



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Outcomes Delivery Plan: The Executive
Office

4 March 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Mr Mike Nesbitt (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Fra McCann
Mr George Robinson
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Ms Caroline Gillan	The Executive Office
Mr Geoffrey Simpson	The Executive Office
Mr Chris Stewart	The Executive Office

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Good afternoon; you are very welcome. Thank you for coming along, and apologies that we are 45 minutes late. We apologise for that, and I know you have been outside the door waiting. Chris, if you introduce your team and do a short presentation, then we can move into questions and answers on the outcomes delivery plan.

Mr Chris Stewart (The Executive Office): Thank you, Chair. Happy to do that. Good afternoon, members. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to be back with you today to brief you on the outcomes delivery plan (ODP). I have with me Caroline Gillan, director of the programme for government division in TEO, and Geoffrey Simpson, who works with Caroline. That division is responsible for developing, managing and reporting on the delivery of the outcomes delivery plan and the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government (PFG).

Chair, I trust that the paper for today's meeting will have given Members a brief summary of the background to the development of the ODP. I will pick up some key issues on that, before going on to outline how it is intended to build on that to develop a Programme for Government. Members will recall that the ODP was originally developed as an interim measure during the period when we had no Ministers. The starting point was the framework of 12 outcomes that had been developed by the previous Executive and which reflect the key areas of economic and societal well-being that people said mattered most to them. Taken together, those outcomes provided a direction for the work of Departments which fully respected the strategic direction that had been set by the former Executive and which enjoyed very broad support.

We had committed to reporting progress against the ODP, and two reports have been published to date, first in December 2018, and then again in September 2019. These reports detailed the progress made towards the 12 outcomes, with each outcome owner — essentially, the permanent secretaries — making a statement of overall progress together with an update on key individual actions. Following that, an updated ODP was developed in the autumn of 2019 and published in December 2019. Hopefully, there is a copy of that in members' packs. That has a renewed focus on the actions likely to have the biggest impact across public services and programmes in the immediate future.

The latest version of the plan was not intended to cover a fixed period. Instead, our intention was for it to be maintained as a live document that can be amended or added to as priorities and actions change. To support that new approach, and to enable the presentation of dynamic information relevant to each outcome, officials have also been developing new monitoring and reporting web pages which will be accessible to the public. Those web pages will now be adapted to reflect the outcomes and actions in the forthcoming PFG to be agreed by the Executive. Our hope is that those will be ready to go live later this year.

Chair, the ODP has been central to public service delivery since June 2018, identifying priorities and driving actions for change across the public sector. Its use of the outcomes framework and its responsive approach now provides an appropriate foundation to develop a Programme for Government. At this point, it might be useful to remind ourselves what the New Decade, New Approach agreement said about the process and approach that the parties agreed for developing a Programme for Government.

There are a number of key points in the agreement. Firstly, the initial use of the ODP as a basis for setting out an immediate work programme; a commitment that the future PFG will focus on prosperity and well-being for all; a promise that it will be developed through engagement and co-design; and a commitment to accountability and transparency in the monitoring of its progress. The agreement also provided the basis for a two-stage approach to developing the Programme for Government, and the Executive have now agreed that approach. The first stage is to develop an immediate PFG to reflect the Executive's immediate priorities, and that stage is well under way. It is hoped to have that Programme for Government for 2020-21 ready by this coming April.

In coming weeks, as part of that process, officials will undertake a targeted engagement with a range of key stakeholders. We in TEO will lead that centrally, given that fairly compressed timescale, but we very much view it just as the start of ongoing engagement and co-design in this whole area. I hope it goes without saying that, in addition to engaging with stakeholders, we are more than happy to engage with this Committee, as you see fit, in that process. Developing an immediate PFG in this way is very challenging in terms of timescale and, indeed, the affordability of new priorities against the background of existing pressures. Nevertheless, it has the advantage of allowing the Executive to set out clearly their priorities and actions for the immediate time ahead.

Beyond that, the second stage will be the development of a long-term, multi-year, strategic Programme for Government, aligned to a multi-year Budget which will follow the spending review, and also to a legislative programme. Our aim is to have that ready by April 2021. As I mentioned earlier, an essential feature of that work is citizen engagement and co-design in working up the proposed outcomes, priorities and actions. That will be followed in due course by a more formal consultation on the draft PFG.

In terms of the timing of the second stage, we see engagement and development taking place between now and August, then a draft PFG formally going out to consultation around September or October, alongside the consultation on the post-2021 Budget. And then, hopefully, agreement on a multi-year PFG early in the calendar year 2021, to begin in that financial year.

That is a very quick skip over the ground. I am happy to answer any questions or expand on any of that.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK. I am sure that members will come in with questions. Just to clarify, we are looking at the nuts and bolts of the development plan, along with the Programme for Government, as opposed to, necessarily, its content. It will be a stroke of genius for politicians to be able to weave both into their questions.

I will begin by asking how you ensure that what is contained in the outcomes is kept realistic. Who keeps that check, and how is it worked with individual Departments and government agencies? My example of that would be that, if we are going to talk about regional equality and about investment

working right across the whole of the North, how can Invest NI get away with doing over 250 of its visits in Belfast and fewer than 80 around the rest of the North? The constituencies of the Chair and Deputy Chair of this Committee have had zero visits over a three-year period. Obviously, they are very high-level statements, but how do we keep them grounded and realistic, if agencies are going to just go way off the mark when it comes to actual delivery on the ground?

Mr Stewart: You appreciate, Chair, that I am not trying to avoid the detail of that question, but I am not really in a position to comment on the distribution of Invest Northern Ireland visits. I am happy to take that back and pass it on to colleagues in Economy and bring you an answer on that.

On the overall question, one of the things we see as very important is to take this forward closely linked to the Budget. Even in the initial Programme for Government, there is a great deal in NDNA to be delivered. It is a very ambitious agreement. The Executive are currently considering how to deliver on NDNA, through both the initial Programme for Government and the multi-year one that will follow. That is also against the background of, to be candid, the financial settlement associated with the agreement not being as generous as any of the parties wished, and very considerable existing pressures right across all the Departments. There is a lot to be done on a limited budget that will require very careful consideration. It means that we need to work very closely with our colleagues in the Department of Finance to ensure that it is realistic and affordable.

Drilling down beyond that, whether it comes to Invest Northern Ireland visits or any other aspect of individual delivery, it is incumbent upon outcome owners and Departments to demonstrate what it is that they are contributing to the achievement of the outcomes and how they are doing that. If concerns arise about whether a particular action or approach is not delivering on an outcome, or is not delivering in a way that demonstrates equality, that is something that I am sure this Committee, individual Committees or an overall Committee of the Executive, if the Assembly decides to establish one, will want to probe very carefully. It is something that we all want to be conscious of in our monitoring and stewardship of the PFG overall.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Do you see that information being real-time? Rather than having to wait until the end of a period, and ask Assembly questions that go back to what happened two or three years ago and then say, "That was terrible", will there be a real-life dashboard that we can look at and see that, "At this point in the year, you are not going to hit those targets, so we need the intervention now."?

Ms Caroline Gillan (The Executive Office): Yes. Chair, you are absolutely right about the outcomes being very high-level. Equally, there is a need to have a focus at action level. It is there that we expect Departments and outcome owners to be able to report on and evidence the impact that they are having at action level — how much they did, how well they did it and who is better off. We are expecting a great use of data right across section 75 groups and council areas. On the reporting and the live reporting, the web pages, once developed, will have live reporting of the indicators, the new data that comes online and hopefully, eventually, at action level, where we will be able to see how individual actions are going, and there will be data behind that. Eventually, the indicators will be broken down, where possible, into section 75 groups and into council areas. So, as well as it being very high-level, there will be a bit more on-the-ground reporting.

Mr Stewart: We are under no illusions, Chair. If that is successful and the data is genuinely accessible, citizens and stakeholders will challenge us on individual delivery and on the overall outcomes, and we will need to respond to that.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Finally, as for additional areas, I know that we were quite keen, given the crisis in housing, homelessness and appropriate housing, to see the issue addressed in a separate section in the Programme for Government and for that to then be drilled down into those reports. Is that being considered at this stage? What is the process for including something? Is it a formal request? Is it an Executive decision? How can an extra area be put in the programme?

Mr Stewart: Ultimately, it is for the Executive to sign off. I would not be at all surprised if it goes in that direction. You and I will both recall that that featured very prominently in the talks that led to NDNA. There was a high degree of consensus across all the parties on the need to do something different on housing, so I would not be at all surprised if the Executive decided to do exactly that, perhaps going as far as providing an additional or new outcome on housing, be that in the initial Programme for Government or the subsequent one. It is an Executive decision, but it is much more likely that it would be in the subsequent multi-year Programme for Government.

Mr Nesbitt: Caroline, can you give me a sense of the role of you and your unit in terms of inputs, outputs and outcomes?

Ms Gillan: We have a central role. A number of teams are involved in developing the document and the content. We work with officials right across the system, and with Ministers, to decide what should be in the Programme for Government. We have a central coordinating role, as well as thinking about how we design the monitoring apparatus. The Programme for Government website is one of the options, but we also need to think about the overall monitoring through to the Executive. Obviously, the Assembly itself will want to look at its role in that. More widely than that, we also have a piece of work to do on the Programme for Government, outcomes delivery and collaboration across the Civil Service and wider public sector. We are looking at how we become a much more outcomes-focused, collaborative system and Civil Service. The outcomes delivery plan has provided a great opportunity as a dry run for working in that way. We have learnt a lot from that about how well we collaborate and how we break down silos. We are working with colleagues from the applied learning centre on training and leadership courses and, more widely, around communications and meaningful work. So there are a number of elements.

Mr Nesbitt: I am assuming that, when it comes to data, it is not the gathering but the analysis that is the issue.

Ms Gillan: Yes. My colleagues in the PFG analytics unit will be sitting at their desks wondering why I have not mentioned them. We have a team of statisticians. There are statisticians in every Department who work on gathering evidence and advising policy colleagues on what evidence they should gather. We have a team of statisticians in TEO particularly looking at the data centrally on Programme for Government, precisely because it is all about knowing, "Are we actually making a difference? Are we gathering the right data?". They, along with Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency central colleagues, lead on looking at whether we have the right indicators. We have 49 of them at the moment, and we will want to do some sort of professional review internally of whether they are telling us the right things, whether some are working better than others and whether there are others that we could suggest or tweak. That is an important role as well.

Mr Nesbitt: I certainly think that outcomes-based accountability is the way to go, but some people say that the danger with outcomes-based accountability is that if you have outcomes for which you are trying to meet targets, you are ultimately tempted to massage the data in order to deliver on paper what has not been delivered on the ground. Do you share that fear?

Ms Gillan: It is not a fear or issue that we have come across particularly. At the end of the day, the data is a tool that allows us to see, for a start, which areas we need to target and where the problem areas are, and also to monitor whether we are actually making a difference. Its strength is that, when we have good data on an intervention or programme, we continue to collect the data and it shows that it is not making a difference, we have the evidence to show that we either have to tweak that intervention or stop it entirely, or, if it is working, do more of it. I do not think that it is so much about massaging the figures but using them as a great tool to show that we are doing the right things to create the biggest impact.

Mr Stewart: If we genuinely make the data accessible, and if it is probed, challenged and analysed, we will get a number of different perspectives on it. One of the other things that we are seeing increasingly is that there are different and new ways of using the information as the science of handling data develops. Just before I left Economy, we were in the foothills of developing a new energy strategy. Not surprisingly, one of the things that that will look at is the decarbonisation of transport. That generates a lot of data around things like reducing CO2 levels, but also reducing levels of other air pollutants. You can map that now in a very sophisticated way and draw out the contours of air pollutants around major roads. You can link that very easily to health data sets, so, very quickly, from that, you can see the measurable outcome of an energy strategy on a number of key health conditions. That is something that, 10 years ago, we simply would not have thought about doing. Yes, there are always dangers with the use of data that we need to guard against, but there is also potential to use it in new and richer ways that allow us to map the outcomes in a much more sophisticated way than we have done previously.

Mr Nesbitt: Mark Friedman briefed the legacy Committee a few years ago. He is the man who is credited with coming up with outcomes-based accountability in government. He was asked by the legacy Committee whether there was an obvious error to avoid. His answer was that, yes, there is, and it is not to try and do it all at once. We are trying to do it all at once. How difficult is it?

Mr Stewart: It is very difficult. At the end of the day, there is always a great deal for an Executive to deliver. There is a great deal for the Executive to deliver in NDNA. There is a great deal of existing pressure right across Departments. The Executive will have to make difficult decisions about what they prioritise. Our job, along with colleagues, is to ensure that the Executive are armed with the data and information to allow those informed choices to be made, and, crucially, to be explained to citizens, and for us all to be accountable for that.

Mr Nesbitt: My final question relates to point xviii on page 41 of 'NDNA'. It talks about the fiscal council that will provide independent assessment of delivery. Do you welcome that? How far advanced is the establishment of the fiscal council?

Mr Stewart: Of course I welcome that, given that the agreement has been signed up to by all five parties and, therefore, has the Executive's imprimatur: so, yes.

Mr Nesbitt: No, no, no. No, it has not.

Mr Stewart: Well, the agreement —.

Mr Nesbitt: It has not been fully endorsed by all five parties.

Mr Stewart: I stand corrected. It was, nevertheless, the basis on which the Executive returned. Therefore, it has the Executive's support. Therefore, it has mine.

Mr Nesbitt: How far advanced is the establishment of the council?

Mr Stewart: It is still early days, but I understand that colleagues in the Department of Finance who are leading on it are working on proposals.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for coming in. I have a couple of brief questions. We know that the Executive have had two away days in the past eight weeks to try to work out an approach to a draft Programme for Government. Can you report any progress?

Mr Stewart: Yes. Now, we are not at the point yet where there is a draft to share or a draft Budget, but those were two very productive discussions — that was the view of Ministers, not of me — where there was time, through that approach, to explore not just the things that usually land on Ministers' desks in a pressurised way — the list of pressures to be met — but the outcomes, in some detail, and the linkages between them. That was very helpful in informing the thinking that we are moving forward with now. As I said, we are not yet at the point where I can tell you that we are about to reveal a draft Programme for Government. There is still some way to go.

Mr Sheehan: Do you have a ballpark timeline?

Mr Stewart: We have the timescale that we are aiming for. If we are to meet the expectations in NDNA, we need to have this by April. Of course, there is a fixed timescale for the Budget, which has to be before the beginning of the financial year, and, to make this work as effectively as we all aim for, we need to keep the PFG in step with the Budget.

Mr Sheehan: What do you anticipate for consultation on a draft PFG?

Mr Stewart: We tend to talk about engagement rather than consultation for this particular part of the process simply because of the timescales involved. I will not remember them all, but we have a list — Geoffrey, I might turn to you for this — of stakeholder organisations that we have asked to engage with, and I have no doubt that that will be added to.

Mr Simpson: We have a programme arranged over the next two or three weeks. We are meeting a range of industry bodies first of all. We are meeting local government associations, so we are meeting the Society of Local Authority Chief Executive and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. We are also meeting the farming community through the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association and the Rural Community Network, and we have an event arranged with the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, which represents the community and voluntary sector. We have the Equality Coalition signed up for another event, we have

the ICTU meeting next week and we are then meeting all five of the commissioners, that is, those for children and young people, the Equality Commission, human rights, victims, and older people.

Mr Sheehan: What distinction are you making between engagement and consultation?

Mr Simpson: The engagement is the start of a consultation process; it will be an ongoing process to help us shape the initial programme that we bring forward in April. That will be a live document, we hope, so that will feed in later as well, meaning that we can keep that engagement going on in 2020-21 and it will be the beginning of the process of helping to shape 2020-21 long-term programme.

Mr Stewart: It is just to draw the distinction between that bit of engagement or consultation that people would often see, namely, a draft document and eight or 12 weeks to respond to it. That is never enough anyway; there needs to be more engagement upstream before you get to the point of drafting a document. In this particular phase, what we are doing is largely shaped simply by the timescale and the time that is available to do it. The work that we will do, which starts now, on the multi-year Programme for Government will be longer, much more intense and much broader.

Ms Gillan: It is also worth remembering that the 12 outcomes that we are working to are a basis for this initial year and were the result of an extensive public consultation a couple of years ago on what was important to people. We are confident about the public consultation and the high outcome level, but, as Chris said, when we move into the multi-year programme we will have a much more thorough look and will ask people, "Are these still important to you? Have things changed? Do you see different outcomes being important or being phrased in a slightly different way?" It is very much a continuous process.

Mr Sheehan: I am just slightly concerned that, given that co-design is used extensively throughout the plan, you can move ahead without any serious consultation.

Mr Simpson: There will be ongoing consultation at outcome-owner level with their particular stakeholder groups. That is where the co-design really comes in, because it is the co-design of actions that will make the big difference.

Ms Gillan: We would like this to be a live document, even in year one, because life changes and things come along. If certain actions need to be prioritised or new actions need to be put in place, obviously based on proper engagement and co-design at the outcome-owner level, they will be put in the document. It is not a static document that we are going to put out in April that will stay that way.

Mr Stewart: You are right; we have to candidly observe that there is a considerable tension between the emphasis on co-design and the timescale in the document, particularly in this first phase. There is not time to do as much as we or our Ministers would like. We will do as much as we can in the time available and will look to do a great deal more of that in the second phase.

Mr Clarke: The framework is something that you did whilst the Executive did not exist, is that right?

Mr Stewart: Yes.

Mr Simpson: The framework goes back to 2016, when the Executive was in place.

Mr Clarke: Yes, but did you continue to work on the basis of what was in that?

Mr Simpson: Yes, we have kept that going.

Mr Clarke: Outcomes 3 and 12 — I know that those are departmental rather than Executive Office targets — both include as an indicator the:

"Gap between % non-FSME school leavers and % FSME school leavers achieving at Level 2 or above including English and Maths."

How do they hope that they are going to achieve something like that?

Mr Stewart: It is a while since I looked at those figures —.

Mr Clarke: Sorry, Chris; I will just qualify it. The framework talks about:

"Improving wellbeing for all — by tackling disadvantage".

Mr Stewart: I will deal with the first part of that first. If I recall the figures correctly, and they may have changed, the difference was roughly 34% to 68% or something like that. That is a huge difference between those two populations. Drilling down into those even more, if you look at the performance of individual schools, you see that there are lots of instances of schools serving communities that have similar levels of socio-economic deprivation but have very significant differences in their performance. Some schools do much better than others. That is the genesis of the target, which is to say that it is not inevitable that children and young people who grow up in socio-economic deprivation will come out with fewer qualifications and that something can be done about that. At the risk of describing it superficially, the factors that contribute to that are well-understood. It is about the standard of teaching in the classroom and the standard of governance in the school boardroom, and it is then about providing the support to teachers and school governors to do that well. Those are the areas where the interventions we would expect —

Mr Clarke: There is crossover between your outcome 3 and outcome 12.

Mr Stewart: Yes.

Mr Clarke: What you said, Chris, leads me to where I want to really be. You say that it is about tackling those issues in particular areas, but the document talks about:

"Improving wellbeing for all — by tackling disadvantage".

You would maybe talk about teaching styles. I can think of many villages that have a Catholic maintained school, a controlled school and an integrated school, and they are all funded differently. It would probably be unfair not to suggest that someone who goes to an integrated school will get more per head of population than those who go to the Catholic school or the Protestant school, as it is perceived. How does that target tackle disadvantage when you are leaving behind the funding mechanism, which is where the real disadvantage is taking place?

Mr Stewart: You are tempting me to go back to areas that Caroline and I worked in. I will probably misremember the detail. That takes us into something fairly fundamental in NDNA as an agreement that is related to that: the transformation of education. That features prominently in the agreement, and I know that it features a lot in the thinking of departmental colleagues and the Minister there. We will see proposals on that in due course. It is recognised that the current education estate and system has some excellent high-performing schools in all the sectors, but it is not sustainable and needs to change. That pattern of schools that you described is going to have to change for sustainability reasons and not because of any judgement on the value of a particular type of school or sector. That is going to require a fairly fundamental recasting of the education system. If there are anomalies, or perceived anomalies, in the funding arrangements, I am sure that they can be examined.

Mr Clarke: That sounds like a reasonable explanation, except that that work has been going on since June 2018. NDNA came early this year. Why was rebalancing education to tackle disadvantage left out of the outcomes for this? There is disadvantage in education. You would assume that someone in a school that is going to get more money should get a better outcome than those who are not funded appropriately, but you focus on free school meals.

Ms Gillan: The other thing to remember is that the outcomes are the focus. Those indicators are not targets at all; they merely sit alongside as indicators that we might check to say, "Are we moving in the right direction for the outcome?". They are not the end of the story. It is not that the education actions, or the actions under either of those two outcomes, are solely focused on those areas; those are purely indicators. The focus is on the wider outcome, which does not constrain you in relation to —

Mr Clarke: The outcome is mischievous. You talk about the percentage of non-free school meal and the percentage of free-school-meal leavers achieving a level 2 or above, but it does not matter what sector they go to, because each of those sectors gets free school meals. There is more disadvantage in the education system than can be measured by free school meals. The real disadvantage is in how each of the models is funded. Some sectors are getting three times the amount of money per head

than another sector, and, to me, that causes a greater disadvantage. Whilst I am not speaking for Protestant boys primarily — I think that everyone should be treated equally — the outcomes for Protestant males are much worse than for those in other sectors. That, therefore, should have been rebalanced as an outcome; indeed, rebalance all sectors, treat everyone as equal and remove the disadvantage as opposed to focusing only on free school meals, because each and every sector will get free school meals.

Mr Simpson: What is being articulated there is the importance of understanding the story behind the indicator and what the data is saying. That is the challenge for the outcome owners. They have to get their head round what that means, what it is telling us, where we need to go and where we need to put our focus.

Mr Clarke: But it is not doing that.

Mr Simpson: That is what people have to —.

Ms Gillan: It is a rebalance.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Just to add to that, I think we are saying that this is about the nuts and bolts. I get what you are saying, which is about the physical outcome itself and querying it. That is proper, but you are not the educational experts who put that outcome there. Maybe the query is more general and asks this: what happens if there is an outcome that does not adequately reflect what is on the ground?

Mr Stewart: That is right. You are absolutely right in that we must not rely solely on one indicator. It is absolutely right that there are many dimensions to underachievement, not all of which can be measured solely through entitlement to free school meals. That reinforces the point that was made about the need for us to have a richness of data to make it accessible and amenable to analysis and probing. The outcome for Protestant boys in socially deprived communities has been well-recognised for many years. You are absolutely right that you do not see that part of the story simply by looking at free school meals. There are other indicators and other sources of data that need to be looked at

Ms Sheerin: Thank you for your presentation. I have a question about the parts of the Programme for Government that you are outlining and some of the commitments that were made in NDNA. Not to keep going back to this, but there are time-bound commitments on the language legislation and the language and culture commissioners. How close are we to the strategies that are outlined? I know that a deadline of the end of March for having a plan in place had been mentioned. I am just wondering about that.

Mr Stewart: Work is under way. I cannot, I am afraid, give you a detailed picture today on the rights, language and culture part of the document, but we can provide you with that information or, better still, I could pass it to my colleague Mark Browne and ask him to do it. I know that, given the centrality of those actions to the agreement and their political significance, it is a priority, and work is under way in the Department on taking those forward.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Fra.

Mr McCann: Last but not least.

Mr Lunn: No, you are not last. Do not worry.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): No, there is still more.

Mr McCann: Thank you for your presentation; it was certainly interesting. I will pick up on an issue that Trevor raised. I get it that you understand it, but free-school-meal entitlement is usually a sure indicator of deprivation in communities. Whatever community they are from, when a child goes to school without any food, it is certainly going to impact on their education. Recent collaborative work that has been taking place between primary schools and secondary schools in broader west Belfast is starting to pay dividends. We need to ensure that that is funded properly, so we need to encourage that kind of working.

I will go back to the consultation, and Pat raised a question about that. I have been on other Committees, so I understand that you are working within a difficult time frame. I used to get a bee in my bonnet about this whole thing. When we talk about consultations, we talk about the usual suspects. You just read out the list of usual suspects that are going to be brought in to talk things out. I thought that we had got over the stage of just relying on that and on bringing people in, talking to them, getting an opinion and then went away and that we had started to broaden out the discussion. What we are doing has to impact on everybody, not just on a number of the sectors. I think that that is the crucial element, especially of the outcomes. Maybe Departments could look at collaborative working with other sectors to see what is happening there. One of the difficulties that you have had in the past is how you deal with Departments that feel that they are not ready or do not want to move into that space where, if they are going to deliver the outcomes that we require to move everything forward, the only way forward is collaborative working.

Mr Stewart: I think that is right. I will pick up on the engagement piece first and then come back to free school meals. You are absolutely right, and we do not want to stop at the "usual suspects", to borrow your phrase. If you think there are obvious gaps even on the list that we produced that we have missed, we are more than happy to take suggestions. We are absolutely happy to engage with this Committee. To be candid, we would love to be doing much more than that, even on the first phase, but NDNA set a ferocious timescale for us to do this. It will be very difficult for us to do much more than we outlined in that first phase, but the second phase starts now and, in essence, does not finish. That will be an ongoing process of engagement.

Ms Gillan: You are absolutely right. To reassure you about how to re-engage with actual real people, we are starting to develop an approach and a strategy that is looking much more at whether we can get focus groups of a good cross section of society and whether we can go to people where they are living, working and carrying out different day-to-day activities rather than expecting them to come to us, which, very often, they do not. We are looking at online opportunities and are going to significant events, for example, the Balmoral show or something like that, so that we can talk to people who happen to be there.

Mr Stewart: I assure you that we are never going back to the old days where you put a document out for eight weeks and everybody told you what was wrong with it. That did not work, and we are not going back to that.

I agree with you on the free-school-meals point. We are saying that it is a very useful indicator but is not the only one. I think there are others that we need to look at, but it remains a very valid indicator. It is a very reliable proxy for socio-economic deprivation. It shows us, I think most importantly of all, the difference in outcomes between schools that are serving communities of similar levels of socio-economic deprivation. We know that some schools have developed better practice in this area, and, as you say, we need to build on that and build on the collaboration between schools and between school sectors. It is not inevitable that, if someone is in receipt of free school meals, they will miss out on their educational experience. That can be addressed. There is good practice, and we need to make sure that it is embedded.

Mr McCann: To go back again for one minute, in the last Assembly and the Assembly before that, one of the things that the Department for Social Development, then the Department for Communities and some of the other Departments started to do, mostly at the request and insistence of their Committees, was to look beyond what I called the "usual suspects". They started to look into neighbourhood renewal partnerships and whatever local farming organisations existed. Sometimes when you have these conversations with the usual suspects, they do not filter down to communities, and when you start to include people in the discussions about how their life will be affected by what we do up here, they will at least say that they had a say in creating that or shaping that.

Mr Stewart: That is absolutely right. In times past, which was not that long ago, we did not really have the ability to consult directly with children and young people. We now do. We have had to learn that, and we are still learning, but there are ways of doing it. So, there is no excuse for not consulting and engaging directly with children and young people now and with any other sector or group in society.

Mr McCann: How do you deal with Departments that do not buy into the new way of thinking on outcomes and of moving away from the silo approach of, "What we have, we hold"?

Mr Stewart: I am glad to say that I think that there is quite considerable evidence of that breaking down. Certainly, Ministers are very quick, I think, to see the linkages. I will give an example that I know

will resonate with many members — mental health. If you look at mental health and mental health services as an issue for the Department of Health, you see that you will simply not see anything like the whole story. However, if you look at the incidence of mental illness amongst school-age children and how it affects their ability to avail themselves of educational opportunity, you start to see it differently.

Look at the how successful something like the Department of Justice's substance abuse court has been in dealing with substance abuse. However, it will say that it works only if the treatment programmes are available in Health and Social Care to refer people to. If you start looking at mental health and mental health provision through the lens of what it contributes to a whole range of outcomes right across the piece, you see that the holy grail is to get to the point where you want the Minister of Justice to spend some of her budget on Health and Social Care because it is contributing to outcome 7, and you want the Minister of Education to spend some of his budget on mental health because it contributes to the outcomes that he has an interest in. Now, I am not claiming that we have got quite that far yet, but there is certainly a growing body of evidence of people recognising what other Departments can do for them and what they can do for other Departments for outcomes.

Ms Gillan: It will really help as we go out to develop the multi-year PFG alongside colleagues who are developing a multi-year Budget. Joining those two discussions together is going to help with that.

Mr Lunn: It is good to see you again —

Mr Stewart: And you.

Mr Lunn: — all of you. What strikes me about this is that it is so hugely ambitious and wide-ranging. It screams "Budget" at me. You mentioned that, Chris, in your preamble. To what extent is there a reliance on European funding in the middle of all this?

Mr Stewart: I cannot claim to have thought specifically about that with regard to European funding in any great detail, Trevor. The Budget challenge itself is immense. Ministers are on record saying that they are disappointed with the financial settlement that came along with the agreement. We are looking forward to the Budget to see what the Chancellor comes out with nationally. I do not think anyone is expecting that to be an absolute game changer, but we are hoping that there will be some room to manoeuvre around that.

It cannot be denied that difficult decisions are going to have to be made in the delivery of this. It is not about not doing things. Our Ministers very quickly reminded me that it is not about not doing things; it is about when and how. Difficult decisions will have to be made on prioritisation and the timing of the delivery of this. Clearly, it is not all going to be delivered in the initial Programme for Government. It is, at least, going to take us into the multi-year Programme for Government and some of it, perhaps, beyond that.

Mr Simpson: Some of the stuff is generational. Taken in totality, it is the journey towards all those outcomes that matters, where you want to be doing better continually in all of them.

Mr Lunn: I did not mean that to be a negative comment. I wish you a fair wind, and if you can deliver substantial sections of all this, that will be a real success. I listened to your discussion about the education system, and I think back, Chris —

Mr Stewart: It takes us both back, yes.

Mr Lunn: — to the various initiatives over the years to try to modernise, change or transform our education system, and we wasted some time getting nowhere on the Education Committee. I can remember two years on the Education and Skills Authority — do I need to go on?

Mr Stewart: Thank you for that summary of my career. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn: You did your best. The fact is that we have been through all that and we still have three educational silos: controlled; maintained; and integrated. The other Trevor and I must have a short discussion some time about the funding of schools, because I think he has got the wrong end of the stick. Beyond that, that is a tough one. I appreciate that the Minister that we have now is relatively forward-thinking, and maybe he means business for the transformation of the systems, the sectors

and the estate that has to be done. I am sure that it is all in here. Even just that on its own is huge. There is so much else there, which I really do wish you well with. Good luck.

Mr Stewart: Thank you for that. It is challenging. I will confine myself a little and not to stray too far into the territory of education or I will get into trouble with my colleagues and the Minister. The need for transformation is clearly signalled in the document. It has been well-understood for a long time. People compare and contrast it with the transformation in Health and Social Care, and there are comparisons that can be made.

One of the things that is sometimes suggested is that there is a need for a Bengoa-style review of education, and the Executive might decide to go in that direction. If I can candidly observe, one of the difficulties there is that, in Health and Social Care there is, broadly speaking, an accepted view of what the right way forward is. There is acceptance of the evidence base and where that is driving transformation of the configuration of Health and Social Care services. I do not think there is anything like the same level of agreement or consensus about what an education system should look like. Thankfully, that is a challenge for politicians.

Mr Lunn: You mentioned the word "transformation". There are two meanings for that word.

Mr Stewart: Yes, there are two definitions of that word.

Mr Robinson: I will be very brief. At the present time, does transport come into the equation, particularly with Translink's financial situation? That will impact quite a lot on schoolchildren and so forth.

Mr Stewart: There is no better example of a set of immediate pressures facing a Department or the need to take action to deliver some of the long-term outcomes. Given what the framework says, yes, this is challenging and ambitious, but there needs to be a sustainable public transport system if that is going to be achieved. Yes, another Committee will have heard from my colleague about the very serious financial difficulties there.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): That ends most of the questions and answers. I want to highlight one point. You said that the Programme for Government 2020-21 should be drafted by April 2020.

Mr Stewart: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Do you intend to brief the Committee on that? Is that something we can do travelling forward?

Mr Stewart: Absolutely. We are at your disposal, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Chris, Caroline and Geoffrey thank you very much indeed for the presentation today.