



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Strategic Investment and Regeneration; Equality and
the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression; Urban
Villages and Communities in Transition:
Executive Office

18 March 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Trevor Clarke
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Ms Siobhan Broderick	The Executive Office
Dr Mark Browne	The Executive Office
Mrs Linsey Farrell	The Executive Office
Mrs Orla McStravick	The Executive Office

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I welcome Dr Mark Browne and his team, and I ask you to note our new social distancing policy. We are not normally spread this far apart but, in the circumstances, it is important that we follow the advice. It puts you front and centre somewhat for the duration of the session. Your colleagues are sitting behind you and, ordinarily, we would not accept contributions from the Public Gallery, but on this occasion we are happy to relax that. I will let you introduce your team, given that this is the first opportunity for you to do so. We will then introduce ourselves and hand back to you.

Dr Mark Browne (The Executive Office): Thank you very much, Chair. It is a pleasure to be back with the Committee. Today, we are providing a briefing on work areas in the infrastructure and racial equality division; Urban Villages and Communities in Transition; and the equality, rights and identity divisions. We discussed the other work areas in my directorate when we met last month, and I hope that that covers the full range of my responsibilities.

I am accompanied today by Siobhan Broderick, director of equality, rights and identity; Linsey Farrell, director of Urban Villages and Communities in Transition; and Orla McStravick, director of infrastructure and racial equality. I will begin by giving you a brief overview of the key work areas, which are also covered in the briefing paper. We will be happy to take whatever questions members have.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): We will introduce ourselves. I am Colin McGrath, the Chair of the Committee.

Ms Sheerin: I am Emma Sheerin, Sinn Féin MLA for Mid Ulster.

Ms Anderson: I am Martina Anderson, MLA for Foyle. This is my first Committee meeting.

Mr Clarke: I am Trevor Clarke, DUP MLA for South Antrim.

Mr Stalford: I am Christopher Stalford, DUP Assembly Member for South Belfast.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): It was probably more sensible to do those introductions the other way round, but I like to vary things to keep people on their toes. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Browne: Thanks, Chair. We appreciate the opportunity to present the key issues that are associated with the rights, language and identity proposals in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. That agreement commits the First Minister and deputy First Minister to sponsoring and overseeing a new framework, which will comprise a number of things, including the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression, an Irish language commissioner and a commissioner to enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster-Scots and Ulster-British tradition here. Consideration is being given to bringing forward the rights, language and identity proposals in the agreement as soon as possible.

The equality, human rights and Delivering Social Change unit provides guidance and advice to policy teams in the Department on the statutory duties under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, particularly in relation to screening and equality impact assessments. It also provides general advice and support to NICS Departments on the application of equality and human rights responsibilities. The unit acts as a sponsor of the Equality Commission. The establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee on a bill of rights is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, the First Minister and deputy First Minister are responsible for the appointment of the panel of five experts, and work is ongoing to establish that panel.

The work of the Urban Villages and Communities in Transition division builds on the extensive good relations work that is being delivered across the directorate, on which we had the opportunity to brief members last month. The Executive Office has responsibility for the delivery of action B4, also known as the Communities in Transition project, which is part of the Executive-wide action plan on tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime. That is one of 38 actions in the plan, which is being delivered by a variety of Executive Departments and agencies. The Department of Justice has overall lead responsibility for the coordination of those separate actions. Action B4 states:

“The Executive should establish a fund to support ambitious initiatives aimed at building capacity in communities in transition, including through developing partnerships across civil society and across community divisions”.

We are supported in the delivery of this project by Co-operation Ireland, operating in partnership with the Mitchell Institute, INCORE and the Institute for Conflict Research.

To assist with focusing efforts on those communities that are most impacted by ongoing paramilitary and associated criminal cores of activity, the project is focused on eight key areas: Carrickfergus and Larne, Derry/Londonderry, north Down, Lurgan, west Belfast, north Belfast, Shankill and east Belfast. We acknowledge that it has taken more time to get this element of work to the implementation stage, especially when compared with other elements of the action plan, but I am pleased to say that the project is now delivering.

There has been considerable progress over the past number of months as a process to appoint local delivery partners has been undertaken across a variety of themes and is now nearing completion. As of 4 March, we have awarded 27 projects across eight areas, and we are in the evaluation stage for one more. Contracts that are in place now run up to the end of the programme in March 2021. It is our view that those projects could usefully run for longer than that, provided the overall programme is extended, as seems to be indicated in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

The Urban Villages initiative is a headline under Together: Building a United Community, or T:BUC. It is an innovative programme that is designed to improve good relations outcomes and develop thriving places where there has been a history of deprivation and community tension. There are five Urban Villages areas — four in Belfast and one in Derry/Londonderry. The initiative shapes and delivers programmes and projects in partnership with local people across all five Urban Villages areas. The programme is having an impact on people's lives and the places where they live, building community cohesion and improving the physical environment. Eighty per cent of participants, for example, feel

more favourable towards people from a different background; 88% of participants are more likely to take part in shared groups or activities with people from a different background; 94% of participants report that the projects have fostered relationships between and within communities; and 92% of participants report an improved sense of community belonging.

Both the Urban Villages programme and the Communities in Transition project have integrated the learning and best practice from the social investment fund (SIF) in their development and delivery. As you will note from the briefing paper, the social investment fund is at an advanced stage of delivery and is making a significant impact on local communities. Of the 65 projects being delivered, 52 are complete, with a spend to date of over £72 million. Through the capital works, 91 premises have been extended, refurbished, improved or built and are now delivering key services in disadvantaged areas. Through the revenue projects, over 45,000 people have benefited to date, 5,000 through employment or training projects, over 28,000 through early intervention projects and over 12,000 through projects that are focused on education. That will continue to increase as the projects roll out.

The infrastructure and racial equality division within which SIF sits covers a range of work streams, including the redevelopment of the Ebrington site. The regeneration of the site has progressed at pace, with tenants in place or identified for all buildings and significant infrastructure works complete or ongoing. We are delighted that work has commenced on the grade A office accommodation, which we see as a key catalyst for the site, and we continue to work with Derry City and Strabane District Council on plans for the transfer of the site at the appropriate time.

The infrastructure and racial equality division also has sponsorship responsibilities for both the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and the Maze Long Kesh Development Corporation (MLKDC), which was established under the Strategic Investment and Regeneration of Sites (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. The Department works closely with those organisations to support them to operate effectively within their mandate to achieve their objectives, ensuring good governance and financial accountability. SIB is continuing to provide support to the public sector on major investment projects, PPP/PFI project implementation and monitoring, and asset management. It is also working to update the draft investment strategy.

MLKDC, while established to redevelop the Maze/Long Kesh site, is taking forward essential maintenance on the scheduled, listed and retained buildings, ensuring health and safety requirements and providing for the existing tenants, who are doing some excellent work, until such time as there is agreement on the site development.

The final area to provide an update on is our work on racial equality. We are continuing to progress implementation of the racial equality strategy. As a result, all Departments have a racial equality champion, and a racial equality subgroup is operational and supported by TEO. Other work is ongoing, particularly around the legislative review and the scope for ethnic monitoring. We have completed a review of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 against equivalent legislation in GB and ROI and are in the process of validating and analysing the findings to inform next steps. In parallel, we have commissioned research in respect of the scope for ethnic monitoring, including the potential for amendments to fair employment legislation. We have also commenced the process to launch the minority ethnic development fund (MEDF) for 2020-21 to support voluntary and community organisations, addressing the needs of people from minority ethnic backgrounds and working towards promoting good relations between different ethnic groups.

In parallel, a review of the MEDF is under way, and its findings will inform the operation of the fund beyond this year. TEO is also the policy lead in respect of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, now renamed the Global Resettlement Scheme. We recently held a two-day innovation lab to look more widely at how we enable refugees and the communities in which they live to build a cohesive and sustainable future together to inform future approaches to refugee integration. We also work with colleagues across Departments to respond to national immigration policy and assess its implications for local people.

That concludes my opening remarks. I appreciate that that was a brief overview of an extensive range of work, and I am happy to take any questions that the Committee may have.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much, Mark. I am sure that there will be a number of questions. You provided quite a comprehensive review of four different areas where a lot of work takes place on the ground. I will commence with four or five questions. Some of them are quite quick and factual so I will not frighten you too much with the list of questions.

My first question is about one of the major pieces of work that the Committee will undertake: the three Bills coming together as a result of the NDNA process. Can you give any sense of timing for when those Bills are likely to be introduced? That would assist with the Committee's forward work plan.

Dr Browne: I thought that you were going to ask all your questions.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I will come back to you because they are on different topics.

Dr Browne: The time frame for the introduction of the legislation was 9 April. It is a very challenging timescale, particularly in the current circumstances, and a lot of the plans that we are looking at will have to be looked at again to assess deliverability. We are considering, with Ministers, the precise process that they wish to follow in bringing forward the legislation. That is still in discussion and will encompass the timing and detailed process for the legislation. The intention is to keep moving forward on the legislation and to introduce it, as an integrated package, to the Assembly.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): A number of your initiatives across the Departments are funding for groups on the ground. At this stage, has any consideration been given to the impact of coronavirus on the community, in that many organisations are probably going to struggle between now and April to fulfil the terms of their grant agreements etc? Will that be looked at flexibly? If a group, for example, is expected to meet over 40 weeks in the year but it has to close down and is not able to do the last three or four weeks, can a by-ball or leeway be given or an investigation worked out whereby, if groups contact you to say that they have had to close, that grants would be clawed back because they are not fulfilling the criteria? Will that be looked at sympathetically?

Dr Browne: This is a very fast-moving situation. The wider picture is being considered by Ministers — today and in the coming days — as to exactly what the priorities need to be across all programmes that are delivered across all Departments and how funding and resource will need to be redirected to meet the challenge that COVID-19 will present. Those things are still under consideration. At this point, all I can say is that we will want to be as flexible as we can be and mindful of the important contribution of all these groups. We also need to be mindful of the potential impact on groups and their structures if funding is restricted or withdrawn. All that must be put in the context of the wider challenge that the Executive face, and important priorities will have to set by Ministers; we await that direction from Ministers. I am afraid that I cannot really go into any more detail on that.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): For many groups that perhaps have only a couple of weeks' funding left of this year but may not be able to deliver their work because people are self-isolating and not participating, it would be very sad if we end up punishing people for not being able to do their work. However, I am sure that that will be given a sympathetic ear. We can discuss this afterwards but, if the Committee is in agreement, we can write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister and ask for a flexible approach because much of that money is for staff wages.

It is understandable that, if you are not delivering a programme, you do not need programme money, so it could go back. However, if people's wages go up until the end of April and they are stopping work in the first or second week of March, it seems unfair to start clawing back weeks' worth of money.

Dr Browne: All I can say is that we are mindful of that. We will put those issues before Ministers, but Ministers will have bigger issues to consider, and I cannot anticipate their final decision.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): At least we know that it is there and in the mix.

A lot of areas, such as the social investment fund, have been time-bound for a number of years. Have fresh bids been prepared for those funding lines, where their money is set to run out? I know from the initial briefings that we received that a lot of the programmes are due to finish this year, or they are certainly moving into the last year of their funding. How many of the initiatives on which departmental money has been spent are likely to run out of funding, and how many have prepared bids for the future?

Dr Browne: At the last briefing, I talked about the Together: Building a United Community shared future fund. We are into the last year of that, but that is not really what we are focusing on today, although it funds Urban Villages. Another year of that £12 million funding is in place, subject to any decisions that Ministers make and various things. We have already highlighted the importance of ongoing funding being made available for that after this year.

The social investment fund was part of the Delivering Social Change initiative. As part of that, in the early years, when funding was made available but projects were not there because it took time to develop them, funding was made available to other projects that fell within the broad aims of that programme. The original budget that was set for the social investment fund was £80 million. We secured agreement to get that extended, in light of rising costs, to £93 million. We do not anticipate that that will be required, but the capacity and the period over which we can spend that £93 million has been extended. If we do not spend the money in-year, we will release it back to the centre, and it will be used for other projects across other Departments, but we still have the potential to spend up to the budget that was identified for the social investment fund. We anticipate that those will finish, insofar as we can be precise about this, in March 2021. It is possible that some projects that have started may have a slight tail into a following year, but we are trying to ensure that we bring the project to an appropriate conclusion.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): The paragraph on age, goods and facilities and services is not very long. Is that an indication that there is not much work going on with that? Is there a stall in that process? How quickly do you reckon that the next steps might appear in that strand of work?

Dr Browne: The age, goods and facilities commitment is made in New Decade, New Approach; it is part of what could constitute a future Programme for Government. The detail of that has to be decided. It is one of the priorities that Ministers will have to determine in light of all the other commitments in that agreement and the new circumstances that we find ourselves in.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Is it parked? It is not progressing much, but it is not slipping. Is it just sitting there waiting?

Dr Browne: It is awaiting Ministers to take a decision on what priority they feel that they can afford to it.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): No problem, Mark. Thank you very much.

Ms Anderson: It is good to meet you again, Mark. Apologies for not being across the detail; I received the papers only this afternoon as I sat down in the Committee, so bear with me. It would be remiss of us, as the Chair said, not to mention coronavirus. Obviously, the Executive met today on civil contingency plans. I am sure that you did not intend to give anyone out there who is worried about their employment concerns that they are being de-prioritised in any way. As the Chair said, those groups will need certainty, particularly if they cannot arrive at deadlines. They need to know that there will be no repercussions and that they will not be punished as a consequence. I support the Chair on that; we will return to it.

New Decade, New Approach sets out Bills and draft legislation, which you spoke about. Some people are concerned about the language in the Bill, particularly the comment about the mandate of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. That has to take account of the sensitivities of those with different national and cultural identities, and it must respect the rule of law. I know that the Irish language community and members of the Protestant/unionist/loyalist (PUL) community have raised concerns already about that. No one wants to unpack the legislation. It may be that that necessitates a statement or comment from the joint First Ministers about how it will be presented so that sensitivities will be compatible with the rights of others as opposed to how it could be used.

I have also been following — again, I read myself into this — some of the issues regarding Ulster Scots. I put on record my absolute support for what is going through about the Ulster-Scots commission. Has any explanation been given of how the Ulster-Scots commissioner will work with the human rights commissioner? When I read about the role of the Ulster-Scots commissioner, I saw that it is to give guidance on human rights standards, yet that is the role of the human rights commissioner. How will that work in practice?

During the week, I received a mailing on the Buy Social unit. Does that relate to the Strategic Investment Board?

Dr Browne: Yes.

Ms Anderson: When I look at how there have been 155 contracts, I am keen to hear how you buy social justice and social procurements and put social clauses in procurement contracts. In the first

instance when I looked at that, I thought that 1,500 people who were regarded as long-term unemployed or who were taking part in work experience had been given access to jobs. However, when I looked further, I saw that it seems that it is 525 people a year. The scale of the billions that are spent in this area must be considered. When I looked at the gender breakdown, I saw that only 25% are female. I saw that 16% are from the neighbourhood renewal programme and that, over a three-year period, only 27 people with a disability were employed. I say all that in the context of our legal obligations to make sure that we promote section 75. Has the Buy Social unit conducted an equality impact assessment on all of that?

I have only received the papers, so you will not be surprised that I am quite interested in the point that you made on Ebrington, given that it has been an Executive responsibility for four years. We all know the history of what has happened over the past number of years, and I am very aware that the late Martin McGuinness regarded the project as not only of developing the landscape of Ebrington but of developing the economic prosperity of the north-west. I am keen to know where we are at with tenants because, in my city of Derry, people are quite concerned about the fact that we have the opportunity with a site, and they do not believe that it is being given the due regard and attention that it needs for it to develop. I am sure that we will get an opportunity to take that forward soon.

Delivering Social Change provides an excellent opportunity to take forward equality of opportunity for section 75 groups. I have always favoured the Delivering Social Change framework.

Finally, on refugees and immigration, I know what we are facing, but we cannot forget what has been referred to as "Europe's sinking shame" of what has happened in the Mediterranean. I know that people who are here from war-torn countries and elsewhere appreciate the help that they are given, but there are also issues that we need to make sure that we are mindful of and that we take care of EU nationals and others particularly during this difficult time.

Dr Browne: Thanks. There were a number of questions there. In working through the detail of the legislation, there will be areas where the wording and understanding will need to be worked through. You mentioned the sensitivities, and we need to work through what that means in the agreement and how it will be translated into the Act. As you said, we need to work through how the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression will link with the Human Rights Commission. I think that it will be to take account of human rights in relation to the functions that the office has to discharge as opposed to trying in any way to impinge on what the Human Rights Commission does. Across all these areas, there are other arm's-length bodies that play into the same broad space. Part of what we will need to do is to ensure that the relationships between the relevant bodies are looked at to try to avoid, where possible, overlap and to ensure that they are complementary. I think that that will be done through a process of defining clearly what the organisations have to do where there is the potential for two organisations to be contributing in the same area, which is not necessarily wrong, making sure that there is a service-level agreement or some other agreement so that there is an understanding of who does what.

Ms Anderson: We need to be clear about that. We need to be clear about the Human Rights Commission's role. If you have two people contributing and defining what rights mean, therein lies the potential for misunderstanding or conflict. We need to be clear about the role of each of the commissioners in this field and the roles of the bodies that will be set up, so that the two, ultimately, where it would be not just the test, but who it would be, in terms of the premise of the Human Rights Commission. That needs to be flagged up.

Dr Browne: The Office of Identity and Cultural Expression will work with the Human Rights Commission to understand what human rights mean in the context of languages and identity. That is what I was saying about working together.

Ms Anderson: OK.

Dr Browne: As to Buy Social, I agree that there is a desire to do more in that area. It has been developing over the last number of years and is being built into contracts. We are supportive of that. We are working with SIB, and will continue to do so, to try to increase the engagement and involvement of all the groups that you have mentioned, to ensure that greater benefits apply.

Ms Anderson: Was an equality impact assessment done?

Dr Browne: I would have to check that and come back to you, if that is OK, Martina.

Ms Anderson: I would be grateful if you could get me that information,

Dr Browne: Very significant progress has been made on Ebrington. A site of that size, with significant heritage buildings on it and all the problems that they bring with them, given their classification and status and the hidden issues that emerge when you try to work with them, brings high costs. Significant investment had to be put into Ebrington around the basic utilities, for example, water, sewerage and electricity. As you will know, a new roadway and gateway into Ebrington has been developed. There has been significant work around all the buildings and a lease, or an expression of interest, has now been taken for all the buildings in Ebrington.

Ms Anderson: There has been an expression of interest in them all?

Dr Browne: Yes, or else there is a lease in place for all of them. We should not just get into how much was invested; it is the outcome that is important, which is that businesses are interested in these areas. Since 2016, when TEO took over direct control of the site, there has been about £15.6 million invested in the site. Something in the region of £22 million was spent before that. So there has been a significant investment in the site.

There are some really exciting developments there now. The new grade-A office building, which has commenced construction, will provide 50,000 square feet net of office space, accommodating between 400 and 450 people. It is due to complete in the summer of 2020-21. A four-star hotel with 152 bedrooms is planned, with a view to commencing construction this year.

Ms Anderson: Is that still going ahead? That is not how the rumour mill has it in Derry, but that is good to hear.

Dr Browne: We hope so. It is hard to know just how the current circumstances are going to impact on all these things.

Ms Anderson: Of course.

Dr Browne: The risk is that it could have a wider impact across the Ebrington site. I can only tell you where we were prior to this. We will have to see how these things unfold. Derry City and Strabane District Council is also preparing a business case for the maritime museum. We are continuing to work on that.

We are mindful that this is not just about the buildings. It is about what that whole shared space symbolises for the city and how we encourage shared activity on the site. However, we need activity on the site to attract people in, and we need to make it an open and welcoming space. We also, of course, located the Peace Tree sculpture there recently, and that has become an important focal point on the site.

You also asked about refugees and migration. Again, that is an excepted matter. However, we try to support minority ethnic groups that are here and to make sure that their voices are heard through the racial equality subgroup and the racial equality champions, who are identified in each Department to look at how policies and their administration affect minority ethnic groups. The minority ethnic development fund of £1.2 million is available to those groups.

As you will know, we have taken the policy lead, with DFC taking the operational lead, in the Syrian vulnerable persons relocation scheme. Some 1,818 refugees were welcomed here. It has been a successful programme that is now coming to an end, and it is being brought in with another programme to become the global resettlement scheme. Just prior to the Executive coming back, a decision was taken that, for the next year, we will participate in that scheme. Ministers need to take a view as to whether they want to continue in that in the longer term, because that is properly a ministerial decision. The initial decision to extend for a year was taken in view of the fact there were no Ministers here.

I mentioned the refugee integration strategy. We have been working, through an innovation lab with various stakeholders, to try to identify the key issues, and we hope to be able to develop that and to bring it to Ministers in the reasonably near future to try to address effective integration. It is not just about bringing people here; it is about how they can integrate effectively with society and everyone can work productively and feel that they have a stake in our local communities.

Ms Anderson: I put on the record that I am very conscious of the fact that coronavirus changes the world for us all.

Mr Stalford: I want to ask some questions about the social investment fund. Before I do, I have to declare an interest. As you know, my constituency office is in a building that received funding through that fund. The irony is that I remember lots of people turning up to the opening of that building, including people who previously had been on their feet in the Assembly, demanding that the social investment fund should be scrapped, but, such is politics, I suppose.

One of the big difficulties around SIF, as you know, was that it took quite a long time to get it moving. There were various working groups, and people who were on those working groups, just, over time, when fatigue set in, effectively drifted away. What appraisal has been made of the governance arrangements around SIF, and will you detail some of that? If such an appraisal has been made, is there potential for a SIF 2.0, and, if so, what governance changes would be made to address those problems?

Dr Browne: First, we are delivering the SIF projects that were agreed by the steering groups where they remain value for money. Some of them, over time, as we have tried to work at them, have demonstrated a series of issues, and we may not be able to deliver them. We are delivering all that have been identified as being feasible. As I mentioned, over £74 million was spent on SIF — so, significant progress. We are down to the last handful of projects, which tend to be the more difficult ones for one reason or another.

You asked specifically about the governance; obviously that is the key element of this. There has been a lot of learning in SIF. It had novel or particular characteristics in that it was very much bottom-up. It was developed in the community and through the various steering groups identifying the projects. That had strengths in that it ensured that people had an opportunity to identify projects that they felt would be useful in their area. It also had some issues in that projects, which maybe had significant issues with them, sometimes got quite a distance, and, had there had been an earlier, detailed and professional assessment of costs and practicalities, there would have been changes to those projects. That is what we have been doing over the last number of years with a lot of these projects; taking ideas that were fine ideas but had significant problems with them. The learning from that, which we have applied to Urban Villages and Communities in Transition, is that, where we work with the community to develop ideas — we believe that is the right thing to do — at an early stage, we need to bring in professionals who can look at the practicalities and costs and get a realistic assessment of whether a project is feasible. That has been a key learning point for us that we have built in.

Another issue is ensuring that, in the governance, clear guidance is given and that the Department ensures that that guidance is followed. The best thing for me to do is to refer to the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) because it was the Audit Office that did the review. It made a number of recommendations, which I will go through quickly. The first one is:

"Where significant community engagement is required, it is essential to ensure that adequate time is allowed to carry out consultation, develop and refine proposals and to ensure that the resulting plans are realistic, detailed and of sufficient quality."

That is a lesson that I cannot not emphasise enough because, very often, projects come forward quickly with money attached to them when the groundwork has not been sufficiently worked through to allow for delivery. There is then a constant tension between money being available and the capacity to deliver, everyone gets under pressure and problems emerge. Clear planning and getting that work done upfront has benefits in the long run and will get us to the end point quicker.

Secondly:

"The Department is ultimately accountable for the decisions taken in awarding public funding".

Those decisions should be "clearly documented" and there should be "a clear audit trail". A lot of work was done in SIF to retain an audit trail. A very high proportion — more than 90% — of minutes were kept. However, some minutes were not available for one reason or another, and some of those were of meetings where important decisions were taken. So, a lesson there is that you must audit and record all the key elements.

On conflicts of interest, I have mentioned before that anyone who has an interest or potential involvement should not be involved in any shape or form in deciding on projects. That has an application much wider than SIF; it goes right across the public sector. Linked to that, the Audit Office talked about the importance that:

"arrangements are established to promote the highest standards ... on propriety, integrity and ethical issues, including conflicts of interest."

There should be:

"Timely communication with those involved in projects".

That ensures that they are aware of what is happening and the basis on which decisions have been taken. There are lessons around that. An important one, which links back to the first point that I made, is:

"Given the importance of establishing the feasibility of major proposals prior to commencement, we" —

i.e. the NIAO —

"recommend that the Department of Finance consider whether Managing Public Money ... should be updated to include this rationale, and if so update" —

it —

"as soon as possible".

So, before there is a commitment to deliver a major programme, the feasibility should be assessed. Have you got all the people that you need? Have you got all the skills that you need? Have you got the capacity to deliver this before you embark on it? Again, that is part of the planning and preparation before launching a major programme.

The last one is about ensuring the dissemination of good practice. We have done a lot of that. As I mentioned, we have taken the learning from SIF. It is a constant mantra in the Department to pick up both the good points of SIF — because there were many good points — and the learning points, and build those into Urban Villages, Communities in Transition and any of the other things that we have been doing.

We have also disseminated those findings at the NICS Live events, for example, and a whole series of seminars. Orla, Siobhan, Linsey and others have all been engaged in that dissemination across the Department. We have disseminated that very widely.

Mr Stalford: And there is a potential SIF 2.0?

Dr Browne: That is in the gift of Ministers. They will have to decide whether it is a priority and whether they have the funding available. In considering all that, they will obviously want to take account of all the points that I just made.

Mr Stalford: OK. On the rights, language and identity proposals, I will speak to the stuff around Ulster Scots and Ulster British. Ulster Scots is a niche interest within the community that I come from. It is an interest that I happen to have, but it is niche and is recognised as such. That is why there is the reference to "Ulster British", which is much more all-encompassing of the broad Protestant-Unionist community that I come from. How quickly do you expect proposals to come forward for what that will look like? I understand that there is a three-month deadline. How quickly do you expect draft legislation to come forward? Will we go the full three months, or do you think that it will be quicker than that?

Dr Browne: The deadline is very challenging. We have been working on the Bills with Ministers. It will be a question of the priority that all of that can achieve and what the Assembly's working arrangements will be, given the circumstances that we are now in. The answer, Chris, is that I do not

really know. We are still making it a priority, but that will have to be set in light of any decisions that Ministers make across the wider sweep of things.

Mr Stalford: It is just that we have been back for two and a half months; have we not?

Ms Sheerin: Yes.

Mr Stalford: We have been back two and a half months. Will we see it in the next two weeks? Are you not in a position to answer that?

Dr Browne: I am not in a position to answer. All that I can say is that we have been working on all of this — what the legislation and arrangements might be — to try to be in a position, as far as possible, to meet that time frame. However, it is very challenging and will be dependent on ministerial decisions.

Mr Stalford: That is fair enough. Thank you.

Mr Clarke: This is a statement rather than a question, Chairman. I hope that it is not ready in two weeks, given the financial pressures that the Executive were facing even before what has hit us in this last number of weeks. It is surreal to be sitting here talking about some of these things when the UK is in the crisis that it is in. I have just zoned out, to be honest. I just cannot get my head around this, because there is a crisis out there. If the public were listening to us worrying about language and all this other stuff, they would say that it is not real.

I appreciate Mark's comments, to be honest. Mark has treated it in a way that there are other priorities. It is just surreal to be having this conversation. For me, some of that can wait. Maybe it cannot wait for people who want to see it happen quicker, but I think that there are bigger emerging problems than whether to be Ulster-British, Irish or anything else at the minute. I take enthusiasm from some of the things that were said in response to Martina about Ebrington. That all sounds great, but I have zoned out today, to be honest. When you follow what is going on in the news, I cannot fathom why we are sitting here, talking about language. I am sorry.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): There has been a lot of difficulty this week. However, unfortunately, processes are processes. If only to confirm that a pause button can be hit, which is, I think, what you are saying we should do, it is important to say that deadlines may need to be stretched and extended.

Mr Clarke: Chairman, I am saying that in the context that it has been generally accepted in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. I am not trying to rehearse the arguments about what is in it. Some people may not like it, but it is the basis on which we are back here. When you hear that people are suffering at the minute, in hospitals right across the world, it is surreal that we are having a discussion about stuff like this and focusing on language.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I do not think that anybody is focusing on it, to be fair.

Mr Clarke: No, no. We are trying to portray that it is business as usual. For me, it is not business as usual: I think that there are other priorities. I appreciate what Mark has said in his responses, to be honest.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): We are on the same page. I do not think that we can say that it is business as usual. We have streamlined right back what we were going to do. We are probably going to finish within an hour and a half —

Mr Clarke: I appreciate that.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): — which, believe me, is a miracle for the Committee. We have reduced numbers. The sentiment of what you are saying is well noted. Martina, did you want to come in?

Ms Anderson: Yes. With regard to what Trevor said, this is the second Committee meeting that I have attended today. I would much prefer that none of us was actually in rooms like this one. It goes against all the advice that we have been given that more than 10 people should not come together because we could potentially transmit the virus as a consequence of there being too many of us sitting in a

room. We have made that case all week and tried to stop the public coming here. Up until yesterday, children were coming here. All of us are apoplectic with concern about all the people of this island.

Mr Clarke: Absolutely.

Ms Anderson: All the people of this island are number one. We send our solidarity to all the people across the world.

As I said, we are all trying to speed-read ourselves into some of this stuff. We are here trying to get a bit of focus. People out there expect us not just to give leadership on the issue but to show how we can keep society moving along, through the terrible, awful ordeal that we are going into: we are not even in the middle of it yet. I know that you know that, too. We all share the same position. It is very difficult to sit here today; I have found it difficult. Emma and I had a conversation before we came in. People are concerned even about being here. We are here because we have been told that, as MLAs, we have to be here unless we are self-isolating. We have to carry out a function. Otherwise, we would not be in the room, because our minds and thoughts are elsewhere. We should ensure that people know that. I am concerned about the number of us in the room. We are not complying with the advice that we have been given. Staff have to be here to service the Committee. Even though we have only just got a quorum, we need to discuss what we will do to engage with the processes on the way forward.

We all thank you, Mark, for the work that you have done to get us to this point and the briefing that you have given us today. We thank the Chair for allowing us to engage with it. However, let there be no doubt about where all our heads are at, and it is certainly not dealing with the issues that come across our desks. However, we have to ensure that, where we can influence decisions and scrutinise them, we continue to do that by whatever means possible.

Mr Clarke: I am sorry if I did not talk about everybody.

Ms Anderson: Of course.

Mr Clarke: I am not UK-centric on this issue: I am talking about everybody across the world.

Ms Anderson: You were talking about everybody. I appreciate that.

Mr Clarke: I am following the situation on my phone. I think that everybody is probably doing the same. I think that what triggered me to speak, Chairman, was Christopher's pushing for a two-week deadline and saying that we have been coming to it for nearly three months. Stuff the three months. This will wait. I am sure that there are difficulties for Mark's staff. They have families as well. We have to be careful how we push that until we get out the other side. The sooner, the better.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): The irony is that, in the past three minutes that we have had this conversation, a Whips meeting has been arranged for 3:30 pm. I am one of the Whips. The purpose of it is to look at whether to reduce the number of sittings and business of the Assembly. Hopefully, a lot of what we are talking about will be addressed at that meeting at 3:30 pm.

The conclusion of your presentation, Mark, and that conversation has kindly stretched this out to allow Christopher to return, so that we can take a decision. We can conclude it ourselves. We will have a short conversation afterwards about some of the actions.

I want to thank you for coming along and pledge to Orla, Linsey and Siobhan that that was easy. *[Laughter.]* I suspect that if you are back up with us *[Inaudible]*—

Ms Anderson: It will not always be like this — once we get our focus back. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): — much longer. Mark, we appreciate that. Thank you.

Dr Browne: Thank you, all. Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Stay safe, and wash your hands. That is the message for everybody.

Ms Anderson: And keep your distance.