



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE
FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY
FIRST MINISTER**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Programme for Government and Investment
Strategy**

14 December 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Alex Maskey
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Ms Caitriona Ruane

Witnesses:

Mr Peter Robinson) Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mr Martin McGuinness)
Ms Martina Anderson)
Mr Jonathan Bell)

The Chairperson:

I welcome the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the junior Ministers and staff. Thank you for attending this session on the Programme for Government. The Committee has agreed to collate the responses of the other statutory Committees to the Programme for Government, which

is what we did last time, as each Committee will have its own point of view on its issues.

I now hand over to you. Please give a briefing, and then we will take questions. I wish to point out that the session is being recorded by Hansard. I am conscious of time constraints; how are you fixed for time?

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister):

We are here at the will of the Committee, so we are not rushing away.

The Chairperson:

That is good.

Mr P Robinson:

Will 10 minutes do it? [*Laughter.*] Thank you very much indeed, Chairman. It looks as though it is a bit of a one-sided affair, with William having to take questions on his side of the House. The deputy First Minister and I are grateful for the invitation to appear before the Committee. We welcome the opportunity to update you all on the new draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland.

The draft Programme for Government is a clear statement of our intention to tackle important issues head on. We believe that it provides the groundwork for economic and social recovery. Before Martin and I talk about the document in more detail, it is important to say something about what it is that we have achieved to date, by looking back at the last Programme for Government. We delivered £5 billion of capital investment since 2008. We passed the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 — the first justice legislation to be enacted by a Northern Ireland Assembly in more than 40 years. We spent more than £140 million on the regeneration of our most disadvantaged areas through the neighbourhood renewal programme. We took decisions on 50% of all planning applications within 11 weeks, and 89% of all applications were approved. We delivered new health and social care developments, including Altnagelvin's £33 million south wing, the new £64 million Downe Hospital, the £9 million Craigavon Area Hospital trauma and orthopaedic facility, 60 new ambulances and £143 million for the new critical care block at the RVH, which is due for completion by the end of next year.

We funded more than £1 billion in improvements to water infrastructure and completion of the £160 million Belfast sewers project, resulting in improvement to water quality in the River Lagan and reducing the risk of flooding. We published a 10-year victims' strategy and secured £36 million for work with victims and survivors for that period. We started the construction of the £97 million Titanic signature building, which we expect to be completed in the first half of 2012. We also provided funding for the Giant's Causeway visitors' centre.

All in all, it is gratifying to look back on some of the achievements of the last Executive and to know that people are experiencing real improvements in their lives. However, I primarily mention those achievements to make the point that we did not develop this Programme for Government in a vacuum but upon a solid base of achievement. Of course, that does not mean that everything is perfect or that we do not need to go much further. Whatever people may say about the draft Programme for Government — and feedback so far has been very positive — it is aspirational, and it does include stretching commitments.

You will be glad to know that I am not going to list all the commitments in my opening remarks, but it is worth highlighting a few of them if only to demonstrate that the draft PFG is, first and foremost, about delivering for the people of Northern Ireland. It is about creating an environment in which people can exercise their talents and strive for a more hopeful and fulfilling future. For that reason, we make no apologies for the fact that the programme opens with a commitment to support the promotion of 25,000 new jobs. Employment and economic activity need to be at the centre of our efforts to enable people to contribute to their own well-being and that of everyone else.

Examples of other stretching commitments include increasing the value of manufacturing exports by 15%; supporting £300 million of investment by businesses in R&D, with at least 20% coming from SMEs; supporting 200 projects through the creative industries innovation fund; 8,000 social and affordable homes, eliminating air passenger duty on direct long-haul flights; encouraging industry to achieve 20% of electricity consumption from renewable electricity and 4% renewable heat by 2015; improving the thermal efficiency of Housing Executive stock and ensuring full double glazing in its properties; and agreeing to any changes to post-2015 structures

of government by the end of next year.

The draft Programme for Government sets out a challenging agenda, but, if it is to mean anything, it must inspire real delivery: we do not intend to wait until every i is dotted and every t crossed in the final version before we begin implementing it. Indeed, the process is already under way. You will have seen announcements about the outcome of the health review yesterday. Difficult decisions will need to be taken, but that demonstrates that we are intent on fulfilling the commitment to reconfigure health and social care services. Those services represent a major endeavour, spending over £4 billion annually. We are determined to take a grip of that issue so that we can deliver the best possible services with the resources available to improve the health and well-being of everyone and to focus resources where they will make the most difference.

We have developed a social protection fund to mitigate the impact of the harsh economic climate on the most vulnerable. Importantly, we have decided to use the fund to benefit more than 250,000 people through a one-off fuel allowance payment this winter. The initiative will support older people, cancer sufferers and individuals who receive a number of income-based benefits. That is nothing less than a real and visible commitment to delivery, although we are committed to looking at how to deal with such issues on a more holistic and long-term basis in future. Our decision to proceed with the Education and Skills Authority has unlocked a major programme of work to make it operational by 2013.

Those are just a few examples of the kind of work that is already under way to deliver the Programme for Government. The PFG is about looking forward and positioning Northern Ireland well for the future, whether that is economically, socially or environmentally. The priorities and commitments that we have identified in the draft document reflect a sense of common purpose in delivering meaningful and lasting change to all parts of our society.

That is why I am determined that we address the need to bring people together across religious, geographical and other boundaries. Quite simply, we cannot afford to waste our valuable energies reliving past conflicts; we need to divert all our efforts into improving our economy. It is for that reason that the programme includes a strong emphasis on creating conditions to improve educational outcomes, particularly for those from deprived community

backgrounds. That is, of course, fundamental to developing our knowledge and skills economy and making Northern Ireland more attractive to investors.

As I said in my statement to the Assembly, we also see education as a way of tackling the divisions in our society. That is why we have committed to establishing a ministerial advisory group to explore and bring forward recommendations to the Minister of Education on how to advance shared education. It is also why we have committed to ensuring that all children will have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes and why we are committed to increasing substantially the number of schools that share facilities.

Before closing, Mr Chairman, I shall touch on the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, which sends out the important message that although we need to cope with smaller capital budgets, investment is more important than ever. Our ambition is to invest £19.3 billion over a 10-year period, including investments in education, health and the economy. Those investments are important in their own right and are even more important in demonstrating that we are moving Northern Ireland forward. With your permission and on that important note, I hand over to the deputy First Minister.

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister):

I am also grateful for the opportunity to talk you through the Programme for Government and the investment strategy. I thank Peter for his initial remarks, and I will pick up on some of the points that he made.

First, we are fully committed to promoting aspiration in our new draft Programme for Government, and I welcome that. We will never tackle deprivation without enabling and empowering people to realise their creative capacity. Our people represent a huge well of talent and energy, and it is from them that we will create the economy and the society that we need for future generations. The Programme for Government will be genuinely transformative only if it reflects the need to rebalance the economy, coupled with the need to ensure equality and promote good relations.

A good example is the commitment to include social clauses in all public procurement

contracts for supplies, services and construction. Work has been under way on that for some time, and there are several key examples of where it has been used, such as in the building of the Peace Bridge in Derry. That is a win for the community, which receives the benefit of the investment; it is a win for unemployed people, who are given a chance to become economically active; and it is a win for employers, who gain new skills and experience and can demonstrate their value as innovative businesses. It brings more than a short-term benefit to those who participate. Members will know the critical importance of having real experience when people look for a new job. Such thinking does not conflict with economic development; it enhances it.

I am delighted to see commitments to critically important measures for growing the economy. Those commitments include achieving £300 million investment through foreign direct investment; increasing visitor numbers to 3.6 million and tourist revenue to £625 million by 2013; aiding the liquidity of small and medium-sized enterprises through a £50 million loan fund; developing sports stadiums for the IFA, GAA and Ulster Rugby; and extending the small business rates relief scheme to 2015. However, the programme recognises the need to support those measures with broader developmental commitments, as the priorities are interconnected and, in many cases, interdependent. We cannot expect to reap the dividends of a thriving economy in future if we do not invest in our people now. Therefore we need to improve educational outcomes for everyone and to tackle the disparities of opportunity between the most and least disadvantaged. We also need to tackle the root causes of deprivation systematically.

The draft Programme for Government is a step in the right direction. It includes, for example, very specific commitments to invest in social enterprise growth in order to increase sustainability in the broad community sector; to establish the new 11-council model for local government by 2015; to implement a levy on single-use carrier bags by 2013; to implement a strategy for integrated and affordable childcare; to deliver at least 30 schemes to improve landscapes in public areas in order to promote private sector investment; to develop Maze/Long Kesh as a regeneration site of regional significance; to develop the One Plan for the regeneration of Derry/Londonderry, incorporating key sites at Fort George and Ebrington; to fulfil our commitments under the Child Poverty Act 2010 to reduce child poverty; to tackle crime against older and vulnerable people by more effective and appropriate sentences and other measures; and to improve community safety by tackling antisocial behaviour. Those are, I am sure you will agree, real commitments to

transformation.

However, the Programme for Government has been developed, as we all know, in challenging times. We want the programme to be aspirational, but we also want it to be the basis of real delivery. As the First Minister said, it is not being developed in a vacuum. During the last Executive, we delivered a school improvement policy that saw the percentage of school leavers achieving at least five GCSEs at A* to C, including GCSE English and maths, increase from 53% to 59%; some 53 major capital school projects, representing an investment of £492 million in our schools estate; some £77 million of expenditure between 2008-2011 on urban regeneration projects, including the transformation of Derry and Armagh city centres, the new Peace Bridge over the Foyle, and the Belfast Streets Ahead project; improved journey times and safety on key transport corridors due to completion of several major road schemes, including the M1 Westlink project, the M2 improvement scheme, improvements on the A1 Belfast-Dublin road, dualling of the A4 from Dungannon to Ballygawley, the new dual carriageway on the A2 from Broadbridge Maydown to City of Derry Airport, and a dual carriageway link facilitating through-traffic on the A26/M2 Ballee Road East in Ballymena; investment of more than £250 million in protecting and enhancing the rural environment and contributing to the development of competitive and sustainable rural businesses and thriving communities; some £28 million refurbishment of the Ulster Museum, which has attracted more than 1 million visitors since reopening and has achieved success in several prestigious awards, including the Art Fund prize in June 2010 and the Sandford award for museum and heritage education; and the establishment of NI Direct as the premier online platform for government information and services, with nearly six million visits since the launch.

More than 100 strategies and plans form the building blocks of the programme, and those contain much of the tactical detail for delivery. Importantly, however, many of the commitments in the programme are being delivered already. Specifically, we are working towards rebalancing the economy, and our arguments on the merits of reducing corporation tax are well documented. Indeed, we have a meeting of the ministerial working group on the issue tomorrow involving the Treasury. I assure you that we are determined to argue our case comprehensively and effectively. We are making preparations to host the World Police and Fire Games in 2013, which will be an event of global significance.

We have also developed and are consulting on proposals to provide £80 million to improve pathways to employment, tackle systemic issues linked to deprivation, increase community services, address dereliction and promote investment in the physical regeneration of deprived areas through the social investment fund. Consultation on that is due to close at the end of the month. We intend to deliver a new victims and survivors' service in 2012. As many people know, we are developing the new multi-million pound police, prison service and fire and rescue service training college at Desertcreat.

The point is that we are determined to deliver. We are doing so already. Those commitments were not written as theoretical concepts but as real targets that everyone can understand and support. The investment strategy represents an excellent lever to drive forward the reforms that we are aiming for in the programme. Around 57,000 people are employed in the construction industry, of which around half are supported by investment in infrastructure and other public works. A significant number of jobs are supported directly through the investment strategy, and many more will be supported indirectly through the supply chain.

In closing, I want to stress how much we welcome this engagement. We are here for two-way dialogue. We are committed to using a consultative approach to finalise the Programme for Government and the investment strategy. Therefore, we all need to focus our attention on delivery. In particular, we intend to come back to the Committee with regular updates as we take the consultation process forward. We are happy to take any questions that the Committee might have.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. I put on record that the Committee and I welcome the draft Programme for Government, although I do not welcome all of the issues that it contains or does not contain. However, we believe that it is a step forward. Last week, we discussed taking the Programme for Government forward. It was thought then that the consultation period will end in February 2012 and that the programme would, probably, come to the Floor of the House in March. Is that reasonable? It would be useful if you could give us a timeline.

Mr P Robinson:

We have set out a fairly detailed timetable. I am not sure whether there is any slippage or speeding up within it. We have a set number of consultation meetings, which will take place during January and early February. The Committee will want to look at the consultation responses, as we will. We hope to be able to agree the final Programme for Government at an Executive meeting, probably on 8 March 2012, if we can make that date. Amendments may be made to the final draft before it goes for sign-off. We hope that by 10 March, before St Patrick's Day comes and we start to head off to the States or to other parts, we will have sent the final document to the printer, with an Assembly debate, perhaps, on Monday 12 March if we can keep to the timing that we have set ourselves. That will allow Committee members and others to be free for the St Patrick's Day period.

The Chairperson:

We worked out that we would need to table a take-note debate prior to that. However, from members' reactions last week, and with that timescale, there will probably be no point in having a take-note debate, because the motion will come forward a lot sooner than, perhaps, some of us anticipated. Although we appreciate that there will perhaps be slippage or movement, it would be useful to have that timescale.

Mr P Robinson:

There is no reason why you, or we, cannot have a take-note debate on the draft programme while the consultation is ongoing.

The Chairperson:

We anticipated that. However, we thought that it would be more useful to have more intensive discussions with interested groups, take briefings from them and collate those into, probably, one document for you. We will discuss that anyway.

I have a couple of questions on specifics: social homes, double glazing and thermal efficiency. The programme undertakes to deliver 8,000 social and affordable homes. Is there a breakdown showing how many of them will be social homes and how many will be affordable homes, because there is a difference? I noted somewhere recently that some organisations are indicating

that we will require 10,000 social homes over the Programme for Government period. How close will we get to that? There is a specific target of 8,000 in the programme. How many of them will be social homes, because if there are 6,000, will we be 4,000 short, going by the other agencies' figures?

Mr M McGuinness:

It will be a challenging programme of work, but the construction of social and affordable homes will provide much-needed housing for some of the most disadvantaged and a boost for the construction industry in difficult times. The programme says that it will deliver 8,000 social and affordable houses across the North. We will also increase the number of energy efficient, sustainable and affordable houses while addressing issues such as fuel poverty and homelessness. The breakdown between social and affordable will have to be decided by the Department for Social Development (DSD) in conjunction with housing associations and others.

Mr P Robinson:

To follow on from that, if I may, there are issues about how numbers are calculated in the Department. Very often, because a project has begun, they take the number for the programme as a whole. This is a matter for the DSD and the Committee for Social Development. We want to make sure that we have real houses that people can move into as opposed to the paper numbers that we saw in the past.

The DSD has not given us a breakdown of the social housing and affordable housing numbers. It has work to do to determine its own detailed programme. The Department's difficulty is that any housing programme can slip depending on how a housing association is progressing and whether planning permissions and other land purchase comes through. We expect the bulk of it to be in social housing, although we should not underestimate the importance of affordable housing as well, which was a significant element over the past four years.

The Chairperson:

Was the figure of 8,000 given by the DSD?

Mr P Robinson:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

Then, I assume that there must have been some discussions with the DSD about the figure.

Mr P Robinson:

It was their figure. We challenge every Department because we come across this when we deal with other figures in the draft Programme for Government. We challenge Departments on every figure to give us their view and whether, if stretched, they can reach that figure. I would be surprised if we can meet every figure in the Programme for Government. Indeed, I would be disappointed if we did so, because that would mean that we had not made them sufficiently challenging in order to stretch Departments to achieve them. However, OFMDFM was given that figure and the DSD is content that it can meet it. It will be up to the Executive to ensure, through the monitoring period, that if any target is starting to fall behind, we take whatever steps are necessary to bring it up to speed.

The Chairperson:

I assume, then, that the Department must think that 8,000 are sufficient.

Mr P Robinson:

I would have thought so. It could well be that were you to take everyone off the housing lists, then you would need that number of houses. However, that never happens, and it does not happen anywhere in the western world.

The Chairperson:

Double glazing is also a matter for the DSD. Do you have any idea of the number of houses that need to be double glazed? I notice that the document just says “100% double glazing achieved”, but what are the numbers?

Mr P Robinson:

My guess is that the number of houses that already have double glazing will be relatively small. Therefore, a major programme will be required — one that is being very much welcomed. We

are talking about most Housing Executive properties.

The Chairperson:

What about other energy efficiencies? I do not see anything about solar panels in the document. There is no indication of whether the DSD mentioned any requirement for energy efficiencies.

Mr M McGuinness:

As regards the new 8,000 social and affordable houses, we can say without fear of contradiction that solar panels have been installed in some of the newbuilds that the housing associations have been involved in, and that that will be a major aspect in the construction of affordable houses.

It is a very challenging programme, but the DSD has been happy to accept it as a challenge. In recognising its responsibilities to meet the target, the DSD recognises the responsibility, when constructing houses, to ensure that they are energy efficient. There is no point in constructing houses and then coming back five or 10 years later to install energy saving devices that could have been installed during construction. Therefore, I presume that that will be a major element in the newbuild of the 8,000 houses. We do not have DSD's figures for double glazing, but those will be tied to the wider issue of addressing fuel poverty.

Mr P Robinson:

Higher building standards, building codes and regulations will automatically require any newbuild to be up to the required standards. On top of that, double glazing assists in home insulation; and further insulation will be part of the DSD's programme.

The Chairperson:

The Committee has been involved in the child poverty aspect. The targets appear to relate to the Child Poverty Act in general. Is it reasonable that there are no individual targets in the Executive?

Mr P Robinson:

The targets are in the Act, but it might be worthwhile permitting the junior Ministers to say a word on this issue as it is their particular area of responsibility in the Department.

Mr Bell (The junior Minister):

We aim to complete the child poverty action plan in the first operating year of the Programme for Government. We are specifically looking at a poverty outcomes model, which will be designed to show the interventions that produce the best effects. As the programme progresses, we expect to implement key milestones, monitor progress through the use of indicators, and make sure that those feed through into the area plans being developed for the social investment fund and the social protection fund, as well as for the childcare fund. We believe that those are key levers for change and accelerators of progress in those particular areas.

OFMDFM officials have been working with other Departments on a child poverty reduction pilot study. The study was planned in advance of announcements in the welfare reform programme that people in work and benefits would be able to retain more of their income. Currently, someone on benefits and in work is allowed to retain a fraction of their income before their benefits are cut, on a pound-for-pound basis. We are looking at the outcome of the study, which aims to reduce child poverty in lower income families and could result in allowing families to work for a few extra hours without losing benefits.

Ms M Anderson (The junior Minister):

As you know, we appeared before the Committee a number of weeks ago and gave you some detail about the work that Jonathan and I are taking forward around children and young people. As we explained then, there are two ministerial subcommittees. One is dealing with a 10-year action plan, and we are mid-term in that period. The five-year action plan, which will take forward the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child concluding observations, is being worked on as we speak, and we hope that it will be launched in the new year.

The second action plan is around children and young people. Jonathan and I have had a series of meetings with children's champions in each Department. Jonathan and I chair a stakeholders' forum. The ministerial subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion is chaired by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but the stakeholders' forum is part of the infrastructure of that.

Jonathan and I have met departmental and non-departmental officials in relation to the work that we are taking forward on an outcomes model. Jonathan explained how we hope that is going to address some of the issues and concerns. I was involved in the child poverty inquiry as a member of this Committee, and I know the work that has been put in by the Committee to take that forward. The work that OFMDFM is doing involves co-ordination. That does not negate or replace the responsibilities of each Minister to bring forward an action plan, as the Act determines, in relation to tackling child poverty.

Mr Bell:

Chairman, you are correct in saying that individual targets are set out in the Act, and they include references to the three ways to measure poverty: absolute poverty, relative poverty, and the mixed measurement. Those are the three measures that we are aiming for, and our targets are equally ambitious.

The Chairperson:

I have a follow-up question about the indicators for calculating poverty. There are three different indicators mentioned in the Act, is that correct?

Mr Bell:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

But there are different targets for each of the indicators, am I right on that?

Mr Bell:

Yes.

Ms M Anderson:

Each Department has a responsibility for developing its own action plan.

The Chairperson:

I want to ask one more question before I move on to other members. I note that, in relation to

greenhouse gas emissions, you are using the baseline of 1990. Why is that?

Mr Bell:

Do you mean greenhouse gas emissions?

The Chairperson:

Yes. It states:

“to work towards a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35% on 1990 levels by 2025”.

I am curious about why you are using the 1990 level.

Mr Bell:

So am I. I will tell you in just one second. The target represents an increase in the ambition from the previous Programme for Government, which contained a target of 25% reduction for the same years.

The Chairperson:

I am sorry; can you repeat that, Jonathan? I missed it.

Mr Bell:

You are talking about working towards a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35% on 1990 levels by 2025?

The Chairperson:

Yes, that is it.

Mr Bell:

We have to look at the most accurate baseline, but the target represents an increase in ambition from the previous Programme for Government of 2008-2011, which contained a target of 25% reduction for the same years. Based on current Executive commitments, analysis of the available data indicates that Northern Ireland emissions in 2025 are likely to show a reduction in the order of around 33% based on the 1990 levels. Therefore, the 35% target is challenging. Achievement of the target reductions in greenhouse gas emissions depends on an effort across all Executive

Departments and accountabilities. The Executive agreed to the establishment of the cross-departmental working group on climate change, chaired by the Environment Minister. The group has produced a Northern Ireland greenhouse gas emissions reduction action plan setting out how each Department will meet its target.

Mr P Robinson:

The short answer to your question, Chairperson, is that it is the 1990 baseline that the Act uses.

The Chairperson:

OK. Is there any update on the reduction from the 1990 baseline figure to the most recent figures? Do we have any figures for last year?

Mr P Robinson:

We do not, but I am sure that the Department that is responsible for it does. We can get it to provide you with those figures.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. Before I bring in Members, I caution that I do not want five-minute speeches. I am going to be like the Speaker; I do not want five-minute speeches and then a series of questions. I am happy to have flexibility *[Interruption.]*

I have to say that mine were all questions. I did not do all the speaking.

Ms Ruane:

Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Tá fáilte romhaibh go dtí an Coiste.

You are very welcome to our Committee. I have a couple of questions and no speeches. It will probably take shorter than 20 minutes. First, I welcome the inclusion of social clauses in public procurement contracts for supply services and construction. That is really important. Will you outline their use and how they will help the economy and individuals? I know that you used the example of the Peace Bridge in Derry, and the same has happened in other projects. That would be very helpful.

Mr M McGuinness:

The Peace Bridge is a very good example. When the First Minister and I recently visited the Titanic signature project, we noted that around 35 apprentices were employed there, and many of them came from all over the North. It seems to be an idea that is catching on. People seem to accept that there are real benefits in upskilling workers, not only for those who are in long-term unemployment or who are just joining the dole queues, but for companies too. Many people who worked on the Peace Bridge have gone on to other and greater things.

In seeking to secure the maximum level of social return from public expenditure, we are determined to include social benefit clauses into every stage of the procurement process, whether it is with respect to construction, services or supplies. Those clauses and contracts can deliver skilling, re-skilling and training opportunities. For example, they can deliver apprenticeships or on-the-job training; create employment opportunities for people who are long-term unemployed; encourage equal opportunities for all, regardless of gender, race or disability; and support SMEs and social enterprises.

Of particular advantage to the Executive is the ability to match investment in an area while taking account of the need to get local people into employment. Contracts will carry a core requirement to target the recruitment and training of local people, and such a process can help to regenerate some of our most disadvantaged communities. We will ensure that social clauses are appropriate to the size of the contract and that their use does not have to add to the cost of a contract. One contractor with experience of working with social clauses in a contract found that their use was the deciding factor in securing additional work of £100 million when in competition with competitors who did not have community-benefit targets in their contracts. Therefore, we welcome a commitment from local councils to take forward a parallel process.

As I said, the idea is catching on and seems to have widespread support among all parties in the Assembly. From our dealings with the construction industry, we know that people there are determined to ensure that we continue to intensify efforts. I am told that the construction of the Peace Bridge created the following jobs: a community liaison officer; a labourer; a storage person; a boat man; a track safety co-ordinator, and graduate engineers. It also created the

following apprenticeships: an apprentice administrator, a trainee engineer and a trainee welder. Eleven of the 12 people who worked on the Peace Bridge went on to gain full-time employment. That is a clear vindication of the strategy.

Mr P Robinson:

It is also worth pointing out that, in this case, it turned out to be an advantage to the contractor. He was able to use his experience in operating the procurement policy to get a job outside Northern Ireland because of his experience and because he had been able to do it so well.

I will tell a story that is slightly “out of school”. In a previous life, when I was Finance Minister, I became chairman of the procurement board. I was being briefed before my first board meeting, and, needless to say, I asked something about the personnel involved. I was told that there was one person who might be a bit of a problem. He was from outside and had a bee in his bonnet about social clauses in procurement contracts. However, at the meeting, the more that that individual spoke, the more that I was convinced that he was right and that the rest of them were wrong.

If the Government set out aims and objectives, goals and targets for what they want to achieve economically, socially and environmentally in relation to procurement, then all levers of government should be used to reach those goals. The Government buy more than anyone else, and so are one of the largest procurement agencies in Northern Ireland. That puts us in the front line of using procurement as a lever to achieve our goals, which are set in our Programme for Government. It is a first-class way, and it is being operated successfully.

Ms Ruane:

Thanks for that. I have to say that I agree with both of you about the positive impact.

The final area that I want to focus on briefly is the review of public administration (RPA) and the education and skills authority (ESA). I welcome the decision on the 11-council model and the fact that the ESA will be established. I think that both of you spoke about educational outcomes, which is an issue that is very close to my heart. I welcome the fact that there have been improvements. However, I think that we all agree that further improvements are needed. In light

of that, will you outline — you talked about 2013 — the timetable for the RPA and the ESA?

Mr P Robinson:

In both cases, the first step will be to get the legislation before the Assembly and, indeed, to get it passed. I will deal with the timetable element of each separately.

Every indicator shows that it is full speed ahead for the Department of Education, but I think that there is still work to be done. I think that it was on 22 September when the then Acting deputy First Minister and I reached agreement on how we would take forward the RPA. We are still waiting for that to be progressed actively in the Department. I think that it is unfortunate that the Minister is not showing enthusiasm in taking it forward, in spite of it being one of his party's policies in the Programme for Government, which was brought forward during the election campaign and for which he got votes. It is an issue that we need to resolve as an Executive. Martin and I have a responsibility as the leaders of the Executive to ensure that when Executive decisions are taken, they are implemented, and we are determined that this decision will be implemented. In the draft Programme for Government, we have set out a timetable by which it should be completed. So, we do not want there to be foot dragging and miss the targets that we have set.

Mr M McGuinness:

The actual targets are to make the local government reorganisation Act in 2012-13, to have arrangements in place for the shadow councils in 2013-14, and have arrangements in place for the transfer of powers to councils in 2014-15.

It is interesting to note that the former Executive's decisions on the future shape of local government were announced in a statement to the Assembly on 31 March 2008. Despite the fact that the former Executive were unable to reach agreement on a way forward to allow for local government restructuring in May 2011, there is still a commitment by the Executive to deliver the vision of strong, local government that will ultimately save money and improve outcomes for the ratepayer by creating more efficient and effective councils. We have had a number of discussions about that at the Executive in the course of recent times. I have to say that I am very hopeful that people will move forward sensibly on the issue and expedite it as quickly as possible. It has been

a running issue for up to eight or nine years, and now, it is make-your-mind-up time. We have made an Executive decision, which is very clear in the Programme for Government, to move to an 11-council model within the time frame that I outlined. So, we are working in a positive spirit with everybody in the Executive to ensure that we meet the commitment that we have made in the Programme for Government.

We expect that ESA will be fully operational by April 2013. I think that that will be another very powerful development because, as we all know, education is at the heart of everything. It is another issue that has been running for too long. The good news is that we have agreement on the way forward. I think that ESA will bring huge benefits to our education system. I concur with Peter's remarks about our drive forward on the need for an intensification of shared education. I think that it is vital that everybody and all of the vested interests, some of whom may be reluctant to fully embrace it even at this stage, recognise the huge benefits that there would be for our young people and education system if we could intensify our efforts on shared education. It would be good for our whole society if we could do that.

I know that some people in the background who are involved in different aspects of education may have concerns; however, the Executive are determined not only to press forward but to intensify the work. The establishment by the Minister of Education of an advisory group is a clear indicator of the importance that we place on the need to ensure that we move forward decisively to bring our children together for the betterment of our entire society.

Mr Lyttle:

Thank you, First Minister and deputy First Minister, for your attendance to speak to this important document. I repeat the welcome that I gave the document on its publication. I fully agree that it is time to move on from the existence of the Assembly and Executive to meaningful delivery on economic and social progress, and economic and social integration. I welcome the key commitment to building a shared and better community.

Would it be possible to provide detail about the sort of businesses that the £50 million loan fund for small and medium-sized enterprises will assist? What is the timescale for the roll-out of the scheme?

With regard to the ESA, will you speak about the need to create sector-support bodies for the controlled and maintained sectors without reference to the integrated sector? Perhaps you could also speak about how exactly you see a shared education system working.

Lastly, the Programme for Government mentions an advisory group to alleviate hardship that may flow from UK Government welfare reform. Will you give us a bit more detail about that and its timescale? It is clear from discussions in the Assembly that extremely difficult times lie ahead as a result of those welfare reforms. Child poverty and childcare have already been discussed, so it would be helpful to hear from you about them.

A public statement issued recently in my name contained an inaccuracy; I apologise to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for it. I corrected that inaccuracy; it will not happen again.

Mr P Robinson:

Thank you for the latter comment. You were not on your own: the BBC ran a similar story. I appreciate the member making those remarks.

Perhaps we should caveat all our remarks on the loan fund, as we are dealing with departmental business other than our own. If you are looking for fuller or better particulars in any cases, we are happy to ask the Ministers of those Departments to provide them.

In common with many other UK regions, Northern Ireland has suffered from market failure in the micro-financing, debt finance, venture capital, technology transfer and business angel funds markets. We will, therefore, address that market failure, increase access to finance and ensure that it is less significant as a barrier to growth. Thirty million pounds of the loan fund will be available in the three years covered by the Programme for Government; the remaining £20 million will be available from 2015-16.

Do you want to deal with welfare reform?

Mr M McGuinness:

That issue exercised us before the Programme for Government was put together. We had a group of officials meet yesterday to set the process of the establishment of that group in train. We want to do it with all haste. It is hoped that a paper outlining the options will be discussed at this week's Executive meeting. It is also hoped that issues around support bodies can be discussed and sorted out very soon. We should make fairly rapid progress on that, given that all this is bearing down on us fairly rapidly.

It is important that everyone be involved in the Education and Skills Authority in a way that satisfies everyone. In putting the Programme for Government together, there were many intensive negotiations to get final agreement on the ESA and to be inclusive. The warm welcome for the establishment of such a group allows those with responsibility for implementation to move forward. However, it has to be inclusive and done in a way that satisfies all the interest groups, given the many neuralgic issues in and around it. We are happy to have agreement and an inclusive approach.

The Chairperson:

I appreciate the First Minister's point about other Departments answering questions, but is there any indication of what powers the sectoral bodies, which the Deputy Chairman mentioned, will have? Will they be only consultative groups or will they have statutory powers?

Mr M McGuinness:

Since it is primarily the responsibility of the Department of Education, we are content to leave the detail to it.

Mr P Robinson:

As Chris said, the ESA will bring together the boards, whereas, of course, integrated schools are not covered by the boards. Presumably, that means that the Department will have to look at another mechanism for ensuring that their views are taken properly into consideration.

Mr Humphrey:

I thank the Ministers for their presentation. First, on a positive note, the fuel allowance initiative,

the 8,000 new social and affordable homes, and the double glazing scheme are very welcome in my constituency of North Belfast.

In talking about moving Northern Ireland forward, the First Minister touched on a wide range of issues, including 25,000 new jobs; investment, particularly inward investment; and competitiveness on the world stage. The First Minister will be aware that many economists, businessmen and business organisations have expressed differing views on corporation tax. Can the First Minister outline the position on pressing for corporation tax, including when it will be devolved and reduced in Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson:

The Government have not yet responded publicly to the consultation, although we know that the outcome was overwhelmingly positive, with businesses of all sizes and from all sectors indicating their support. There was opposition, but it seemed to be based on a circular from trades unions. Outside the trades union movement, there was very little opposition. That is not to suggest that trades unions' views should be taken lightly. Their prime concern was that if our block grant was reduced as a result of corporation tax, frontline services might be affected. The Executive will have to look at that issue when they determine what the cost to our block will be.

Some further steps have to be taken. Tomorrow, the deputy First Minister and I and the Finance Minister will meet David Gauke and the Secretary of State and Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office to look at, principally, three areas: the legislative vehicle that might be used if corporation tax were devolved; the administrative arrangements that would have to be put in place; and, of course, the quantum of any reduction to our block. Each area will have subheadings dealing with its complexities — brass-plating, for example. The Government's expectation is that that will take some months to complete.

As you know, we believe that the decision could have been taken in autumn 2011. The Chancellor of the Exchequer visited Wrightbus Ltd at the time, and indicated that he hoped to take the decision in autumn. The complexity of the issue suggests that the Government will not be able to do that before the summer. However, if the decision is positive, the Executive will have to determine the level of corporation tax and from when they will introduce the changes.

They might announce their intention to do so and the amount by which they would do so but delay the date. Indeed, they may introduce it incrementally. The Executive have not taken those decisions. The united view of all the political parties represented around the Executive table is that those powers should be devolved to Northern Ireland to be able to compete with our near neighbours on the island, who have a much lower level of corporation tax.

Mr Humphrey:

The emphasis of the previous Programme for Government was on growing the economy. Are the proposals in the draft document for growing the economy and industry more ambitious?

Mr P Robinson:

I do not believe that they are over-ambitious, although they are ambitious. We admit that. When we deal primarily with jobs, targets are ambitious because the Departments involved were successful over the past four years; it is the punishment for success. For example, with regard to DETI, we set Invest Northern Ireland a target of about 6,500 jobs; it achieved well over 7,500. That told us that if we stretch that Department, it can go further; therefore, we have stretched it further. The targets are ambitious; however, the leadership is such that we believe it is capable of performing.

We know from our trips to the United States — indeed, hopefully, we will look at other destinations over the next four years — that Northern Ireland has become a very attractive place for business. The figures that we have set ourselves are based on present circumstances, and we know that we are limiting the areas where we can seek inward investment. We cannot go for front-office jobs because Northern Ireland is not as attractive as the South due to its lower corporation tax. Therefore, although we have set ambitious targets in the Programme for Government, had we power to set our own corporation tax, we could set even more ambitious targets.

At present, that is based on our looking at areas such as financial services, business services, ICT, high-end engineering, creative industries and the green economy. In those areas, Northern Ireland is an attractive place due to its cost-competitiveness and skills. However, all bets are off if we could set a lower level of corporation tax, as Northern Ireland's attractiveness could be

unbeatable.

Mr Eastwood:

You are very welcome. There is much in the document, so I will try to focus. Our party will make its own submission.

There are some notable omissions: one is the legacy of the past and finding a comprehensive mechanism for dealing with it; the other is the upcoming decade of commemorations. We have all been in discussions about that, and OFMDFM needs to take leadership. It is a difficult issue but one that we need to grasp.

I want to focus on the One Plan in Derry — the regeneration plan. It is very welcome to see it in the Programme for Government. You say that you will develop the One Plan, but what does "develop" mean? I asked questions about your spend and got the answer to one just before lunch. However, it was more about the spend on Ebrington specifically.

The One Plan is big and ambitious but essential for the people of our city. It contains 11 catalyst projects: City of Culture, the expansion of Magee, and infrastructural development, among many others. Like the people of Derry, I want to see resources put behind that. Can you tell me today or in writing what money and resources will be put beside each of those catalyst projects? Derry has many great plans, but we need delivery. The potential for delivery and change for the city would be enormous, but we need to see the resource allocation behind it.

Mr M McGuinness:

Everything in the Programme for Government is included on the basis that there is initial agreement by the Executive that it go out for consultation; in other words, we are agreed on the content of the Programme for Government.

The past and how we deal with commemorations are subject to discussion that involves more than the Executive parties; it includes the Irish and British Governments. It is vital to get agreement on the way forward before anything is put into a Programme for Government. Thus far, we have not had agreement on the past. I have said repeatedly in many interviews in recent

years that the biggest flaw in the Belfast Agreement or Good Friday Agreement, the St Andrews Agreement or the Hillsborough agreement is the lack of agreement on how we deal with the past.

Where there is failure, we have to acknowledge it; that does not mean that we accept failure. The past challenges us all, and it is hugely important that we recognise that there is still a job of work to be done. That is a nettle that will have to be grasped.

We have to deal with commemorations, which are important irrespective of people's political allegiances, in a way that ensures that there is no disruption of the incredible political and peaceful transformation that has taken place in recent times. There are people who will try to capitalise on situations around commemorations in order to exacerbate the situation on the streets. It is our job to prevent that, and all the parties are anxious to ensure that nothing happens during those important commemorations that in any way endangers the recent changes. Discussions on how we deal with commemorations will continue to ensure that they pass off peacefully and with dignity and respect.

Ilex has been at the heart of the One Plan, including the completion of an iconic peace bridge and the new parade ground that will be ready early next year. It is a performance infrastructure and public space. That creates an exciting platform with which to attract investment. The City of Culture 2013 is a fundamental element in the regeneration of the city, and BT has shown its confidence in the area by investing £3.75 million and making the city a digital capital through access to superfast broadband. Twenty digital companies have already been created this year, and it is such initiatives that attract investors and build further confidence. As developments at Ebrington and Fort George develop on site, the private sector is taking an increasing interest. Over the next 12 to 18 months, six projects will be brought to the market, both for direct development and for occupancy. That exercise will involve many millions of pounds of private investment.

The One Plan was published in June 2011, and Ilex is engaging with other Departments, which is important in ensuring that the process is used to inform decision making in the north-west.

By 2014-15, we will have spent about £30.5 million on the Ebrington site. The Department provides for revenue costs to Ilex, which is about 50% of its annual running costs, and other expenditure, largely in relation to projects at Ebrington. It is envisaged that the projects developed on the Ebrington site will be the parade ground infrastructure and public realm; that is well advanced and will be open to the public early next year. Work on the car park and enabling platform will begin next year and will be finished by the end of the year. There will be the refurbishment of the building to house a maritime museum and the development of the clock tower in the main square. In addition to conservation works to bring other buildings back into use in the site, that work will continue. The parade ground works commenced in September 2010, with a completion date of early next year. The car park project is due to commence next year, and, hopefully, it will be finished by the end of the year. The clock tower will be developed in 2012-13 and the maritime museum in 2014-15.

You will have heard the announcement about extra places for universities and higher education places. Magee is looking to grab some of those, and many of the places will be in the STEM subjects, which are very important to the businesses that we are attracting.

There is huge discussion about the A5 and the A8, which are flagship projects for the North/South Ministerial Council. The Irish Government's commitments were for the latter years of the project, and we were front-loading in years 1 and 2. However, in light of the very disappointing statement by the Irish Government, serious consideration has to be given to how we take forward those important projects, and Departments have been charged with doing that. It would not be appropriate to pre-empt here the outcome of those discussions, which will take place over the coming weeks, but, by early next year, people will have a good idea of how it will be taken forward.

The key is to ensure that lines of communication between Ilex and the Departments are kept open. All Departments understand their responsibilities, and there is an absolute commitment from the Executive to ensure that we proceed as best we can with the One Plan and to ensure that the City of Culture 2013 is the success that we all know it can be.

Mr P Robinson:

Martin has dealt with those issues fairly comprehensively, and I will touch on one or two of the matters involved, starting with Ilex. I have been impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of people in Londonderry. I have met people who are involved with the Ilex project and more widely.

We should all look at what happened there with some satisfaction because I suspect that all those groups had their own ideas of how progress should be made and they were able to bring it together successfully in the One Plan. It is an ambitious plan with challenging targets. It cannot all be funded by the Executive, although the Executive have a contribution to make; however, the Ilex board and personnel will recognise that they have to look to other funding as well. I understand from my most recent visit that they were looking for considerable engagement from the private sector. It would be a much better environment for the private sector to operate in if they followed the plan through. We wish it well and will give as much assistance as possible.

On the two wider issues that Colum raised, we will have one centenary after another over the next decade, and it is vital that in commemorating them we do not undermine the very real progress that we are making in Northern Ireland. There is a great opportunity for us to gain a better understanding of each other's positions by looking at the context of history. Perhaps by looking at history from a distance we will come to understand how we arrived at our positions. The centenaries can be positive if we learn to respect and have greater tolerance for the views of others.

There are many layers to dealing with the past: to a great extent, we were dealing with the legacy of the past when we set up the institutions here; the political stability that we achieved is addressing the issues of the past. Our Programme for Government commitment to a shared future and the work that we are doing and happily progressing under the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy will make a massive contribution to that.

When most people talk about this subject they are really dealing with how we come to terms with victims, their hurt and how it can be dealt with. There is more than just one answer. Victims look for different ways of dealing with the dark, difficult days that they have come

through.

One aspect of dealing with it is our looking at the Maze/Long Kesh site and the building of a peace and conflict resolution centre, part of which will be a storytelling exercise to allow victims to tell their stories. That in some way addresses the issue. Most, if not all, parties have accepted an invitation from the Secretary of State to bring them together to look at how we deal with the past. However, we want to make sure that in dealing with the past we do not jeopardise the future.

Some events where it looked as if people wanted to address the past became very heated. Therefore it is important that we do it in a way that respects people's very real difficulty in coming to terms with loss and, for many, the injuries that they will have to suffer for the rest of their lives. It is a very sensitive issue and one that we should not attempt to make a party-political issue; we should seek to resolve it in a way that allows flexibility for people who have suffered to deal with it in their different ways.

Mr A Maskey:

Thank you for your time and contributions so far. There has been much discussion about the social investment fund. I am very pleased that tackling disadvantage is writ large throughout the Programme for Government, and I look forward across the Departments to see how we deal with that effectively and holistically.

As you outlined previously, the social investment fund has twin pillars. Will you give us a sense of how you see it being developed? There has been a fair amount of speculation and suggestions about how the money will be spent. What are the current updates?

Mr M McGuinness:

There has been a lot of interest in the establishment of the social investment fund and the social protection fund. There has been a widespread welcome for how we utilised the social protection fund in trying to assist a fairly wide range of people who are affected by fuel poverty. It is intended that the social investment fund will provide £40 million to address dereliction and promote investment in the physical regeneration of deprived areas, and £40 million to improve

pathways to employment, tackle systemic issues such as deprivation, and increase community services. Although we expect to see improved outcomes for the four key objectives of the fund, specific targets will be set for the strategic area plan, and those may differ across the zones depending on baseline information and identified priorities.

We recognise that the issues that we are trying to tackle will not be addressed overnight, and we all know that. It will take some time before we see the progress that we would wish to see. Although we will see outputs during the period, the delivery of outcomes will not be apparent until near the end of the fund. Nonetheless, we will ensure that the strategic area plans have clearly defined outcomes and targets, monitoring and evaluation, and that will be an integral part of the work going forward.

This is a real challenge, not just for those in Government or those who established the fund; it also represents a real challenge for people in communities to come forward with ideas. This is about a bottom-up approach, as opposed to stuff trickling down to communities. We want communities to be involved in identifying issues in their areas so that delivery is not just what we provide; rather, it is what communities can bring to this important project themselves.

Mr P Robinson:

That is the critical issue. I was taking a breath after you asked the question, because there are two areas in which I think that it is necessary to pause. First, this is out for consultation, and we do not want to say what we are going to do until we have had the benefit of the views of consultees. Martin touched on the second issue, which is that this is a bottom-up approach. We have given guidance on the themes that will be covered by the fund. However, if it is to be meaningful, it is essential that the proposals as to how an area can be improved come from people in that area. It is not a matter of us telling them what is good for them: it is about them telling us what they need in order to realise the potential of their area. When we get to the phase at which people are looking at projects in their area, I hope that there will be — and I hesitate to use the word cross-contamination — interaction between the various zones so that good ideas in one can be picked up in another. This is a real opportunity for some exchange between communities to ensure that they get the best value for money out of the funds that will be available.

We are looking at the exercise not just in terms of the three remaining years that we have

under this Programme for Government, because we believe that it will be necessary well beyond the life of this Programme for Government. We also want it to include investment for the future so that it effectively becomes a baseline commitment as opposed to a one-off project.

Mr A Maskey:

Thank you. I have a final point. You earlier outlined the positive outcome that the Executive have agreed to move forward on local government changes, and you outlined the time frame for the legislative and enabling process. If there is undue delay, is there any point at which that time frame will be in jeopardy?

Mr P Robinson:

There is. We have set out the target in the Programme for Government and we need to bring forward legislation. A considerable amount of work has been done in council areas to look at how they can bring together those council activities that will form part of the new council areas, although it dispersed towards the tail end because no progress was being made. There is a lot of work involved, and we will want the Department to give us a timetable to show how it will meet the Programme for Government deadlines. We will be fairly stern in ensuring that each of those points on the time frame are kept, so as to ensure that we do not have slippage and fail to meet the overall target.

Mr M McGuinness:

The Minister of the Environment recently sent invitations to all Departments to meet him to discuss how all of this will be dealt with in the time ahead. Hopefully, those discussions will take place shortly. It is very important that the decision in the Programme for Government on the establishment of the 11-council model is implemented, because any failure to implement it means that we are squandering much-needed resources that could be utilised over the course of quite a number of years ahead of us for the benefit of front line services in both health and education.

Mr Nesbitt:

I have questions about two of the hard numerical targets. First, in relation to the 25,000 jobs, the deputy First Minister mentioned the value of apprenticeships. I think I am speaking accurately in saying that only 4% of the 8,000 members of the Federation of Small Businesses are currently

engaged with ApprenticeshipsNI, but that their research suggests that that figure could go to well over 50% with the right resource and support. Secondly, I know that the First Minister was with the FSB last night. It has a vision not of 25,000 jobs but of 40,000, not overall but just in the micro and small enterprise sectors. I would welcome your comments.

Mr P Robinson:

I am very supportive of the FSB entrepreneur initiative, particularly because it is not just based on the principle of bringing people into work but on the principle of helping our economy, because the intention is to encourage export drives, and that, of course, is a very valuable part of improving the prosperity of Northern Ireland. I support what they are doing, and, as I indicated to William Humphrey a short time ago, the targets we have set are based on recognition of the global recession, the finance made available to us and the limitations within which we have to work because of tax. If there are changes in those factors, that will change the outcomes. The real game changer in all of that would be a reduction in corporation tax. That would make life a lot easier for Invest Northern Ireland, and I would be disappointed if it did not considerably exceed the targets that we have set under those circumstances.

As far as apprenticeships are concerned, as someone who has spent the last 30 or 40 years as an elected representative in east Belfast, where we had the big industries and manufacturing, which had the apprentice system at their core, I am a strong believer in it as a way of ensuring that we do not start to lose valuable skills. It is an area that I hope DETI will look at to see what it can do to assist.

As you will know from last night, 97% of companies in Northern Ireland have fewer than 20 employees, but if each of those companies were to take on just one additional person, that would have a massive impact on the employment figures, which were publicly released today. It is good to see that Northern Ireland's unemployment level is going down — 6.9% from 7.3%. It is good to see that it is less than the UK average, almost half the figure for the Republic of Ireland and less than European and American levels, but it is still a great challenge. If you are in that 6.9% of people who are unemployed, it is of little comfort that the figures are relatively low compared to other places. Nonetheless, the challenge is there. Given all the circumstances that we have faced over the past three or four years, we have come out very strongly compared to those who have

faced the same kind of circumstances as we have. However, there is a lot more to be done.

Mr M McGuinness:

I agree with Peter. There are huge challenges for us as we move ahead. The main emphasis has to be on whether we can achieve a lower rate of corporation tax, because, from our experiences, we have proven that even against a backdrop of a high rate of corporation tax, we are still attracting a lot of foreign direct investment. In fact, during our stewardship of the Executive over the years, we have brought in more jobs through foreign direct investment than at any other time in the history of the state. If we can do that against the backdrop of a high rate of corporation tax, just think about what is achievable.

When we took part in the economic investment conference at the State Department, which was supported by Hilary Clinton and President Obama, we learnt that the businesses there expressed their keenness to come here if we could get a lower rate of corporation tax. However, all of this will centre on whether we can get the tax at a rate that is affordable and acceptable to our Executive and Assembly.

Those important discussions will commence tomorrow. I hope that we will not see a foot-dragging exercise on the issue. As Peter said, we expected that we would have had an announcement in the autumn, but it looks likely that it will not happen until next summer. However, we know that there are all sorts of attitudes in the Treasury and in Downing Street, where it was clear to us from the very beginning that there was coolness on the issue from the Treasury. However, as articulated by Owen Paterson and others, in the political sphere, they were quite keen that this would be done.

Therefore, this is something that they have to work out among themselves. We are advocating very strongly on behalf of the Assembly and all parties in the Executive that this needs to be done, that we are at a huge disadvantage, and that we can dramatically improve employment prospects, particularly for our young people, if we can have the powers to devolve corporation tax in our own hands.

Therefore, this is a difficult and challenging time. Unemployment statistics in mainland

Europe are massive compared to those we are facing. As Peter said, it is unacceptable that 6.9% of our people are not in employment, but, when you look at unemployment statistics in places such as Spain, Portugal and Greece, they are through the roof. Even down South yesterday, there was a further increase in unemployment levels to something like 14.5%. Therefore, we are focused on ensuring that developing our economy remains front and centre of our Programme for Government, and it is hugely important that all the strategies and tactics that we can deploy are utilised to get the best results for the people whom we represent.

Mr Nesbitt:

I would like to ask about the tourism targets, because I see the Titanic signature building on the front cover of the Programme for Government. The Comptroller and Auditor General said that the alternative proposal from the Odyssey Trust would have been a lot easier on the public purse — £40 million compared to the Titanic building's £60 million — and that the OTC would have yielded more in terms of long-term cash benefits. Therefore, what was wrong with the wrap-around at W5? Why did you go for this project?

Mr P Robinson:

Did you see the wrap-around at W5? It did not inspire me, I have to say.

Mr Nesbitt:

What about the economic appraisal that seems to favour the OTC?

Mr P Robinson:

That was their economic appraisal. My view of auditors might have sneaked out during Question Time this week. The visitor figures that we have in the Programme for Government require us to do much better than we have done in any previous year; they represent a significant increase.

I believe that people will be blown away by the new Titanic signature project when it opens. It is a fantastic concept, and the building is great. The deputy First Minister and I visited it just over a week ago, and it is beginning to take shape. They already have about 30,000 visitor bookings from sources outside Northern Ireland. It will be a very significant attraction in Northern Ireland.

Interestingly, some of the market research that they carried out showed that the Titanic is better known than Ireland by people in middle Asia and south Asia. From that point of view, we have a massive commodity for the tourist industry. I do not think that anyone will be disappointed by the Titanic signature project. The rather more makeshift one proposed for the side of the Odyssey paled in comparison to what is happening. I accept that this is a much more extensive proposition, but it is a much more permanent proposition that, in international terms, will be seen as a must-go destination.

Mr M McGuinness:

Maybe, we are just more ambitious for the future than the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Mr Nesbitt:

You are remarkably clear on the point. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson:

First Minister, deputy First Minister and junior Ministers, thank you very much for your presentation and generosity of time. We will collate the views of other Committees and discuss the possibility of a take-note debate.