



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

North West Regional College/Education  
Maintenance Allowance/DEL Priorities:  
Ministerial Briefing

27 February 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jim Allister  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mr Chris Lyttle  
Ms Bronwyn McGahan  
Mr Pat Ramsey  
Mr Alastair Ross

**Witnesses:**

Dr Stephen Farry	Minister for Employment and Learning
Mrs Catherine Bell	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Andrew Hamilton	Department for Employment and Learning

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Minister, I welcome you. You are here to brief us on your thinking about what you wish to take forward in the future. I also welcome the deputy secretaries from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), Catherine Bell and Andrew Hamilton. We will open up the floor to you. We have an hour and a half, which should give us ample time to cover the issues.

**Dr Stephen Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):** Thanks very much, Deputy Chair. First of all, I welcome the opportunity to have this session with the Committee. My intention is not to speak too long at the start, but rather to have a fairly open, free-flowing discussion covering a range of issues, within the normal rules of decorum and order. I am joined by Catherine and Andrew, our deputy secretaries. Between us, we will attempt to answer any of the Committee's questions today. As you will appreciate, given that we have a fairly open agenda, we may not be in a position to give detailed answers on every particular issue, but we will no doubt undertake to follow through with detailed answers in writing if there are things that we cannot fully address today.

I will start with the education maintenance allowance (EMA) and the Committee's concerns about the interaction with it during the final stages of that process. You will have seen the letter that I wrote to the former Committee Chair. I want to say at the outset that we certainly regret the way in which the process unfolded. It was not the way that we normally do things or wish to do things. So, we accept that that was not the normal process and that the Committee has a legitimate expectation to receive summaries of responses to consultations and indicative ways forward on major pieces of policy from Departments.

The context behind what happened is that this was a slightly unusual consultation because it was a joint one between ourselves and the Department of Education. We had a need to identify a common

position between the two Departments as we proceeded. It was also a matter that needed to go to the Executive for further consideration. Most crucially, there was a particular urgency around all this because the EMA scheme is delivered by the Student Loans Company. We had the intention of commencing the reforms from the 2013-14 financial year, but we were quite late in notifying the Student Loans Company, so there was a real pressure to get early decisions taken in order to have a chance of ensuring that we could deliver in time. Thankfully, we have just about made the timescales set by it.

We will undertake to continue best practice with the Committee around how we handle consultations. I hope that we have adhered to that in the past. Where there are other unusual circumstances and we cannot quite follow the normal practice, I think that we have learned from this experience to communicate with the Committee and to explain why certain things are not coming rather than simply leaving it unstated and unsaid.

On the actual detail, you are conscious of the statement made to the Assembly. We have also circulated a summary of the responses to the consultation, which, I think, is in your packs today. We are happy to answer any further questions that members may have on those issues, but I do not see any point in just rehashing what was said in the Assembly at this stage.

Another aspect that I would quite like to focus on today is shaping further discussions that the Committee will wish to have with the Department. Obviously, the Committee is here to scrutinise and hold the Department to account, but also you have a role to play in providing advice on policymaking. It is for the Committee to make its own decisions about what it wishes to place on its agenda, but I am happy to give a flavour of what the Department's priorities will be over the coming months. On the back of that, we can have more detailed discussions through the usual channels about the issues that you may wish to take forward.

I will just highlight a number of the issues that provide an opportunity to hold an evidence session. Issues that are likely to come to the Committee in the very near future include the Steps 2 Success programme, which is the new employment programme for Northern Ireland. We are still in the process of finalising decisions on that. The Committee has had a number of recent evidence sessions on that matter, and the points that were raised in Committee are still being considered by officials. The Committee has made a contribution to that process, but we understand your desire to have another briefing on that, and we will facilitate that at an appropriate time.

The Department is also finalising an economic inactivity baseline study. You will appreciate that, in the Programme for Government, there is a commitment for DEL and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to produce a strategy aimed at reducing economic inactivity. That baseline is the starting analysis that will inform the production of the strategy. That is at ministerial level for formal clearance, and it will then be circulated around other Ministers. It would be useful if we had an evidence session with the Committee on that, and, in turn, that will help us to get a sense of priorities, which, in turn, will inform the production of the formal strategy.

I am conscious of the implications of the reclassification by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) of our further education (FE) colleges and teacher training colleges. We are devising a consultation paper that has to go to the Executive for approval, given the potential legislative implications. In recent months, the Committee has expressed an interest in that, and we will be happy to have a discussion on those points.

The phase 1 study into the teacher training infrastructure should also be complete within the next number of weeks, and members of the Committee may well have an interest in discussing that issue with us.

We are also moving ahead with devising a consultation paper on employment law. You will recall that, in the autumn, we had a briefing on our plans in that regard. Actions are under way on the non-legislative aspects of that, but we need to compile a consultation paper on the legislative aspects. That will be an active piece of work over a number of months and, indeed, years, and we anticipate that the Committee will have an interest in those issues.

We welcome the Committee's ongoing work in its inquiry on careers. The careers strategy is a joint one between the Department of Education and us, and that is scheduled for review in early 2014. I am happy to potentially bring that forward by a number of months, but, in any event, we anticipate the results of the Committee's inquiry, and that should go some way towards informing the formal review that is to be conducted by the two Departments.

Finally, you are all conscious that we have launched a major review of apprenticeships and youth training. That review is now under way. Shortly, we will announce the expert panel that will advise that process, and we will want to take the temperature of the Committee on that on a number of occasions as that work progresses. Those are my opening comments, Deputy Chair. We are happy to field any questions.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Again, Minister, thank you for coming to the Committee today. Are you happy to take questions on the EMA situation?

**Dr Farry:** Yes.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I do not see a reference to the review of teacher training or the review of the agency workers directive on your list. Where do those issues sit at the moment?

**Dr Farry:** The list is not fully comprehensive; it is an indicative list of some suggested items. In my opening remarks, I referenced the teacher training review, and phase 1 of that should be with us in the next number of weeks. We are happy to brief the Committee on that. We may well need to report to the Assembly first, because, in some respects, it is important that we report to the Assembly as a whole as well as to the Committee. We are happy to explore the outworkings of the report from the consultants with the Committee in detail. Similarly, we are more than happy to come to the Committee to discuss the agency workers directive review. The Committee will have its own ideas and issues, too. We want to make sure that we pick up whatever you raise with us and programme that in.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I will ask one question on EMA and then open it up to the floor. We have papers from the consultation. Following the consultation, what was the key thing that influenced your decision on the EMA model that the Department has decided on?

**Dr Farry:** We had two real underlying considerations. The first was that we wanted to preserve EMA as a system. So, there was not really any expectation that we would wish to remove EMA or remove it from a large number of people. The second consideration was that we had upward pressure on numbers. The system, as it stood, was not targeted effectively. There was a considerable amount of dead weight in how it was being distributed. The money that was available to us was not being directed to where it would make the biggest difference to retaining participation either at school or FE college. The reforms that we have announced are consistent with the objectives that we set out. We now have a system that is both better targeted and more financially sustainable and affordable within Northern Ireland's Budget.

**Mr Andrew Hamilton (Department for Employment and Learning):** I will add a little bit of the detail about what steered us to the final solution. We can demonstrate that we listened to the outcome of the consultation. You will remember that we floated thresholds of £16,000, but there was no support for that. A number of people pointed out that that would mean that pupils and students whose mother and father earn around £8,000 a year each would not qualify, so we veered away from having a threshold as low as that. You will also be aware that the final result shows two thresholds: one for families with one child; and a slightly higher one for families with two children. That resulted from what the National Union of Students — Union of Students in Ireland, in particular, said to us. Those were very helpful steers towards the final solution.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I acknowledge and appreciate the Minister's comments on future deliberation. That is positive. We can all have more meaningful engagement rather than more robust engagement in the Chamber, which we could do without. We can all play our part in that.

I am keen to ask the Minister some questions about the North West Regional College. You indicated before coming here that you were prepared to do talk about it.

**Dr Farry:** Yes, that is fine.

**Mr P Ramsey:** You will be aware that, for over three years, the Committee, and particularly a number of Committee members, have been talking about serious industrial relations difficulties in North West Regional College. In many regards, it is the most critical and damning report of any school, institution or university that has been seen in any of the stewardships that Catherine and Andrew have worked under. In your own words, Minister, there have been unquestionable failures by the management and

the board of governors. The statements of the chair, particularly last week, do not instil any confidence in me whatsoever that the culture of intimidation and fear, as evidenced in an independent report, is being dealt with.

Those are my initial comments. I have further questions, and I will try to be as tight with time as I can.

**Dr Farry:** OK, Pat. We are here today for a fairly open session. As the Deputy Chair said, we can stay here until around 11.30 am. We are happy to go through a number of issues, and we can do so in a fair degree of detail if that is what members want us to do. So, we are more than happy to discuss the North West Regional College situation today. Pat, as you referred to, I indicated that we were happy for that to be flagged up.

The report that we, as a Department, commissioned is very strong and forthright. That is helpful to the situation. I do not wish to rank it against reports on other institutions that have been commissioned by DEL or other Departments. However, on an absolutely stand-alone basis, it is a strong report.

It is for the board of governors to take the report forward. The report raises issues of challenge to the board of governors. It raises issues of challenge to the unions and how they have conducted themselves. Most clearly, it raises a significant number of issues of challenge to the college's management. I appoint the chair and the members of the board of governors. They are directly accountable to me and the Department. I am happy to give them the space to take on board the recommendations. The board has been very clear that it fully accepts the recommendations of the report. The college improvement plan was put in place in December. We were having an ongoing discussion. As this report was being compiled and finalised, there was a clear sense of direction as to where things were heading.

We now need to give them the space to proceed and deliver on the recommendations. Harry McConnell stressed that it may take three to five years to deliver the full change recommended. I appreciate that people will be impatient and will want to see things happening a lot sooner. I probably join those people in that demand. We need to see changes in the culture of the college as quickly as possible. People need to reflect on what Mr McConnell states in his report very quickly.

Pat, we, as a Department, take the issue of the North West Regional College incredibly seriously. It was in that context that we followed through on what was a recommendation and request from the board of governors to commission the report. We are also very clear that North West Regional College has to be a key element of the skills infrastructure in the north-west. In many respects, it has to drive the transformation of the economy in Derry and its surrounds. If we have a college in which there are poor industrial relations, that college will not be effective in delivering on its wider mission. It will not be providing a proper service to current and prospective students in that area. It will not be working as effectively with employers as it should be, and it will not be making an impact to help the economy.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the Minister's comments. When you have so many unique initiatives going forward with youth training, it is important that the college has a meaningful part to play. I have to say, for the record, that it has played that part in the training and education of young people.

The Deputy Chair and I, in particular, have raised this issue ad nauseam for a number of years. We raised it with the previous Minister, Danny Kennedy. Minister, I do not know how many times I have been through your door to talk about these issues. I do not have confidence. You said — and I will use your own terminology — that people should reflect on the report. You are absolutely right. How can you expect employees who have felt the bluntness of a culture of intimidation and fear to have any confidence in the college's present principal and board of governors?

I will say this on record for the first time. I spent an hour in the home of the chair of the board of governors 18 months ago. I provided him with information on this matter. He said that he was shocked and horrified and would get something done about it. That was on a Friday afternoon. On the Monday morning, I got a letter thanking me for the meeting. That is what he did. He ignored those comments.

What is the Department going to do to protect current staff at the North West Regional College, given that this matter arose under the watch of the present board of governors? Catherine and I had a private conversation some weeks ago, the content of which I promised I would not share. However, before this report was initiated, a young female lecturer took to an employment tribunal a case against the college, which spent hundreds of thousands of pounds of public money to defend that culture of

fear. It lost that case. What was the finding against the college? The tribunal found that Fiona McGeedy was victimised and humiliated by the college. The college spent over £100,000 on that case, which was a disgrace. That happened under the watch of that principal and chair of governors, who are continuing to provide industrial relations. How can they have the confidence of staff? Will somebody please answer me that?

**Mrs Catherine Bell (Department for Employment and Learning):** When the report was issued last week, the conclusions and recommendations of which the governing body has accepted, the Minister publicly said that he will have his officials work with the college but particularly with the governing body. He also said that he would closely monitor the implementation of the improvement plan and action plan.

You have to understand that there are processes and that we have to go through proper process. We have a report that lays out very firmly what needs to be done. We have a governing body that has drawn up an improvement plan that the Department has accepted. There now needs to be an action plan to implement that. We cannot just go in and say that we are going to sack a principal and do this or that. We have to work through a process.

**Mr P Ramsey:** With respect to Catherine, that college improvement plan commenced last year before Harry McConnell's report came out. So, there is absolutely nothing on the table. Reflecting the Minister's words, I will say for the record that this is the most damning and critical report that, under the stewardship of Catherine and Andrew, I have ever seen on your watch.

You rightly say that an estrangement took place between the University and College Union and senior management. That has to be resolved. However, that does not take away from the clear, clinical evidence that there is a culture of fear and intimidation at the college. You have told me for two or three years that you are monitoring the situation. I do not think that that is acceptable.

**Dr Farry:** I will say several things to you, Pat. The Department has taken the issue of the North West Regional College extremely seriously; otherwise we would not have such a detailed, stark and forthright report published or be answering questions about the matter today. In that respect, the issues are now fully out in the open. I have accepted that there is a culture of fear. The report suggests —

**Mr P Ramsey:** The college does not accept that, Minister. The college is saying that there is a perception of fear. It is still in denial.

**Dr Farry:** Whether a culture of fear is an actual culture of fear or a perception of a culture of fear, the fact is that that culture, whether real or imagined, is inhibiting the college's potential.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I agree.

**Dr Farry:** So, in that respect, it is a serious issue. No one is running away from any of the issues in the report. We are not going to sit back now, Pat, and say that we have published a report and that we will now hand it over to the college. Our officials will be very proactive in working with the board.

The key challenges lie primarily with the management, and, to an extent, with the unions. However, I accept that there are also issues that are of relevance to the board of governors. There is nothing in the report to suggest that the board of governors acted in any way inappropriately on any issue. I think that the criticism that has been laid against the board of governors is that they maybe had opportunities in the past to be more proactive on issues. They are also actively encouraged to be more proactive and to interpret their responsibilities in managing the college in a much wider framework. That change in culture at the top can, I think, happen over the next number of weeks and months. In the first instance, I think that it is important that we let the board of governors get on with it. It has accepted the recommendations, and now we want to see it delivering on them.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I have to say that I do not think that the board of governors has accepted or respected the clear findings of the Harry McConnell report. I am sorry, Deputy Chair, but this has been fundamental to me for over two years, and I will tell you why again. Like you, Deputy Chair, I had scores of people in my office. I will repeat this: I had grown men in with me who were in tears because of the way that they were treated in that college. I also had women in with me, and Fiona McGeedy was one of them. Fiona was humiliated — humiliated — by the college, but she was

successful with her huge claim against it. That epitomised what has gone on right throughout the redundancy debacle and the curriculum audit debacle, which we still have not got to the bottom of. For the record, it was your Department that asked for those redundancies to be put on hold, and the board of governors refused to acknowledge that. That is accurate, because it came from Mary McIlvor. All that is still in the ether.

The board of governors said that it was launching an inquiry into redundancy practices in the college. It was not. There was an inquiry into redundancy processes in Northern Ireland colleges. So, that was a red herring. It then threw in another red herring when it said that PricewaterhouseCoopers was looking at something else. It was in denial for two years. When the Assembly team and the MP in Derry went to see the board, it did not want to know. The Committee was writing to it for a long time, but it did not want to know. It was forced into a corner, but it is now taking some acknowledgement that, to some extent, it was it who championed the report.

I am saying very clearly to the Committee, which has taken such a clear interest in the humanitarian aspects of this and in the human rights of workers in the college, that we should consider tabling a motion in the House. This is too important to let go, given that there are still people in the college who carried out that culture of fear and intimidation. What investigation is taking place into them? We have people at the college who are still frightened, who are not motivated and who have low morale. They are frightened to go to work and are afraid to open their mouth in case they are condemned and labelled. So, Deputy Chair, with your consent, can we consider bringing forward a motion on industrial relations at the North West Regional College for future deliberation?

**Mrs C Bell:** May I respond? We talked about the college improvement plan. What I did not say is that, after such an improvement plan, the college is required to produce an action plan that is overseen by the governing body. As part of the Department's formal process, that is monitored by the director of further education on a monthly basis. It will be through that process that things will be addressed, but we have to go through proper process.

**Mr P Ramsey:** It is the same people who are causing the intimidation and fear. It is the same people who are doing that. They have not changed in any way. I do not see the chair of the board of governors — I am sorry, Deputy Chair; I do apologise. I promise that I will try to be short, but I am so passionate about this, I really am. I see the staff; in fact, they were on to me last night, in advance of this meeting, to make sure that their opinion is reflected in my comments.

**Dr Farry:** Pat, let me be clear about the lines of accountability. We have listened clearly to all your points. The Committee is here to hold the Department to account and to scrutinise its work. I, as Minister, appoint the chair and the members of the board of governors, and the staff of the college, including the management, are appointed by the board of governors. So, there is no direct relationship between the management of the college and the Department. The board of governors is the key delivery partner is all this. I take on board everything that you say. I listened very carefully to what you said. We have a detailed report in front us on the way forward. I think —

**Mr P Ramsey:** Which report on the way forward is that?

**Dr Farry:** The McConnell report. I think that —

**Mr P Ramsey:** Does the Department have an action plan?

**Dr Farry:** It is for the board of governors to take this forward with the support —

**Mr P Ramsey:** But does the Department have an action plan?

**Mrs C Bell:** Yes. The Department has a process that it uses when a college gets into difficulty, whether it is a financial difficulty or something such as this. We have a formal process, and we have used that with other colleges. That is what we will be using.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Catherine, with respect, you have never faced this kind of challenge in any of the colleges.

**Mrs C Bell:** Absolutely, but that does not mean to say that we do not have the ability to deal with it or to use the process —

**Mr P Ramsey:** But you have not dealt with it in the past three years.

**Mrs C Bell:** We have just had a report. We have accepted the improvement plan. We have asked for an action plan —

**Mr P Ramsey:** That was last year, Catherine.

**Mrs C Bell:** Yes, but at the same time, the Department has been working with the governing body on a whole range of things, not just the industrial relations in the college. The action plan that will come out of the improvement plan will be actively monitored by senior officials from the Department.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** When will this action plan be put together? When will we, as a Committee, get sight of this action plan? Will we see it?

**Mrs C Bell:** That is open and transparent. There is no problem with that. The action plan to take forward the college improvement plan will be open and transparent.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** When will it be ready for us to have sight of?

**Mrs C Bell:** Since last Thursday, when the report was officially released, we have been in touch with the governing body and with the chair in particular. We have requested a meeting with the governing body to discuss the issue. It is meeting today with the trade unions, and at that meeting, a date will be agreed for the Department to go up. We will then agree a date with the governing body for an action plan.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I want to ask one final question. Do you believe that, in light of the Harry McConnell report, the principal and the chair of the board of governors should reflect on their positions after overseeing what happened in that college?

**Dr Farry:** That is a useful question that allows me to put this in context. It is very important that we now allow the proper processes to take their course. Members are perfectly entitled to make comments, and if you want to consider tabling a motion, you can do so. However, it is important that I offer caution: we are talking about individuals. Various allegations are being made about individuals, and members are making recommendations about what should happen to certain people. If you go down that line, there is a danger that it will become counterproductive to the outcome of delivering better industrial relations in the college. If due process is circumvented, you could end up undermining the overall outcome that I think that we all want. So, it is not for me to answer that question —

**Mr P Ramsey:** In fairness, Minister, it is up to you tell me, and to have confidence in doing so, "Pat, I will resolve these problems. I will reconcile the differences, and I will ensure that this college is better suited going forward and that it will not treat staff in this way."

**Dr Farry:** Yes. I want to see the North West Regional College delivering. I believe that it should be a real engine for economic transformation in the region, particularly on skills. So, I want to see an effective college. It is for the board of governors to deliver that, and they are entrusted by me and the Department to do that job. I want to give them the space to do that over the coming months. They have accepted the recommendations in the McConnell report, and the challenge is now with them. If, after reflection, we see that that has not been the case, we will have to reconsider how the Department relates to the board of governors of that college. I stress that the staff, including the management, are employed by the board of governors, and that is the relationship that we need to focus on.

**Mrs C Bell:** The last thing that I want to say is that there was serious criticism of the trade unions. The trade unions should not now start a process of keeping this going and continually undermining what people are trying to take forward. We need to give the action plan time, and we need to give people the time to do what needs to be done. Continually fighting with the management, and I am not taking a position —

**Mr P Ramsey:** You are, Catherine.



**Mrs C Bell:** I am not taking a position. I am saying that there was criticism of the trade union and the management and that there was some criticism of the governing body. That is what we are working with the college on to address.

**Mr P Ramsey:** The trade union was not found guilty of humiliating and victimising staff.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Pat, we are going to have to move on. I know that Bronwyn wants in.

I share Pat's sentiments. I am not going to go over them again, but I have sat in people's homes, and they have come to locations. I have sat with them for two, three and four hours at a time discussing this issue.

Minister, you referred to the fear in the college and asked whether it is real or a perception. It is not a perception. In the survey that was done — this is in the report — 60% of the respondents said that they had witnessed bullying, 67% said that that caused them anxiety, 62% reported a loss of confidence and self-esteem, and 89% considered that there was a bullying culture in the college. We could go on. That is what the people in the college said, and that fear remains.

I am a wee bit sceptical about whether, over the next three to five years, the governing body can regain confidence and rebuild the college back to where it was and to where we want to see it. What I know is that a process apparently has to be followed. That has been outlined today. An action plan is also supposed to be drawn up. We would like to see that action plan and to have quarterly reports on it so that we can see exactly what is happening. We want to keep a close scrutiny on this issue.

I believe that this issue has been a continual thorn in the flesh over the past year, 18 months or two years. People have sought to bring it somewhere, and that has paid off. It has come to the fore, and the dirty washing has come out. We have seen exactly what the difficulties and problems are, and we have been vindicated in that. We now need to ensure that the college is rebuilt and that the confidence is put back in the college so that it delivers what it should be delivering for the students and so that there is not a culture of fear among the teaching and other staff. We will have to keep a close eye on that.

**Dr Farry:** Sure. First, I accept that there are grounds for people being sceptical about this —

**Mr P Ramsey:** I appreciate that.

**Dr Farry:** The board of governors has a challenge to lead the efforts in rebuilding trust and confidence among the wider community, particularly in the north-west, that the college is effectively delivering the skills agenda and improving industrial relations. We are happy to provide you with regular updates on how things are going.

Finally, just to be very clear, I accept that there is a culture of fear in the college. Given that that culture exists, the issue beneath that of whether it is real or imagined is probably of secondary relevance. We need to be careful in drilling beneath that to the precise allegations that people may or may not make about particular incidents, because we are talking about individuals and there may be processes that outwork from the report. However, the overarching perception in the college is that there is a culture of fear, and there is clearly a problem with industrial relations.

**Ms McGahan:** I have spoken to my party colleagues who also sit on this Committee, and we welcome the report and its recommendations. We believe that the report should be published in full and that a new body that involves all the stakeholders should be set up to implement these recommendations. That should be reviewed and scrutinised by your Department.

I note that it was stated in the report that the lines of accountability between the board of governors and the management team were blurred. So, we will be calling for clear terms of reference for the board of governors and the management team. Obviously, the chair of the board of governors should have responsibility for that. Also, if the board of governors thinks that its responsibilities are being encroached on, it should call in the Department. Finally, the college needs to get back to what it should be doing, which is teaching.

**Dr Farry:** Bronwyn, I will start with your last point. I agree 100% that it is about teaching and investing in skills. We want to make sure that the college is fit for purpose in delivering that.

The report has been fully published. It is available on the Department's website, and I think that it has also been copied to all Committee members. If that is not the case, we will ensure that it is circulated to everyone, but I am pretty certain that that has been done.

Returning to the board of governors, I will say that that is the correct structure to take this forward. However, one of the outworkings of the report is an encouragement — I will put it in those terms — of the board of governors to be more assertive in its position. There should not be any ambiguity in the hierarchy of structures. The board of governors has the ultimate and supreme responsibility for the college, and the principal of the college is accountable to the board. The principal does not run the college with the board of governors off to the side. The board of governors runs the college, and it appoints the principal and holds the principal to account. The Department is happy to work closely with the board of governors to better engender that culture in the board, to help it to hold the management of the college to account and to take a more proactive role in running the institution.

**Mr Allister:** My question is on a different subject.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** That is fair enough. We thank the Minister for his indulgence in answering questions on the South West College —

**Dr Farry:** The North West Regional College.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Sorry, yes.

**Mr Allister:** We might get to the South West College.

**Dr Farry:** Is the South West College on your list, Jim?

**Mr Allister:** Yes, if I get that far.

I must say that I am not across the issues in the North West Regional College to the extent that Pat is. However, I listened to and heard enough to well understand the frustration at the failure to get to grips with the issue. I commend Pat for his vigour in pursuing it. It seems that, in dealing with the issue, that vigour has not been reciprocated in the Department.

**Dr Farry:** Jim, I am not quite sure what more you would like the Department to do. We commissioned the report, which, as Pat said, is fairly stark, and we are committed to accepting the recommendations and to working with the board of governors to deliver on those recommendations. I certainly think that we have taken the issue very seriously. It has been a priority, particularly for Catherine and our further education division.

**Mr Allister:** I hope that it turns out to be so.

I want to ask you, first, about educational maintenance allowance. In the consultation, the Transferor Representatives' Council and the North Eastern Education and Library Board referred specifically to the need to consider targeting EMA at underachieving Protestant working-class boys. They mentioned that because the Equality Commission identified that category as a priority. What heed did you pay to that recommendation?

**Dr Farry:** We need to be cautious about our ability to differentiate between people's ability to access EMA. Outside the context of EMA, we are conscious of that challenge through the relative lack of achievement among Protestant working-class males. I will refer you to our widening participation strategy for higher education, in which enhancing achievement among that group is a core theme. Under equality legislation, we cannot proactively create particular schemes or aspects of schemes that apply only to certain individuals from different parts of the community. However, EMA will be of benefit to those who find themselves in that situation.

I would also digress a little and discuss, for example, the review of apprenticeships. The more that we can do, whether through my Department or the Department of Education, to talk about alternative pathways and to find different ways of motivating people to stay on in formal education, other types of

training course or, in due course, apprenticeships, the better. That is probably the best way of tackling lack of participation.

**Mr Allister:** The Transferor Representatives' Council recommended that you target that group through EMA in some way. You obviously did not do that. Are you saying that you could not?

**Dr Farry:** I do not believe that that would have been possible.

**Mr A Hamilton:** When we undertook the review and got the results from the surveys, it became quite clear that the EMA scheme makes a difference to a number of people. That was why the Ministers did not want to abolish it. The changes have meant that EMA continues to be available to those who are most disadvantaged, and if Protestant working-class boys are included in that, they will continue to receive EMA. One of the options before Ministers was that they consider reducing the threshold below which EMA was available. We consulted on the option of reducing that from 22,000 to 16,000 to the free school meals service, but we took the view that if we moved to that, too many people would have been excluded and that that could have impacted on their decision to remain in school after 16.

**Mr Allister:** Was there any evidence that EMA as previously applied had impacted particularly on the Protestant group?

**Mr A Hamilton:** No. The surveys did not look at community background. We did not have that evidence.

**Mr Allister:** Would that not be worth looking at?

**Mr A Hamilton:** People would have qualified, irrespective of their background. Those who are most disadvantaged continue to benefit.

**Mr Allister:** Stranmillis is the main issue that I want to discuss with you from a number of angles. It has been without a chair of its board of governors since, I think, December, and the process seems to have had a few hiccups. There could be an interregnum of six months before it has a chair. Why was the process of recruiting a new chair not activated with a view to there being a natural handover in December? Why was it allowed to drag without being implemented?

**Dr Farry:** That happened in the context of a number of issues with the future of the teacher training infrastructure in Northern Ireland. We had to reflect on the likely potential term of office for a future chair of the board of governors. We had the ongoing issue of the potential merger of Stranmillis and Queen's University in the background. We were considering that, and we came to the conclusion that it was appropriate to seek the appointment of a chair. I do not believe that the college is necessarily losing out because of an interregnum between Steve Costello and any new appointee. I have full confidence in the current vice-chair, Doreen Bell, who is acting up as chair. Am I right in imagining that you want to ask about the advertising process?

**Mr Allister:** Yes. We have arrived at a situation where you advertised and had two applicants, and you have now determined that you will not go with them. So, you re-advertised. However, when Mr Costello was appointed, you had only one applicant, and the Department was very happy to appoint him. I am just puzzled about the differential of approach.

**Dr Farry:** The appointment of Mr Costello was somewhat before my time, but, just to be very clear, we have not reached a decision that the people who have applied to date will not be appointed. We are seeking to ensure that we have a sufficiently wide pool of people from which to make an appointment.

**Mr A Hamilton:** We took advice from the Commissioner for Public Appointments on whether it was OK to do that. Certainly that —

**Mr Allister:** He did not advise you to do that. You just said, "We are going to do this."

**Mr A Hamilton:** I should maybe declare my conflict here, although it is not so much a conflict. I have an interest in that I will be the chair of the panel. I took the view, with my panel members, that going forward with two applicants risked the conclusion of no appointment being made. So, rather than take that risk —

**Mr Allister:** To reach the conclusion that you needed to advertise further, you must have looked at the quality of the applicants.

**Mr A Hamilton:** No. We did not have access to the applications. We purely —

**Mr Allister:** Do you know who has applied?

**Mr A Hamilton:** Do I know who has applied?

**Mr Allister:** Yes.

**Mr A Hamilton:** I know that a phone call has been made to my permanent secretary since that position, but I did not know at the time.

**Mr Allister:** So, you do not know who the two applicants who were not sufficient in number are.

**Mr A Hamilton:** I am aware of a phone call between one of the applicants and the permanent secretary, after the decision was taken. I was not aware of the identity of the applicants before that. So, this has been —

**Mr Allister:** Can you explain how — I think it was in 2004 — the Department —

**Mr A Hamilton:** I was not here at that time.

**Mr Allister:** OK, the Nuremberg defence. Well, it is not even the Nuremberg defence, but whatever. In 2004, one applicant, maybe because his face fitted, was very acceptable. That was enough. In 2013, there are two applicants but that is not enough.

**Dr Farry:** We have higher standards now.

**Mr Allister:** Have we? Right. We will watch this space with interest as to who is appointed. In terms of —

**Dr Farry:** I think, Jim, it is important to put on record that the decision to re-advertise is not a commentary upon the standards or otherwise, or the identity, of anyone who has applied up until now. It is purely based upon seeking to have a sufficient pool of people to consider. It may well be that one of those who applied in the first round ends up being appointed. That may not be the case. We simply do not know. However, it is vital with a position of this importance that we ensure that we have a —

**Mr Allister:** So how many applicants do you have to have?

**Dr Farry:** We will have to make a decision based on what happens after the current phase of advertising.

**Mr Allister:** You decided that two is not enough, but you do not know how many is enough.

**Dr Farry:** We have not said that two is not enough. We decided that we need to see whether we could have a wider competitive pool.

**Mr Allister:** And if you do not get any more?

**Dr Farry:** We will then have to make a decision as to what we do with that.

**Mr Allister:** What could you do but conclude the process?

**Dr Farry:** That may well be the outcome of that.

**Mr Allister:** Mr Hamilton is the chairman of the selection panel, as I understand it. Have you nothing in your mind, Mr Hamilton? Will we need half a dozen? Two is not enough. What is enough?

**Mr A Hamilton:** The panel will consider the position after it receives the results of the latest advertisement. If there are no further applications, the panel has a choice: to run with the original two or to re-advertise.

**Mr Allister:** Again?

**Mr A Hamilton:** Those are the only two choices. I am not going to make that decision here, Mr Allister. I will consult with my colleagues on the panel and take account of the views of —

**Mr Allister:** I know that the Minister said that Doreen Bell is very capable of carrying on, and I am sure that that is right, but for the continuity and good governance of the college, it needs a chair.

**Mr A Hamilton:** That is correct, yes.

**Mr Allister:** So, you just cannot go on advertising until you get a face that fits or the number that fits.

**Dr Farry:** Neither of those are considerations in this. We want to have a competitive pool. At the end of this process, the panel will come to its conclusion as to what is the appropriate way forward. Jim, you may well speculate as to what the logical conclusion of that may be. We are not in a position today to confirm that, but you will have your own view of what we should be doing.

**Mr Allister:** I want to ask you about the more long-term future of Stranmillis. You are aware of the issues that Stranmillis has about its NDPB status.

**Dr Farry:** Yes.

**Mr Allister:** I think that the Committee shared with you a document that Stranmillis sent to us.

**Dr Farry:** Yes, you may well have done.

**Mr Allister:** That document sets out the practical difficulties that the college is experiencing, and I would urge you, Minister, to study that. You said in your introductory remarks that you were looking to consultation on the governance of further education, etc. That would include the higher education establishments that have been branded non-departmental public body (NDPB). What is the timescale on that?

**Dr Farry:** We are drafting a consultation paper in this regard. It will have to go to the Executive because this will anticipate potential legislation. So, it has to be signed off by the Executive, and I do not want to anticipate whether the Executive will or will not do that. I certainly hope that they will. Then we will be looking for a three-month consultation, and then we will have to consider the outworkings of that.

**Mr Allister:** But you are persuaded of the need for change?

**Dr Farry:** I am certainly persuaded of the need that we should consult on this. I would say that, in the FE sector, Colleges NI has come up with a view of what the best way forward should be in a not-for-profit status for the FE sector. There is not yet, shall we say, an emerging view of what the status of Stranmillis should be, though I anticipate that there will be a strong body of views that it should be autonomous of the Department. I appreciate, as well, that there is a slight unease, in that Stranmillis is on one trajectory and St Mary's is on another. That essentially reflects the different natures of the governance of the two colleges. The two colleges are often seen as being mirror images of each other, but, in practice, they are not. The governance of Stranmillis has been shaped by legislation passed in this Building many decades ago, whereas St Mary's has had a different type of history.

It may well be that, in the existing governance arrangements of St Mary's, it is able to have itself reclassified by the Office for National Statistics —

**Mr Allister:** I understand all that, but in the consultation, which is focused on the further education colleges but will embrace the higher education colleges, given some of the particular issues that Stranmillis has, would you consider taking a fresh look at the Colleges of Education (Northern Ireland) Order (2005)? One of Stranmillis's issues is that it has been denied, for example, charitable status. It was not given the right to appoint its own chair and board of governors. It is prohibited from borrowing and cannot dispose of property. The promise of the 2005 order, as opposed to the actuality of it, was that it would be put on the same footing as other higher education authorities but it has not been, because it has been denied all those things. Would you include in the consultation a fresh look at that?

**Dr Farry:** I imagine that all those issues are things that we can consider in the consultation.

**Mr A Hamilton:** If the NDPB status is to change, all those "controls" would have to be removed.

**Mr Allister:** No, but under the 2005 order, even when Stranmillis had the other status — the non-profit institutions serving households status — it was still denied charitable status. As I understand it, it was denied the right to dispose of property.

**Mr A Hamilton:** My understanding of this is that when ONS looks at this issue, it asks to what extent the body is under the control of central government. It is not a matter of its legal status; it is what control over it central government exercises. One of the issues that it will consider is the degree of influence that the Minister exercises; for example, the appointment of the governing body. If the Minister appoints the governing body, I suspect that ONS will conclude that Stranmillis remains under the control of central government.

**Mr Allister:** Do you agree, therefore, that, as part of the consultation, there needs to be a fresh look at the 2005 arrangements?

**Mr A Hamilton:** The 2005 legislation would have to be repealed, to the extent that it applies to Stranmillis, in order for Stranmillis to —

**Mr Allister:** I suppose that I am anxious, Minister, that we do not go through a dual process: that we do not go through a consultation process on NDPB status, reach a conclusion about that, and then discover that we now have to consult on whether to change the 2005 order. I am asking you to do it in tandem.

**Dr Farry:** We accept your premise. This consultation needs to be sufficiently comprehensive and robust to pick up all the issues and enable us — if that is the view that the Department and the Executive take in due course — to legislate to affect status during the course of this mandate. Given that we are approaching the end of the second year of what is now a four-year Assembly term, the timescales are fairly tight. I want to see a single consultation, and, in due course, if we are to have legislation, we can proceed to have that to address all the issues.

**Mr Allister:** I urge expedition in that. In the interim, can you give us any comfort that, on procurement, which has been a major issue in that Stranmillis has had to go through all sorts of hoops, the lightest touch that is permissible will be applied?

**Dr Farry:** My general philosophy is to allow the institutions to manage themselves: I do not want to micromanage. However, we operate within the parameters of the law on these matters.

**Mr Allister:** I have hogged enough time, I suspect. I have one other issue, and if there is time at the end I will come back to it.

**Mr Ross:** I will be as short as I can, as well. On the EMA stuff, obviously there were two major problems with the old scheme. One was that many of the young people who were receiving EMA would have stayed in education regardless of whether they received the payment. That was a major issue, and, in fairness, you have targeted it much better now, and there is general agreement on that. The second issue was that the payments were being used for purposes other than education. So, young people were receiving payments and spending the money on social activities. That was not a good use of public money, and there was not much sympathy for that.

I noticed in the responses that St Louis's Grammar School and two other respondents mentioned a voucher scheme. What consideration was given to having the payment administered through a voucher scheme? Was that deemed to be practical?

**Dr Farry:** I have to confess that we have not overly explored the issue of the voucher scheme. However, I am a little wary of us overly prescribing what the young people do with the money or being overly judgmental about how they spend the money. The key issue that you have identified is that EMA needs to make a difference to people's decisions to stay on at school or FE college. In some cases, the money may well be used to support indirect education, such as the purchase of sporting materials. Equally, it may be that they spend it on other activities. That, in turn, may be sensationalised in things that are viewed as somewhat frivolous. However, if that socialisation and enjoyment of other things allows the young people to stay on in school, it is probably fair enough, because —

**Mr Ross:** You are saying that it is a good use of public money if young people are using an EMA payment for social activity.

**Dr Farry:** The key issue is whether young people will want to stay on in school and college. You have to draw the comparison. If they were not staying on in school or college, what would they be doing? They would either be not in education, employment or training (NEET), which would be another drain on the system where we have to invest in other types of programmes, or they would be going into work and saying, "Some of my peers are in the world of work and have their money. They can spend, go out and go to McDonald's, the cinema or whatever the 16- or 17-year-old wants to do, whereas I can't because I do not have the resources to compete. So, rather than going to school when my friends are earning a little bit of money and are going out socialising, maybe I should leave and go into the world of work."

We want to ensure, by contrast, that people reach the appropriate level of education and training and that they are investing in higher-level skills. In turn, people can go into the world of work at the appropriate level, earn more competitive salaries and, as such, contribute to the wider economy. So we want to encourage young people to stay on in school for as long as possible. In part, the EMA scheme was designed to incentivise people to stay on in school as opposed to leaving, either in a sense of doing nothing or alternatively being tempted into work at a premature point, rather than investing in their skills.

**Mr Ross:** I would hope that most people would see the incentive of staying on in school as being a good education and, hopefully, a good job at the end of that. Likewise, I would like to think that EMA is there to remove any barrier from staying in education, as opposed to being used for other activities. Will you monitor how EMA progresses with a view to reviewing it again in the future? How do you intend to collate the information on how EMA is used and whether young people are using it for educational purposes?

**Dr Farry:** We can commission another survey in the same way that PricewaterhouseCoopers did a report in 2010. We will want to consider doing a review in a couple of years to see exactly how things are progressing.

On the issue of deadweight, it is important to recognise that the new, modified scheme is much more targeted. We believe that it is 21% more efficient in its targeting than was the case before. However, you will never remove deadweight from the system entirely. There will always be a certain degree of inefficiency in the system, and you cannot always anticipate what people are going to do. We will see exactly how we are performing in the global picture. There will be a limit to how much deadweight we are going to remove from the system. Also, in the past, we cited a figure of 64% deadweight in individuals who do not stay on in education purely because they have EMA. However, that does not translate to saying that 64% of the resources were being spent inefficiently. There is always a degree of concentration of resources to begin with, and we have now concentrated them further.

**Mr Ross:** Just two other issues, if I can. The papers that we have on the forward work programme talk about FE colleges' status as non-departmental public bodies and changes to their classification. I may have missed this in the period that I was off the Committee. Will you remind us of the rationale for changing the status and any possible implications for FE colleges?

**Dr Farry:** This is basically reclassification by the Office for National Statistics. It has branded the six FE colleges as non-departmental public bodies. That raises particular issues in their ability to manage

their resources. It creates a lot more bureaucracy for the colleges. It also disincentivises them to engage with the business community in Northern Ireland. As NDPBs, they have to manage their entire resources in-year. If they create further income beyond what they receive from the public sector — from their engagement with business — they are restricted in their ability to retain those profits and reinvest them in other activities across the financial years. So, they are operating within much more limited confines.

The colleges have become increasingly concerned about that situation over the past 12 months or so. There is a hunger for us to consider how we can do things differently. There may well be a need for legislation to address it. That is why we have to go for the consultation as a first phase. On a similar line to what Jim said in relation to Stranmillis, insofar as we can deliver any flexibilities through a light touch with the colleges, we will seek to do so. However, there are restrictions on how far we can go.

**Mr Ross:** Finally, I have raised the issue with you before of the employment law review. Can you give us an idea of when you will be taking a decision on that?

**Dr Farry:** We will want to take a paper to the Executive in early to mid-spring on a number of different options in relation to the different aspects that will require to be addressed by legislation.

**Mr Ross:** You will understand the importance of this to making sure that our attraction to companies is there, and also in multinational companies setting up back-office operations here in Northern Ireland as opposed to elsewhere in the UK. Even in recent months, we have seen multinational corporations moving jobs around the UK. Clearly, if we have a different legal system, that will be a disincentive for them to come to Northern Ireland. I urge you to be as quick as you can on that. I am sure that I know the answer; it will be the same answer that I always get. However, are you minded towards any position, or will you wait to see the outcome of the consultation?

**Dr Farry:** This particular issue is one where an iterative process involving the stakeholders is perhaps the most effective way of reaching a view on what should be done. Particularly bearing in mind our political structures in Northern Ireland, that is probably the most productive way of taking this forward. There is ongoing engagement between business representatives and the trade unions behind the scenes under the auspices of the Labour Relations Agency. That process will, hopefully, conclude in sufficient time to inform any paper that goes to the Executive.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Alastair, you asked about when this will come forward, and the Minister responded by saying early spring. Spring is only a week away, so we are not so far from that.

**Mr Hilditch:** We note the review of apprenticeships and youth training, and potentially a future work and careers strategy. On youth unemployment in general — maybe those who are caught more in a NEET situation — is there an opportunity to try to get the likes of the community and voluntary sector, and maybe local government through the review of public administration, to try to establish some type of social enterprise that could put young people back on track? I do not want go back to the direct rule days of Enterprise Ulster and things like that, but certainly schemes that get young folk into the employment sector but that do not fit into some of the current schemes.

**Dr Farry:** David, we are certainly happy to be creative in what we do and proactive in who we engage with. On youth unemployment and NEETs, we have actively sought the support of the 26 district councils to offer placement opportunities.

**Mr Hilditch:** Is that the YES scheme? I believe that some of the pilots of that have been quite successful.

**Dr Farry:** The outworkings of that are looking good.

In the NEETs strategy, there is a very heavy focus on working with the community and voluntary sector in the delivery of schemes. We have a NEETs advisory forum that involves people from the community and voluntary sector. Obviously we made major announcements in relation to the collaboration and innovation fund in December, and about £9 million is now available to take forward a number of initiatives.

I stress that, in taking forward schemes, we need to be conscious of two considerations. The first is that there needs to be a certain efficiency in spend per head and the way that we do these things. We



cannot just throw loads of money at it. We have to make sure that we are taking things forward efficiently. Secondly, we want some sort of skills premium for people. We want to avoid a situation in which we create schemes that essentially park people for a period of time and get them off the books in some shape or form but, whenever those schemes end, they are no better off in their employability or job-specific skills. Where possible, we try to build upskilling elements into the programmes that we take forward. Cue Catherine on that.

**Mrs C Bell:** You have covered it adequately. The whole idea is not just to get them off — for example, when we are doing the economic inactivity — benefits that lead them to jobseeker's allowance. We want them to get into work and start progressing up the skills ladder. That is the key. We want them to do training that makes them employable and then continue to do training so that they can benefit from the other jobs that we hope that Northern Ireland will be able to attract.

**Mr Hilditch:** Would that not be a good time to gel local government and the likes of the community and voluntary sector together to promote social enterprise?

**Mr A Hamilton:** Part of the programme that the Minister referenced includes what we called the collaboration and innovation fund, where we were looking for innovative approaches. Some of the schemes that have been approved actually involve local councils working with the voluntary and community sector, so we are interested in that.

When we were starting out and developing our strategy, we had really no resource identified at all. We thought that we might be able to identify £2 million or £3 million. However, when we produced the NEETs strategy with the Executive's support behind it, we were allocated £10 million. Further to that, again through the Minister's making his proposals, identifying other areas where we could help, the Executive made further additional resources available to the extent that Northern Ireland now has a major programme here with total spend of about £25 million. That excludes the Training for Success skills for life programme, which is really part of this process. So, we probably have one of the most comprehensive packages of support for young people who are not in employment, education or training, comparable with anywhere in the UK, if not in Europe.

**Ms McGahan:** You referred to your priorities earlier. Have you considered making post-19 special educational needs a priority? I know you said recently that your policy is always under review. I am just concerned that there are gaps in provision, but I appreciate that there is a lot of diversity in that sector. I would just like to hear your views on a potential way forward to address this. Is your Department prepared to engage with Sperrinview in Dungannon to hear its views on this?

I had a meeting with South West College at its Dungannon campus regarding the provision, and it said that its hands are essentially tied due to this concept of numbers, which determines whether a class should run. I am just wondering whether that situation can be reviewed, especially for the post-19 sector?

**Dr Farry:** There are two or three things to say on that. First, we are very conscious that this is an area of interest, and not just for this Committee. The Health Committee and the Education Committee are also taking an interest. We will organise a meeting between the disability employment service and the organisations that you mentioned, the names of which we have picked up on today. I will ask officials there to take that forward and to have a discussion.

In due course, it may be useful for the service to have a wider discussion with the Committee about the post-19 opportunities that are available. We have a range of programmes on offer already. I hope that they are fairly comprehensive, but if there is a concern that people can fall through the cracks in the system, we will need to look at that and refine things. It may be useful to take that forward.

**Ms McGahan:** I know some parents are not aware of those courses. That information has never been furnished to them. Maybe that is because they are not suitable, hence the gap in the provision of services.

**Mrs C Bell:** I think that you are absolutely right. I am keen to follow that up with the Dungannon campus to see what the issue is. There are some problems that arise when young people with special needs leave special schools that have medical facilities. Obviously, a college does not have that, and that is where young people really lose out. We have looked at this many times. Really it is a daycare facility, yet the daycare facilities are mainly for older people. It takes quite some time to get them to a daycare facility, so young people with special needs regress. We have looked at that aspect. I would

like to hear what the college is saying about turning people away if it does not have sufficient classes, because we do give additional resources for special needs.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** OK. Jim, did you want to come in again?

**Mr Allister:** Yes, if there is time.

Minister, in questions for written answer, I have asked you whether there were any concerns about duplication of funding under the employer support programme. If I understood your answers correctly, you basically said that there were not any concerns. Is that correct?

**Dr Farry:** There are concerns in that you and others have raised concerns. There should not be duplication of resources, but I think we have said that there is always an inherent risk in the system, and we need to make sure that we manage that closely.

**Mrs C Bell:** You are aware that there is an ongoing investigation. That will come to a conclusion in the not-too-distant future.

**Mr Allister:** Is that specific to one particular college?

**Mrs C Bell:** It is one college, but because the issue has been raised, we have raised it across the six colleges. Once there is an issue like that, we do not just concentrate on one college. We widen it out so that every college looks at it.

**Mr Allister:** What is the timescale for that investigation?

**Mrs C Bell:** I would have to come back to you; I am vague about it. My understanding is that it is in the imminent future, particularly for one college, but I am not sure about the other five because they are further behind. We will come back to you. We have taken it incredibly seriously.

**Mr Allister:** Is there a cross-departmental issue with Invest NI and innovation vouchers?

**Mrs C Bell:** That is one area that we are investigating.

**Dr Farry:** Relations between the Department and Invest NI are very close. We work in partnership with it on the cross-cutting issues. We will write to the Committee and set out the issue in further detail.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** That seems to be it from members, Minister, but I want to ask you one thing about Steps 2 Success. You said during Question Time last week that it will go out for tender within the next few months. Will officials be back to Committee prior to that?

**Dr Farry:** If you want that, yes.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Fair enough. The Committee would perhaps like a further briefing from officials prior to that.

The college development plan process will begin in March. Will the Committee have involvement with or input into that?

**Mrs C Bell:** The college development planning process is the process whereby the Minister sets the priorities for the FE sector, and the officials in the Department then work with the principals, their senior team and the chair of the governing body to determine how the Minister's priorities will be taken forward. It is a way of managing a college. Your influence is really influencing the Minister's priorities. Officials can certainly come to the Committee to talk about the whole process and the Minister's priorities as well. There is no problem with that.

**Mr P Ramsey:** It would be useful to know how they line up with existing programmes, such as the youth employment programmes, Steps 2 Success and others.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Everybody seems to have exhausted their views. Minister, we thank you for taking the time to come along and be open with the Committee today, and we thank Catherine and Andrew for coming. We appreciate it very much.

**Dr Farry:** Thank you very much, Deputy Chairman; see you soon.