



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Committee for Employment and Learning**

# **OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)**

**Dissolution of the Department for Employment and  
Learning: Stakeholder Event, Room 144**

**18 April 2012**

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Employment and Learning

### **Dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning: Stakeholder Event, Room 144**

**18 April 2012**

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

Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jim Allister  
Mr Barry McElduff  
Mr David McIlveen  
Mr Pat Ramsey

**Witnesses:**

Ms Claire Lavery	Action on Hearing Loss
Mr Alan McClure	Action on Hearing Loss
Ms Nicola Strahan	Action on Hearing Loss
Ms Jackie White	Action on Hearing Loss
Ms Louise Brennan	Alternative Education Providers' Forum
Mr Conor Kennedy	Alternative Education Providers' Forum
Ms Caroline Rutherford	Alternative Education Providers' Forum
Ms Monica Wilson	Disability Action
Ms Sara Boyce	Include Youth
Ms Koulla Yiasouma	Include Youth
Mr Mark Ennis	Invest Northern Ireland
Ms Tracy Meharg	Invest Northern Ireland
Ms Jennifer Greenfield	Law Centre (NI)
Ms Ursula O'Hare	Law Centre (NI)
Mr Thomas McKillop	Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance
Mr Tony McMullan	Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance
Mr Jack Thornbury	Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance
Mr Brendan Clarke	Open Colleges Network Northern Ireland
Ms Patricia Short	Open Colleges Network Northern Ireland
Ms Orla Corrigan	Parkanaur College
Mr Tom O'Sullivan	Parkanaur College
Professor Peter Finn	St Mary's University College
Mr George Dunn	University and College Union
Mr Mike Larkin	University and College Union
Ms Julie Williams-Nash	University and College Union

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Folks, we will make a start. We have quite a lot on today, and we are fairly tightly tied for time. We have to try to keep within the time regime if possible. We welcome the folk from the Law Centre, and we have your written presentation in front of us. If you want to add something to that, you can, and we will then go into questions. We have only 15 minutes, so we have to get it all done and dusted within that time to let the other groups come in. We will hand over to you to say a few words first, and we can then ask some questions.

**Ms Ursula O'Hare (Law Centre (NI)):** Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today. We appreciate that you have a very large number of presentations to hear this morning, so we will confine our comments to the two broad areas that we remarked upon in our correspondence on the issue that you are considering today.

When the Committee wrote to us to seek our views on where, in the event of dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), its functions should be realigned, we commented largely on two broad areas: the jobs and benefits function of DEL and its employment law function. That focus is explained by the nature of our work and where we interact with the Department for Employment and Learning. The Law Centre has appeared before this Committee a number of times in the past couple of years to discuss employment law and policy, so you are aware that our work is to provide advice and representation on a number of legal issues, including employment law. Hence, our interest in the proposed dissolution relates to the transfer of that employment law function. We also provide social security advice and representation, and, given the changes that are ahead with welfare reform, we have an interest in where that jobs and benefit function aligns.

I will take the social security issue first. We suggested to you in our paper that consideration should be given to realigning that jobs and benefits function in the Department for Social Development (DSD), and the reason is simply that, as you know, it is anticipated that the Welfare Reform Bill will be introduced here this spring. The Welfare Reform Bill in Britain recently received Royal Assent, and that will pave the way for what some are heralding as the biggest change in the social security system in a generation. The Welfare Reform Bill introduces universal credit, and universal credit strengthens the link between receipt of working-age benefits, requirements to look for work and increased conditionality. It is, essentially, predicated on a model that envisages integrated delivery of employment support to help people to get into work and arrangements to implement the new benefit. We are also, of course, in a situation where more and more people will move into jobseeking arrangements as a result of the migration from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance, and lone parents will increasingly move to work-seeking arrangements if their youngest child has reached the age of five and they are transferring onto jobseeker's allowance.

As you know, our current arrangements are that that work is split between two Departments. DSD, through the Social Security Agency, is responsible, essentially, for establishing your entitlement to benefit and payment of benefits, while the Department for Employment and Learning has responsibility for delivering its jobs and benefits services to working-age claimants. So, the Department for Employment and Learning's job and benefits advisers would have a role in determining whether someone is actively seeking work. In practice, the decisions on those issues are essentially for DSD, so you have an intermeshing of services. In Britain, that work is handled under the auspices of one Department, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Because of the shift to universal credit, which is a significant change to our current arrangements, we are suggesting that consideration needs to be given to whether or not the jobs and benefits function should be transferred to DSD, and we think that there are reasons why it should. Essentially, because of the importance of the policy on welfare reform and the centrality of the new work-seeking arrangements, we suggest that that work should be handled by a single Department. In a sense, I suppose that this is about achieving a seamless co-ordination of what could be the biggest change to the welfare state. Therefore, our preference is for that function to move to DSD.

As we outlined in our paper, we also have an interest in the employment law function and how that should be realigned in the event of dissolution, and I want to turn to that now. I will pass over to my colleague, Jennifer Greenfield, who will comment on the employment law aspects.

**Ms Jennifer Greenfield (Law Centre (NI)):** You will see our proposal in our letter to the Committee. Our proposal is founded on the basis of our daily exposure to the range of queries on employment matters

that comes to us from employees and workers across Northern Ireland. For example, during 2011 we received well over 2,000 queries on many and varied issues, and we represented some of those cases at industrial tribunals. We provide a source of advice to those who might otherwise struggle to receive it. That is the point that I wish to focus on this morning. We would be very concerned to ensure that the existing specialism and expertise that have been built up in the current Department and that flow from it are not lost. The value of advice at an early stage in employment law matters for employees and employers cannot be overestimated; it can have a knock-on effect on whether a case goes any further or goes properly forward. We would be concerned to ensure that there is no loss of specialism and expertise. In addition, we view this as an opportunity to look at the particular areas that are currently within that sphere of advice. There may be opportunities to look at that a little. For example, migrant workers' rights may fit with a Department that has an equality specialism or remit. We have an open mind in looking at the areas that will best fit the particular issues.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I think that we get the gist of that, and I know that Committee members want to ask questions.

You referred to the jobs and benefits function of DEL and said that it would best be situated in DSD. However, the purpose of the jobs and benefits function is to get young people and the unemployed into work rather than just get them benefits. Why do you feel that that function would be better in DSD rather than the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI)?

**Ms O'Hare:** Absolutely; the function of the employment service to get people into work, and the Department for Employment and Learning runs a number of programmes, Steps to Work being one. As a result of the requirement for those on benefits to actively seek work, there will come a point at which there is a mandatory requirement for them to participate in, for example, Steps to Work or other employment support programmes. What effectively happens in jobs and benefits offices is that you register for your benefits and are then passed to a personal adviser who will support you in seeking work. The universal credit will make a strong connection between entitlement to benefit and actively seeking work. There will be increased conditionality in the system and more and more of a requirement on you to actively seek work. Our thinking was that, given that all that will be delivered in one place, it would make sense to co-ordinate that function in one Department.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Fair enough, we will leave it at that.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I will also try to be brief. Your presentation is unusual in that you see there being different roles. Most groups want to be in one Department or the other, but I can understand your view because of the complexity of the work that you do on employment, benefits and other matters. Could you break down your funding streams for the three areas that you identified?

**Ms O'Hare:** Certainly. We have a mixed funding base. Our core funding comes from the Department for Social Development for our social security work; we have an employment law funding stream for our employment advice service; our immigration work is funded separately through a contract with the Legal Services Commission; and there is health board funding for some of our community care work. So we have a very mixed funding base.

**Mr P Ramsey:** So, your funding is mainly from DEL. Do you not get any funding from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)?

**Ms O'Hare:** No. Our core funder is DSD, and we get project funding from DEL. In the past, OFMDFM has, for example, supported the translation costs for migrant workers' guides.

**Mr P Ramsey:** It would be useful if you could provide us with the percentage of funding that is provided for each area of your work.

**Ms O'Hare:** OK. Would you like me to send that through to the Committee Chair?

**Mr P Ramsey:** Yes, please.

**Mr McElduff:** I commend your thoughtful approach, and your presentation is very well laid out. Will you tell us a little more about the Law Centre's interaction with DEL on essential skills? That will highlight the relevance of the final paragraph of your submission.

**Ms O'Hare:** It is an issue that we have only really just come to, specifically in relation to refugees' access to classes in English as a second language. It is really about ensuring the integration of refugees in Northern Ireland. It is very much a new area of work for us, and it emerged through work that we have been involved in with OFMDFM on an immigration subgroup, which is formally convened by OFMDFM, chaired by the Law Centre and involves a range of Departments and stakeholders. We have discussed with DEL how it could consider and put in place arrangements that would enable refugees to have access to English language classes. I suppose that I added that last paragraph for the sake of completeness and to highlight that that is a new area on which we are working with the Department.

**Mr McElduff:** Thank you.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Any other questions from members? We are very close to the end of our time for this session anyway.

**Ms O'Hare:** I know that you are. I had my watch off to make sure that, come the fifteen minute bell, we would stop.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you for coming, giving your short presentation and taking some questions from the Committee this morning. We will certainly take on board all the information that we receive during these sessions. I remind you that these sessions are being recorded by Hansard.

**Ms O'Hare:** Thank you very much for the opportunity. One of the things that would be helpful for us all would be some clarity on the timescale and the arrangements that will be put in place. From our end of the house, I know that there is some uncertainty around that. Thank you very much.

**Mr Buchanan:** I welcome representatives from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) to the Committee. We have fifteen minutes to go through this and get it over with. We thank you for coming along to give us a brief presentation, after which we will open the session up for questions. We have your written submission, and I note from it that you folk are of the very strong view that the Department should not be abolished. I can see that view throughout the submission. The Department will cease to function at the end of June 2012, from what we can make out, but I see no indication from you as to where you feel its functions should go when it ceases operations. Perhaps you could give us some clarification on that front.

**Mr Tony McMullan (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance):** Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Chairperson. I will explain the background. The decision to abolish the Department was announced — surprisingly and quickly for us — in January by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, but, until then, there had been no hint of it. We then received an invitation from Mr McCrea to make a written submission, in which we argued strongly for the retention of the Department. Since then, however, the situation has become slightly clearer than it was at that time, in that OFMDFM has also issued invitations to interested groups to provide submissions. We have made a submission in response to OFMDFM's invitation. In that context, we are still arguing for the retention of DEL as a separate entity. However, if it becomes clear that DEL is no longer going to remain, it is our very strong opinion that the entire Department should merge with DETI and form a new Department.

DEL should not be split into various parts. There are some indications that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister saw the Department splitting into DETI and the Department of Education (DE). We are aware that there are also some strong rumours that DSD is arguing that the employment service function should be transferred to it. However, it is our considered view that, if DEL is to be abolished, it should transfer in its entirety. It should not be subsumed into DETI but should be merged with DETI into a new Department, which, we have suggested in our submission to OFMDFM, should be called something like the Department of the economy and employment, because of the close interrelated links between the economy and employment.

I turn now to the proposed transfer of the higher education (HE) function to the Department of Education. Members may recall that, at one stage, education functions were all part of the same Department. Although, in theory, it looks logical and sensible to have all education functions in the one Department, it was the considered view of people that when that happened, the primary, secondary and grammar school sectors were seen as the cream of the Department and got more interest from the politicians and the media and so forth, and the further education (FE) and higher education sector was not viewed in the same light. It is the view of our members who support the further and higher education sector that rather than move back to that situation by way of a transfer to the Department of Education, they would be better treated in the exercise of the functions that they provide to the education sector as part of DEL or in a new Department.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you. Do members have any questions?

**Mr Allister:** Are you of the view that DEL should move as a whole because you think that, as a Department, it is a homogeneous whole, or is it because that, when you analyse each constituent part of it, you think that the natural home for each of those happens to be DETI?

**Mr T McMullan:** It is our view that the Department is homogeneous in nature. When the Department was originally created, at the time of the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly, there were some arguments about whether functions should be created in DEL or in other Departments. The Department is not one of the smaller Departments; there are smaller Departments than DEL. It has a range of functions, including the employment service function, the careers function, the disability advisory service and others. We believe that those functions work well together in the Department, and, in our submission, we argue that it should not be split apart, because of the nature of the work and the interrelationship between the various functions. If it is to go into another Department, a merger with DETI seems to be the most sensible and logical merger, given its role in dealing with the economy.

**Mr Allister:** The Department, as it presently exists, even in its very title, has different components: employment and learning. Indeed, it has a jobs and benefits dimension as well. Is there anything particularly homogeneous about the Department that means that it must stay together? What is the argument against the jobs and benefits dimension going to DSD?

**Mr Thomas McKillop (Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance):** I would have answered "both" to your previous question. It sits well in its entirety, but each of the individual functions, if they were to transfer, would transfer to DETI. Each constituent part would fit in very well with what is being done in DETI, whether it is the higher education stuff that is helping with skills and that ties in with the economy and industry, or whether it is the employment service, which, again, helps people find employment and already has links with sections of DETI through the redundancy service and the statistics and things that are produced for the Department. There already are close similarities between them, and, if the Department were to go, the argument is that it should go in its entirety. However, you can look at each individual part and say that it would fit in with that theory as well.

**Mr Allister:** What is the argument against jobs and benefits going to DSD?

**Mr McKillop:** It is almost against the primary focus of DEL at the minute. The priority for the Department for Employment and Learning is to create employment. The priority for the Social Security Agency and for DSD is the payment of benefits, and the two have almost been seen to be counterproductive. Over the past couple of years, a lot of work has been done in the Department to say that the focus needs to move away from merely fulfilling benefit conditionality, which is what seems to be happening in the jobs and benefits offices, towards doing more qualitative work with employers. There is a very strong feeling among staff, particularly our members who have transferred from DSD into DEL, that they are getting the chance to see that. Instead of doing quantitative work based around fulfilling benefit needs, they are now doing quality work to help to skill people and get them out into the economy.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Some other unions feel that some of further and higher education would sit better with the Department of Education. Do you think that teacher training fits in best with DETI or with the Department of Education?

**Mr T McMullan:** Teacher training has not been an issue that affects our members, and, quite honestly, we have not considered it.

**Mr Allister:** Your members certainly have a view on the merger of Stranmillis University College and Queen's University because they have expressed it to us. They do not have a view about which Department that should go to?

**Mr T McMullan:** NIPSA's submission has been based on the response from DEL members and the Civil Service side. I understand the point that Mr Allister makes, and we do not have a view on that.

**Mr McElduff:** I want to broaden the question out beyond teacher training to higher education in its totality. Would you make an argument against higher education being absorbed in the Department of Education? Is an argument being advanced by NIPSA that it should not go to DE?

**Mr T McMullan:** Yes. At one point many years ago, all the education functions were in the same Department, and the view of our members who were around in those days was that, in a sense, the further and higher education sector was the Cinderella service of education. As I said, the media, politicians and others looked at primary, grammar and secondary education as a priority, and, when resources needed to be allocated, those sectors got it rather than the further and higher education sector. So, our members in the further and higher education sector believe that they have had a better opportunity to propagate what should happen in further education as part of a separate Department rather than as part of the Department of Education. They think that they have had a better deal in DEL.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** OK. There are no other questions. Thank you for coming along and giving us your time and your presentation this morning. We have stayed well within the time, so thank you for that.

I welcome Mark Ennis and Tracy Meharg from Invest NI to give us their presentation this morning. I remind you that this session is being recorded by Hansard and will go into our report. A slot of 15 minutes has been allocated for this session. We have your written response in front of us, but we invite you to make a short presentation and we will then open it up for questions from Committee members.

**Mr Mark Ennis (Invest Northern Ireland):** I thank the Committee for inviting us here to give evidence. It is much appreciated. As our time is limited, I will cut to the chase. Unashamedly, we are very keen to have a fair part of the Department for Employment and Learning reassigned to either a new Department of the economy or to DETI. Whatever it turns out to be is for others to decide. We are particularly keen to reassign the further and higher education parts of the Department. The reason for that view is that we have been tasked to create 25,000 jobs over the next few years, and there are three pillars to achieving that: the financial, in terms of grants, tax and corporation tax, etc; the environmental; and, most importantly, the supply of well-educated young people and skills. I have differentiated as there is a difference between the two.

In the past three years, we have been fairly successful in job creation. However, we are already seeing some skill shortages, particularly in areas such as engineering, chemistry and IT, and that is a concern. One of the challenges that we have is that when you build up some critical mass in a sector, as we have in the financial services and legal services sectors, you create a demand. I am getting feedback from businesses that they have lost people to other companies as the skills are not available to supply that critical mass. The worst thing from the standpoint of Northern Ireland plc would be an inability, having once established such a critical mass, to supply it. That can only be achieved through a focused strategy, and the success of that is the alignment between business and higher and further education. That is paramount. That also came out in the report of the Independent Review of Economic Policy (IREP), which made a similar recommendation with the same basic logic that I have

articulated. I am sure that the Committee is also talking to DEL and the FE and HE sectors, but the views that I have received from them is that they strongly support its being combined in a single Department.

From Invest NI's point of view, if Northern Ireland is to be competitive and attract new investment, it is important that we have a single point of contact. That will mean that, instead of having to co-ordinate across a number of Departments, we can go with that financial and skills package. That is paramount for success, and it would also be helpful and give us a competitive edge. Indeed, that was one of the key themes that came out from potential inward investors to us during the investment conference in Washington in 2010. They asked us to help them to make their transition easy and to give them one point of contact they can talk to and that will deliver.

The best way to illustrate that point quickly for the Committee is through the use of some examples that show how the approach has worked and demonstrate the evidence of success. We were recently successful in bringing in 300 jobs from Axiom. We worked with DEL to achieve that, and we provided the business improvement training and DEL provided the pre-employment training. That was an example of the two organisations combining and working together. Tracy and Catherine Bell in the Department in particular have worked for a number of years and are starting to get some real success in the cohesion of bringing that unit together, and I am very protective of trying to keep that relationship as strong as possible.

What is our relationship with colleges of further education? How has that benefited us? What are the examples? We now have 40 courses that promote STEM subjects in FE. My day job, aside from my role in Invest NI, is in the energy business, and so I am very conscious of the renewables sector in particular. Belfast Met now does a course in wind turbine apprenticeships, and the DONG business is coming in. There is a direct link with FE supporting business coming in. South Eastern Regional College is promoting offshore energy, and South West College is supporting the foundation degree in wind technology. That is all very relevant to the industry.

What direct stuff have we done? Our innovation vouchers have encouraged a lot of small businesses to engage with FE colleges, because there is a reluctance among SMEs to engage with the universities. We will not go into the reasons behind that, but they are more comfortable dealing with the colleges, particularly in their own areas. The new composites centre is a fantastic example of where the universities have combined with businesses and Invest NI to create something. On Friday, I am meeting a potential inward investor who, potentially, has 300 jobs for Northern Ireland based on the production of composite wheels for aircraft. One of the key factors for that investor was visiting that composites centre and seeing that it worked.

**Ms Tracy Meharg (Invest Northern Ireland):** I very much re-emphasise Mark's point. It is quite clear that the economies that have the skills and research infrastructure are the economies that will grow in the future and attract investment.

I will take it into real examples, because that is helpful. On the skills side, let us take Citi. When Citi came to Northern Ireland, we worked very closely with it, DEL, FE and HE. At that time, there was no investment administrative qualification in Northern Ireland, and, working with DEL, Belfast Met and the University of Ulster, we put that qualification in place in Northern Ireland. That could not have been done before and, on the back of that, we were able to attract a 200-job project. That is one example of the work that we have done with DEL and the colleges and universities together.

On small businesses, it is important to recognise the importance of further education and its role in the community, particularly around subregional growth, which is key. In trying to get a more even spread of growth in the economy, the anchors have to be in the FE colleges. One really good example that Mark mentioned is the South West College, which has been brilliant, especially the InnoTech Centre and the innovation voucher scheme. It is working with tiny little companies on things like working with tourism businesses to develop collaborative phone apps to drive tourism to them. It is working with farms to develop innovative farm cubicles to allow the cows to produce more milk, and it is working with material housing companies to increase what they are doing. It is very much happening on the ground.



The change in FE over the past number of years and its role on the economy have been transformational, and we cannot afford to lose that. It has such an important role in vocational and technical training and embedding innovation in the community. It is important that there is a whole cascade. At the high end, Mark has mentioned the composites centre. You also have the likes of Seagate, which we work with to embed lots more R&D in Northern Ireland. As part of that, it invested in Queen's to create a centre, and, on the back of that centre, spin-outs are starting. We need to have that whole continuum of support from the very high-tech companies right down to the very small companies that have never done this before and need to get stepped in. The FE colleges get them on that ladder. We talk about the innovation escalator, and we want to get them on that escalator and grow them. From FDI right through to small companies, we have to ensure that everything that is happening is fully aligned with the needs of the economy. I believe that that is best served by retaining it in the Department.

**Mr Ennis:** I hope that that gives you a flavour. We could go on all day with examples, but I hope that that has given you an understanding of the importance that we are placing on it.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Yes, thank you very much for that. I want to open up the discussion.

**Mr P Ramsey:** It is a pity that we are tight for time today, because I would have liked to have had a good discussion about the skills shortages that were referred to earlier. However, let us cut to the chase. Can you explain, in a few short sentences, how detrimental it would be to separate further and higher education?

**Mr Ennis:** As Tracy mentioned when she gave you the examples, we have worked for the past three or four years to try to get the two to work closer together because one tends to be a stepping stone to the other in many instances. The examples that we have given show how it is not just about the university linkage to business; it goes a step back into the further education link to business. The danger in splitting them, as with anything, is that you lose the focus of one. The focus of DEL — I just wrote this down to remind myself — is:

*"to promote learning and skills, to prepare people for work and to support the economy".*

To my mind, that feeds directly into a Department of the economy. FE is a vital part of that whole link, as is HE.

**Ms Meharg:** Wherever the policy sits will be an issue. If a policy for skills is in one Department but the responsibility for delivering it rests in another Department, there is an opportunity for a mismatch between where the budget is allocated and where the policy sits.

**Mr Ennis:** Sitting as the body that is responsible for providing skills to both indigenous businesses and those attracted by inward investment, if you do not have control of the budget and the policy, but you are being tasked with the outcome of supplying it, there is a disconnect there that is not helpful.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I agree.

**Mr McElduff:** I want to deploy the challenge function, although I am not being adversarial for the sake of it. What is the status of Invest NI and its relationship with DETI at this time? Does that relationship allow you to be objective in addressing this issue?

**Mr Ennis:** Let me answer the second bit first. Tracy can give you the exact details of the relationship with the body itself. We are very independent in view. We have a board, which I am representing today, that is independent even of the executive team in Invest NI. The quality of the board — I will take myself out of the equation — means that it is a challenging and independent board. Its focus is on all on what is best for Northern Ireland plc, regardless of where it sits. I report and am directly responsible to and am appointed by the Minister, so there is an independence there. While there is a Civil Service structure, which runs from Invest NI through DETI to the Minister, I have a direct link with the Minister. That independence is very important in the whole outcome. The IREP report has strengthened that, in my view, and has enabled us to have a greater degree of independence.

**Ms Meharg:** Invest NI was set up in 2002 as a non-departmental public body. We are not civil servants, we are public service employees nowadays and are employed directly by Invest Northern Ireland. We take direction from our board, which has a level of independence from the Department. Clearly, from an operational perspective and from the Government's perspective, DETI has clear oversight of and responsibility for our targets up through the Department. You would not take that away. Ultimately, however, our remit is about delivering the targets that are set for us by the Executive through the Programme for Government, which flow down through to Invest NI.

**Mr Ennis:** The chain of command, as I see it, begins with the Executive, who deliver policy in a broader round. That gets distilled down to our Minister, who sets policy for our Department. It is distilled further by DETI, which splits that up, and then we are responsible for the delivery of that policy.

**Mr Allister:** You have given us examples of how you say Invest NI has worked successfully with DEL. One could turn that round and say that it does not really matter which separate Department those functions lie within, because you have a track record of working successfully with an outside Department no matter which it is. Where, from that, do we draw the argument that, in fact, things would be better if it was within DETI?

**Mr Ennis:** That is a fair question. I asked our own team the same question because I am interested in it. It has taken us quite a number of years to get to where we are with DEL. If you do not mind, I will go back to the DEL thing, which is:

*"to promote learning and skills, to prepare people for work and to support the economy".*

The Department of Education's overarching objective is somewhat different to that, but there is a great commonality between where DEL and DETI sit, particularly with Invest NI working with it. I have named Tracy and Catherine Bell not to flatter them, but because they have worked tirelessly to make FE relate to business. Without that personal leadership from those individuals in those Departments, we would not have had the success that I alluded to.

**Mr Allister:** But that has happened in spite of it being separate Departments.

**Mr Ennis:** It has.

**Mr Allister:** So, if it ended up in the Department of Education, for example, would it make any difference?

**Mr Ennis:** It would, because the overarching policies and objectives are different. DEL's overarching policy objective is similar to that of Invest NI. It is about promoting work, creating jobs and preparing people for the workplace.

**Mr Allister:** Within the context of repressed budgets, would that commonality give rise to the elements that are now DEL-orientated becoming swamped?

**Mr Ennis:** I do not believe so. In fact, I think that you would get a more efficient organisation if you combined the Departments. I mean that in both human and budgetary terms.

**Mr Allister:** Do you mean job losses?

**Mr Ennis:** I think that there could be some. Regardless of whether the Department is combined with DETI or Education, I think that there will be some duplication of effort that will no longer happen. Whether there will be job losses or redeployments into new areas that we are not living up at the moment remains to be seen. I think that redeployments would be more appropriate. There are shortages. We are in a big competitive environment and we need the skills set to address it.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you for your time and your presentation this morning. We are just within the time allocated, and I thank you for that.

**Mr Ennis:** Thank you again for the opportunity

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I welcome Alan McClure, James Bailey, Claire Lavery and Jackie White from Action on Hearing Loss. I remind you that this session is being recorded by Hansard. You have a 15-minute slot and we have received your written presentation. I ask you to make a short presentation, and we will then open it up to questions.

**Ms Jackie White (Action on Hearing Loss):** I am Jackie White, the director of Action on Hearing Loss. I am very pleased to meet you all, and I thank you for the invitation to come along. Essentially, Action on Hearing Loss is the largest charity in Northern Ireland that provides services to deaf people, hard-of-hearing people and those with tinnitus. To supplement what we have given you by way of a presentation, we thought that we might bring along some of the issues and experiences of how things are currently set up, and perhaps stimulate some thoughts on what the future might look like for a more positive experience for deaf and hard-of-hearing people through education and into employment. I hope that that will be useful. I will hand over to my colleague, Alan McClure, and then introduce one of our previous service users, Nicola Strahan, who will tell you about her personal experiences.

**Mr Alan McClure (Action on Hearing Loss):** Hello everyone, and thanks again for inviting us along. I will talk about transitions and education. The transition period for everyone is a very important, life-changing time. Currently, people with hearing loss are advised incorrectly by staff who are positioned to give advice. These staff suggest that those with hearing loss who are in transition could, if possible, become hairdressers or stack shelves in Tesco, and that type of guidance is very inappropriate. It does not recognise the skills that we all have, including deaf people. To try and support and develop the confidence of younger deaf and hard-of-hearing people, we have become involved in the transition phase of those people's lives. So much so that, a few weeks ago, we organised a four-day residential, at which we had a group of 14 people, all of whom attend mainstream schools and come from all parts of Northern Ireland. The evaluation was fantastic. All the feedback was very, very complimentary to us. One person commented that it was the best weekend of their life. That was said genuinely. It demonstrates that we have assisted them in building their confidence and let them see that they are not alone, as quite often they are in their mainstream school, where they do not know anyone else with some hearing loss. We have brought them together as a community to feed back to us what they want — the learner knows best.

Moving forward after transition into education, what we really want to see is that everyone, if that is their choice, has equal access, regardless of disability. Currently, that access can depend on which college you wish to attend and where you live. The support that is offered from the regional colleges is very diverse. It can range from some colleges not wishing to entertain deaf awareness training or deaf learners, to the other extreme, where we have people in learning support units contacting us for support. We are finding that, when we have that active partnership with our specialism, the student learns better.

DEL functions extremely well in lots of areas. One thing we want to see is that communication is continued throughout the learner pathway and those with the specialist knowledge are invited to participate in the decision-making in those people's lives.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** From your perspective of dealing with people with hearing loss, where do you see that responsibility being best placed, if it comes to the stage at which DEL is abolished? Is that with DETI or the Department of Education?

**Ms White:** Essentially, believe it or not, we do not have a very strong feeling as to whether it lives in one place or another. What we do feel strongly about is that whatever red tape is there is dissolved, and that the learner or person has a continuous pathway to move through. So, whether that responsibility moves to one Department or the other, the Departments must talk to each other. Nicola is going to tell us very quickly a little about her own experience, which shows that, when people do not

talk to each other, the person is not at the centre of the pathway and things go a little bit wrong, to say the least.

**Ms Nicola Strahan (Action on Hearing Loss):** As Jackie has already mentioned, I am a service user of Action on Hearing Loss. I am deaf, so, if you have any difficulty in hearing my voice or understanding my speech — combined with my Ballymena accent — please let me know. *[Laughter.]* I have been educated in Northern Ireland, from a mainstream grammar school in Ballymena through to a postgraduate education at both the universities. I had difficulties when I moved from grammar school to university. To begin with, it is a culture shock for anybody. You are moving from a very small group of maybe 20 people to a lecture with 100-plus people. There were massive communication issues for me in being able to follow what was being said in the lecture, taking notes and progressing with my course. It took time to identify what the issues were going to be and put solutions in place to address them, such as communications support, in the form of note-takers, and purchasing equipment, like a portable loop, to enable me to continue with my studies. It was so difficult in my first year with the transition that I decided to change to a new course and start afresh from that point. I continued the course and graduated, and moved on to postgraduate study with the knowledge that I had of the issues and of the solutions that I could implement. I was able to hit the ground running on the postgrad course, and, two years ago, I decided to undertake more postgraduate study. I was very disappointed to find that, despite knowing what the issues were going to be and the solutions that could be implemented to address them, there were still difficulties moving back into further and higher education. That was partly because of disability advisers as opposed to people with specific in-depth knowledge of a disability. If people coming through the education system and moving from mainstream secondary education to further and higher education do not know what to expect or what the issues are and how to address them, it is very difficult to make that transition. There needs to be continuity through the whole education process, starting from secondary school and going right through, to address those issues.

**Ms White:** That is to demonstrate to you that, whichever decision is made, we implore people to remember the personal experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing people through education and into employment and further education. It is really important that people talk to each other and that the person remains at the centre of the experience.

We have a very positive relationship with DEL on the sign language interpreting work and on the access to work scheme. If the work starts to be separated, we do not want to lose the relationships or the expertise that has been built up or the momentum that has been started.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** We hope that, whatever happens to DEL, that relationship will remain in place and you will continue to have a good working relationship with the people who mean so much to you.

**Mr McElduff:** I commend the presentation; it is a good idea to take this opportunity to highlight your issues in the way that you have. You are not very prescriptive about where the services or the responsibility should end up, but you are making the point that the person must be at the centre and that the communication must continue. Well done on your presentation.

**Ms White:** Thank you very much.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you.

I welcome Tom O'Sullivan and Orla Corrigan from Parkanaur College. We are glad to have you here. We have a small presentation from the college in front of us, and we have a 15-minute slot to hear where you feel the functions of DEL would be best placed, whatever happens to it come the end of the term. I remind you that the session is being recorded by Hansard. We will leave the floor open to you for a few moments and then open up for questions from members.

**Mr Tom O'Sullivan (Parkanaur College):** You have met us before; most of you had a nice, sunny day out at Parkanaur College. We appreciate your invitation to convey our opinion. You will remember that what is unique about Parkanaur College is that it is the only specialist educational college in Northern Ireland. We are dealing with a niche area when it comes to individuals. Ultimately, we are looking at

individuals who come to us from 18 years onward and who face some kind of unique challenge or obstacle that often puts them outside the mainstream, the main framework, in Northern Ireland. We work with individuals who often are to be found outside the educational set-up and are struggling with life skills, abilities, mental health difficulties or physical impairments. It might simply be about the motivation to get out of bed in the morning or achieving the skills that are necessary to be able to move into employment. That is where we are positioned.

In the last two paragraphs of Wilfred Mitchell's letter, which you have in front of you, he says:

*"The attraction for alignment with the Department of Education is strong not least because the staff dealing with provision generally have related qualifications and is therefore more appreciative and supportive of College activities."*

We appreciate that, when it comes to education, the skills, the qualifications and, to a degree, some of the experience are with the Department of Education. However, given the uniqueness of Parkanaur College, I would draw your attention to the last paragraph of the letter:

*"Not with standing this transient future needs of young people into mature independent adults ought to be related to a sustainable quality of life in an integrated society. Young people ought to have outcomes that meet their needs and prepare them to maximise their independent living and employability skills."*

In the last line of the letter, Wilfred expresses our view that the best set-up for us would be to be with DETI.

That last paragraph identifies the core issues. We are interested in getting people into employment, and that is where the majority of the challenge for us lies. That is where we need the support and help; we need to hit the outcomes there. We are helping those people with a degree of education through the core courses that we provide and the supportive frameworks, but it is all about equipping them with the skills to get into employment.

Because we are in that small niche, we feel that DETI will provide us with the best outcome and the best support. That is where we will get the links to the workforce and to placement providers and the opportunities for jobs in the community, and that is where the employment will be. It is about where these young people, who have real and difficult challenges in life, find themselves: they have come through the education system — perhaps the majority of their life has been spent there — and that is often where it ends. We need to make that transition, and we feel that DETI will help us to do that to the best of our ability and help us to hit the outcomes, most importantly, for the people who find themselves in that position.

I hope that we have conveyed the opinion of Parkanaur College and what we feel is best suited to us. Do you have any questions? Is there anything that we have not covered?

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I want to commend Parkanaur College for what it delivers. The Committee visited the college some time ago and saw at first hand exactly what is delivered there. I take your point about your focus being on getting people into employment and your point about where you feel that the functions of the Department should go.

**Mr McElduff:** I just want to note that it is a close call, in Parkanaur College's assessment. In the English and Welsh experience, for whatever reason, the 70 specialised FE colleges are clearly identified with the Department of Education. Did that not push you in the direction of DE?

**Ms Orla Corrigan (Parkanaur College):** One of our criteria is employment, and I do not think that the Department of Education is going to help us with that. Arlene Foster and her team are putting money into companies and organisations, and that is where we are at our weakest at the moment. I know that the economic climate is a factor, but they give us assistance in meeting our aims. It is employment and vocational training that we are looking for. I would say that the aim of many of the 70 further education colleges in England and Wales is maybe not as much about getting employment as our aim is.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** OK. Thank you for coming and speaking with us this morning. As I said, this session is being recorded by Hansard and the Hansard report will go into our submissions. I thank you again for your time.

**Mr McElduff:** Will you tell the students whom we met that we were asking about them?

**Ms Corrigan:** We will.

**Mr O'Sullivan:** Yes. They were very vocal on that occasion. Thank you for your time, folks.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I welcome Caroline Rutherford, Louise Brennan and Conor Kennedy. We have received a briefing paper from you. We will give you the opportunity to expand on that a little if you wish and then open it up for questions. We have a 15-minute slot for this session, and I remind you that the session is being recorded by Hansard for our own submissions.

**Mr Conor Kennedy (Alternative Education Providers' Forum):** I think the handiest way would be to address each of the five questions and expand on them as we go along.

The first question asked was, given the functions and purpose of our organisation, which Department we think we should be aligned with. We would like to be aligned with the Department of Education, on the basis that we currently work mainly with 14- to 16-year-olds who have, for whatever reason, fallen out of mainstream education. We operate with a small 16-plus group, which may be extended under the 14-19 strategy. We have done a body of work with the Department of Education in trying to formalise working with those young people and in trying to bring in additional support services and the like that have not come from DEL entirely. We have found that, once we transfer those young people into further education or training organisations, the support services that we bring have not found a continuation. Therefore, that small transition in those guys' lives tends to roll back a little to previous circumstances. As I said, the Department of Education is currently reviewing alternative education. Some of the answers may be found in there, but it would add some sort of continuity to the thinking along those lines.

The second question asked was why we take the view expressed in the first answer, and I think that I have just covered that. Again, it comes down to having that body of evidence and work already through the Department of Education, in working through Every School a Good School, positive behaviour strategies that mention alternative education provision (AEP), and us trying to slowly but surely align ourselves with its vision of future alternative education provision mechanisms.

The third question asked was whether there were any experiences that influenced our preference, and the answer to that is yes. The main body of work that we have been involved with is in working through the board system and the Department system. In working with DEL, our work has been in bringing young people in through vocational enhancement programmes, looking at post-16 transitions and support services that may or may not be applied to young people in those cases and ensuring that the good work that we have done over the year or two years that we have those young students continues. Some of the anecdotal case evidence that we have suggests that a lot of the young people who we transfer into training organisations or into the *[Inaudible.]* or the like tends to roll back, and those guys do bleed. We have an open-door policy and those young people can come back to our centre and seek further advice and support, but if that were housed in DEL it would relieve the burden on us to focus on the guys that we will be educating the following year. DE has already outlined a lot of that support service, and, hopefully, through the AEP mechanisms that it is looking at at the minute, it will bring that on board through the 14-19 strategy.

What are our concerns about the dissolution of the Department? We are wondering where the responsibilities for monitoring that education continuum lie. As we send guys to training organisations and into the colleges post-16, where will that monitoring and evaluation come from to ensure that, as we move these guys forward, the work that we have done is continued with the support mechanisms in place? The multi-agency working should maybe be brought to recognise that those guys have come from a difficult place and worked back into education and have not fallen into a NEET category. They

have remained in the education sector but may need additional support through some form of additional educational needs support, from counselling to family work and even the involvement of other agencies, be it Assert, Opportunity Youth or Include Youth to ensure that they continue with the work that they have done and do not fall out of the operating system of education again.

**Ms Louise Brennan (Alternative Education Providers' Forum):** Our big concern is about where the NEETs strategy will sit if DEL is abolished and whether the Department of Education will run with the same strategy that DEL has developed. We have worked very closely with Barnardo's and so on in coming up with a strategy, and we are concerned that the focus may well change. We work with what we term pre-NEETs. So, if we can work in a much more aligned way with pre-NEETs and NEETs, it makes sense for us to fall within the one Department. However, if that Department does not take responsibility in the same way that DEL has, we will have serious concerns about where those post-16 young people will be.

**Mr C Kennedy:** In operating with that group, we have around 150 young people outside mainstream education in greater Belfast in any single year. That will be quite a burden, in terms of resources and allocation of support services, for whoever picks them up post-16, and we want to flag that the guys who have already fallen out of the system have — *[Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.]* — to as many agencies as we possibly can. We need to maintain and continue that because it is quite a large category of people in the greater Belfast area. We also need to consider any other relevant comments, and we would reflect much of what we have said already. I have talked as fast as possible in the 15 minutes so that we get can as much out there as possible. We will leave it with questions, if you are happy enough.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you for that; we will open it up.

**Mr D McIlveen:** Thank you for the presentation; it has been really useful and was very succinct. Conor, you mentioned the words "continuity" and "continuum" a couple of times, and we seem to put a lot of emphasis on that. You also said that a lot of your work is focused towards the post-16 transition. Although your work is mainly with 14- to 16-year-olds, it obviously has the end goal of the transition from education into employment. Given that DETI is responsible solely for job creation and economic enhancement, is there not a feasible argument that continuity towards the post-16 transition could be enhanced by being part of DETI as opposed to being part of the Department of Education?

**Mr C Kennedy:** We could, if we argued that a lot of our young people would go straight into employment. One of the difficulties we have is getting the young people even education-ready. By the time we have worked with them over one or two years, we can focus on everybody, from those with serious numeracy and literacy difficulties right through to higher-level GCSE students. However, in engaging them with education, it is about giving them catch-up time. They may have missed two or three years of education already, and they can sort of continue with those structures and continue on through. A small proportion of our young people go immediately into employment; we find that the majority of them go into training organisations or colleges, and some of them re-engage with mainstream education at a sixth form or seventh form, especially as the entitlement framework shakes out and gives them that. So, yes, technically, you could argue that DETI could, in creating jobs for these young guys, get them somewhere. However, it would be a small proportion of the guys that we work with, to take them through to that mechanism, and that is why we feel that it may be best housed in the Department of Education.

**Ms Brennan:** You have the whole thing too of emotional intelligence. A lot of the young people we work with are maybe not as emotionally intelligent as they should be with their peers. So, it is about creating stable young people who are able to go into work and continue in work. There does seem to be a time lapse; we need that extra time with them to allow them to develop. I am not entirely sure that, within the workforce, that would be the best way for them, but in education, within a zone where they can feel confident and comfortable, is. A lot of these young people have horrendous family situations. It is not just as cut and dried as giving them a job and they will be fine; a lot of other work has to be done as well. That could be housed more cleverly within Education than DETI.

**Mr D McIlveen:** I am possibly taking on the road of devil's advocate, but, if you do it that way, are you deferring the transition, because you are continuing along a pathway? Just by keeping them comfortable, is that possibly holding back the transition?

**Ms Brennan:** It is not about keeping them comfortable; it is about giving them support and bringing them up to a level at which they are able to compete with their peers. A lot of these young people have been seriously disadvantaged and come from families in areas of high deprivation. We talk about NEETs, but some of these young people come from families that are generationally NEET. It is not just about getting them a job. It is about getting them a job that they will be able to maintain for the rest of their life. We do not want some kind of a rolling door, where they are in for six months, out for six months, then in for six months. We want stable young people who can actually enjoy and welcome work and do it for a lifetime.

**Mr C Kennedy:** I think that what we are looking for with the deferral is a successful transition as opposed to a transition per se. It is about making sure that they are embedded, and not cotton-wooled within our organisations.

**Mr P Ramsey:** You are very welcome this morning. It has been an interesting discussion from David's probing, and one that is hugely important to the NEETs strategy. I take the point that you are dealing with the post-16 age group. Clearly, the Committee inquiry that we carried out into NEETs was all about trying to ensure that there is a much greater collaborative approach. Preventative action has to be the key. However, people are telling us that, unless further and higher education are synchronised in one Department, we will fail in delivering employment opportunities for our young people. For a lot of young people who are NEET, the tendency is to go towards further education rather than higher education, which will then hopefully trigger opportunities for work. It is difficult, even for us, to determine what the best model is. Clearly, Education has a fundamental role, but, following on from David's point, the economic driver has to be within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, because the opportunities are there. There are established links now between further and higher education, which possibly were not there in years before, creating people to meet the need of a shortage in the workforce. You are the first group that has focused more towards the Education side, which we understand, but there is a clear need for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to have a role. Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Ms Brennan:** There is a need for joined-up thinking in government. In the alternative sector, we have been doing that for quite a while. I do not think that it is just the responsibility of DETI or just the responsibility of the Department of Education. We could bring in Health, Environment or the Department for Social Development; there is a whole list of Departments that need to take responsibility. Our concern is that the young people we are working with are not job-ready; they are barely education-ready. We need to work on that. If you are going to create skills, you need to create lifelong skills. You need to create young people who are able to sustain those skills. You need to create people who are emotionally stable and able to do that. The areas that we work in have high rates of suicide amongst young people, high rates of unemployment amongst young people and high rates of mental health issues amongst young people. That does not all come about because the young person happened to be born in that area. There are trends. There is a trend of a lack of support from when they are younger upwards. We need to step back and ask what the best way is for these young people. Within the alternative sector, we have youth workers, teachers and educationalists working together. I really do not see the problem in Departments coming together to work. Although I accept what you are saying — maybe DETI is the way of creating jobs — if these people are not ready for jobs, creating all the jobs in the world will not make them ready for employment.

**Mr McElduff:** It is really important to hear you say that the young people you relate to are not job-ready and, sometimes, not education-ready. That tells us where we are going. It must be very rewarding work when you make a successful transition. What are your current links with DEL and the Department of Education?

**Mr C Kennedy:** I will take that in reverse and deal with the Department of Education first. Every young person that we have is technically still registered at their school of origin. Therefore, technically, each school and each school principal still has responsibility, and all of the Department's papers and work



come on top of that. Furthermore, the AEP review has been ticking over for quite some time and will hopefully come to fruition in the next six to eight months. We have been working with the Department and the boards on that to ensure that best practice by the Department and the board is manifested in our community organisations.

As to DEL, we work with them to place young people in vocational enhancement programmes. We also work with the careers service and all of the centres that we work with have full and invaluable input from that service. That allows the young guys that we work with to feel that they are not completely other, as it were; they are not outside the system per se. It is about ensuring that those mechanisms and the education side — we have talked about getting people education-ready — are aligned realistically to getting them into a job down the line. It is getting them through DEL mechanisms to say this is where it goes. That kind of sums it up. Louise, would there be any additional support?

**Ms Brennan:** There would. At the moment, I am working on a transition programme in west Belfast that will look at getting young people to the stage where they are capable of transferring from school into employment or training, which will prevent them from becoming NEETS. However, the training organisations are telling us that 70% of the young people that they get into their training programmes have serious literacy and numeracy problems. That is not just young people who are coming from alternative education, but young people per se who come into those training organisations. If the majority of those young people fall out of those training organisations — that is likely, and our experience is that, by October, we know who will be the keepers and who will go — then you are creating another year of NEETS. If we are serious about stopping that and putting in the mechanisms to do so, there has to be some kind of transition programme that works with schools, the alternative education sector, the training colleges and organisations, and further education. That will ensure that there is a smoother passage and that any relevant information relating to those young people is transferred, so that, for instance, you do not find six weeks after a young person joins a training organisation that he or she has literacy difficulties. That information should follow them. That is the type of joined-up work that needs to happen if we are really serious about tackling the growing number of young people who are not capable — I use those words very seriously — of maintaining themselves in employment.

**Mr C Kennedy:** In that regard, our discussions with DEL have not progressed as much as those with the Department of Education. DEL has not taken full cognisance of the 150 young people that we deal with each year in greater Belfast.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** OK folks, our time has run on a little. Thank you for coming along and giving us your presentation. No doubt your views will be taken on board.

**Ms Brennan:** We did a review of alternative education 10 years on. I have left some copies of that for the Committee.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I welcome Monica Wilson from Disability Action. I am glad that you have been able to come. We have a 15-minute slot in which to hear from you on where you feel the — [*Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.*] — and areas of the Department that are most aligned when it comes to the dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning. This session will be recorded by Hansard for our submission. We have received a paper from you. We will give you a few minutes to expand on that, and I am sure that the Committee will have some questions for you.

**Ms Monica Wilson (Disability Action):** Thank you, Chair. I understand from the number of people sitting in the waiting room drinking tea that your time frames are sacrosanct. Thank you for your indulgence. I will not speak directly to the letter that we sent; I thought it might help if I just talk more generally. However, if there are questions, I beg your indulgence as I have an ear infection, so you will have to shout at me.

To set the context, I will speak specifically about the issues for people with disabilities in relation to the potential dissolution. I will start with the statistic that there are 229,000 people with disabilities in the 16-64 age bracket. That information was not in the letter. I will not rehearse the £6 million budget or the 1,800 staff, but it may be something to consider in how the cake is portioned. For example, the

employment service has around 1,200 staff, and the disablement employment service, which has had a number of names previously, is within that. That provides either direct service or service through third-party organisations to almost 4,000 people with disabilities. On the other side of that, 1,000 of those people are supported under the European social fund (ESF), and so the strategy, ESF and equality unit in DEL also has significant influence in relation to people with disabilities.

I do not think I need 15 minutes; I just want to talk about a few principles, the key one being cultural confusion. Originally, it seemed from the outside to be quite simple: split it between DE and DETI. However, there seems to be a debate that we on the outside are not privy to, which suggests that the Department for Social Development should play a part. That is why I am not speaking to the letter. I would like to say quite clearly that that would be very detrimental to people with disabilities, particularly in the context of the current welfare reforms.

We need to think about why the service is there in the first place: to encourage people to find jobs. The work is about enabling, supporting, developing and delivering, whereas no matter what the initial intent, the work of people in the Social Security Agency is about ensuring entitlement and delivery of service, tackling fraud and error, and all of those things. In a culture where people with disabilities already receive passive views, where we are thought of as fairly non-contributing and as not having much to give, that interface between benefit entitlement and ability and wish to work becomes very confused.

The disablement employment service and the employment service in total in the Department for Employment and Learning work with those who are furthest from the labour market and who face the greatest barriers. We think it would be absolutely detrimental if the employment service, including the disability employment service, is moved to DETI. Now, we have no particular comments in relation to FE and HE, except that —

**Mr McElduff:** Sorry, can I just check with you, Monica: it would be detrimental if it moved to —

**Ms M Wilson:** To DSD. Sorry, did I say DETI? I apologise; it would be detrimental if it was moved to DSD, in our opinion. There is a need to think about strategic alignment, never mind just cultural stuff, if there is some form of a Department of the economy. Although I have no fixed views, my presumption is that if the employment elements of DEL moved to DETI, then there would need to be some quite major structural reform, as my understanding is that DETI is quite a small Department with a lot of NDPBs. I understand that, but there needs to be a structural alignment if we are trying to create jobs and increase the economic prosperity of the country. If jobs are created, jobs will be filled. Perhaps that is too simplistic, but that is the way that we see it.

I made a point about offering services to the people who are furthest from the labour market. That would become even more complex if the DSD part were to come into play. We need the alignment with the skills and industry unit of DEL, because, for example, through the Training for Success programme, we support 400 people with disabilities in the mainstream. Our concept is that, quite clearly, people should be in the mainstream, if that is possible, with the supports that they need. It is about alignment with not only the employment service directly but the skills and industry side.

Finally, as we move into the next round of European social funding, you need to be aware that the underpinning programme for vocational training services for disabled people in Northern Ireland comes nearly exclusively from the European social fund. It is not quite as simple as considering just the disability employment service.

I will not repeat myself, but I am very happy to take any questions.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you very much for your very good presentation. I note from your letter Disability Action's concern that, in this whole movement or transfer, the good relationship and discussions that you have with DEL remain and do not get lost or become stalled. That can be focused on and taken into consideration.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I appreciate Monica taking the time out to come here today. Other groups that represent people with disabilities, including MENCAP, have made it very clear that they want the responsibility to be in DETI. They see the employment opportunities and the economic driver. If they get any less than that, they will be the poor relation. As you said, the consistency of services in providing that additional support for people who have a range of perhaps complex disabilities could then be diminished or diluted.

**Ms M Wilson:** Although a lot of good work has been done, there is still a key issue about perceptions of disabled people being able to work. The welfare reform debate is making it much more difficult for people, and I am really concerned about the future for disabled people who are job-seeking. I have to be fair and say that a move to DETI would not be easy either, because there is a different culture there, and that culture merge would need to be sorted out. However, if we have a service that we know, we can try to build different relationships, and they will need to be different relationships. I am calling it a Department of the economy, but I do not know what it will be called. Pat, I do not underestimate the difficulties that can arise in any merged organisation, but I think that that is the best place.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you, Monica, for coming to the Committee and giving your time. We appreciate that very much.

**Ms M Wilson:** That is OK. Good luck with the rest of your deliberations.

**Professor Peter Finn (St Mary's University College):** Good afternoon, everyone.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Peter, you are very welcome to the Committee. We have a 15-minute slot for you. The session will be recorded by Hansard for our own submissions. We have had some correspondence from you, and we are happy to let you expand on that for a few moments. We will then open up the session for members to ask questions.

**Professor Finn:** Thank you very much, Deputy Chair and everyone, whom I know a little bit better now. I very much welcome the opportunity to briefly present the views of St Mary's University College on this very important issue, and I appreciate that I have only a few minutes to do so. So, I will be brief and will refer only to the future ministerial oversight of higher education arising from the dissolution of DEL because that is where my area of expertise and knowledge is. St Mary's will, of course, work constructively with whatever Department oversees higher education, but we have a view on the matter, and we understand that that view is not shared by everyone in the sector. That diversity of views is a good thing, but we believe that our view is worth your consideration.

I will make a general point about higher education at a high level of abstraction. It is a highly sophisticated and multidimensional phenomenon that covers learning and teaching, research, knowledge transfer, innovation, community outreach and a wide range of other specialist areas. It also has a very high degree of diversity in form and function, and its character in any place, including Northern Ireland, owes much to history as well to prevailing economic, social and cultural circumstances. I say that because it is not surprising that there is no perfect solution as to where higher education should sit in our local Administration. I believe that we should seek a best-fit solution where the local higher education sector could be aligned to a Department where the core business is either economic development or the education of people and related services. I understand the arguments for both, but the position at St Mary's — this has been agreed by our governing body — is that we believe that higher education in Northern Ireland is best served by an alignment with the Department of Education. We set that out in a very brief response to Basil, the Chair, arising from his letter of 26 January, and we also sent a response of the same nature to OFMDFM, which also had a consultation on the matter.

The position we have taken is based on five factors. The first is that the very nature of higher education, as we see it, is such that it has a focus on learning and teaching and the student experience at the very core of its mission. Higher education does many other things, but we believe that at its core are learning and teaching and the student experience. Lord Patten, chancellor of Oxford University, writing in the 'Financial Times' in February challenged the assertion that there is a direct

relationship between higher education and economic growth. He referred to the work of Alison Wolf in her text 'Does Education Matter?' and said:

*"While she recognised that it would be stupid to suggest that education had no major economic importance, she demolished the naive and distorting belief that there is 'a simple, direct relationship between the amount of education in a society and its future growth rate, and the belief that governments can fine-tune education expenditures to maximise that self-same rate of growth'".*

So, the first point is that the nature of higher education suggests that at its core are learning and teaching and the student experience, and all that is best aligned with a Department of education rather than with a Department that is focused on economic development.

The second factor is the desire for greater integration of higher education with other strands of education. We believe that Northern Ireland could benefit from an integration of all aspects of learning and teaching and from all aspects of education being in one Department. We ask you to consider the public interest with respect to the annual £500 million spend on higher education. When Lord Empey launched the strategic review of higher education, he referred to that £500 million spend. At first, I thought that was enormous, but we then realised that over half of that sum goes on loans and grants to students to enable them to study in the higher education institutions, and of the rest, a very significant proportion goes directly to the institutions to support learning and teaching. So, I am presenting the thesis that public investment and, therefore, public interest in that £500 million is largely in the domain of learning and teaching, not in other areas of higher education. Therefore, learning and teaching belongs naturally in the domain of education rather than in the other area.

The next area is potential for collaborative work with the administration of higher education in other jurisdictions. I am looking at what goes on in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Dublin, and, in those three places, higher education is part of a bigger administration of all education. We have a different situation in Westminster, where it is based in a Department of business and industry, but I think Northern Ireland has to decide what is right for Northern Ireland: is it a methodology similar to that of the devolved Administrations in Edinburgh and Cardiff and the sovereign Government in Dublin or is it a situation similar to the Westminster situation? That is an important question. My view is that there could be great benefits to ongoing collaboration along those lines.

Then there are the priorities in the Programme for Government. I know that the Programme for Government very much emphasises the economic development of society, and, of course, I endorse that and think it is absolutely right. However, it also refers in large measure to the promotion of social justice, social cohesion and various other social objectives. My view is that higher education can play a very important role there as well.

I am not saying for one moment that it is a cut-and-dried argument. I am saying that there is a range of views on it. I am presenting a view from our perspective at St Mary's, and it comes down on the side of a Department of education, for the five reasons I have outlined.

I will conclude on the possibility of initial teacher education or teacher education somehow finding its way into one Department and the rest of higher education finding its way into another, should that be considered. It is a scenario where the two university colleges, because they specialise in teacher education, would perhaps be with DE, while the rest of HE would be in DETI, if that were proposed. There is an obvious link between teacher education and the Department of Education. There is a very obvious link with regard to the training and education of teachers along a continuum from initial through to continuing professional development, but it has to be fully understood that, in this country and in virtually every country in the world, initial teacher education is firmly embedded in the higher education sector. St Mary's, Stranmillis and Queen's, etc, are part of the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers. Teachers are educated in a university, higher education context. I say that because, if there were to be some thoughts around aligning teacher education with DE and placing HE elsewhere, that would have to be very carefully managed. The university colleges, for example, have been beneficiaries of very good initiatives in the HE sector in respect of human resources or in the centres of excellence in learning and teaching. We are absolutely embedded in the whole idea of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, which is part of the higher education sector. I am not opposed to any thoughts around connecting the university colleges in one direction and the universities in

another, but, if that were to be, it needs to be very carefully managed and considered so that integral elements of the higher education sector do not find themselves isolated from mainstream higher education.

I appreciate that time is limited, Tom, so I have given you the context that we would like to bring to the deliberations. I thank you for that.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you for your views.

**Mr Allister:** Your views are very clear, which is no less than we expected, and that is good. They were thought-provoking, in that you are swimming against the tide of believing that there is this affinity between education and economic growth. That is an interesting perception. Other people say to us that when higher education was last within a greater Department of education, it turned out to be the Cinderella of the set-up, and they, therefore, fear a return to those days. Why do you not share the fear that the rest of the sector obviously shares?

**Professor Finn:** Thank you for the question, Jim. I will take you one step back. I, of course, recognise the affinity between higher education and economic growth. Even the quotation I gave makes it clear that having a good higher education and university sector is absolutely critical to the economy of any nation. I do not deny that; it is part and parcel of the case. What I am saying is that, on balance, as you clearly picked up, there are broader issues that lead our organisation towards the view that it should be elsewhere.

I suppose my answer, and I mean this to be very honest, is that we have to learn from that. There were experiences in the past where higher education was perhaps in what could be described as a Cinderella situation. However, the very fact that you, as an elected Member, are aware of this and that we are all aware of it is the best way of ensuring that it does not happen again. This has been the most constructive process of arriving at an outcome. If we were to arrive at an outcome that places the higher education sector in Northern Ireland in the Department of Education, we would be fully cognisant of the fact that it should not and cannot be a Cinderella area. Ultimately, it is down to those in the sector and the scrutiny Committee that will be in place to ensure that higher education has its proper place. So, I do not share those concerns. I think that the institutions are sufficiently mature to ensure that, in the future, that should not be the case — and by institutions, I mean the universities, higher education institutions and political institutions.

**Mr Allister:** I think the concerns are, in part, based upon the belief that, within such a Department, the primary political pressure in severe budgetary times that would come from constituents through the MLAs would be about primary school education, secondary school education and grammar school education. At the end of the queue, as it were, would be the pressures on higher education. That, I think, in the past, was right. I am not sure that, just by being aware of it, that would change anything.

**Professor Finn:** There is no question that the thesis you are presenting, Jim, has great validity. One of the things that must happen is connectivity with other jurisdictions, which I referred to. We have, within the political dispensations in Northern Ireland, methodologies for the political system to outreach to other parts of the British Isles. There are ways and means of using those North/South and east-west connections to ensure that nothing would happen in Northern Ireland that was out of sync with what was happening in other parts of the British Isles. It is a matter of political will. I accept what you are saying, which is that, from the ground up, there will be pressures to put time and energy into some of the issues you have discussed. However, I am suggesting that there are also pressures that come downwards as well. The higher education sector in Northern Ireland will be very clear in its connections to the wider British Isles system. It should not be behind the door about making its own representations. If you look at it the other way, where would the evidence be to support the thesis that higher education will have a higher profile in the other Department? That is an unproven thesis. I accept that there is a background in scenario A, but, with scenario B, the proposition cannot be based on evidence.

**Mr Allister:** I accept that it is, in so far as it can be, based on what has happened in DEL, which is, of course, a much smaller Department than any new Department would be.

**Professor Finn:** But that is not what we are talking about. It is either A or B. DEL is gone. I accept that line of argument, but I would still argue that, on balance, the case is stronger for an alignment with the Department of Education.

**Mr McElduff:** You say that if, for example, teacher training and the university colleges go to DE and other aspects of higher education go elsewhere, that would have to be carefully managed and considered. How would it be managed?

**Professor Finn:** The first thing to realise is that the two university colleges make up a very tiny proportion of the higher education sector. So, the first issue is one of hiving off two very small institutions with very small amounts of public funding, relative to the larger ones. How we manage that is the big issue. In a sense, that is why I am bringing it to your attention. I am just pointing out that the university colleges are totally embedded in a higher education sector that has all sorts of dimensions that will have to remain. Otherwise, you will have a situation in which, de facto, students are not being educated in a higher education environment. That is not what we want.

It comes down to negotiations, and if there were to be negotiations and discussions about how this might happen, methodologies would need to be built in to secure the interests of a small higher education sector within DE, if the main part of higher education were to be placed somewhere else. That comes down to guarantees and very strong discussions with the university colleges about how that would happen. I cannot answer that today, Barry, but I can tell you that it is something that we will not walk into it blindly, because we could find ourselves in a situation in which it would be impossible to redress the issue after the event.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Peter, thank you for your open and frank discussion with members today. We very much appreciate it. Your comments will be noted in Hansard.

**Professor Finn:** Once again, thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee. I thank the two members who asked questions. I am appreciative of the questions; they are important questions about the process.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I welcome Julie Williams-Nash, Mike Larkin and George Dunn from the University and College Union (UCU). Good afternoon. You are very welcome. We have a 15-minute slot for this session. We have received some documentation from you. We will give you the opportunity to open up on that a little and then we will have some questions from members. I remind you that this session is being recorded by Hansard for our submission.

**Ms Julie Williams-Nash (University and College Union):** Thank you for inviting us today. I will go through our paper and the points that we want to raise today, which build on those in our submission. Afterwards, I will bring in Mike and George to answer any questions that you may have.

As you know, UCU has submitted its position paper on the dissolution of DEL. We feel that our view is solid and precise. Further education and higher education belong within the governance and jurisdiction of the Department of Education. We have only 10 to 15 minutes to reinforce our viewpoint. We hope that you will take our view on board, and we appreciate that you already have done so and have listened respectfully to us. I thank you again for providing us with this opportunity today.

We hope that when the Committee makes its recommendations to the Executive, it will reflect the view of UCU, which represents 4,000 educators across Northern Ireland, many of whom continue to face tremendous pressures and challenging times in their workplaces. UCU fully respects and applauds the synergies between further and higher education and economic development, enterprise and the private sector. We do not wish to be misrepresented on that point in any way. Our members are at the forefront of research and development, innovation and economic progress and advancement. That is at the core of any society and is not the issue here today. That is precisely why I feel that our vision on this issue is in danger of becoming blurred. Therefore, this is where I feel we need to focus.

We could debate and discuss the merits of economic drivers from here to eternity, but we have only 10 minutes to reiterate the issue as simply as this: within the Executive governing Northern Ireland, where should further and higher education be positioned? Clearly, we believe that it should be in the Department of Education. Why? Because further and higher education is not solely about the economy. Yes, it plays a pivotal and crucial role, but that is not the whole picture. In budgetary terms alone, the sums are skewed awkwardly. DETI has an annual budget of £207 million, and the FE budget alone is larger than that. DEL has an annual budget that is not that much under four times DETI's budget; I think it is £767 million for 2012-13. However, it is not just about the money. It is about taking further and higher education and placing it at the mercy of a private/business sector that, by its nature, exists to serve its own interests. We do not find fault with that; we are just making the point. We believe that the harnessing of our further education colleges to the economy has already been tried and has been found to be flawed. For example, the FE Means Business policy resulted in the incorporation model being implemented to make colleges corporate organisations run on a business model. This diverted those institutions from being a public education service, and UCU sees the impact of that day and daily. We deal with the fallout as colleges stumble from one crisis to another.

We are still waiting for the launch of the higher education strategy, which we look forward to. This morning, I found a quote in the introduction to the document, 'Report of the Review of Higher Education Governance in Scotland', which was launched in February of this year:

*"The 19th century Scottish metaphysician Sir William Hamilton wrote in 1835 that 'a University is a trust confided by the State to certain hands for the common interest of the nation.'"*

He went on to say that universities may and ought to be "corrected, reformed or recast" by the state, and that they must be able to "avoid undue influence from outside".

The same principle extends to further education. The FE sector in Northern Ireland has been through turbulent times, as has been mentioned. I will quote once again from the introduction to the Scottish report:

*"Universities in today's world play many roles of direct significance to society, going well beyond the personal interests of those embarking on higher education, well beyond the organisational ambitions of individual institutions, and well beyond the expectations of those who employ graduates. They stimulate economic development; they provide a focus for cultural growth; they are engines of social regeneration; they ... are vital assets for communities. They instigate and nourish public debate, and provide necessary critical analysis of the ideas and actions of public bodies and politicians."*

Universities and further education colleges are at the core of society. We represent, as I mentioned, 4,000 lecturers. Our members are educators, not businesspeople. Although UCU fully understands and appreciates the vital role that further and higher education plays in driving forward a vibrant economy, something that we all aspire to in Northern Ireland, our concern is that the shifting emphasis away from education and towards the business/private sector could have an adverse impact in the long term. This is a very real and genuine concern for UCU and for our members.

The Department of Education shares the mission of educators to impart knowledge and encourage learning by students so that they can obtain qualifications, develop skills and gather experience to equip them to progress in their chosen careers and as citizens.

Finally, UCU believes that the tribunal function of DEL would be properly located in the Department of Justice. We agree with the general consensus that teacher training would naturally fit with the Department of Education, which would end the anomaly whereby provision is set by one Department and funded by another. It is the UCU's passion and commitment for education, for lifelong learning, for womb-to-tomb or cradle-to-grave education for all citizens that is reflected in our vision of further and higher education sitting within the Department of Education.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you very much. You said in your submission that HE is not solely about the economy. Do you not believe that it is a substantial driver of the economy?

**Ms Williams-Nash:** Absolutely, and I think I have made the point that we believe that it is a driver, but the issue is where higher education should sit within government, not whether universities and the economy are intrinsically linked, which they are. We are not dissing that in any way whatsoever. That is the point that I was trying to make; they are intrinsically linked, but it is an issue of where the governance should sit within the government structures of the Executive. It is about education: universities are educators.

**Mr Mike Larkin (University and College Union):** There is a lot of resolve within UCU to have an education-driven governance. That is unanimous across the local committee of UCU. My personal view is that the relationship between commerce, industry, the higher education institutions and research has to stay there, but, in the end, you are dealing with an educational institution.

**Mr McElduff:** It seems to me that there is real tension inside the higher and further education sector about whether it is business-driven or education-driven. You have set out your stall very strongly in paragraphs 3 and 4 of your written submission. You say that FE Means Business is a move away from a public education service. Are you a lone voice within the sector in saying that?

**Mr Larkin:** We have been very strong in our opinion, and we have let all our members know this. I do not think that we are a lone voice, but we may be the only ones who are making enough noise to be heard. I do not think that there is a tension. There is a clear mission to educate, and that is in our institutions. There is also a mission to innovate, and that will involve funding from a whole variety of sources, including DETI as well as other sources. There should not be a tension as long as you look at the governance of the institutions carefully. In the end, it is still an educational mission.

**Mr D McIlveen:** Thank you for your presentation. From the outset, I have struggled with the economic argument, and I am still struggling with it. I cannot get my head around why you would want to be part of the Department of Education, which is struggling despite having a budget that, at around £1.9 billion annually, is twice the next highest departmental budget. It needs more money. Just yesterday, we heard reports of possible school closures, which are largely economically driven. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has actually been giving money back because it has been managing its budgets relatively well. Why would you want to be part of a Department that, quite frankly, is on the verge of being broke?

**Ms Williams-Nash:** Up until the late 1990s, the Department of Education had further and higher education, and that was where it traditionally sat. DEL was created further on from that. If the functions of DEL were to go to DETI, they would go to a Department that has a much smaller budget and a clear focus on enterprise, investment and the economy and which does not currently have any remit for education. DETI is not about education but about enterprise, trade and investment, whereas universities and further education colleges are about education. That is not to say that there is not a synergy. I do not want to take away from that in any way at all, but they are educational institutions, not businesses.

**Mr Larkin:** Why should we, representing a lot of people and their futures, take the short-term view that there is an economic problem in one Department so we should go into another one? With due respect to you, you or the Executive will make a big decision. They may regret it. You have to look at the funding of the Department of Education and its structure, and that should not influence our view that the long-term future of higher and further education lies in the educational sphere. I would not let the economics interfere with the longer-term outlook.

**Mr McElduff:** Are you making a philosophical point?

**Mr Larkin:** That is a practical point.

**Mr George Dunn (University and College Union):** In addition, as our paper states, there is a fear that, if the functions of the Department were to end up in DETI, there would be a short-term focus on the development of education rather than research being more long-term. Ideally, it ought to be. It should be there for involvement with academic freedom and the ideals of a university, which should focus on



that, not just on the economic issues, ie to be a provider of services for industry. It should be more than that.

**Ms Williams-Nash:** Under such a short-term approach, the private sector might say that it needs a certain course, which the college might provide. When that need is finished, that course is pulled, so you have a potential for patchwork short-termism to supply a particular need and then to withdraw it when that need is exhausted.

**Mr D McIlveen:** What if the short-term outcome was that the £787 million of DEL budget was gobbled up in the Department of Education?

**Ms Williams-Nash:** That would not be the case.

**Mr D McIlveen:** Do you think?

**Ms Williams-Nash:** If it were, that Department would have to answer for that.

**Mr D McIlveen:** We have to be realistic in that if universities and colleges had been represented in the Department of Education six months ago, a lot of your members would now be looking at redundancy, because there was such a huge gap in the budget.

**Ms Williams-Nash:** They are looking at redundancy already.

**Mr D McIlveen:** If that £40 million had not come through DEL, there would have been a lot more redundancies. We have to be honest and ask whether that outcome would have been achieved in the Department of Education. I do not believe that it would, because the money would not have been there to do it.

**Mr Larkin:** Surely, within a big Department of Education, you would ring-fence the further and higher education sectors as part of a review of the internal structure that you are bound to have to go through if you do this. You are representing the people of Northern Ireland, and they would probably expect you to look at this more rationally in that sense and not just allow it to be consumed. We expect that, and we trust you to do that.

**Mr Allister:** Your union, which represents so many lecturers etc who work in the universities, takes one view, but the leadership of the universities in which they work takes the opposite view. Why is that?

**Mr Larkin:** We do not know what the view is higher up.

**Mr Allister:** Have you not discussed that?

**Mr George Dunn:** At Queen's University, we have informed all our members of the proposal, and we have invited them to write letters to their MLAs. To date, we have had no negative feedback to argue against our position.

**Mr Allister:** Is your stance decided by the leadership of the union and passed down, or was it arrived at in consultation with the members from the grass roots up?

**Mr George Dunn:** It was formulated by the leadership first as a guide, but they have all been informed of that.

**Mr Allister:** So, it is the collective view of the leadership sitting together and coming to that view, rather than the result of a consultation with the staff and the staff advising the union that this is the way to go.

**Mr Larkin:** We have openly consulted with all the UCU members at our university, and I am sure that that has happened elsewhere. We have said, "This is the position", and all I have got is positive support.

**Mr Allister:** You have said, "This is the position; do you have any view?" You have not said, "What should our position be?"

**Mr Larkin:** No, we have not put it to them.

**Mr Allister:** You have not talked to the universities either. So, we are getting quite a limited view in that it is the view of the leadership of the union that has not been countered by a grass roots rebellion.

**Mr George Dunn:** They have been informed of our position.

**Ms Williams-Nash:** There has been no opposition to that. It is the unanimous view of the regional council.

**Mr Allister:** Yes, but it is a regional council view.

**Mr Larkin:** A lot of people have approached me positively to say, "Yes, we must consider this to be an educational mission".

**Mr Allister:** I will pick up on another point that we have heard from some others. You have experience in the past of being in a greater Department of Education. Some people have expressed to us that that was not a happy experience because higher education turned out to be the Cinderella in funding terms. David was alluding to matters such as that. Have you no fears in that regard?

**Mr Larkin:** I reiterate that the higher education universities and further education colleges are so important that any administration has to —

**Mr Allister:** They were so important 10, 12 and 20 years ago, yet they continually complained that they were the Cinderella in the Department of Education.

**Mr Larkin:** I have been in Northern Ireland teaching in university for 32 years, and I have no experience of that being the case. I have never felt that.

**Mr Allister:** Then someone was crying wolf, because that message was certainly conveyed loud and clear.

**Mr Larkin:** By whom?

**Mr Allister:** In an Assembly that existed here between 1982 and 1986, a constant theme was that higher education was the forgotten side of education, got the raw deal on funding and was regularly neglected. That is in consequence of the fact that most constituents have children at school and fewer constituents have children at university. When times are tight, the pressure is maximised by those who have kids at school through their MLAs.

**Mr Larkin:** Of course, we have far more students now —

**Mr Allister:** We do.

**Mr Larkin:** The dynamic of the electorate has surely changed.

**Mr Allister:** OK.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Folks, we have exceeded the time. Thank you for coming along and for the discussion, which, no doubt, will be taken on board.

I welcome Brendan Clarke and Patricia Short from Open Colleges Network Northern Ireland (OCN). We are glad to have you here. We have a 15-minute slot. We have a written submission from you, but we will give you the opportunity to expand slightly on that if you wish, after which we will open it up for members if they have any questions. I remind you that this is being recorded by Hansard.

**Mr Brendan Clarke (Open Colleges Network Northern Ireland):** Thank you, Chair. I am Brendan Clarke from the Open Colleges Network, and this is my colleague Patricia Short. You will have had the opportunity to read our paper. We are an awarding body that is based here in Northern Ireland, one of only two independent organisations that offer qualifications across the qualifications and credit framework (QCF). We grew out of the Open College Network movement, which originated in the 1970s and 1980s and was about recognising learning wherever it took place. Over a number of years, we have grown and developed partnerships with our colleagues in England and Wales. We have now established ourselves as one of the leading independent awarding organisations in Northern Ireland. We recruit and work with a number of organisation centres, including government organisations, employers, training organisations, schools and colleges. Last year, we supported 29,000 learners in achieving a number of qualifications. The commentary that we have to make, particularly about learning across a broader range of opportunities, comes from a position of significance in terms of the number of people we engage with.

The opportunities that are presented by the dissolution of DEL are significant. There is an opportunity for the Committee to paint a broad picture of the future of learning for life in Northern Ireland. The opportunities that other devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales and our partner organisations in the Republic of Ireland have taken in terms of moving forward with the issues of lifelong learning across a broader perspective have reached beyond where we are in Northern Ireland. For example, our colleagues in Scotland have recently established Education Scotland. That is not quite like the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) that we propose; it is an amalgam that looks at curriculum, learning and inspection and looks to establish policy. It has a framework for learning that is inclusive of the Scottish Qualifications Authority and Education Scotland. Our colleagues in Wales have a credit and qualification framework, whose website recognises all learning through education and training. Our colleagues in England have a framework, and we have borrowed from them. The opportunity for us to establish ourselves on a clear path for learning for life, which is inclusive from the cradle to the grave and recognises the opportunities, for example, in family learning, and moves through primary and post-primary education and into adult life, is significant. We encourage the Committee to take that on board.

I do not know where your commentaries about the future of learning for life will take you. The lesson that seems to be coming from the devolved communities is that learning for all needs to be grasped. The split in respect of the Department for Employment and Learning and Department of Education in Northern Ireland will have suggested that there are certain policy drivers working in competition with each other, and I know some colleagues who will have already presented that to this group and to the group downstairs. That has been difficult for those involved in learning and education to overcome. We feel that Northern Ireland needs to establish a framework for learning. We may draw upon the opportunities for learning of our colleagues in Scotland, England and Wales, but we need to have a framework that respects our history, cultural community and needs in relation to our national and international opportunities.

We also think that the opportunity provided by the potential dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning provides your Committee with an opportunity to blaze a trail with regard to the future for learning. In our statement, we commented on the possibility of a commission for learning. The learning that we engage in through our lives is usually identified through a transition from one stage to another — from primary to secondary to adult to marriage to having children. There are lots of situated learning opportunities. They are covered by a range of ministries in Northern Ireland, but there is no one cohesive force that draws all of them together. We feel that a lasting legacy from the Committee might be the establishment of a commission for learning which would start to look at the opportunities provided throughout the different ministries associated here in Northern Ireland. It would provide an opportunity to bring those together, be able to answer questions that are at the root of our learning and provide opportunities for significant dialogue and discourse to take place.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you for your presentation. You have expressed fears in your written submission about how further and higher education might be eroded if it were to be moved into the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Why do you think that would be the case?

**Mr B Clarke:** The focus on the economy and skills is an important one for us, but, equally, the focus on the human capacity and the social capital of learning is important. We use the notion of a river, with lots of tributaries. The route to skills and economy is one type of learning, but it is not the only type that takes place. There is a broader community of learning in terms of situated learning, whether that be in school, college, through adult and community opportunities, working in hospitals or working wherever. The single focus on skills will not engage sufficiently with the broad range of learning opportunities that are, first, necessary to address the skills, because, in a sense, the focus on skills generally starts at 16, and the focus on learning needs to start a lot earlier. Secondly, it will not necessarily address the issues relating to our history, which we still struggle with. We feel that a single focus is insufficient in its capacity to drive us forward in learning for the future.

**Mr McElduff:** I think you have answered my question in your last part there. I was going to refer you to question two and your answer that DETI could speak to only one main sort of learning that is focused on employability and addressing the needs of the economy. I was going to ask you what the other types of learning are. I think you have answered that.

**Mr B Clarke:** The other types of learning are those situated wherever they are. Family learning, for instance, is a perfect example. We have engaged in a number of activities in relation to working with families and communities, particularly families, who struggle with a cycle of disadvantage. International experience from across the world, and established in many ways in Brazil by Paolo Ferrer, shows that the mother, particularly in a family, is the root of a great deal of learning. Family learning is not exclusively focused on the opportunities that a mother can bring to the learning in a family, but it is often rich in that. Family learning is an important activity in breaking cycles of disadvantage and in bringing people into a community of learning that is not exclusively age-related but which looks at where people are situated in their learning. A focus on skills and learning would only ever exclude that sort of activity and would never discover the richness that it provides.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** OK. Thank you for your presence this afternoon and for making your presentation. No doubt your thoughts and views will be taken on board as the Department seeks to move out of where it is and in somewhere else.

**Mr B Clarke:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you. As I said, if there is anything that we can do to assist the Committee in taking forward any ideas that align with our charitable objectives, we are more than happy to commit to that.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I welcome Koulla Yiasouma and Sara Boyce from Include Youth. We have received your written submission. We will give you the opportunity to expand on that if you so wish and then open it up to questions from members. We have a 15-minute slot for this session and it is being recorded by Hansard for our submission.

**Ms Koulla Yiasouma (Include Youth):** Thank you. I will make a brief statement, and I am mindful that we are the last in what must have been a very long line. I will set our stall out quickly and hopefully you will still be in the mood for a discussion.

On behalf of Sara and me, I thank you for inviting us. Obviously, we will concentrate on young people who are not in education, employment or training, who are called NEETs, and our presentation will focus on them. As the Chair has said, we submitted a written response in February and our paper is based on that.

This is not the first time that we have met with the Committee. First, we want to commend the Committee for its work in addressing the issue of young people who are NEET, and particularly its work on extending EMA or training allowance for young people on pre-vocational training projects such as our Give and Take scheme. We encourage the Committee and Committee members to continue with that very positive work. It has succeeded in bringing the issue to the fore, but there is still some way to go.

We enjoy quite an effective relationship with the Department on a number of levels. We are funded by it, we are in partnership with the careers service and we are involved in skills, training and policy development. However, at the outset, it should be noted that, although DEL has certainly had a lead role on the issue of young people who are NEET, responsibility for addressing the needs of that group lies with a number of Departments and, crucially, with the Executive as a whole. Indeed, recognition of the cross-cutting nature of the issues that are faced by young people forms a central tenet of the Pathways to Success strategy, which, as you know, is still in draft.

The previous Committee's inquiry highlighted the fact that young people face the risk of becoming NEET for a range of complex and interrelated reasons. The issues that affect those young people do not fit neatly or solely under the remit of either DE or DETI and span education, family support, health, youth work, skills and training, welfare support, employment and enterprise. It is quite complicated. Although we accept the logic of assigning lead responsibility to one Department, addressing the barriers faced by those young people requires a strategic, co-ordinated and adequately resourced response that is driven by the Executive as a whole. Therefore, in our view, it is simply not a matter of identifying whether DETI or DE would be best placed to take lead responsibility for that group of young people. Despite positive statements by the Minister for Employment and Learning regarding his prioritisation of this issue, coupled with his recent announcement of a policy framework for youth unemployment as well as an employer engagement plan, there is little evidence in either the Programme for Government or the economic development strategy that the core group of young people who are NEET will receive the level of attention and support that they require over the lifetime of the current Programme for Government. Indeed, our understanding is that the main policy instrument, Pathways to Success, will not have any funding attached to it. We are, therefore, concerned that this issue will be further marginalised, whichever Department it finds itself in.

The Minister's recent comments to this Committee about the £26.5 million Barnett consequential — whoever thought we would say words like that — flowing from the youth contract across the water serves only to underscore our concerns. However, notwithstanding our criticisms of DEL's response to the issue of young people who are NEET, it has, as a Department, built up a level of policy understanding and analysis around the issue which will be very much lacking in DETI and, to a lesser extent, DE. Although we recognise that key DEL staff will transfer to other Departments, taking with them their current responsibilities, there will inevitably be a loss of knowledge in the process.

In view of the concerns that we have just outlined, Include Youth wishes to see the following issues addressed in any decisions taken concerning the transfer of DEL functions to other Departments — this is our shopping list, if you like. First, the weakness to date of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people must be fully addressed if it is to function as an effective oversight mechanism for work on the issue of young people who are NEET, including the Pathways to Success strategy.

Lead responsibility for the issue of young people who are NEET and for the implementation of the Pathways to Success strategy must sit with one named Department. That Department must be adequately resourced to do the work, including through the provision of ring-fenced funding and the establishment of a dedicated unit. Additionally, the Executive should commit to the ring-fencing of the youth contract Barnett consequential — the total £26.5 million — to that Department if it is to have any chance of successfully addressing the issue.

It will be critical that the continuity of focus and provision is maintained during the transfer of DEL's powers and the subsequent bedding-in period. There will be a need to quickly build the knowledge and skills of any new staff who are tasked with working on the issue of young people who are NEET. The focus must be evident in the relevant Department or Departments across all levels, including at ministerial level.

Include Youth, along with others in the children and young people's sector, believes that the time is right for government to seriously consider the need to introduce a statutory duty to co-operate for children and young people. The Programme for Government must be amended to reflect the expected shifts in departmental responsibility for delivering on key commitments contained within it.

The extremely valuable role that is played by the Employment and Learning Committee, not only in effectively scrutinising the Department for Employment and Learning's work on the issue of young people who are NEET, but in proactively undertaking its own inquiry, must be replicated by the relevant statutory Committee or Committees in the future. Members of the current and previous DEL Committees built up a level of expertise and displayed a commendable commitment to this issue, which has been most impressive. Include Youth is concerned that that expertise and focus will be dissipated in the transfer of DEL's functions across other Departments.

Again, I want to congratulate you. On behalf of the young people that we work with, I want to say that they have been incredibly pleased and impressed by the commitment that all members of the Committee have given to this issue, and that they want to thank you for that. The question is this: how will we keep the momentum going?

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you very much for your kind words. I note your concerns about the dissolution of DEL and the transfer of its functions and how that might impact on the discussions and the work that you have been doing with the Department. That fear and concern has been expressed by some of the other people who we have had before the Committee today regarding the good work that has already been done and how that can be continued and not just swallowed up or lost when the functions are moved. It is something that we will have to take into consideration and keep in mind when things move on.

**Mr McElduff:** I commend you on your presentation. There are some very strong points on page 3 of your written presentation. One point you make is that, despite the good relationships with DEL in the past and at present, that has still not led to a proper prioritisation of the needs of young people. I suppose that you have not called it by saying which Department or Departments responsibility should go to; you are essentially making a legacy statement to an incoming Department. I do not really have a question; I am just absorbing the points that have been made.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I have a couple of points. I want to thank Include Youth; it has been very helpful over a long period and has helped a number of Committee members to have a stronger and more appropriate understanding of NEETs.

We agree with you; all of us on this Committee share your concerns about what is going to happen to all the good work that has been done around NEETs. David, for example, has a motion, and hopefully we can get all-party agreement on it to keep that momentum going. Clearly, it is up to the Minister, through his exit strategy, to ensure that the most appropriate strategy is in place to serve our young people. We have not seen that yet, but it is important. The Minister tells us that the Executive are required to approve the strategy, but we can assure you individually that, now that we are involved in this, we will stay with it, because it is important to keep the campaign going.

Barry rightly pointed out that you have not made a definitive statement about where the NEETs issue should sit, but it is clear that a number of groups that have made presentations to us, including those from the higher and further education sector, want it to sit within the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Aside from Include Youth, colleges are the main player in providing training opportunities and education for young people. On the one hand, there is growing momentum behind the proposal that the DEL functions should all fit into the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. On the other hand, a huge swathe of the voluntary and community sector believes that education plays a huge part in preventing young people becoming NEET. That is important to us as well. It is about getting in at an early stage. I am sorry for rambling on, Chair.

**Ms Yiasouma:** I think that that is right. You can make a case for both DETI and DE. The issue around young people who are NEET is cross-cutting. It obviously has to go somewhere, and it will go into these huge Departments. We have struggled to get the focus that is needed with DEL, and we are beginning to see some inroads into that. Can you imagine what it is going to be like when responsibility for this issue, which is perceived to be a small one, moves to these huge Departments? That is why, although I understand what you said about the Minister, we think there needs to be a steer from the Executive, and particularly from OFMDFM, to say that they need to have the issue of young people not in education, employment or training at their table on a regular basis so that they can keep an eye on it.

We have been toing and froing about DETI and DE and what have you, and we have said that it will go where it will go, but it needs to be ring-fenced. If it brings a load of cash with it, that will focus their minds.

**Ms Sara Boyce (Include Youth):** To add to what Koulla said about the Executive level, our concern is in relation to the Pathways to Success strategy. The officials have said in recent months that there is a plan to establish an additional subgroup of the ministerial subcommittee; a sort of implementation subgroup for the NEETs strategy. Our worry about that at the moment is that the track record of the ministerial subcommittee has not been great. I think that that is widely accepted. The OFMDFM Committee has been scrutinising that as well. Our concern is that, if it has not delivered well for children and young people to date, we do not want to see another subgroup tacked on to it until the problems are resolved. I know that there has been a review of the mechanisms within OFMDFM, and Koulla made a point about that earlier. If we are to get the joined-up approach and connectedness that we need at Executive level, it is so important that the ministerial subcommittee works effectively.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you for your presentation to the Committee today. You are no stranger to the Committee; you have been with us on various occasions. Your views and presentation will be taken into consideration.