



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Departmental European Policy  
Developments including the European Social  
Fund 2014–20: Departmental Briefing

5 February 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Employment and Learning

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2014–20: Departmental Briefing

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

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)  
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Sammy Douglas  
Mr Phil Flanagan  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mr Chris Lyttle  
Mr Fra McCann  
Mr Pat Ramsey  
Mr Alastair Ross

**Witnesses:**

Mr Colin Jack	Department for Employment and Learning
Mrs Patricia McVeigh	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Gordon Browne	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Colin Jack, who is director of strategy in the European employment relations division, Mrs Patricia McVeigh, who is head of European policy branch, and Mr Gordon Browne, who is from the Barroso task force working group. Folks, you are very welcome. Over to you.

**Mr Colin Jack (Department for Employment and Learning):** Good morning, Chairman. We have given you a short paper, which gives an update on where we are with the European social fund (ESF) and the competitive European funding programmes.

It is important to explain at this point that just because of the way that the EU funding cycle works, we are still in delivery mode in respect of the 2007-2013 round of funding in terms of the European social fund, which is one of the structural funds, whereas the budget that was agreed by the EU last year for 2014-2020 is now filtering into delivery of the competitive funding programmes, including ERASMUS+ and Horizon 2020, which are the programmes that are of most interest to DEL.

I will give you a brief update of where we are with the current ESF programme. We got additional funding of £26 million for the programme during 2012. Approximately £20 million of that was transferred from the European regional development fund programme and a further £6 million under the jobs and economy initiative. That money has been supporting 15 additional projects under the Northern Ireland European social fund programme, in addition to the 82 that we already supported under the programme. It has allowed us to increase the allocations across the full 97 projects that we support under priority 1 of the ESF programme. That has also increased the target number of

participants for the programme from 89,000 to just over 100,000. That is welcome additional money that we have had for the current ESF programme.

In respect of the new programme, members were briefed in December about the outcome of the consultation exercise, which we held over the summer of 2013. The responses were generally very positive about the proposals in the consultation document, and we have published the responses on the departmental website. We have also had some correspondence with the Committee following the 5 December hearing. We are currently working on the UK partnership agreement, which is submitted by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, on behalf of the UK Government as a whole in all the UK programmes delivered by UK and English Departments and those delivered by the devolved Administrations.

We are then required to submit the operational programme for the European social fund within three months of submission of the UK partnership agreement. At the moment, we are working on having the draft operational programme ready for submission to the Commission by the end of May, allowing for ministerial and Executive approval. Then the Commission has a period of time to consider approval of the programme. We then get into the process of deciding what activities we will support under the programme.

As was explained to the Committee in December, we have three priorities under the programme. The first priority is aimed at a range of groups of individuals who are facing barriers to employability. The second priority is aimed at tackling social exclusion, with particular focus on disability and community family support for families with young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) or at risk of becoming NEET. The third priority will be support for apprenticeships and traineeships.

The new competitive funding programmes are getting up and running rather more quickly. A number of the programmes have application deadlines in April for funding to be rolled out relatively quickly. There has been a rationalisation of the programmes.

Under the old round of funding there was a programme called the lifelong learning programme that included a range of strands: Erasmus, which was higher education; and Leonardo, Grundtvig and others that were more in the vocational education field. The programme has also been widened to include sport for the first time. A consortium of the British Council and an organisation called Ecorys individually ran strands of the previous programme and formed a consortium to be appointed as the new UK national agency for the new programme. They publicise the programme and administer applications for a number of strands of it.

That programme has a budget of €14.7 billion over the programme period. We are working with a range of stakeholders to promote applications from within Northern Ireland. We hosted an event last week, involving Colleges NI in conjunction with its counterpart organisations in the South, the west of Scotland and Wales, to promote opportunities under the competitive funding programmes for the further education sector in all the different territories.

Horizon 2020 is the €80 billion research programme for the EU, and it is the largest research programme in the world. The details of the first work programmes, which are over the first two years, were published on 11 December, and they are worth €15 billion. Again, we are working hard to promote greater uptake of Horizon 2020 by Northern Ireland's further and higher education institutions and businesses, and we are working closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on that. DEL's contribution is a £1.8 million higher education European support fund. That fund has also facilitated the creation of a network of contact points that are working with companies and research organisations to help them succeed in Horizon 2020.

I will mention a couple of further things that are not in the paper. The Executive's Barroso task force working group has been meeting for some time. There has been a review of the themes under the Barroso task force working group. There were previously four, and those are now being streamlined to be social, economic and environmental. DEL will jointly chair the social and economic subgroups of the Barroso task force working group to recognise the contribution that the Department makes to the social agenda and the economic agenda, and that will be feeding into the development of the Executive's European priorities for 2014-2020.

A further angle on that is that the desk officers in Brussels will be redesigned, if you can redesign people. We will have new liaison officers who will be aligned with the new themes. Gordon, who is with us today, has given presentations to the Committee on a number of occasions about the

contribution of his work. His term will come to an end later this month, and the new liaison officers will come on board before the summer.

That is a brief run-through of the issues. We are happy to take questions.

**The Chairperson:** With regard to your last point, if you are realigning, are you going from four officers to three?

**Mr Jack:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** Will three new officers be going out?

**Mr Jack:** My understanding is that the current plan is that one of the existing four will remain and two new officers will go out to Brussels.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Anytime that we have been there, Gordon has been able to keep the Committee well informed of what has been going on in Brussels, which is appreciated. I just want that to be noted here today because that help has been valuable to the Committee.

You mentioned in your briefing that one of the main aims was to tackle barriers to employment. I notice that even in your briefing paper, when you refer to your targets and what you have achieved, you state:

*"Progress against the revised targets has been good with many of them having already been exceeded ... Only the NEET target is proving challenging despite exhaustive efforts".*

I think that we have a Department that seems to be focused on NEETs, and I suppose that it is disappointing to read that.

**Mr Jack:** Yes. A range of reasons could underlie that. I have a summary here of the progress with the targets up to September 2013. Those targets cover the whole programme up to the end of March 2015. We have a target of 4,500 young people aged 16 to 19 who are NEET to take part in the programme. Up to the end of September 2013, we had achieved 2,300 NEET young people, which is 51 % of the target. Most of the other targets we have already achieved or we are 80% to 90% of achievement.

Part of the issue is that we had a second call for applications under the programme at the midway point, in 2011. Most of the activity for young people not in education, employment or training has come into the programme only since that point. So, in the first couple of years of the programme, we were really not doing well against that target. We now have a much stronger focus on the young people who are NEET. We also have a range of other programmes that we have introduced using mainstream funding as well as the ESF funding. We have the Pathways to Success strategy, the collaboration and innovation fund and the community family support programme, so we are confident of meeting that target by the end of the programme. It is an issue of phasing the activity that is coming on board.

**The Chairperson:** Was that target revised from the initial programme?

**Mr Jack:** No, it was the original target. I understand that there was just a disappointing response to that aspect of the priorities in the first half of the programme, which was rectified in the second half through additional weighting being given to activity for young people who were NEET in the second call for applications.

**The Chairperson:** You referred to consultation with local government, and we all know that changes are coming there. How are you finding that and how are you progressing it?

**Mr Jack:** We have been having ongoing contact with local government through the development of the new programmes. The Department of Finance and Personnel is leading the process of engagement through the consultative partnership group on all the new programmes, so that is not just the ESF programme but the European regional development fund programme, the rural development programme and, indeed, the INTERREG programme and Peace IV as well. So, we have engaged with local government through that forum, but we have also had a number of meetings specifically with

local government on the ESF programme, and we are continuing those. Really, the focus at the moment is on working with them to make sure that we have an application process under the new programme, where there is complementarity between what we support under the European social fund and what local government will do in the future. We are conscious of the reconstitution of local government, the introduction of community planning and so on. We will be keeping very close to that as it rolls out.

**The Chairperson:** OK. I suppose from the Committee's point of view, another point is that you stated that the operational programme is ready to go to the Commission in May. Have you any intention of letting this Committee see it before it goes?

**Mr Jack:** Yes, we will come back to the Committee before we do that.

**The Chairperson:** That would be helpful and beneficial. Before I open the meeting to other questions, you refer to the fact that Horizon 2020 has appointed a number of Northern Ireland contact points. Will you supply those to the Committee, as well, so that we have them on a constituency basis and can make use of them?

**Mr Jack:** We can certainly do that, yes.

**Mr Douglas:** Thank you for the presentation so far, Colin. I echo the Chair's remarks about Gordon being very helpful when we were in Brussels. He has kept things simple for us and I wish you all the best in the future, Gordon.

May I bring you back to the additional £6 million that is being made available? You said that that will support 15 additional ESF projects in the voluntary and community sector. Will you give us a bit of a flavour of some of those projects?

**Mr Jack:** Yes. In fact, when we had the second call for applications in 2011, we were significantly oversubscribed and we had a pass mark. We were not able to afford all the projects that had achieved higher than the pass mark. The additional projects that came on board were those that had not managed to receive some funding the first time round. So, there are a range of projects. Some of them would be tackling young people who are NEET, but they would tackle a more general range of people who are facing barriers to employability. All of those have been getting up and running over the past year. They are all now fully operational. There is still another 15 months of this programme, approximately, to run.

**Mr Douglas:** Would you take those projects from a list or would you say that you need a geographical spread, if somewhere, say the like of Fermanagh, lacks such initiatives?

**Mr Jack:** The 2011 call worked as a competitive list and the projects that scored most strongly against the criteria were supported. We are looking at how we design the new programme to make sure that we have a good geographical spread.

**Mr Douglas:** I was going to again raise the issue of NEETs being a bit disappointing, although you said that things are now improving. I understand that NEETs is a big problem throughout Europe. One need only look at Spain and its problems with young unemployment, which is much higher than ours. Gordon, are there any comparisons in Europe of how well they are doing compared to us?

**Mr Gordon Browne (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** There is actually a piece of work that has just arrived in the office in Brussels regarding that. I think that Minister Farry mentioned recently that there would be a review of training in the Department, and one element of that is to look at the problem of NEETs and how it is being tackled in various regions. That is about to start, and it will probably be taken forward by my successor.

Obviously, Spain, Italy and Greece have huge problems. They are starting to bring in a lot of new schemes, which do not yet have the data behind them. However, they are looking at some of the stronger areas that do not have the same tradition of such problems, such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Admittedly, they have a different schooling system, industry and so on that support them, but they are looking at issues of engaging young people a lot more in regard to career paths and so on in school at the age of 14. So, it is almost like the try to head the problem off before it becomes a problem.

I know that, historically, a problem with so-called NEETS is trying to find them as well, so it is trying to strike that balance between the ones we know who have already fallen into the category and stopping young people from falling into it. Some of the initiatives that the Department is taking forward with family engagement and so on are key to that, as well, but it is a piece of work that it is starting on.

**Mr Jack:** It is a very active area of policy development across Europe. There was a Council agreement at the last meeting under the Irish presidency in June 2013, where the youth guarantee proposal was agreed. So, member states and regions across Europe are considering how they will deliver the youth guarantee. We feel, through the Pathways to Success strategy, the introduction of the Yes programme and so on, that we had kind of anticipated that to some extent. We will submit proposals, through the UK Government response, to the Commission that will set out how we see ourselves delivering the youth guarantee. We will certainly look to learn from practice elsewhere. There is a lot of room for innovation.

**Mr Browne:** I should have mentioned that I have started to make contact with the Commission regarding this area, and it has informed me that it is developing its own seminar, which will come about shortly. It will probably happen after I leave, but it will look at best practice and so on in the academy. So, you are right to say that it is a Europe-wide issue that the Commission is also taking a great interest in.

**Mr Douglas:** Will you keep us up to date with progress on that?

**Mr Jack:** Absolutely.

**Mr Hilditch:** Thanks for your presentation. You indicated that the new theme of sport will be included in the programme. There has been a flurry of contact in recent days from different angles, including from people from the mainland wanting to get a bit of an interest in Northern Ireland. Is that linked to the idea that the news is out there that sport will be included? I am working on one at the minute to get ex-prisoners back into employment and so forth. It could perhaps be coincidental.

**Mrs Patricia McVeigh (Department for Employment and Learning):** Yes, I think that it could well be. I think that there is recognition of the importance of sport in giving access to young people and developing young people, as well as its social and cultural benefit in breaking down barriers and uniting communities. The Commission recognised that, and that is why it put sport on the agenda.

**Mr Hilditch:** The bit that worries me at the further education end is that there are some great projects out there at the minute, but the interest is not being generated at the other end on the educational side.

**Mr Browne:** This week in Brussels there is an information day for the sport aspect of ERASMUS+, and I know that others in the office are attending it. So, I can send you some of the information from that.

**Mr Hilditch:** That would be very useful.

**Mr Browne:** I also know that the IFA, the GAA and Ulster Rugby will come to Brussels in late February to look at some of the issues. So, again, we can feed back some information to you on that.

**Mr Jack:** Not through our European-funded activity but through the collaboration and innovation fund for young people not in education, employment or training, we have recently brought on board an additional six projects under the collaboration and innovation fund. One of those projects is with an organisation that uses sport as a medium to encourage the development of young people. That will be part of the set of approaches of working with young people that we will be evaluating through the evaluation of Pathways to Success. So, it will be interesting to see the results of that.

**Mr Hilditch:** That is good. I look forward to that information coming forward.

On social inclusion, I am aware that, under the disability strategy, it is still proving very difficult to get employers to take folk on at the minute. How do you see things panning out there?

**Mr Jack:** We are working on that. The disability sector has been a very strong feature of the current programme, and we anticipate that continuing to be the case. In fact, there will probably be a more explicit emphasis on disability in the new programme. We are working up the detail at the moment, but I know that some of those organisations have been facing challenges in securing placements with employers. The employment service in DEL has a lead role in engagement with employers, and we want to encourage all employers to offer opportunities.

**Mr Hilditch:** There are fair enough incentives there as well, but that barrier still seems to exist.

**Mr Jack:** There is also quite a concerted effort in the public sector to encourage public sector employers to remove some of the barriers to giving work placements, including to those with disabilities as well as to those who face other barriers. Certainly, the Department wanted to lead the way and offer placements in the Department, and there were various bureaucratic hurdles to be resolved with that. However, we have successfully negotiated those hurdles and are working with other Departments, local government and others to do that.

**Mr F McCann:** David touched on some of the points that I wanted to make. Usually when we ask questions about youth unemployment, it is paraphrased to say, as Sammy did, that other countries are much worse than here. However, when you drill down into youth unemployment here, you see that, although you might have an average across the North, there are huge pockets that are every bit as bad as anywhere else. What is being done to highlight that and to try to tackle it on the ground?

**Mr Jack:** Better information has become available since the 2011 census to give us more information at a local level not only about unemployment generally but about youth unemployment specifically and where it is. One of the difficulties that we have had is that the information that we have generally comes from the labour force survey. That is good when you are looking for an overall picture of unemployment, but, when you start getting into smaller groups and smaller geographical areas, you get sampling error coming in, and it is more difficult to have robust figures. However, it can be obvious on the ground where there are higher levels of youth unemployment. In funding programmes, we fund them where the need is. That is certainly something that we want to guide us in the development of the new ESF programme and in anything that we are doing for young people who are not in education, employment or training.

**Mr F McCann:** I have one other point to make. Since I came on to the Committee, we have been deeply impressed by the way that the Germans do things, but there is a lot hidden there. Recently, I saw a programme on the huge unemployment that there is in, I think, northern Germany. Apprenticeships do not work, and there is high unemployment there. The fact that there are serious problems there never comes through. Sometimes you wonder why, if what they do is so impressive, they do not move it to those areas. I must say that it applies most in communities where immigrants live.

I have another question to ask. Is there anything in Europe that tracks emigration from countries and looks at the impact that it has on skills and the workforce?

**Mr Browne:** There is the EURES portal, I think, which looks at portability for people in employment, but I am not sure whether it tracks where people are going. I suppose the great European model is a Europe without borders. The Commission is very keen that people move freely and so on. We have had discussions with such regions as Baden-Württemberg in Germany, which is a very well-off and wealthy region, and it has a lot of big industry. It still has skill shortages. Its youth unemployment rate is 6% or 7%, but it still wants more people to come in. That is one of the angles that we have been talking about. Ideally, they want people from Northern Ireland, say, to come across and stay, but we would like them to learn new skills and come back, obviously. There is, maybe, a lack of information. Again, I can look at that a bit closer.

**Mr F McCann:** I would appreciate that.

**Mrs McVeigh:** Fra, I think that the OECD would probably do some work on things like that. Migration is going to be one of the issues to be considered under the new Greek presidency. We may find that there will be issues that will be looked at in the future. So, you could look at the OECD as a possible source for migration rates.

**Mr Browne:** I know that Spain has highlighted huge problems due to its astronomical levels of youth unemployment. A lot of its young people are leaving the country. Spain is worried that, when things pick up, the skills will not be there to fill the void. So, it is a hot topic, but I would need to look a bit closer to see what is available.

**Mr Jack:** The German experience has been very influential in the review of apprenticeships that the Department has been carrying forward, for example, but we recognise — I think that the Minister recognises this — that that is not the only place that you can learn from. We are very keen to identify the most appropriate models to learn from. In the youth training review, for example, which is getting under way, it may be that the school system in Germany is not close enough to ours for us to learn lessons. Maybe we need to look at some other examples to find out what the best model is for youth training. There are certainly lessons to be learned from Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and even some of the southern European countries that are tackling big problems and having to address this on an even bigger scale than we are. There could be lessons to be learned from there, as they are struggling with an even bigger problem.

**The Chairperson:** Gordon, I think that it was when we were out in Brussels that you mentioned that the Department was working with mid-Norway on a scheme about apprenticeships. What is the position with that?

**Mr Browne:** Yes, we had more discussions recently. We had hoped to have an event in Brussels in February, but mid-Norway was unable to proceed at that time. Discussions have continued between the office and the region, and the skills and industry division is very keen to look at the different models on skills and apprenticeships and so on. All the Norwegian regions now hold one event a year in Brussels. They are keen that this year's event be held in Northern Ireland and Norway, so it is almost broadening out now. The skills and industry division sent some information on the sorts of initiatives that it is putting forward and on what it is interested in. In Norway, their ears pricked up, shall we say, and they were quite interested in that. We have also had some early discussions with the Commission about its involvement so that we can look at what Europe is suggesting and what Northern Ireland and Norway are doing to hopefully build linkages for future collaboration. They are hoping to put something on in the second half of 2014. Again, we would be happy to share that with the Committee at a later date.

**The Chairperson:** That would be worthwhile.

**Mr Buchanan:** Apologies for missing your presentation. Going back to the ESF programme, Colin, can you tell us what role local government will play in that and the new programme?

**Mr Jack:** The process is that we are meeting representatives of local government and, indeed, other stakeholders to design the application process for the new programme. Under the new programme, we expect local government to have a role as a match funder, which it has currently. We are conscious that there is a lot of change under way in local government, with the review of public administration, the new councils coming into being from April 2015 and the community planning process.

There is a slight issue with the timing, because we will need to invite applications later this calendar year. So, that will happen before the new councils come into being. We want to make sure that what we do under the European social fund is consistent with the general direction of where local government wants us to go. We also need to make sure that it is consistent with the skills strategy. That is the main driver for us.

Again, the programme lasts seven years, and although we do not know what the economic situation will be towards the end of the programming period, I think that, given that we had two calls for applications under the current programme, it is likely that we will have a midway point in the programme this time round. So, if there is a change, we can take account of that halfway through. At that point, community planning should be better established, and it may be clearer how we can run the application process in a way that is consistent with community planning.

**The Chairperson:** To finish, the European priorities for 2013-14 are listed in appendix 2, and I can see that three of the seven targets that are rated as not green are DEL-related. Is there anything that we should be concerned about there?



**Mrs McVeigh:** On the targets, no. Some of it is a timing issue in getting data. At this juncture, we have just done a review, and I have asked for information on the quarter 3 targets. At this moment in time, it looks as though we will probably achieve all our targets. One of our targets was around the Norway seminar and things like that. However, we recognise, as Gordon just articulated, that that may be delayed. Are you talking about the implementation plan, Chair?

**The Chairperson:** It is the European priorities in appendix 2 and the mid-year progress report.

**Mrs McVeigh:** On the 2013-14 targets?

**The Chairperson:** Yes.

**Mrs McVeigh:** We are confident that —

**The Chairperson:** You are confident, then. We will bring you back again, Patricia, to make sure that you are still confident then.

**Mr Jack:** We are particularly pleased with the progress that we have made on competitive funding. I know that the Committee had access to a paper that Assembly researchers drew up for the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. There were some gaps in the information about the funding that was drawn down in the employment and learning sector. We have more complete and up-to-date information that shows us that DEL is able to attribute roughly 40% of the drawdown on competitive funding that Northern Ireland as a region draws down to our sectors. In fact, year-on-year, we have increased by 20% and upwards the amount of funding that we have been drawing down.

So, we are making good progress on that. It will be interesting to see how we do at the very end of the process, with the Executive's target of a 20% increase in drawdown across the board. The DEL contribution will certainly go a long way to help to achieve that target.

**Mr Flanagan:** I am sorry that I missed your presentation, but I was watching it upstairs. Is there any indication from other European countries about the best practice for dealing with youth unemployment and long-term unemployment?

**Mr Jack:** We covered that in one of the other sessions. We are working on looking at best practice on targeting youth unemployment and long-term unemployment. Indeed, we have asked the Brussels office to support us in that work. Also, because of the implementation of the youth guarantee across Europe, a lot of information will become available about how different member states and regions are doing that. There will be a lot of practice to learn from, and we will continually look at how our practice matches up.

We had an intensive policy formulation period in 2011-12 when we identified youth unemployment as a big issue here. We also had the introduction of the youth employment scheme and the Pathways to Success NEET strategy. So, we are saying to the Commission that this is what we are doing, as well as the established programmes such as Steps to Work and Steps 2 Success and the further and higher education offerings, to deliver the youth guarantee. There will be member states that have not previously been delivering the youth guarantee. They will introduce new programmes, and they will all seek to learn from best practice and to bring in the most effective programmes that they can. So, it will be a changing picture. There will be a lot to learn from, and we will want to keep a close eye on it.

**Mr Browne:** I will just add to Colin's point. The Commission has recognised that each member state and each region has very different issues, problems, demographics, business make-up and so on. So, for once, they are not being too prescriptive about what you deliver and implement with regard to it. As Colin said, there will be a lot of different schemes out there, and it may be a case of trying to pick and choose the aspects of other schemes that could be slotted in and be suitable for Northern Ireland.

**Mrs McVeigh:** As Colin said, each member state will submit to the Commission how it is going to support the youth guarantee. Those reports will be available to us all. The UK have not submitted theirs yet, but the South of Ireland have submitted theirs, and we will get sight of that. So, as Colin said, we will be able to look at other countries and member states to see how they are addressing that.

**Mr Flanagan:** Where the budget allocation for the youth employment scheme is concerned, it is costing Europe around €20 billion a year, but the funding allocation is €6 billion over a multi-year framework. Are the Executive going to get any of that money to implement any of the schemes?

**Mr Jack:** The Executive will not receive any money from the youth employment initiative. That is only for regions and member states with youth unemployment rate that is above 25%. We have been below that figure, but there is still a commitment across Europe to deliver the youth guarantee. We are looking at how our programmes measure up against that.

The €6 billion sounds like a lot of money, but when you split it across the whole of Europe, compared with the budgets that are available under structural funds and from member state resources, you see that it is not that significant. So, we are doing a lot with our own money and with the ESF. That is the plan to address youth unemployment and NEETs. A significant proportion of the €6 billion is just carved out of the bigger ESF allocation.

**Mr Flanagan:** Do you know off the top of your head the definition of the youth guarantee scheme? Is it to create placements, better skills and jobs for young people? Is there a one-sentence definition for it?

**Mr Jack:** It is to provide a good quality —

**Mr Browne:** It is a guarantee of a place in education, training or employment within four months of becoming unemployed.

**Mr Flanagan:** Is there no mention of a paid job?

**Mr Browne:** It could be a training place. It does not have to be an actual offer of employment.

**Mrs McVeigh:** It could be, but it has to be a quality offer.

**Mr Browne:** That is one of the terms that the Commission has not quite defined.

**Mrs McVeigh:** That is why Northern Ireland, through its current programmes, is meeting that offer. For example, there is the YES programme. As soon as young people become unemployed and register with the jobs and benefits office, they will be offered something. So, that will be positive.

**Mr Flanagan:** I want you to be aware of my personal view that the youth guarantee scheme does not go far enough. When you say that you are doing enough to meet the conditions of the youth guarantee scheme, I still think that there is a lot more that could be done. However, I understand that you are trying some initiatives, and we fully support you in the initiatives that you are trialling.

**The Chairperson:** No other members have indicated that they wish to speak.

Gordon, this is possibly the last time that you will be in front of us as a desk officer. Have you any updates on the work that you have been doing?

**Mr Browne:** Quite a lot of it has been covered. Obviously, there is the current desk officer set-up. I work to DEL, DETI, Invest NI, DRD and the Department of Education. On the DEL side during the past three months or so since I have spoken to you, a lot of my work has been with the skills and industry division side. I mentioned the mid-Norway link-up that it is very keen on. There was a recent call for progress on delivering skills and growth where it was keen to showcase the ICT working group. Just the other week, it could not get the necessary partner, and there have been discussions between me, the skills and industry division and the Commission on the grand coalition for digital jobs. That has been ongoing through January. We had a meeting last week with the Commission. Skills and industry was over in Brussels, and that was very positive. I think that it is keen to take the pledge and to be part of that grand coalition to showcase the ICT working group, as well as to work across and learn from others as well.

We mentioned the engagement elements and the discussions with Norway. We have also had discussions with lower Austria and Baden-Württemberg, and we are trying to continue those linkages. We are at the stage where we are looking on the horizon for a lot of those new programmes coming on board. We are expecting quite a bit in the coming months. Obviously, we are coming up to the

European elections, and the Commission will lose its mandate somewhat before the new commissioners come in. Therefore, the next few months — up until the spring — is seen to be quite a key time. Colin touched on the fact that the Department is engaging with the various stakeholders in Northern Ireland, and that is a real key aspect of it. We want to make sure that we make people aware of what is coming downstream so that they can avail themselves of the opportunities.

**The Chairperson:** Gordon, your input to the Committee and the information that you have supplied to us has always been very beneficial and well received. That is the case even for today's meeting. It is always good to have that knowledge at the table. So, I wish you all the best in your new endeavours.