



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Sectoral Working Groups:
Department for Employment and Learning

4 December 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

Sectoral Working Groups: Department for Employment and Learning

4 December 2013

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan

Witnesses:

Mr Michael Gould	Department for Employment and Learning
Ms Sian McCleave	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr George Wilson	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Michael Gould, the acting director of the skills and industry division in the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL); Ms Sian McCleave, the head of skills policy; and Mr George Wilson, the acting head of sectoral development.

Mr Michael Gould (Department for Employment and Learning): Thank you, Chairman. Thank you for the invitation to present to the Committee. I appreciate that this is slightly different from the work of the Department that you heard about earlier. We will be focusing primarily on our work with businesses, which involves looking at their specific skills needs and their collective skills needs. As you said, I am joined by Sian and George. Sian looks after the information and communication technology (ICT) group, and George is currently looking after the advanced manufacturing and engineering services group and the food and drink manufacturing group.

If you are content, I will give a short overview of the background to the groups, including why they were set up and how they are working. George and Sian will then highlight some specific examples from the groups and hopefully give a flavour of some of the progress that has been made to date.

We currently have three sectoral working groups: the information and communication technology group; the advanced manufacturing and engineering services group; and the food and drink manufacturing group. The groups build on the work that we developed in three previous sectoral groups. There was one primarily on ICT, one on financial services and one on hospitality and catering. The groups' actions are in support of the Department's work on the Programme for Government (PFG) and our qualifications targets, the Northern Ireland economic strategy and the Northern Ireland skills strategy, and, in particular, the group looks at our work with priority economic sectors.

Although we have gone down the sectoral route, we very much treated everyone as different prior to 2007. That worked for a while, but it really became apparent that we needed to have a much better

knowledge of the specific skills needs in a sector. Therefore, we set up some sectoral groups, starting with the ICT group. The group consists of businesses, educationalists — higher education (HE) and further education (FE) are represented — and relevant Departments, including ours. We like to have the Department of Education, (DE), the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and Invest NI at the table. It brings into the one group all the players that can make a difference.

Having a sectoral group allows a greater insight into the skills needs in each sector. Although all sectors will say that they have skills needs, and, yes, there are similarities among the groups, all of them are different. Having a sectoral group with that focus allows us to get into the real granularity of their skills issues. It also allows us to provide specific skills actions to address those issues. The Minister has taken the chair of the past three groups. That has certainly added a lot of impetus to the issues that we hear from the companies and the ability to get the government bodies to come into action.

The main aim of the group is to rectify any skills issues. The focus is on action. Again, rather than being a talking shop, having the Minister there means that we are focused on the actions and outcomes. We will convene a group if we identify that a sector has a particular issue. In the main, we have been reactive up until now: we listened to businesses say that they had skills issues and formed a group around those businesses. Ideally, we would like to be in a situation in which we are more proactive and have a group for each of the priority sectors currently recognised in the economic strategy.

Once we form a group, we normally undertake a piece of research to give us an evidence base to look at the skills issues. We then get the industry to articulate what the skills needs are. That leads to the prioritisation of actions. Each action plan that is produced for the group has three component parts: skills provision; sector attractiveness, or the attractiveness of a career in that sector; and communication and stakeholder engagement. Through that action plan, we develop specific actions for us and the other partners, including business, FE, HE and other Departments, to try to converge and coalesce and have a critical mass on the actions to address the sectoral issues.

I will hand over to Sian, who will give some details on the ICT working group and some of the progress made to date.

Ms Sian McCleave (Department for Employment and Learning): The ICT working group was established in January 2012. In the six months that followed, the group worked together and, using the evidence base that Michael talked about and the group's experience, put together an action plan, a copy of which is in Committee members' packs. The first thing that I would like to highlight is the cross-cutting nature of the group. With the Department of Education, DETI and Invest NI all represented, we have a good way of looking, from an education point of view, at inward investment, the economy and, of course, the PFG. They helped to fund various aspects of the action plan.

Therefore, there has been significant progress made in the past year. Most importantly, the work has coincided with a rise of over 24% in applications to IT-related degree courses at both our universities. The leaflet in your pack sets out some of the major initiatives that have been taken forward in that time, and I will take a moment to talk about some of them.

As Michael mentioned, we split the activities in the action plan into three sections: skills provision; career attractiveness; and communication and coordination. Under the theme of skills provision, a number of initiatives have been taken forward. First, a master's course for non-IT graduates has been introduced at both our universities. That is now in its second year, and 134 students are enrolled on the course, which is up from 104 last year. A software testers academy has been developed between the Department, South Eastern Regional College (SERC) and employers. That has been well received, and it now has its third cohort, and Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) has been brought in as a delivery partner for that. Importantly, the academy model works by engaging with employees to establish specific vacancies in their area and then develop customised training to meet that need. The Department advertises places on the training course and trains a cohort of people to meet those needs and fill the identified vacancies in the companies. Thirty-eight of the 40 individuals trained in the first two cohorts are now in employment in the sector, and a third cohort of 32 individuals is currently in training.

Based on that successful model, the Department has also launched a cloud technology academy and a data analytics academy. The Department has also established an ICT apprenticeship model that brings together the public and private sectors to train apprentices. That builds on the existing ICT apprenticeship available through ApprenticeshipsNI but adds in a boot camp at the start. It also helps

to run a joint recruitment exercise for all the companies involved. Some of the companies may not have been involved in the apprenticeship programme before and may be looking to bring in one apprenticeship, so that helps them with recruitment and addresses any perceived risk from taking the apprenticeship. It has been really well received, and a second cohort is now in motion, with 44 apprentices being trained. The first cohort had 32 apprentices. We are also piloting a higher-level apprenticeship in South West College (SWC). Those two models will be used to inform the apprenticeship review that the Minister is undertaking at the moment.

There is then the career attractiveness section of the action plan. The Department continues to fund the Bring IT On campaign. There are two strands to that. On-the-ground activity, which includes school visits, university open days and ICT events, is undertaken by e-skills UK, Momentum and Sentinus. They also run a website that has a lot of case studies from people employed in local companies. That provides a lot of information. Then, there is a TV and radio marketing campaign, which will be starting up again later this month.

Finally, under the communication and coordination strand, one of the issues that we had is that — I think that this is probably fair to say for most of the groups — although there is a lot of provision and help available, a lot of employers are not aware of it. Therefore, getting employers on board and helping them to raise awareness of the initiatives among their colleagues has been a major development. With the help of Invest NI, the ICT sector has established a collaborative network that is bringing employers together, and those employers are helping to run strands that are delivering against the ICT action plan. That has been in operation for only a short while, but we really think that it will be very helpful in helping employers to take a lead in some of the areas.

In closing, it is worth mentioning the Momentum digital summit, which was on 25 September. It brought together employers from the sector to talk about skills and access to finance and markets. It was very clear from the meeting that employers welcomed the work done on the ICT action plan and the Minister's support and that they were supportive of all the work that has gone on to date. However, they and we are very aware that, although a lot of good work is happening in that very fast-moving sector, we have to keep looking at and shaping as necessary the actions that we are taking forward in order to meet employers' needs. For that reason, we will present an updated action plan to the next meeting of the ICT working group on 11 December.

Mr Gould: We will now hand over to George to talk about the work of the advanced manufacturing and engineering services group and the food and drink manufacturing group.

Mr George Wilson (Department for Employment and Learning): The advanced manufacturing group is the newest of the three groups. It had its first meeting in September 2012. The group is working on an action plan that is based on research commissioned by the Department in conjunction with the group, and that work is being undertaken by RSM McClure Watters. We are expecting the final draft of that report in, hopefully, a week to 10 days.

To address the diverse skills needs of the sector, four subgroups consisting of members of the group were set up in the following areas: aerospace and advanced manufacturing; energy and renewables; general manufacturing; and education. Yesterday, the group met and split into those subgroups to discuss the draft report and to identify actions for the action plan. Each subgroup was asked to consider the draft report as it applied to their specific area, provide comments and identify three top priorities for action. The Department took the data away yesterday. We will now collate that and try to include it in the action plan under the three themes of skills provision, sector attractiveness, and coordination and communication. A final action plan, based on the outcomes of yesterday's exercise, will be presented to the members of the group for their endorsement and approval for publishing. It is anticipated that the action plan will be finalised in January 2014 and subsequently published.

A number of actions in the draft action plan are being progressed, one of which is a higher-level apprenticeship in engineering. The first phase of the pilot commenced on Monday 11 November, with 20 apprentices undertaking training through SWC. The second strand of that involves Bombardier and its supply chain along with BMC, and they been invited to submit a proposal to deliver an engineering pilot in aeronautical engineering. One of the potential results of the project is that it will be offered as a progression route for recruited candidates who already hold the level 3 vocational qualification. It is anticipated that the second phase will be launched in the new year, and it is our intention that students will commence it in September 2014. Funding has been allocated to support 35 apprentices in the two strands.

Another initiative being taken forward under the aerospace academy is the creation of a pilot computer numerical control (CNC) machining conversion course. Following discussions, it was agreed to undertake a pilot with Magellan Aerospace and SERC, with input from Northern Regional College (NRC). A programme of training has now been finalised and agreed, and it includes modules that are core components and modules that are optional. The pilot involves the upskilling of a total of 15 newly recruited staff, funded via the Department's Assured Skills programme, with DEL meeting 60% of the agreed costs. Training for that started on 11 November. Once the CNC machining course pilot is complete, we will be able to evaluate the lessons learned and consider how to expand the academy model to other areas of the aerospace sector in conjunction with the sector bodies.

On the issue of gender balance in the sector, the Minister recently addressed a number of events relating to the engineering sector. At one event during Tomorrow's Engineers Week, he launched a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) business subgroup report on addressing gender balance.

I will now move on to the food and drink manufacturing and processing sector group. Again, the objectives are outlined under the three specific themes of skills provision, sector attractiveness, and coordination and communication. The group met most recently on 1 November to review its progress against its action plan over the past year. At the meeting, the Minister accepted an invitation from the group to be co-chair, along with Tony O'Neill from Moy Park.

The group felt that, although there had been some good outcomes, progress had been much slower than expected owing to the small number of employers actively involved. To address that, the group along with the Department seek to widen industry membership. A number of current actions from the action plan are being progressed. The food engineering apprenticeship pilot programme is under way. The Department has worked with local food processing employers to develop a programme in conjunction with Southern Regional College (SRC) and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). The programme seeks to address the industry's shortage of engineering apprentices and involves all parties working together to determine the content of what we are calling a "boot camp", which will give new apprentices a solid grounding in food processing. The first 21 apprentices are due to start boot camp on Monday 6 January. In that, there are modules and units that make up the level 2 and level 3 frameworks that the apprentices will follow. Eight companies are involved in the pilot, offering 21 jobs. Recruitment is currently under way, with companies in the process of interviewing candidates.

The sector has undertaken to offer 10 placement opportunities over a three-year period to unemployed graduates through the Department's INTRO programme. To date, four graduates have been placed. Through the youth employment scheme, 19 local food companies have offered 51 placements to young unemployed people. In response to concerns that were raised by employers, CAFRE and Queen's University have increased the scientific content of their degrees, the aim of which is to meet the sector's needs for graduates. A higher level of science knowledge and skills has now been added to the content. One of the successes there is the Tasty Careers sector attractiveness project. For the second year, the Department is funding that programme, which aims to educate schoolchildren and their key influencers about the wide range of career options available across the food and drink sector. The group and the Department are currently discussing ways in which to build on the success of that, with the ultimate aim of the programme being that it is sustained by the industry. Representatives of the group have participated in more than 20 careers and industry presentations in schools and universities.

Concerns have been raised about the lack of knowledge of government skills provision, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). To help to rectify that, a conference was held in April to raise awareness of skills and related issues and to highlight from where employers can access training and funding. In addition, named contact points in the Department, Invest NI and CAFRE have been meeting to discuss their respective training portfolios so that they can signpost businesses to the appropriate training or Department to offer more streamlined services.

There have been a few HR clinics to build on the conference's momentum. Two were organised in September. HR managers were invited to hear presentations on the training provision that is available from each government provider and were then able to discuss their needs on a one-to-one basis. Feedback from those who attended has been very positive.

Finally, over the coming weeks, the group will be working to widen industry membership and set key objectives for 2014.

Mr Gould: I appreciate that there was a lot of detail there, Chairman. However, I wanted the Committee to understand that there is a lot of action going on in each of the groups. As I said, they are not talking shops; rather, they are very focused on action.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that, Michael. Sammy, I know that you need to get away. Do you want in?

Mr Douglas: Thank you, Chair. You are correct, Michael, when you say that there is a lot of information there. However, it is very good information, so I appreciate that.

Sian, my question is perhaps for you. Last night, we had an Adjournment debate about tourism in — sorry — East Belfast. I want to declare an interest. My son runs the Hudson Bar in Gresham Street. I think that it is in your constituency, Fra. It is clear that tourist numbers have been on the increase recently. Look at the likes of Ballyhackamore and the number of excellent restaurants and pubs there. It has become the new Lisburn Road of Belfast.

My question relates to the whole issue of ICT support. There are many part-time workers in the food and drink industry. What support can employees in the like of a pub or restaurant access? I think that Bronwyn said that we learned at the European Employment Forum 2013 that, in 10 years' time, over 90% of people in every industry will need ICT skills. It is important for all the sectors.

Mr Gould: Sian is offering me the opportunity to come in, Sammy. We recognise the tourist sector as being vital. The work that we did led to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's work on ni2012. We continue to support the industry through things such as WorldHost training, whereby a group of skills advisers will go into any business and work with the company to see what training individual employees need. That could be ICT training, and we are happy to help fund and organise training for a business if ICT is recognised as being the issue for a company. For the individual, there is plenty of provision in further education colleges and part-time provision through universities, including the Open University.

Mr Douglas: Say that a pub had six workers, and they all wanted to do ICT. Is it possible that they could go on a course as a group?

Mr Gould: Yes, and the provision can come to them so that they can be trained on the company's premises.

Mr Douglas: I assume that the likes of Bombardier and Harland and Wolff have been involved on the engineering side.

Mr G Wilson: Yes, the engineering group consists of DETI; Invest NI; DEL; DE.; Bombardier; Seagate.; A J Power; Magellan Aerospace; Moyola Precision Engineering; Caterpillar; Japan Tobacco International (JTI); Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE); Michelin; Schrader Electronics; chambers of commerce; the Confederation of British Industry (CBI); universities; colleges; a couple of sector skills councils; Semta; and ADS Northern Ireland. It is a pretty big group.

Mr Douglas: You got them all anyway. Well done. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson: ICT coding was a big thing. Where are you with that, or what are you introducing?

Ms McCleave: That is one of the main skill shortages that the sector faces, so most of our work is focused on the coding issue. A raft of initiatives has been taken forward. One called CoderDojo is at some colleges and is well supported. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) recently introduced into some schools an A level in system software. Some schools also teach a non-CCEA qualification. Applications for computer science courses at universities are up massively.

Mr Gould: The academies that we will put in place for a company or companies, where we can aggregate the demand of a number of small companies, are principally about coding.

The Chairperson: Are there any updates on the agrifood action plan of June 2012, George? The plan, published by Minister Farry in June 2012, set out the actions for the following 12 months.

Mr G Wilson: The most recent meeting of the future skills action group on food was to discuss what happened in the previous year. Some of the things that I outlined — placements for the unemployed, talent management, apprenticeships and Tasty Careers — were the types of things coming out of that action plan. The main thing on the negative side was that more membership was needed, and we and the group are looking at that.

The Chairperson: The tie-in in that group was the co-chair Tony O'Neill, who is also chair of the Agri-Food Strategy Board (AFSB). Is there duplication between the two? I am conscious that some of the recommendations of the future skills action group are similar to those in the agrifood strategy.

Mr Gould: The food and drink group that we initiated preceded Tony's work on the Agri-Food Strategy Board. It has been fortuitous that Tony is chair of both, because he is very familiar with the skills work and brought that into the Going for Growth report. The Executive's response to Going for Growth will reflect that and try to coalesce the skills issues. Our Department will not have the full remit to deal with, for example, farmers. That is for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). However, we will work with the group to look at all the skills issues.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentations. Regarding the manufacturing and engineering group, the sector employs at least 5,000 people in County Tyrone. How many representatives on the working group come from Tyrone?

Mr G Wilson: I do not know. I have the names of the employers, but I do not know where they are based.

Ms McGahan: I listened, but —

Mr Gould: We are more than happy for any of the employers from Tyrone to be involved in the group, particularly those that are involved in the quarries or the manufacturing of products that crush stone.

Ms McGahan: How can I go about taking that forward?

Mr Gould: I will happily talk to any of the employers. If there are groups or individual employers that want someone to talk to them about being involved in the group, I will happily go and meet them.

Ms McCleave: When it comes to informing that group, there is a Northern Ireland adviser for employment and skills, Bill McGinnis. He undertook a lot of work, focusing particularly on identifying skills needs in the area.

Mr Gould: Dungannon and Ballygawley.

Ms McCleave: He did speak to quite a few employers from that area.

Ms McGahan: There are four subgroups, and one is on general manufacturing. Is Manufacturing NI involved in that subgroup?

Mr Gould: It is not specifically on the group, because, as you know, it is currently changing its chief executive. I am due to meet its representatives at 2.00 pm today actually. I have been in very close contact with Brian throughout the whole process.

Ms McGahan: Regarding the food and drink sector, it was recently brought to my attention that there was an A level in agriculture, which I guess takes in that particular area of work. However, it had to be pulled because of a lack of numbers. I do not know whether having some flexibility around that course has been raised with you. I know of a number of young people from a secondary school who had to travel to South West College to do the A level, but because the class did not have 10 or more people, it was subsequently pulled. The students were quite disappointed, because it is an area that they want to pursue. I do not know whether that is on your radar.

Mr Gould: That specific issue has not been brought to the group yet.

Ms McGahan: I have not seen the content of the agriculture A level, but I guess that it takes in that particular sector.

Mr Gould: It seems to me that that would fit well with the programmes that CAFRE offers. It could almost act as a feeder into its programmes in agricultural production.

The Chairperson: Folks, thank you very much for your time and your presentation.