



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Programme for Government Update:
Department for Employment and Learning

25 June 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Victor Dukelow	Department for Employment and Learning
Ms June Ingram	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Billy Lyttle	Department for Employment and Learning
Ms Sheila McNeill	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Jim Russell	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr John Smith	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Daryl Young	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: The Department will provide a separate briefing for each of the departmental commitments in the Programme of Government (PFG). I welcome John Smith, director of finance. Commitment 20 is to increase the uptake in economically relevant science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) places. I think June and Billy are going to join you, is that right? Are you going first?

Mr John Smith (Department for Employment and Learning): Thank you, Chair. The way we propose to handle this is that I will briefly make a few opening remarks about the PFG, and then I will hand over to colleagues here who will take you through each of the commitments in more detail, if that is OK.

This is the latest on-running periodic update on our progress against the Programme for Government, which, members will be aware, is the Executive's overarching document and commitment to work through the issues that we all face and to provide the groundwork for economic and social recovery in Northern Ireland. The programme sets out the actions that Departments will take to deliver the Executive's priorities, the number one priority being the economy and the objective of a vibrant economy that can transform our society whilst also dealing with the deprivation and poverty that has affected some of our communities for generations.

As we move out of recession, the most immediate challenge lies in supporting economic recovery and tackling disadvantage. This Department plays a central role in that; in particular, in the rebuilding of the Northern Ireland labour market following the impact of the global economic downturn, whilst also trying to rebalance the local economy and increase living standards. The Executive's vision for the

economy is based on a sustainable and growing private sector with a highly skilled and flexible workforce operating in productive, sustainable and innovative firms that are able not only to service the Northern Ireland economy but to compete effectively on the global stage. Clearly this Department has a key role to play in that agenda, driving up skills and helping people to move nearer to the labour market and to stay in work.

Of the 82 PFG commitments, DEL has five, which, very briefly, are: to increase the uptake of uptake of economically relevant science, technology, engineering and maths places, otherwise known as STEM; to upskill the working-age population by delivering over 200,000 qualifications over the life of the PFG; to develop and implement a strategy to reduce economic inactivity through skills, training and job creation; to support people, with an emphasis on young people, into employment by providing skills and training; and, lastly, to ensure that there are no increases in student fees beyond the rate of inflation for Northern Ireland students who are studying here.

That is a brief introduction to the PFG. I now propose to hand over to June and Billy, who will lead off with the detail on the STEM commitment.

The Chairperson: Thanks, John. June and Billy, you are very welcome.

Mr Billy Lyttle (Department for Employment and Learning): Thank you. Commitment 20, as John has said, is to increase uptake in economically relevant STEM places by 700 by 2014-15. The targets stretch over three years. For 2012-13 it was 233 places, rising to a cumulative 467 in 2013-14 and finally to the full 700 by 2014-15. As we have already said, all places have to be in economically relevant STEM areas, so the places were allocated to the universities and further education colleges on the basis of their existing maximum student number (MaSN) totals at the time. Seven hundred was the total number that was considered affordable and achievable.

The baseline year against which the achievement is to be measured is the 2011-12 academic year. The actual measurement of the baseline and the achievement each year is taken from figures produced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The figures are produced retrospectively by HESA and only become available in the February following the end of the academic year to which they relate. That means that, for the 2012-13 academic year, the figures only became available in February 2014, and for the current academic year we will not have the figures until February 2015.

That said, the figures for the 2011-12 baseline year show that there were 3,465 students enrolled on economically relevant STEM courses. The PFG target for that year was 233 additional places, so that pitched the target up to 3,698. The actual number reported by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) was 3,885, so that is an increase of 420 on the base year, which means that the target was achieved and exceeded by 187 places.

The figures just quoted relate to the total first-year enrolments, which include both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. However, if we were to focus only on first-year, full-time undergraduate enrolments, the figures change. The 2011-12 baseline year had 2,735 students enrolled in economically relevant STEM areas. The HESA figures for 2012-13 show that that increased to 3,055, an increase of 320, a 12% increase in the year. Again, measuring on that basis, the PFG target has been achieved and surpassed. In the 2011-12 year, 26% of first-year, full-time undergraduates were enrolled in these economically relevant STEM areas. In 2012-13 that percentage rose to just under 30%, a 4% increase over the year.

So far, I have referred only to economically relevant STEM courses, as that is the target published in the PFG. However, members will be aware that a lot of emphasis is being placed on what is called narrow STEM. The list of subjects covered by that is the same as for economically relevant STEM, except that it does not include agriculture and related subjects. Looking only at narrow STEM numbers, then the 2011-12 baseline shows 2,645 undergraduates enrolled. By 2012-13, that increased to 2,950, which is an increase of 305, or just under 11.5% in the year. By the end of the 2012-13 year, just under 29% of first-year, full-time undergraduates were enrolled on narrow STEM courses.

In summary, the PFG target for 2012-13 was achieved and surpassed on the basis of either total student enrolments or enrolments of first-year, full-time students only on economically relevant courses. The target was also achieved and surpassed if you measure it against narrow STEM enrolments. That PFG target for 2012-13 — the 233 — included 23 places allocated to the FE colleges for HE and FE courses. Statistics produced by DEL show that achievement in that year was

an increase in 33 on narrow STEM subjects. So, in the part of the target that relates to the FE sector as well, there was an increase in 10 in excess of the 23 target over the year.

The funding made available in the current academic year, which does not end until the end of July, shows an additional 234 places. That brings it up to a cumulative 467, as stated in the PFG. But, as I said earlier, we will not have the figures for the current year enrolments until February next year.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Billy. No matter what way you measured it, you have hit your target.

Mr B Lyttle: Oh yes. We cut it several ways just to do that.

The Chairperson: Can I ask, in regard to the breakdown of the target between FE and HE, does the Department have specific guidelines between the two, or is it an overall target?

Mr B Lyttle: I am sorry, I do not understand —

The Chairperson: For your target of 233 additional places, is there a breakdown for higher education and further education? What percentage of the 233 target was allocated to each?

Mr B Lyttle: When we allocated at the time, the intention was to put about 10% of the total number into FE. So, across the three years, against the 700 target, 70 places were allocated to the FE colleges.

The Chairperson: You say that the funding is in place for another 234 additional places. How much is the funding? How much are you talking about?

Mr B Lyttle: That is a good question. The Executive made available an addition £1 million, £2 million and £3 million across the three years for that. In the current year, it is at least £2 million; it may be a bit more than that, but I do not have the figures to prove that to you.

The Chairperson: Is that broken up pro rata between HE and FE?

Mr B Lyttle: It is, yes.

Ms McGahan: Thanks for your presentation. I welcome the increase in the numbers for STEM subjects. Figures show that men outnumber women by nearly three to one in high-level STEM posts. Can you give me a breakdown by gender?

Mr B Lyttle: On the economically relevant STEM areas that are referred to, the total enrolment of men and women on full-time courses was 3,885 in 2012-13. The breakdown of that was 62% male and 38% female. It is 2,400-plus against 1,475.

Mr F McCann: Just picking up on the progress, when you look at the targets, it is amazing to see that there is only one red element. All the rest of the targets have been reached. The paper states, under progress to date, that we helped 23,471 people into employment.

The Chairperson: Fra, I think that you are looking at the next briefing. You are getting too excited. You have given somebody a warning about what you are going to ask.

Mr F McCann: I was just letting the next ones know what I was going to ask. I will come back to it, Chair.

The Chairperson: Where did the "narrow STEM" phraseology come from? Was it departmental?

Mr B Lyttle: I do not know whether it was departmental. It is accepted across the HE sector in the UK. The subjects are broken down into broad STEM, narrow STEM and economically relevant STEM. The use of the term "narrow" tries to focus it in only on the mathematics, physical sciences and engineering and technology, whereas if you broaden that out into economically relevant STEM, we begin to include things like agriculture and related subjects. When you go into broad STEM, you add

in medicine, dentistry and subjects allied to health, architecture and planning. They are generally accepted definitions.

The Chairperson: Billy and June, thank you very much.

Members, we move on to commitment 25, which is upskilling the working population by delivering over 200,000 qualifications. June is staying with us as director of skills. We also have Jim Russell, deputy director of employment service; Victor Dukelow, deputy director, analytical services; and Daryl Young, deputy director, further education. Good morning, folks. You are very welcome. Victor, are you starting?

Mr Victor Dukelow (Department for Employment and Learning): I am, indeed. Thank you, Chair, for the introductions.

In commitment 25, the Programme for Government requires the Department to deliver over 200,000 qualifications by 2015. If you look at the detail of the Programme for Government, and to be a bit more precise, you will see that it requires us to deliver 211,000 qualifications. That is what the target sums up to in total over a four-year period. Just to be clear on what is counted towards that 211,000 qualifications total, we count only full qualifications. Therefore, partial achievement is not included in the total. It is only those qualifications at level 2 and above that are counted towards the target. They are counted across FE; HE, including HE delivered via further education; our training programmes; and the essential skills programme. It is across a very wide base of the Department's skills delivery structures.

The target was set to be ambitious yet achievable. It was set so that it would deliver more qualifications than in the previous four-year period leading up to the current Programme for Government, yet, when it was set, there was also recognition that the young adult population, which is a really key demographic for the Department in delivering those qualifications, was due to contract by 4% over the Programme for Government period. Seeking to deliver more qualifications from a smaller base, effectively, was the ambition.

The briefing paper that I think you received in advance sets out the latest position for DEL PFG commitments, and that relates to the position at December 2013. At that point, more than 138,000 qualifications had been achieved. That is close to 140,000, and that is a figure that you should be familiar with. That year 2 position is certainly ahead of what we had anticipated, so I think it can be regarded as positive performance. Much of the data required to report on year 3 of the performance against that target is now in the public domain, and those data show that a further 79,000 qualifications at level 2 and above were attained in that year. That is an all-time record for qualifications delivered in any one year at those levels and brings the total number of qualifications achieved to over 217,000 over the PFG period to date.

Ultimately, that strong performance — this follows on from some of John's comments earlier — is likely to contribute to the delivery of the Executive's economic and social vision. In that regard, it is encouraging to note that around 30% of the qualifications achieved towards the target were in those important narrow STEM areas that Billy spoke about a few moments ago, and also that 20% of the enrolments leading towards those qualifications targets were drawn from the fifth most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. So, people from more deprived backgrounds are well represented in the qualification totals. That is all I want to say by way of background, but I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: Victor, can you give me a breakdown of the 217,000 year by year?

Mr Dukelow: There were around 65,000 in the first year of the target, 73,000 in the second year and then the 79,000 that I just spoke about that we delivered in the third year.

The Chairperson: The 79,000 is from 2013-14.

Mr Dukelow: It relates to the 2013-14 PFG period.

The Chairperson: So you have already met your entire commitment, then.

Mr Dukelow: It is difficult to count chickens in all this but the figures largely speak for themselves, I think.

The Chairperson: You referenced deprived areas.

Mr Dukelow: Yes. When we look at the enrolment figures, we look at to what extent people from the more deprived areas of Northern Ireland are taking up provision. We count that on the basis of NISRA's multiple deprivation analysis, which ranks super output areas in Northern Ireland. Those are very small areas of about 1,000 households. It ranks the super output areas, and we are able to look at the fifth most deprived areas on that basis and examine to what extent students are drawn from those fifth most deprived areas. It is encouraging to note that about 20% of our enrolment is drawn from those fifth most deprived areas.

The Chairperson: Do you have any information on why that is now, because I know that it was not that in the past? Is the Department proactively doing that? At what level are those courses?

Mr Daryl Young (Department for Employment and Learning): In the FE sector, that is definitely the case. I do not have that specific figure in front of me, but I think that, in FE, it would probably be higher than 20% from the fifth of the population. We have a number of programmes where colleges encourage access for those who are most disadvantaged or who are furthest from the labour market — for example, the learner access and improvement programme for disengaged adults. We put a lot of emphasis, through the FE sector, on bringing in people from the most disadvantaged areas.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation, Victor. The last time that you were at this Committee, you gave a presentation on international adult skills.

Mr Dukelow: Oh yes.

Ms McGahan: I asked you about the agrifood industry, which employs 92,000 in the North and is identified as a priority area for skills provision. According to that presentation, it still had one of the lowest scores for literacy and numeracy. I asked you why that was, and you said that you would have to go back and look at it. Have you done that? Now, I know that one of you stated that 36% of people who are enrolled in essential skills are in employment, but I want to drill down into that sector, given the fact that it is a priority area for skills provision.

Mr Dukelow: I would need to look back at the record and how we responded. However, if memory serves me right, in the data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) study, it was difficult to drill down to that level in the sectoral material. I would need to just remind myself —

Ms McGahan: If this is a priority area for the Minister, surely we need that data.

Mr Dukelow: I do not know if June wants to comment. Certainly an immense amount of work has been done, not just in the PIAAC study but on statistics more generally, seeking to identify rates of return in the sector, where the skills needs are —

Ms McGahan: Can I ask you to come back to the Committee and outline, in a detailed way, how you are focusing on the agrifood industry, given the fact that it employs 92,000 people in the North? That is important. I want to know, in a detailed way, how you are focusing on that sector, given the fact that it is the Minister's priority.

Ms June Ingram (Department for Employment and Learning): The Minister has a working group with the agrifood industry, but, of course, we will come back with more detail on what the group is doing and link in to the statistical issues.

Ms McGahan: I am just concerned that, at the last presentation that you gave, there was no improvement in skills. We just need to get an update on where that is.

The Chairperson: Fra, we are on commitment 25 now.

Mr F McCann: That is quite interesting about the 20% of people who come from deprived areas. Are you able to monitor them to see what the dropout rate is and how they are progressing?

Mr Dukelow: There is that ability, because we have postcodes. When people enrol, they give their home address and where they have come from, so we are able to monitor to what extent they are retained on the course and qualify at the end of it. I do not have the statistics in front of me, but one of the reports that I brought to the Committee during the year is the Department's quality and performance report, which sets out these targets and commitments in more detail and drills down into that kind of area. We hope to publish the next version of that report over the next couple of months. It would be a good vehicle to look at that issue again and make sure that those people, while they enrol on the course, continue with it and qualify.

Mr Young: We do not have specific figures of the retention achievement for the most deprived areas, and we can look at that. However, it is probably worth saying that this is against a backdrop of retention rates across the FE sector as a whole being pretty constant at around 88% or 89% over the last couple of years. Over the last two years, the achievement rates from colleges have gone up from 80% to 87%. Those rates are very high and compare well with other parts of the UK and other parts of the world. That is the backdrop, and that partly goes to explain why the achievement of qualifications targets are on such good track; colleges are keeping more people and doing more with the people they have kept.

Mr F McCann: This is probably a follow-on from what Bronwyn said. We have been arguing with you in and around how you attract more people from deprived areas into education. Was anything different done to make that increase possible?

Mr Young: The colleges do a lot of work on pastoral care and support to try to make sure that they keep people who come into their college. The learner access and engagement programme (LAEP) has staff whose specific role is to attract people into college in the first place and then support and mentor them while they are in college. There is quite a bit going on in those areas to make sure that people who are attracted to the colleges stay in the system.

Mr F McCann: People might not want to follow a more academic route when they leave school. Do the colleges go into socially deprived areas — there are quite a lot right across the divide — and sit down with young people leaving school and tell them what their options are, or that there may be an influx of jobs in electronics, IT etc? Do staff sit down and try to encourage them and explain that getting some jobs depends on their coming through a certain level of education? Does that happen?

Mr Young: The colleges certainly should be and are doing that. There are two aspects to that. First, when a college is designing its curriculum, it makes sure that it meets the needs of employers and future skills needs. It makes sure that the necessary qualifications and courses are there. Secondly, at the enrolment stage, there is guidance. It is a mix of individuals' aspirations and the needs of the economy, and all are taken into account at enrolment.

Mr F McCann: How much is social media used to try to encourage young people?

Mr Young: I am not sure. I cannot answer that.

Ms Ingram: On that, we are also talking about the role of the Department's Careers Service; careers advisers in schools; making use of information on the labour market, the skills pipeline; and the demands of the future. We are looking at how we can increase the use of social media. The review of careers education will look at all aspects of how advice is provided.

Mr F McCann: There is a figure in the progress update document of 23,471 jobs. How many are full-time? How many are part-time? How many are short-term jobs? How many people dropped out? That is all important.

Am I talking about the wrong thing again?

The Chairperson: Yes. We are on page 64, Fra.

Mr F McCann: Sorry. I was looking at page 65, Chair.

The Chairperson: That is another question for which you have given warning. Folks, thank you very much.

Members, we are now looking at commitment 27 on page 64. Jim is staying with us, and Sheila McNeill is joining us. Sheila is the assistant director of the employment service in the Department. Jim, are you taking the lead on this one?

Mr Jim Russell (Department for Employment and Learning): Yes. Commitment 27 is the strategy to reduce economic inactivity through targeted incentives, skills, training and job creation. As the Committee knows, we briefed on this in detail on 28 May, when we shared with you the results of the first part of the consultation exercise, which was the public consultation. As we reported then, we had 58 responses and over 120 people attended our stakeholder events in April/May.

Given the nature of the issue, we decided to do some additional stakeholder engagement with employers, representative organisations and a number of the economically inactive groups that we are trying to target. We engaged with the Rural Community Network, and they held some focus groups for us with those people. We did that work in May and June, and it is now all complete. We analysed the Hansard report of the meeting of 28 May and used that as the Committee's response to the consultation exercise. We met the business community last week, and we have recorded and summarised its views. We have received and analysed the Rural Community Network's report on the work that it did with the various inactive groups. We have now a complete summary document of responses to the consultation, and that is with Ministers for clearance. If they clear the document, it will be published next week, and that will conclude the consultation exercise.

We also have a paper that will be considered by the Executive subcommittee on the economy next Tuesday. The paper will update the subcommittee on progress to date and summarise where we are in three parts. The first part contains recommendations on which there was very strong agreement and so should probably feature in any final strategy. The second part provides ideas and recommendations that divided opinion and require more in-depth and detailed analysis by us to tease out what the issues are. The third part contains new thinking that, perhaps, we had not previously considered.

If the subcommittee is content next week, we will spend the summer months doing the detailed analysis, with a view to having, by September, some firm proposals to share with Ministers to see whether they are content to take them forward. So we are on course and up to date. I think that we have delivered what we promised on 28 May. The Committee will receive the summary document when it is published.

The Chairperson: You mentioned that the consultation needed clearance by Ministers — plural. Who needs to do that, apart from —

Mr Russell: DETI and DEL: it is a joint target. I think that it is the only joint one in the Programme for Government, which slows things up. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee had to see it as well and comment, if it wanted to, so everything is doubled.

The Chairperson: The input, you mean, is a —

Mr C Lyttle: Or maybe the outcome.

The Chairperson: Have you been assured that your paper to the subcommittee will be on the Executive agenda next week and that it will be prioritised?

Mr Russell: It is one of only two agenda items next week.

The Chairperson: Members have no further questions on the briefing on 28 May. My request is plain and simple, Jim: keep the Committee updated.

Mr Russell: Sure.

The Chairperson: Commitment 36 is to:

"Support people (with an emphasis on young people) into employment by providing skills and training."

Ms Sheila McNeill (Department for Employment and Learning): The Department's target is to get 114,000 into employment over the Programme for Government period. The figure was broken down and front-ended because of the recession. The targets in the first two years were to achieve a total of 35,000 and 30,000. The Department performed well against those. In the first year, it hit 108% of the 35,000 target, with an outcome of 37,970. On the second-year target, it supported 38,871 people into employment, which was 129.5% of the target. The target in the third year, 2013-14, which is the year that you are interested in, was 24,000. The performance, to date, is 38,928, which is 62% above what we expected.

Performance in this area continues to be very good. In the year to date, the April target was 1,911 and we supported 2,906 into employment, which is 52% higher than was expected at that time of year. The combined figure for April and May was 5,477. Of those, 1,681 are young persons, which is 25.6%. Over the three years to date, the target was 89,000; the performance was 115,769, which, at 130%, is 30% above what we expected.

Over the same period to April 2014, the number of young persons was 12,386, which is 31.81% of the total for that year. For the year to date, it is 1,681 young persons, which is 25.64% of the total.

To balance that, the jobseeker's allowance (JSA) live load in May showed that the claimant count was 54,722. That is 6.2% of the workforce, a decrease of 2.4% on the previous month and a reduction in the claimant count of 1,325. Five years ago, the total was 48,000, so that is still quite a big increase on then, but it has been going down every year.

The youth claimant count, which is for those aged under 25, was 13,531 in May, which is 24.7% of all claimants. That represents a decrease of 3.7%, or 524 claimants, over the month and a decrease of 18%, or 2,972 claimants, over the year. The youth claimant count represented 1.5% of the workforce in May.

The live load is roughly at the 2010-11 level. There is still a way to go on it, and we are still way behind other Administrations.

The Chairperson: Sheila, thank you very much for that. Like, I am sure, other Committee members, I feel that the figures would be an awful lot more informative if included in your written submission. That is not a criticism of you, so please do not take it that way, but perhaps John could look at that. There was a lot of good information, but it would have been beneficial to have it in front of us and scrutinise it before you presented. Please do not take that as a criticism, but maybe we could have that for the next time.

Fra, you have been looking to come in on this.

Mr F McCann: Yes, from the start of the meeting. The figures make for good reading and are good to hear. This has been asked before: what is the geographical spread of the jobs? Are we impacting on the areas where there is severe unemployment and deprivation?

Ms McNeill: I have the figures for the highest ones but not where the results are. I will get those for you.

Mr F McCann: Is the 23,000 figure made up of part-time, short-term or long-term workers?

Mr Russell: They are all full-time, which means over 16 hours a week. The work is not necessarily permanent and some could be temporary contracts, but all are over 16 hours a week.

Mr F McCann: That information would give us a good idea and knowledge of the type and length of employment, which would allow us to make our mind up about how things are working on the ground.

Ms McNeill: I am not sure that that information is available yet. When HMRC gets its real-time information up and running, you will be able to get that.

Mr C Lyttle: Chair, I agree with you about the stats: it would be helpful to see the detail. I know that the media do not always tend to cover reasonably positive news. I think that it would be really helpful to try to communicate that information to the public to encourage people that there is progress in the right direction. Even though we are still quite some way behind other regions and there are pockets of

persistent unemployment, it would be good to balance that out with some positive information. I recognise that it is extremely challenging to get the media to cover that.

The Chairperson: No other member wishes to ask a question. Sheila and Jim, thank you very much.