to OFMDFM? Lobbying should be part of your job.

Ms Smyth: Of course.

Mr Spratt: It is easy to say what you have said.

Ms Smyth: It is.

Mr Spratt: Tell me what you have done or what you intend to do.

Ms Smyth: Our chief executive has met the Ministers from OFMDFM. We do lobby. We have developed a programme for local government. It has been put round all of the relevant Departments. It is designed to be complementary to, and inform, the forthcoming Programme for Government. It also takes on board something the Chair said earlier about potential further devolution and taking on further functions once political confidence has been built in the transfer of the functions that will be taken on. We are at a very difficult time in relation to NILGA and local government. At the moment, NILGA is in the process of reconstituting, so we are in a slightly weakened position. That is why there is not an elected member with me at today's session. We are in the process of consulting with the 11 councils on their engagement over the next period, funding mechanisms, membership, new constitutions, and so forth. That has not come to a resolution, as yet. So, we are continuing to negotiate on some thorny issues with some of them. We have strong support from all of them, as far as I can see, to continue, particularly on the lobbying role and the consensus-building role. I should say that we are working more on financial issues. At the moment, the way in which we are constituted means that we represent the 26 councils, and we need to develop the constitution and membership to represent the 11. We are in between two stools at the moment. Very shortly, we will begin a much more concerted effort to lobby along those lines — local government finance and strategic policy — and we have support from the 11 councils to do that. We are doing what we can to support them in advance of their eventual sign up.

Mr Spratt: You have just made a statement to the Committee to say that the chief executive lobbied OFMDFM Ministers. Was that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, or was it the junior Ministers? When did that lobbying take place, and what was the lobby about?

Ms Smyth: I would need to go back to the office to get the details of the visits. As far as I understand, there have been a number of visits. I know that we have had contact with officials about various aspects of OFMDFM's work, and that would be more on the economic policy side and the Programme for Government side. I know that the chief executive led on some of those visits, but there may have been visits with members as well. I do not have the detail of that at the moment, but I can certainly furnish the Committee with that.

Mr Spratt: In evidence a short time ago, you specifically said — it will be on the record in Hansard — that the chief executive met OFMDFM Ministers.

Ms Smyth: As far as I am aware.

Mr Spratt: So you are not sure? You made a statement, and you are not sure now.

Ms Smyth: I am not 100% sure, but I am fairly sure that he has met at least one of the junior Ministers.

Mr Spratt: So you are retracting the first statement that you made.

Ms Smyth: If that has caused confusion, yes.

Mr Spratt: It is not causing confusion, but we need to get it clear. You cannot make a statement and say that you have had meetings. I want to know what those meetings were about and on what issues the chief executive lobbied. Perhaps, Chair, we can get a letter back from NILGA — from the chief executive — to tell us exactly when those meetings took place, if they took place, and what the lobbies were about so that we are clear.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): I think that that is agreed. Karen, are you content with that?

Ms Smyth: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Jackie, Mary and Karen, thank you very much. Mary, I apologise again for the confusion.

Ms Kerr: It was nice to have another hat.

The Chairperson (Mr Nesbitt): Clearly, we shall give some thought as to how we keep abreast of the political partnership panel, which may be the key in this area. Thank you very much indeed.