



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Programme for Government: Department of
Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

15 November 2016

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Programme for Government: Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

15 November 2016

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Linda Dillon (Chairperson)
Ms Caoimhe Archibald (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr David Ford
Mr William Irwin
Mr Harold McKee
Mr Oliver McMullan

Witnesses:

Mr David Small	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Ms Louise Warde Hunter	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Graeme Wilkinson	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Louise, Graeme and David will remain at the table for the Programme for Government (PFG) briefing. Am I right?

Ms Louise Warde Hunter (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Yes, that is right.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): We will keep this as brief as possible.

Ms Warde Hunter: I think that I can do the introduction to this session even more rapidly, if I may, as long as I do not go so fast that members lose the meaning. As this is the first time that we have come to talk to you properly about the PFG, I feel that I need to give you some input up front. The important thing for us to flag to you is the context for the PFG and the new ways of thinking and working that it requires of us as officials. I will then focus on the outcomes for which DAERA has specific responsibility and its wider relevance to the PFG overall. I hope, in the next five minutes or so, to give you a sense of that.

Committee members will be aware of the genesis of the new Programme for Government. The parties in the Fresh Start Agreement agreed that a Programme for Government framework adopting an outcomes-based approach would be developed. That PFG has been informed by extensive stakeholder engagements over the last two years, and those indicated widespread support for the adoption of an outcomes-based approach. A total of 810 responses was received to the consultation on the draft programme, which was conducted over the summer. The responses, along with the

outcomes of a lot of stakeholder engagement carried out by Departments, have been drawn together to produce a PFG consultation document. That has been agreed by the Executive and is out for consultation until 23 December.

The Executive's approach to developing the Programme for Government represents a new way of doing things, and, certainly at official level, we respect that. By focusing on major societal outcomes, it provides a means by which people and groups from all sectors can play a part in developing meaningful plans and actions to find ways to do things that we have not done before in order to make a real difference to the lives of our people and in our communities. The use of an outcomes-based approach has gained currency internationally in recent years. It has been used with success in other jurisdictions, including parts of the United States, Finland and, nearer to home, Scotland. Last month, many civil servants, public servants and representatives of the voluntary and community sector had an opportunity to hear much more about this at the outcomes-based accountability (OBA) summit conference. Mark Friedman, the international authority on this, spoke at the conference, and I am sure that members got a chance to meet him at the event held at Parliament Buildings. I am steadily working through his book.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recently underlined our commitment to an outcomes-based approach. It recommended that we prepare and implement a multi-year, strategic, outcomes-based Programme for Government framed by a vision for Northern Ireland's people and economy. An outcomes-based approach brings into focus the things that really matter for the citizen. It requires a collective approach that looks to draw in all of the contributions within and beyond government to make the biggest differences possible. Outcomes express the societal impacts and situations of well-being that we want to get to, and, by involving those who matter in their delivery, we learn how we should get there.

Before I turn to DAERA's role, I will say a brief word about where we are in that process. As I said, there has been widespread support for the approach. The original document, which was launched in May, had 14 strategic outcomes and 42 key indicators. It covered a very wide range of activities designed to reflect the Executive's ambition for Northern Ireland as a whole, and each indicator had specific measures that had been selected to track progress. The current version of the document, which was launched last month, took account of all that feedback and reflected it through the engagement and consultation process. Particularly, it focused on the need for clearer links between each outcome and the primary indicators that support it to allow us to measure progress. There are now 48 proposed indicators to underpin the 14 strategic outcomes.

The outcomes-based accountability model says that having between three and five indicators per outcome usually works best. All efforts are now focused on making sure that those indicators are measurable in a very open and transparent way. For the indicators and their underpinning action plans that are still being worked up, we make sure that we have those done in a way that is open and transparent.

I will look now at DAERA's specific area of ownership in the PFG. As a Department whose work spans economic, environmental and social dimensions, DAERA has a substantial role to play in contributing to a range of PFG outcomes. However, the second outcome is one for which we have specific responsibility. That outcome, as you are aware, is:

"We live and work sustainably, protecting the environment".

I will come back to that in just a moment. DAERA will also make essential contributions to the PFG's economic outcome and its related indicators:

"We prosper through a strong, competitive (regionally balanced) economy"

We will do so through our support for the agri-food and fisheries sectors.

The Committee is well apprised of the vital contribution that the agri-food industry makes to the Northern Ireland economy. We account for 5.5% of employment in NI and contribute to turnover of almost £5 billion. The farming and processing industries contribute a gross value added (GVA) of £1.1 billion per annum. The agri-food industry was pleased to see that it was mentioned in the foreword to the new document. There is a commitment in the PFG to supporting a "diverse export base" and "higher levels of productivity". Those are both areas in which DAERA has played and will play an active role.

That is not the only area to which we will contribute. The Department can also contribute to wider health indicators through its management of forest and country parks and the regulation of air quality. Of course, the Department also contributes to the well-being of rural communities through a range of interventions. Whilst the PFG expresses the outcomes for all citizens, DAERA reflects the ways in which our work addresses those outcomes from the perspective of the rural dweller. That is an important issue.

I go back to DAERA's outcome, for which David has lead responsibility. Our health and prosperity depend on our natural environment. Achieving economic growth at the cost of environmental degradation through overexploitation or pollution is not sustainable, so DAERA seeks to deliver positive environmental outcomes in tandem with growing the Northern Ireland economy. I will explain briefly how we have approached our contribution as the overall PFG was shaping up. We held a number of successful workshops with environmental NGOs and other stakeholders to facilitate the process. Feedback from those groups was instrumental in shaping the approach to the key indicators that the Department will now deliver. Following the consultation, revisions were made to the Programme for Government, and there are now six indicators under outcome 2. We have primary responsibility for five of them: greenhouse gas emissions; the percentage of household waste reused, recycled or composted; air quality; water quality; and biodiversity. The other indicator for this outcome relates to the percentage of journeys made by walking, cycling or public transport. That indicator will be delivered mainly through the Department for Infrastructure.

The initial consultation included an indicator of sustainability, with greenhouse gas emissions as the sole measure. However, respondents to the consultation considered that to be too narrow, and, with that being taken on board, the additional indicators on water quality and biodiversity were added. The power, the iterative nature of the process and the ability of those with strong, vested, informed interests who come to be heard have been part and parcel of how the Department has conducted its approach to shaping the range of indicators in the current document. Delivery plans have now been developed for three of DAERA's five indicators, and delivery plans for water quality and biodiversity remain in development. Our process on that is about trying to capture the relevant actions from all our delivery partners as a way of delivering an effective approach to the desired outcomes.

Again, I apologise, Chair, for the pace at which I have delivered this, but I appreciate that we are short of time. I hope that that sets out the DAERA stall on the PFG for you.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Thank you, Louise. I appreciate that. In the consultation, concerns were raised that rural aspects were not really in there or mentioned. I accept what you say about the indicators: some of them obviously relate to everybody, regardless of whether you are rural, urban or where you live. My concern is that it should be properly rural-proofed. How will the Department ensure that it is?

Look at some of the decisions that have already been made. Take today's example: the reason that I had to step out is that we have staff from Cookstown, Ballynahinch and Newcastle social security offices because the Minister for Communities proposes to close those offices. None of those decisions was properly rural-proofed. When I looked at what they called rural proofing, I felt that my eight-year-old child could do better. It was disgraceful, and that is putting mildly. What they did was take their figures from a one-mile radius of the town. Ardboe is a long way from Cookstown — it is certainly not within one mile of it — but the people of Ardboe use Cookstown social security office. That is just one example. I am really concerned about that.

We wrote to the AERA Minister to ask whether she could speak to her party and Executive colleague to ask him to do a serious rural-proofing exercise on it, but that does not appear to have had any impact. Therefore, I am very concerned that this Department should ensure that other Ministers rural-proof their decisions. If we do not do that, this is a waste of time. That is my fear. If the Department can tell me how it intends to do it and convinces me that it will do it properly, I would be happy with what is here. However, we must ensure that it is rural-proofed. At the end of the day, we are the Committee for protecting rural dwellers, agricultural people and the environment. That is where my focus is.

Ms Warde Hunter: OK. Thank you, Chair, for those comments. I appreciate the challenges in making sure that rural proofing and the needs of rural dwellers remain always on the agenda of every Department. However, I still see that the sweep and thrust of the Programme for Government looks at things in a more cohesive way, with greater cross-departmental working and engagement. It creates an environment for the behaviours where the agenda for ensuring that rural proofing can be taken

forward. The more we engage with others and contribute to their outcomes, the better, as that gives the Department a locus.

Specifically, on our responsibility for rural proofing in the Rural Needs Act, that goes to the heart of how we engage, not only our strategic engagement with local authorities — it is a matter that we talked about before in Committee — but, clearly, with other Departments on what it means to engage people on how you do it and the guidance and support that we can offer sister Departments to do that. Your point is well made, Chair, with regard to the continuing work. I have said it before, and you know that it is a very small team working on that. Nonetheless, it is about trying to engage with colleagues at a strategic level, equipping them with the knowledge and skills and inspiring them to see what they are doing in the round to factor their rural bit in.

Every Department has a responsibility in this; it is nothing new. The Rural Needs Act brought that to the table. The previous Executive were already committed to this, but the issue is in the execution. We will maintain our commitment to reaching out and supporting where we can, through engagement and the transfer of skills, so that others can take it forward.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): OK, I accept that. I just think that the Minister needs to drive this. I am not looking for a response to this; the Minister needs to drive it. We, as a Committee, will hold her to account, and, as her officials, I ask you to ensure that she is aware of that. We will hold her to account on the fact that she must ensure that her Executive colleagues rural-proof every decision that they make.

Ms Archibald: Thank you. The inclusion of the two new indicators in that outcome is a good indication of how the process has worked and that you can be responsive to consultees' feedback. Considering the need for partnership and working with the various stakeholders and partners in delivering and rolling out the programme, how will it be done and what are its practicalities?

Ms Warde Hunter: We were talking initially about the strategic, cross-cutting bit of the rural agenda. Perhaps, in answer to your question, it might be helpful if we put in what we are doing about the outcome for which we have lead ownership. That might give you a better idea. If it is OK, I will pass to David to give a bit of sense on that.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I do not want to cut off discussion, but we need to keep responses as brief as possible. We only have 15 minutes, and I want to give every member an opportunity to ask a question.

Ms Warde Hunter: OK.

Mr David Small (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): There were two key themes to the new Programme for Government. One was that it was outcome-focused, and the other was that it was collaborative, that we would work in collaboration with our partners. On the two new indicators that you mentioned, particularly water quality, we will have to work in partnership with delivery partners — for example, the Department for Infrastructure — and we have already had meetings and engagement with the Department for Infrastructure and NI Water. Their interventions will make an important contribution to delivering on the water quality indicator. Similarly, on the recycling indicator, we have had good engagement with councils. Councils have statutory responsibilities for waste, and we have had good engagement through a kind of workshop approach, trying to identify the contribution that councils can make and how they go about recycling.

We have worked with DFI on transport initiatives about the contribution that they can make to the air quality indicator. We fully recognise the need for collaborative working with other partners. We probably still need to do a bit more work on how I, as senior responsible owner (SRO), and my colleagues engage with partners and make sure that there is an ongoing engagement. As well as contributing to the shape of the delivery plan, they will be key partners in delivering the actions.

Mr McKee: I am slightly disappointed with the Programme for Government for the Department. When I read through it, it appears as if we never amalgamated. It looks like the Department of the Environment because all six key indicators have to do with the environment: natural built environment, combat climate change, waste management, greenhouse gas emissions, air quality, sustainable transport, water quality, biodiversity and natural capital. I cannot see much leaning towards the agri-sector at all. All it says is that it will:

"ensure that sustainable practices are promoted"

and that it will:

"Work with stakeholders, e.g. agriculture and marine, to establish sustainable management practices which safeguard biodiversity and natural capital."

I have a fear of management. Those who will come to work with farmers do not normally work with them; they make the farmers work not in farm practices but more in an environmental holding. There is no mention of what we will do for the milk producers, about Brexit or how we export our goods. There is a lot of work to be done.

Ms Warde Hunter: I will respond first on the issue of how it looks through the lens of trying to see the Department identified in it. We are in a different way of working; that is what I was at pains to say in terms of what the Executive's vision is. Each permanent secretary owns different outcomes. However, just because one permanent secretary owns something, that does not mean that others are not involved. The very first outcome has to do with the economy. We have a huge contribution to make to issues of productivity. Look at the work that we are doing on export and trade. The agri-food industry is front and centre in some of the indicators that they are using. If you look at the work that we do with the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) or the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), R&D, and skills and innovation, you will see that all of that is connecting. I appreciate that it is not saying, "That bit's DAERA's", but part of our engagement is about ensuring that we work with the Department for the Economy on its appropriate strategies, which will sit underneath that.

Mr Graeme Wilkinson (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): We have been working on a strategic plan. You will see, Harold, a bit more of our Department in that. It is also about embedding our Programme for Government outcomes. We are working on our strategy to 2020 and beyond. That will give a bit more flavour and texture as to what our organisation is doing not just on the environment but on the agri-food sector.

Mr Small: I think that you will find, Mr McKee, that there is a key theme on the environment. A number of the indicators that link through that key environmental theme have fallen to me because I head up the environment group in the Department. Equally, Louise points to the economic theme. That is how the Programme for Government has been developed. There are 14 outcomes, one of which happens to be environmental. That is why, from my point of view and the DAERA point of view, you will see an environmental slant.

As Louise said, on the economic theme, the Department will make strong contributions through its work on agri-food, fisheries and creating rural jobs under the LEADER and rural development programmes. We will make strong contributions through the economic strategy when it is refreshed, which will feed into the economic theme. The prominence of some of the activities that we lead on in the Department, such as agri-food and fisheries, has been lost a bit because they are now in an economy theme. It is not agri-food, but agri-food is a key part of it, whereas the environment one happens to be a bit more overt because there is a core theme around the environment.

Mr McKee: Agriculture is almost in the wrong Department; it should be in Economy.

Mr Small: It is not that it is in the wrong Department. One of the core themes of the Executive's Programme for Government is the economy, and our Department will make a strong contribution to that.

Ms Warde Hunter: Part of how we contribute to the indicator for external sales is through the facilitation of export-led growth and thinking about our veterinary side through the negotiation of export health certificates in line with industry priorities, opening up new markets and so forth. It is a different way of seeing the world. I assure you that we are alert and are engaging with sister Departments to make sure that the contribution of the agri-food industry has prominence.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): We are getting a presentation on 1 December about the business plan and mid-year progress report, and it is extremely important that we get the papers well in advance of the presentation. To be fair to Harold, it would be helpful to us all to set them against the PFG to see

where they fit together. If we do not have the papers in time, it is very difficult and makes my Committee members very cross.

Ms Warde Hunter: Apologies.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): It would make things a lot clearer, and we would then have an opportunity, as Committee members, to do that prior to the presentation. Otherwise, it is difficult for us to get good questioning in. If we could get the paper well in advance of the meeting, we would be very appreciative.

Ms Warde Hunter: I understand, Chair, and we will adhere to that. Being able to draw those threads through is important. I have a paper on that. We will take that forward.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I suppose that is how we will be able to do it.

Mr Ford: It is unfortunate that the indicators in the consultation document are anything but smart in the way that they are set out. The delivery plan certainly put a lot of flesh on some areas at least. I wonder whether David could give us an idea as to how you are getting on with preparing delivery plans on biodiversity and water quality, as I am intensely suspicious of anything that has a bar chart with only three years showing and no real trend line.

Mr Small: The delivery plan for water quality has been developed; we are just trying to finalise it at the moment. We are not as far ahead on biodiversity, but we are working with stakeholders in biodiversity on what the measure might be — that will be quite difficult — and on what the specific actions and interventions will be. It is slightly behind the water quality plan, but I hope that in the next couple of weeks we will bring both to a conclusion. As you know, the other three —

Mr Ford: To the Committee, I trust.

Mr Small: Well, to the Minister initially. The three delivery plans that we have completed are already available through the PFG consultation process. As soon —

Mr Ford: Although they are not immediately visible on the website.

Mr Small: No, you need to go through the links.

Mr Ford: I tried to and could not find them.

Mr Small: They should be —

Mr Ford: A slight hint to IT, perhaps.

Mr Small: You will not find them —

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): They are in the pack.

Mr Ford: Yes, I read them in the pack. I then tried to see how publicly accessible they were, and as a member of the public I could not find them.

Ms Warde Hunter: OK. We will take that away.

Mr Small: They are under the Programme for Government link. They should be available. As I said, the delivery plans for water quality and biodiversity are being finalised, but they will become available too.

Mr McMullan: Just very quickly, what matrix do you use for rural proofing?

Ms Warde Hunter: The team has been working to develop something that we can take out. I cannot give you a neat answer on what the matrix looks like at the moment, but I would be happy to provide an insight into the work that we have done so far.

Mr McMullan: What do you take for rural proofing? Do you consult the rural White Paper?

Ms Warde Hunter: The team that is taking forward the Rural Needs Act has been looking at the interpretation of "due regard" and what that means for Departments —

Mr McMullan: The rural White Paper that went before the Rural Needs Bill.

Ms Warde Hunter: — to build on that.

Mr McMullan: Has the rural White Paper been used to rural-proof any decisions going through to the PFG?

Ms Warde Hunter: The PFG overall as it stands at the moment?

Mr McMullan: Has the rural White Paper been used in anything that we have looked at today?

Ms Warde Hunter: I beg your pardon, Mr McMullan. I understand your point. I do not know the answer to that, but I could ask the Executive Office.

Mr McMullan: It is quite explicit that rural proofing is for all Departments. It is in the rural White Paper, and all Departments have signed up to it. If you are telling me that you have not used it, I would like to know what yardstick you use for rural proofing. The rural White Paper is quite clear.

Ms Warde Hunter: I take your point. The only thing that I can do at the moment is take the question back and put it to the Executive Office. It has a line of sight across all Departments.

Mr McMullan: Yes, it would be interesting to hear what it has to say.

Ms Warde Hunter: We can certainly ask.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): If we could get an answer to that. A written briefing on how you plan to rural-proof the five delivery plans that the Department has responsibility for would be useful. That is something that could definitely be answered by the Department. The other thing is separate, but it would be useful for members if we could get that written briefing.

Ms Warde Hunter: Yes, OK.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Sydney, a very quick question and a very quick answer.

Mr Anderson: I am interested in the position of the Department on how we can tackle environmental crime in and outside the waste sector. It was referred to in the first draft of the PFG, but I think that they are saying to us that they need to tackle environmental crime occurring outside it. It does not refer to that. Is there any reason for that? Can you explain it?

Ms Warde Hunter: I will pass to David on that environmental bit.

Mr Small: I am not sure that I picked up the full question. You referred to a —

Mr Anderson: I referred to the need to tackle environmental crime occurring inside and outside the waste sector. That comment is not in the second —

Mr Small: It does not feature as a key indicator. We have been in regular contact with the Department of Justice to try to ensure that the contribution that we make to dealing with environmental crime is reflected, as far as we can, in the contributions that we can make to the wider crime outcome. There may be opportunities to make sure that the contribution that the Department makes on rural crime is properly —

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I think that the Minister has already indicated that that is a priority for her. I am not sure that it is —

Mr Small: Again, it is about how prominent an issue is. Like many other issues, not every interest area is clearly visible in the Programme for Government. It is a very high-level document.

Mr Anderson: It is a very big issue.

Mr Small: Yes, it is an important issue, but it is a very high-level document. We can take the issue of rural crime away and see how we might give it more prominence.

The Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Thank you. Waste as a whole is a big issue. I am not even sure that waste crime is anywhere near the biggest part of it, but that is a conversation for another day. Thank you very much. I appreciate you coming along today.