



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Upskilling the Northern Ireland Workforce:
Departmental Briefing

16 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Tim Devine	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Michael Gould	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Mervyn Langtry	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: I apologise to Michael and his colleagues for the delay in bringing them to the table. I know you regard it as an occupational hazard, but the previous presentation involved young people from different backgrounds and we had to be sensitive, which I am sure you will appreciate. The floor is yours, Michael, if you want to introduce people.

Mr Michael Gould (Department for Employment and Learning): Thank you, Chair. First, I have to make an apology on behalf of our director, June Ingram, who, as a new director, wanted to be here today but, unfortunately, is unable to be. So, I am joined today by Mervyn Langtry, who heads our skills delivery branch, and Tim Devine, who heads our management development branch in the skills and industry division.

We thank the Committee for the invitation to appear again. When we were last here, on 21 March, we ran out of time. We were trying to describe the work of the division as a whole. We thought it would be useful to come back, and we appreciate the opportunity to do so. We will highlight two specific actions that are integral to the development and delivery of the skills strategy. With your consent, I will take a few minutes to explain the strategic context as to why we are involved in upskilling the current workforce. Mervyn and Tim will then cover how we are upskilling the current workforce and looking at developing management leadership skills in the workforce.

'Success Through Skills - Transforming Futures' is the second skills strategy for Northern Ireland. The first was developed in 2004 and implemented by 2006. Since 2009, we have been working on producing the existing skills strategy. One thing that we were very keen on and insisted on having was a forecast of the economic situation that Northern Ireland would face by 2020 so that we could work back from that to try to understand the skills needs of the workforce in 2020 and look at what we need to do between now and then to ensure that we have the skills that the economy needs for the future.

Today, we will look at two of the policy headlines that have come out of the strategy. The Committee has heard from us before on the skills strategy itself, so we will just go through two of the five main policy headlines: the need to upskill the current workforce and the need to improve management and leadership skills.

The skills levels have improved. We have evidence of that, and through the Programme for Government, we have reported on how skills levels have improved in the workforce. However, we need to do more. If you look at the chart that we have included in our paper, you will see that, despite improvements, the skills profile of Northern Ireland is relatively weak. We are good at high-level qualifications, which is probably a reflection of the number of young people who take the opportunity to go to university. However, we also have a very high level of people with no or low qualifications. The previous presentation was obviously a manifestation of the reasons behind that. We have a lower level of intermediate skills — level 3 and level 4 — and that compares unfavourably with other regions in the EU 27 and other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. So, we believe that we need to upskill the current workforce.

Within that context is the fact that 80% of the 2020 workforce are in work now. So, eight out of 10 of the 2020 workforce are in work now, and many of those people have low or no qualifications. They do not have the qualifications that the work of the future will require. The graph looks at trends in workforce skills, and it is taken from the evidence base that we use for forecasting. It shows that the need for higher-level skills will increase as we move towards 2020 and that the proportion of jobs that require low or no qualifications will decrease. So, again, that is one of the reasons why we need to upskill the current workforce.

The Chairperson: Is that based on the bar chart that we are looking at?

Mr Gould: That is correct.

The Chairperson: It is forecasting that, in 2020, the figure for national qualifications framework (NQF) levels 4 to 6 will be 37% and that there will be a reduction to 12% for NQF level 1 and below. You are saying that those are the qualifications that the economy will need rather than the qualifications that we will actually have.

Mr Gould: Yes.

The Chairperson: And the chart is based on statistics from Oxford Economics and the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

Mr Gould: We work on the basis that, by 2020, roughly 50% of jobs will require a level 4 qualification or above and that probably half the jobs that require low or no qualifications now will have disappeared. That is a reflection of the world of work; things like licence to practise, health and safety, and all other aspects —

The Chairperson: How robust is that forecast? You mentioned licence to practise, and I understand that, but those are quite dramatic imperatives. You are saying that half of all low-skilled work is going to go. How rigorous are those statistics? How secure do you feel about them?

Mr Gould: The researchers are confident, and they have obviously modelled this. We asked them to look at two economic models. One looked at how, if we do no more than we are doing now, we can reduce the productivity gap between ourselves and the rest of the UK. The productivity gap between ourselves in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, excluding London and the south-east, is about 10%. The researchers believe that, if we close that gap of 10% by reducing the differential, those are the types of qualifications that people will need to do the jobs that will be available.

Mr P Ramsey: Are there regional variations in need? One would imagine that the future needs of Belfast might be for financial services, for example. However, in Derry, the needs might be different. They might be related to IT rather than financial services. Is there an indication that there are regional variations?

Mr Gould: There are regional variations. In addition to asking the researchers to do a forecast, we asked them to break down the figures for each region. I have not brought that information with me; I did not want to overload the Committee today with six regional forecasts. However, they are available.

Mr P Ramsey: Could you share them with us?

Mr Gould: We can certainly share them with the Committee. I am happy to do that.

Mr Allister: Is there much variation between them?

Mr Gould: There is a fair amount of variation between the likes of Fermanagh and Belfast, with its reliance on, or influx of, financial services, which Mr Ramsey pointed out. We have had the forecast broken down for each of the regions, based on the regional area around the further education (FE) colleges. We are happy to share that with you.

Hopefully, I have given the Committee an understanding of why we need to look at upskilling the workforce and why we need to improve management and leadership skills. In conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), Invest NI (INI) and InterTradeIreland, we simultaneously conducted a piece of work on management and leadership within Northern Ireland companies. That work compared us to the United States in particular and to other developed countries within the OECD. It has shown us that, with improved management and leadership skills, we can make a big improvement in economic output, employment and productivity.

With your consent, I will now ask Mervyn to talk about how we are upskilling the current workforce, and Tim will then talk about management and leadership skills.

The Chairperson: Just before Mervyn gets started, I want to say that I need more convincing about this topic than I do about the skills gap at the bottom end. If you are in a big company, that company should be training you, and if you are an owner-occupier and are running your own business, you should know what you are doing. I am just saying that I am interested in your assertion that research has shown us that, if we do this, it will work better. I am not disputing that; I just need convincing. So, keep that in the back of your mind as Mervyn tells me how we will do it anyway.

Mr Mervyn Langtry (Department for Employment and Learning): Thank you very much indeed. Good morning, everyone. I will give you some background to the skills solutions service that the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) operates and offers to employers in Northern Ireland. It was established in late 2009 in response to feedback from employers who found it difficult to understand and, at times, access the programmes that the Department offered — schemes that could be of benefit to them in developing their workforce.

The feedback was especially strong from smaller enterprises, which, particularly in difficult financial times, did not have the time or inclination to trawl through lots of websites looking for information about what was available. They were not always clear who they should contact for information about what was available. As Michael said, from a departmental perspective, we recognise that it is very important to continue to engage businesses or get them to initially engage with training and development opportunities. All the evidence at that time demonstrated that businesses that invest in training and developing their staff during a recession are more than twice as likely to survive, and, indeed, prosper, in those circumstances.

So, the skills solutions service was designed to become a portal or one-stop shop for employers so that they could access the Department's services, and there was a particular emphasis on skills development. The aims of the service were to help employers to understand; to help them to access the Department's training provision; to offer them a single point of contact into departmental services; and to help them to understand what financial and other support was available.

I would stress that the skills solutions service is about real engagement with employers. My staff are not there purely as some kind of a sales force for the Department's wares. Our starting point when we engage with any business is "Tell me about your business. Tell me what is important to you in business at this moment in time." The word "understand" features prominently in the training that my staff have had. It is not just about products that we have to offer or pushing those products. It is about genuinely understanding the needs of individual businesses and trying to build a relationship with them. It is very much about the Stephen Covey philosophy in 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People' — understand then be understood.

So, how does it work? We have a fairly small, compact team that is organised on a geographical basis. We have three teams of two people to cover Northern Ireland. Each of those teams covers two of the regions served by our FE colleges. How do they make contact with employers? We have a range of approaches to enable us to do that. We give presentations and set up stands. We engage with companies at all sorts of employer-focused events, some run by district councils, chambers of commerce or employers' federations; at our Department's "Made not Born" management and leadership events, which Tim will talk about; and at employer service events. Essentially, anywhere where employers are likely to congregate, we are happy to engage with them. We also get referrals from FE colleges' economic engagement teams. We get requests directly through the advertising that we do on our own website, and we get referrals from other parts of the Department.

In all cases, our aim is to be user-friendly and customer-focused in all that we do. For example, we always go to the employer rather than asking the employer to come to us. That is important from my perspective because it helps us to keep the end clearly in view when we see employers in their natural business habitat. The focus throughout the process is very much on need, understanding the need and then directing employers to the appropriate support. If that support does not exist, we can help small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through our customised training option, whereby we will seek to broker a training solution for them that will meet their need. That would normally be delivered through an FE college, and I will give you a practical example of that in a moment.

Who can use the service? The skills solution service is happy to engage with any employer in Northern Ireland to help them to clarify their skills needs and to point them to ways in which the Department can help, whether through management and leadership development, apprenticeships, customised training, help with recruitment or whatever. The service is completely free and is available, as I said, Province-wide.

What is the impact? Is the service making a difference? In 2011-12, we had contact with about 700 businesses. We were able to engage with them and provide the kind of service that I have just outlined. The feedback we get is consistently sound. Employers value the clarity that the advisers can bring. They also value the lack of bureaucracy in the engagement that we have with them.

I mentioned customised training projects. We ran several —

The Chairperson: Mervyn, I will interrupt you for a wee bit, if you do not mind. We need to get to the punch and pizzazz of what is going on. Just hit us with it. I have already put these folks through a really long Committee meeting. I need them to be excited by what you are telling them. Excite them.

Mr Langtry: I will give you a specific example of a company that we have worked with. It is a fairly small company, but the work is typical of what we have been doing. Cubis Industries is a business based in Craigavon. It has about 75 staff and specialises in steel and structural products, particularly those that are used to protect staff when working underground; cages, and that kind of thing. It came across the skills solutions service via our website and contacted us. We sent one of our advisers to meet the staff. He followed the "understand then be understood" mantra that I have described. It became clear, in discussions with the company, that there was a need for six staff to be upskilled in their welding to the industry standard metal inert gas (MIG) welding. Our adviser contacted the Southern Regional College's business development officer with a view to brokering a suitable response. That process identified a level 2 diploma in engineering with an element specific to MIG welding. The difficulty was that Cubis is a very small business. It had production targets to meet and orders to make. Releasing staff to go to the college was just not easy. We were able to broker an arrangement with the college whereby the tutor went to Cubis and delivered the training in two smaller tranches of three each. It has been a great practical success.

That is a practical example of the skills solutions service in action, identifying and dealing with a real skills development need. It shows us working in partnership with a local college to meet their need. The company has gained through the process, because it now has skills in place that will help it to remain competitive in what is a challenging market. Hopefully, that will help it to secure further orders, thereby securing employment for its staff. The employees involved have increased their personal portfolio of skills and qualifications. So, that is just one example of the skills solutions service doing exactly what it says on the tin: finding a solution to a specific skills need for a small company.

Mr P Ramsey: What was the cost and who paid it?

Mr Langtry: The cost overall was £4,680 and was shared. The Department was able to make a contribution of about £3,100. I think that I will leave it there.

The Chairperson: It is my impression that we are not grabbing the big picture. I mean that very gently, but I want to get it through to the Department. If you are serious about getting our skills and our management up to a level that is internationally competitive, I think we need a bit more va-va-voom in the whole thing. That is an observation that you could come back and look at. Do any colleagues want to say anything before we move on?

Mr Allister: Does the service that you offer overlap with what Invest NI offers?

Mr Langtry: No. We work very closely with Invest NI.

Mr Allister: I want to hear about any collaboration there is with Invest NI because it, too, has regional offices and engagement with local business, etc. It will tell you that it does all sorts of wonderful things in that regard. I want to understand where it stops and you finish, or whether you overlap.

Mr Langtry: We liaise closely with Invest NI at a local level and at a policy level.

Mr Gould: We work very closely with Invest NI to make sure that there is no overlap. We do joint visits with it, and I have done many with my colleagues. We have looked at how we can help companies, particularly during the recession.

Mr Allister: For example, you had contact with 700 businesses last year. Is it the case that some of those businesses might be in Invest NI's statistics as well?

Mr Gould: No. When we are working with a company, we try to ensure that it is not doing any work with Invest NI. There are 126,000 companies in Northern Ireland. I think we all recognise that we cannot do enough. I think that was your point, Chair. We are doing what we can with what we have got, but we need to —

Mr Allister: But how do you collaborate with Invest NI if you do not work with the same businesses?

Mr Gould: We will not work with the same businesses at the same time on the same projects. We could be involved with an engineering company that has a research and development project with Invest NI. Invest NI will fund the research and development project, and we will work with the company to look at the skills provision in the workforce. We will try to complement what Invest does and Invest will try to complement what we do in order to get the best outcome for the company. That is really what we are trying to do.

Mr Allister: Do you think that is working?

Mr Gould: I think it is working.

Mr Allister: If, for example, DEL were part of DETI and you were part of DETI, would anything change?

Mr Gould: Possibly.

Mr Allister: Would it change for the better?

Mr Gould: That depends on how the outworkings of any integration were to take place.

Mr Allister: That does not tell me much.

The Chairperson: It is a typical Civil Service answer.

Mr Tim Devine (Department for Employment and Learning): I was going to offer an example at the end of my short presentation of how we are working with Invest NI. At the moment, we are working with it to develop a common diagnostic framework that will signpost to either DEL provision or Invest

NI provision so that the employer will come through a one-stop shop and will not be confused by, if you like, the interdepartmental —

Mr Allister: I suppose what I am really asking is this: would it be better if the job you do were married with the job that Invest NI does with business locally?

Mr Gould: Well, we are working together, although each of us is doing a different thing.

Mr Allister: Yes, but would they be better married together?

Mr Gould: I think that is a political question, to be honest.

The Chairperson: Jim, be fair. He is a civil servant; he cannot answer that.

Mr Allister: I am not driving at the political aegis that controls it. I am driving at whether there is sense in having a different set of staff under you or under DETI, if you move to DETI, and another set of staff under Invest NI, or should they all be the one set of staff working to DETI, Invest NI, or whoever?

Mr Gould: That is a problem that we constantly talk about and try to work out for the best. The best way that I can explain it is by using a medical analogy. When you go in with a health problem, you want the health service to do the best for the patient, but that may involve specialists. We want to try to provide the best service for the company, but that may involve different specialisms. We need a very good triage. We need a very good system where the companies can come and get the best help directed to them for their particular problem. That is why we do things in a different way from Invest NI, but we are both there to help the company. We tend to focus on the individual; it tends to focus on the productivity and how the company operates. Together, we believe that we have got the package that can help the company. The secret is to make sure that the co-ordination is there and that there is good access through the triage or the electronic means, and that there is co-ordination between ourselves and the different organisations.

Mr Allister: Do you not think that the company might appreciate it more if it were all coming from the same source?

Mr Gould: If we can hide the wiring for them, it does not really matter who provides the service. They are interested in getting an outcome, in our experience. That is why we spend time working with Invest to try to improve the service we offer.

Mr Devine: I have a short presentation to make on the management development programmes and management leadership solutions that we offer.

The Chairperson: After that, I will let Mervyn have the final say, because he was anxious to get in there.

Mr Devine: My role is to cover management and leadership programmes. I also manage the Investors in People (IIP) delivery centre in Northern Ireland. We have tried to make the offer as joined-up as we possibly can for business.

We have two strands to how we work with business. We work with companies in a reasonably holistic fashion and we offer individual programmes for individual managers. We underpin everything with the Investors in People frameworks and standards, which are UK-wide as opposed to Northern Ireland specific.

In Northern Ireland, we find that the management and leadership needs in business are no different to those in the Republic or the rest of the UK. However, we have found, through the research that Michael mentioned, that our starting line is a little bit lower than that in the rest of the UK. We have fewer managers than the rest of the UK, and our performance indicators are slightly lower than the UK average. So, we need to drive up the performance of managers and leaders in Northern Ireland business. When you tie that in with the new economic strategy and the need to rebalance and rebuild, we need to focus on SMEs, because that is where over 90% of business is.

You asked a question, Chair, about the capacity and capability of the larger companies. They tend to have more capacity and capability to develop their managers; it is the SMEs that do not. That is why our focus is on SMEs in our management and leadership provision.

I have provided slides that show you an overview of the three main strands. We have the management analysis and planning (MAP) programme, which is where we send consultants into a company, normally for two to three days. Those consultants will look at the management and leadership capacity of individual companies and produce a tailored report that signposts the managers to either tailored training or some of our other management programmes. The MAP programme is quite often also an introduction to Investors in People, because quite often it will see the holistic solution as going for the investors.

We have a raft of management leadership developments — a suite of 15 programmes. As you can see from the slide, they cover everything from first-line managers to middle managers, senior managers as well as some of the more demand-driven areas of needs in business that arise in thematic areas. We offer relatively generous support for both the tailored training, for which we offer 40%, and for our suite of programmes, for which we will offer funding of up to 50%. So, there is quite a generous package of support from government.

On my side of the house, we also look after the INTRO programme, which you may be familiar with. We have 100 graduates a year who go through the programme and are matched with companies and are employed with them from day one. The idea is that the companies will come up with specific business projects that they need, our delivery-partner, Parity, matches the graduates with the companies, the graduates get core management training and they are supported as they develop the projects with the companies. That programme has been running in one iteration or another for quite a number of years and its success rate is nearly 90% retention, which means that business does value it.

As I said, I am also now responsible for the Investors in People delivery centre here in Northern Ireland. Again, we have a particular focus on SMEs to try to get them to take up Investors in People. We will fund the first IIP assessment for SMEs.

We are also trying to work differently and in a more novel way in Northern Ireland. We are trying to set up relationships with local councils, and we have several councils involved in developing group contracts to support employers in their areas. The Department and councils co-fund, support and lower the cost of those group projects with local companies.

Part of the problem with pushing management and leadership is that companies recognise the need to develop particular technical skills but may not recognise the need to develop their managers. A lot of research shows that sometimes the last people who are developed in companies are managers. So, the Made Not Born campaign was developed in 2009. The idea behind that was to use masterclasses and speakers of excellence, who would have an identity with SMEs, to share best practice with SMEs in the local regions. We would also bring out individual advisers and organisations to advise them and tell about the programmes of support that are on offer. We completed the final roadshows of Made Not Born a month or two ago.

Some members asked what we are doing at the moment. We are working on a joint INI/DEL framework for management and leadership, and there are two strands to that. There will be an online questionnaire, and a chief executive or senior manager can fill in a questionnaire about the company. It will be analysed and will signpost to INI support or DEL support. Therefore, that is where we talk about hiding the wiring.

We are also developing a diagnostic tool where individual managers can go in and undertake a questionnaire. Again, it will signpost to INI or DEL support. It is more likely to be DEL support for individual managers because of the range of programmes that we put on offer. We are hoping to launch that around September, and we are now trialling the questionnaires.

Our contracts for the bursary organisations for management and leadership development programmes (MLDPs) are up at Christmas. So, we are now considering what suite of programmes we should offer in the longer term, particularly for SMEs. We reviewed the programmes in 2009-2010, and the feedback that we got was that the range of offers was about right in respect of the levels, that is, first-line manager, middle manager and senior manager, and the thematic areas that we offered was also about right, but we will review that again over the summer, with a view to refreshing the suite of programmes.

We are also looking at supporting microbusinesses. They are the hardest organisations to work with and the hardest businesses to reach because they tend to be focused on the day-to-day running of their businesses. By microbusinesses, I mean organisations with fewer than nine members of staff. We want to see how we can offer support to them. That project will kick off over the summer.

Investors in People has been modernised, and the idea is that it is not just about the standard. There are a raft of tools, diagnostics, frameworks and best practice models available on the Investors in People website. It is about using IIP specialists to say let us not focus on the standard, let us focus on the business need. That is not a Northern Ireland initiative. IIP UK is driving it forward, so watch this space for IIP modernisation.

The management and leadership strategy is due for review, and my team is looking at starting that review this year, but it will not be done in isolation. There is a lot of work going on across the UK, the Republic and internationally on the importance of management and leadership, and signposting the way forward. So, the review of the strategy is timely.

Finally, the Made Not Born campaign has come to an end. It was a three-year cycle, so we are moving on to evaluating how that worked. Did it reach all the parts that we wanted it to reach, and where should Made Not Born go in the future? It was a way of getting round the regions in Northern Ireland and bringing the message to local businesses in their own environment. I will stop there, and you can ask questions.

Ms Gildernew: I had to go to a Women's Aid presentation in the Long Gallery, so I am sorry that I was not here for the whole presentation, but thank you for it.

I paid a ministerial visit to Parity a couple of years ago, and I was very impressed by the standard of the young people who were involved in the training programme and the ideas that they had, but to what extent do our universities turn out very highly qualified young people with good solid degrees but no practical training? Unless there is a year out or a placement, people who have done degrees in humanities or whatever have an excellent degree and a good qualification, but they do not know an awful lot about the world outside.

Mr Gould: We have to recognise that the economy is going to need a spectrum of skills. So, while we talk about the need for science, technology, engineering and maths being very important, there will be a need for humanities. However, the challenge is when young people focus on going from school to university without the placement year, they tend to take academic courses, which are an extension of school life. When we question the universities, they will say that they are there to educate for society rather than just to educate for the economy, and we have robust debates around whether that is right and proper. The more applied subjects such as engineering, information and communication technology (ICT), agriculture, science and food technology tend to have a much more hands-on practical nature and make individuals more employable.

Ms Gildernew: In my constituency, we depend heavily on SMEs. Most of our businesses are microbusinesses, which you said are the hardest to reach. Those are also the businesses that probably need that support most. How do you see that working its way through in the future? A number of years ago, I visited one small business that had a graduate, and they were out that day. It was a case of people saying, "Honest to God, they're useless." They were not very impressed with the life skills that that young person had. They thought that this young person was coming in to help them, but felt that they were helping the young person. That would be good, if they knew that that was what they were signing up for, and not the opposite.

Mr Gould: There are things that can be done through the education system. We have got to get more employability skills built in to every course. It is the soft skills that employers say young people lack: communication, being able to report and write in English, problem-solving and working in teams. Those could be integrated much more into the education system. I know that the universities and colleges are trying to do that.

We would like to be able to help SMEs, and microbusinesses in particular, because they make up the vast majority of businesses throughout Northern Ireland. If we could, we would like to help the managers or owners of microbusinesses and SMEs understand what they would be taking on in mentoring a young person at either undergraduate level or when they graduate. We would like to see more people coming forward with placements for the likes of the INTRO programme. Within the new

economic strategy, we have an undertaking to look at how we can expand that to try to get placements for graduates who are perhaps unemployed, irrespective of what subjects they studied. If we could get more quality projects from microbusinesses, we would work with them.

Mr Devine: There are a couple of things I want to come back on. First, the INTRO programme is oversubscribed at the minute. We have more employers and more graduates looking for places than we have money to resource. It is capped at 100.

The second element of your question relates to how we get at SMEs. How do we get to those SMEs and smaller businesses that have a need but do not know how to access the support and resources? That is what Made Not Born was about — bringing the information to small employers in their areas. As I said in the presentation, it is also about the work we do with local councils and enterprise zones. We work with people who inform and advice SMEs. So, we work with the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), the Institute of Directors (IoD), the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), all the usual suspects, to say what we have on offer and ask whether they can bring some of the client companies they believe would benefit from the programmes to Made Not Born or refer them to the Department.

We are now starting to work with some of the banks. At the last Made Not Born event, someone from a bank asked whether they could bring someone to the event the next day, because they knew we had programmes on offer that a certain business needed. It is a journey. That is why the evaluation of Made Not Born is quite important. It will test how we have been doing to date over that three-year period and maybe help us map out the best way forward in communicating with employers, SMEs and microbusinesses in particular, across all Northern Ireland.

Ms Gildernew: Not everybody has the benefit of the enterprise centre experience, including a lot of farm diversification projects.

Mr Devine: We are starting to use new technology. With Made Not Born we have been using Twitter and LinkedIn and all sorts of technology that I know very little about but am being forced to learn about quite quickly.

The Chairperson: If you need advice about Twitter — *[Laughter.]*

Ms Gildernew: Keep your shoes on. Isn't that it, Basil?

The Chairperson: You needed to have been here earlier to understand that bit.

Mr McElduff: This is a very stupid question, but are those programmes available at no financial cost to businesses?

Mr Devine: Some of them are and some of them are not. For example, MAP, the management analysis programme, is free of charge to SMEs. It is worth about £1,000. We would support the tailored training that would flow from MAP to a rate of 40%. In the suite of 15 programmes, we offer 50% support to companies. IIP first-time assessments are free to SMEs. There is a range of support, and that is tilted to benefit SMEs because we feel that larger companies have the capacity, architecture and money to fund things to a higher level.

Mr Gould: The other thing is that, as they are together in the one division, if something is identified by some of Tim's advisers that could be satisfied by training that Mervyn's team can deliver, we can make that obvious connection. A lot of customised training is free to small companies.

Mr Allister: You were sitting in during the presentation by Bytes. It is in the business of upskilling or providing skills from a very basic level. Is there any interface between what you do and, to take it by way of an example, what it does?

Mr Gould: When you say interface, do you mean do we work with it to bring young people on into the world of work?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Gould: No, we are not currently working with it.

Mr Allister: Should you not be?

Mr Gould: That is a very good question. We fund The Bytes Project from within the Department, as you heard. That falls within the skills and industry division. We have been the source of funding for it. We work very much at what the employer wants. So, if the employer was open to looking at somebody from that particular background and was prepared to take a young person like that on a short-term placement or for a short —

Mr Allister: Upskilling a workforce is not about just providing courses. There has to be a skill that, ultimately, an employer will want. However, it is about equipping employees. So, why would there be any hesitancy about working with groups that are providing maybe fairly basic skills, but are skills nonetheless, that better equip that person to seek and obtain employment?

Mr Gould: There is no policy reason why we would not do it. We are currently focusing on those who are in work. The young people on The Bytes Project are not yet in work. They are looking for work experience to improve their self-confidence and employability, but we really have to work at what the employer wants, if they are prepared to take the young person in. There may be many reasons why they are afraid to do that. If they would be open to taking young people in, we would be open to working with the likes of Bytes and other organisations to afford them that opportunity. In many ways, our employment service, through the youth employment programme, will be doing exactly that; namely, trying to work with large and small employers to offer work placements and work tasters linked with training.

The Chairperson: Folks, we will call it a day. Thank you very much for coming. Does anybody want to say anything else?

Mr Langtry: Mr Allister asked whether it would be better if we were all situated together in DETI. From talking to employers, and we do have to keep the customer in mind at the end of the day, I think there is a definite sense that they are confused. They come to us about certain elements and to DETI or INI about others. In some instances, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) can provide help for rural development. You then factor in help from local councils. If you were to ask employers that question, they would say the more that we work together and have a genuine one-stop shop, probably the better. That would be the perspective you would get from businesses.

The Chairperson: OK. If I could just give you an observation. I am in benign mood but you can read the entrails. The corollary of the statement that was just made is that people need to know more about what DEL does. You will be behind the Go For It campaign, for example, and people will know that, if they are starting up a microbusiness, that is where they go to get advice.

The case needs to be made about the strategic investment in skills. That is why I was interested in the statistics and when Tim mentioned the upcoming Made Not Born review and the other bits. We need to do something, under whatever guise it will be, to explain that this is not just window dressing or a bit of icing on the cake. The skills of our management and workforce are the tool that will close the productivity gap, which we really have to do.

We need, collectively, to raise our game, certainly in the communicating of it. I do not mean to be unduly critical but we need to do more. Hopefully, this is the start of things, and I look forward to further engagement in another place, perhaps, about how we take it forward.

Mr Gould: Thank you very much. We look forward to that, too.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much indeed.