



Public Accounts Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Developing the Skills for Northern
Ireland's Future: Department for the
Economy; Department of Finance; Northern
Ireland Audit Office

21 November 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Public Accounts Committee

Inquiry into Developing the Skills for Northern Ireland's Future: Department for the Economy; Department of Finance; Northern Ireland Audit Office

21 November 2024

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Daniel McCrossan (Chairperson)
Ms Cheryl Brownlee (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Tom Buchanan
Mr Colin Crawford
Mr Pádraig Delargy
Ms Diane Forsythe
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr David Honeyford

Witnesses:

Mrs Moira Doherty	Department for the Economy
Mr Ian Snowden	Department for the Economy
Mr Graeme Wilkinson	Department for the Economy
Ms Julie Sewell	Department of Finance
Mr Stuart Stevenson	Department of Finance
Ms Dorinnia Carville	Northern Ireland Audit Office

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I welcome to the meeting Ian Snowden, the accounting officer for the Department for the Economy; Graeme Wilkinson, director of the skills division in the Department for the Economy; Moira Doherty, deputy secretary for the Department for the Economy; Dorinnia Carville, our Comptroller and Auditor General; Stuart Stevenson, the Treasury Officer of Accounts; and Julie Sewell, who is the from public audit and accountability branch in the Department of Finance.

You are very welcome to the Public Accounts Committee. We appreciate your time with us today. We have a number of questions for you, and members will collectively ask those. There will be a number of themes: progress towards the skills strategy; spend in that area; skills data; the skills landscape and the Skills Council; joined-up working across government; and the approach to education and training for 14- to 19-year-olds. To make the best use of our time this afternoon, please keep your answers brief. Members have quite a lot of questions and will undoubtedly have follow-up questions. A word of caution from this Public Accounts Committee: if we find you deviating from the topic, we will very quickly ask you to return to the subject area, so do not take our bluntness as in any way a reflection of yourselves. It is just that we want to keep this very tight and get to the nub of the issues today. I know that members will be doing the same. Thank you very much for being with us.

Mr Snowden, Mr Wilkinson and Mrs Doherty, I ask you to make some brief opening remarks.

Mr Ian Snowden (Department for the Economy): Thank you, Chair and members, for inviting us to engage with you on this subject today. I will start by reflecting on the fact that the Northern Ireland economy is performing really well at present. Our unemployment rate is at an unprecedentedly low level of 1.9%, and we have a very tight labour market. If the economy is to continue to develop in line with the ambitions in the Programme for Government, we need to ensure that employers and those who want to invest here have access to a supply of skilled workers. Developing the skills of the population is also crucial for improving levels of economic and social inclusion, so it is impossible to overstate the importance of the skills agenda.

That is why we welcome the Audit Office report and look forward to engaging with the Committee on it today. The Department has accepted the Audit Office's recommendations, and work is under way to address the issues that have been identified in the report. The Department has been and will continue to be very active in looking for new ways in which we can provide opportunities for individuals to reach their potential and for businesses to get access to the skills that they need to be able to innovate, compete and grow.

Since the publication of the skills strategy, we have put in place outcome agreements with our universities; rolled out all-age apprenticeships; launched a £12 million skills fund, which will support new skills programmes such as Step Up, SKILL UP and Assured Skills; and joined the Alliance for Lifelong Learning (ALL). The report focuses on the complexity of our skills system and the issues with cohesion and coordination that arise from that complexity. Since the skills strategy was published in March 2022, we have worked with other Departments, colleges and universities, training providers and business representatives to improve outcomes for individuals and employers. The formal appointment of the Northern Ireland Skills Council (NISC) is a significant development in that. The council provides an important channel for effective engagement between government, business and the education sector in the development and delivery of skills policy. The council supported the development of the recently published digital skills action plan and is helping the Department with the collaborative development of a green skills action plan.

The report comments on the progress towards the goals of the skills strategy. The most recent statistics from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), which are from October and which we forwarded to the Committee, show that we are making progress towards those goals. The proportion of the workforce qualified to level 2 and above and to level 3 and above both increased substantially between 2022 and 2023, as we continue to make progress against the 2020 baseline. The proportion of our STEM graduates remains static, but there has been a significant increase in the number of individuals achieving narrow STEM degree qualifications in Northern Ireland, which is up by 850. While the 2023 figures are encouraging, we are not at all complacent about the challenge that we face if we are to achieve the strategic goals by 2030. It will require significant acceleration of the rate of improvement year-on-year compared with that in the past seven years.

A major theme of the Audit Office's report is the pace of change in the system. The case for systemic change in our skills system was set out by the OECD in its 'Skills Strategy' report, in the skills strategy itself, in the Lyons review of Invest NI and now, of course, in the Audit Office report. The OECD described the complexity of our system, but it noted also that the skills systems of all advanced economies are inherently complex, and there are no off-the-shelf solutions waiting to be implemented. Real and sustainable transformation of a complex system such as ours will, therefore, take a bit of time. We need to get our governance arrangements right, to build consensus on the changes that are needed and how those will be achieved and to ensure that the service that we provide to learners and businesses is not diminished while the transition takes place. That all has to be achieved within the finite resources that we have available to the Department. The skills action plan that we will publish in the new year will set out how we will prioritise the use of our resources to achieve the greatest impact.

In summary, a lot of work has been delivered since the skills strategy was published, but we are still at the beginning of a change process, and there is quite some distance to go. The Audit Office report has made a really important contribution by focusing our attention, at a very early stage in the strategy's life, on what we need to do to ensure that we successfully deliver the targets and goals of the strategy. My colleagues and I are happy to answer any questions that Committee members have about the report and the Department's response to it.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you, Mr Snowden, and thanks for keeping your introductory remarks brief. No doubt members will follow up with quite a number of questions, but I will begin.

Your Department leads on skills policy and has spent almost £1 billion on skills support in the two years since the skills strategy was launched. However, the Audit Office report shows that there has been little progress towards achieving the strategic goals included in the Department's skills strategy and that, extremely worryingly, businesses continue to report the detrimental impact that skills shortages have on their performance. It is an area of substantial spend and staff resource. For instance, in March 2024, there were 379 staff and 46 vacant posts in the Department's skills and education group, with salary costs, in 2023-24, of £14 million. As accounting officer, do you consider that to be value for money?

Mr Snowden: On value for money, all the programmes that we support and the schemes, policies and programmes that we implement in the Department are subjected to evaluation. Each one of those evaluations showed that the individual interventions delivered value for money. We have an obligation to look at the programme level across the whole of the activity in order to assure ourselves that we are getting the best value for money from the totality of the support that is delivered, not just from specific projects and schemes. The report points out that we do not have a particular way of measuring or demonstrating that at this time. We are, therefore, developing a monitoring and evaluation framework for the skills strategy, which we will complete and publish at the start of next year. That will put in place the framework by which we will be able to establish the extent to which what we are delivering is achieving value for money for us.

On the progress against the strategic goals, I outlined that we had seen some changes since the 2022 figures, which are the most recent. If the trends from 2017 to 2023 were to continue, we would fall slightly short of the targets in the skills strategy. Currently, on the level 2 qualifications, the trend is an increase of 0.7%, year-on-year, on average. We need to increase that to about 1%, year-on-year, to achieve the target, so there will have to be an increase in or acceleration of the work that we need to do. For the level 3 and above, we need to increase the rate of growth, annually, from 1.3% to 1.7%, so there is, certainly, quite a bit that needs to be done to get us to those targets.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): How realistic is it that we achieve those targets?

Mr Snowden: Given the encouraging figures that we have seen and the change between 2022 and 2023, there is reason to be optimistic that those targets will be achieved. However, that will have to be sustained over a six- to seven-year period to get us to the point at which we will achieve those goals.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): What particular hurdles do you see as a risk to achieving those objectives?

Mr Snowden: There are always risks in the amount of funding that is available. I do not need to tell any members of the Committee that the Government and Executive are in a tight financial situation and that there are lots of pressures on the budget that is available. We will have to work within the allocations that we have. We no longer have access to the European social fund. We have been successful — Mr Wilkinson has been leading on this — in getting support from UK Government sources, but those are not long-term guaranteed. The access and availability of sufficient resources to invest in skills will be the major challenge that we will face.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): You mentioned the European social fund. What is the implication of losing that?

Mr Snowden: Previously, we funded programmes, such as apprenticeships, out of the European social fund. Now, that has to be met from the Department's core budget.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK, and is that what is putting those targets at risk, then, in the absence of that?

Mr Snowden: It is the general amount of money, I would say. It is not specific changes or a loss or gaining of any one particular programme. The total available sum is the constraining factor there.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. Thank you.

Mr Snowden, you have a strategic objective to "enhance education, skills and employability". Do you believe that you are failing to fully achieve that objective?

Mr Snowden: If you look at changes that have happened over the past decade or so, you will see that there are significant improvements and changes in the levels of skills in the workforce and in the population generally. That is not to say that we have gone all the distance that we could and that we have made all the progress that we would like to see. For example, The Productivity Institute, an independent organisation, which is headed up by Dr David Jordan from Queen's University, noted in its most recent bulletin that Northern Ireland had made significant progress on skills. He also said that quite a lot more needs to be achieved if we are to meet the requirements of the economy.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. Who conducted the evaluations to suggest that the schemes are value for money?

Mr Snowden: Do you have the details of those, Graeme?

Mr Graeme Wilkinson (Department for the Economy): Individual programmes are evaluated in the Department. The SKILL UP programme is one that we completed recently. We commissioned that, so the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) completed an independent evaluation of that particular programme. We have quite a broad spectrum of programmes and projects that are part of what the Department delivers, so they are all different in how they are evaluated. I gave the SKILL UP programme as an example: CCEA completed the independent evaluation of whether or not it achieved its objectives.

Mr Snowden: We do some of the evaluations ourselves, and some are done by organisations external to the Department.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. Do you think that businesses are content with the progress that has been made?

Mr Snowden: We have quite a lot of engagement with businesses, and the feedback is that, across the board, in all sectors, people are reflecting how difficult it is to get appropriately skilled staff or, indeed, any staff to take on the positions that are vacant at the minute. That is a reflection of the strength of the economy. We were reflecting, earlier that, when the skills strategy was set in the first instance, in 2022, one of our growth projections for the additional number of workers required in the economy was something like 7,000 a year. In the past two years, it has averaged 14,000. That is an indication of the strength of the economy and some difficulty.

There are two issues there: one is the lack of people, in general, and the other is the skills of the people who are in the workforce. The bigger problem is simply the lack of people, and, as the number of young people leaving education starts to decline, long term, that will increasingly become a pressure point in the economy. Then, there are people who are seeking specific skills and cannot get access to those. Employers continually reflect those issues back to us.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Similarly, we also pick those up quite a bit in our respective constituencies.

I was thinking through what you said about the evaluations. Is it best practice to mark your own homework when it comes to that?

Mr Snowden: The analytical services division in the Department is staffed by statisticians, who are NISRA employees, and economists, who work to the Department of Finance's chief economist. Our staff who deliver the programmes are not the ones who are evaluating them. They are evaluated by professional economists and statisticians.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you, Mr Snowden.

Mr Delargy: Thank you for your presentation and for coming to the Committee. I have worked with you all previously, and you have been very good in answering any queries that I have had. I really appreciate that.

Obviously, there have been a number of changes in the Department, particularly over the past year. From monitoring the progress on the skills agenda and the skills piece, how do you think that those have changed over the past year? For example, what positive strategies have you put in place to try to develop skills? Ian, you mentioned some of the targets that you do not feel that you will meet. Are any

urgent actions being taken to get the skills strategy back on schedule and to achieve those strategic goals?

Mr Snowden: Next Friday, I will have been in post for a year. Mrs Doherty has been in post for 16 months now, and, obviously, the Minister was new when the Executive returned at the end of January. There has been quite a lot of change at the top of the Department in that sense.

What has happened since then? Minister Murphy came in, and he has his own economic vision, which he outlined in the Assembly in February. That is a departure from the 10X Economy strategy, which was focused on innovation, to a broader approach based on good jobs, productivity, regional balance and decarbonising the economy. At the beginning of July, I think, he announced that he intended to take a skills approach. One of the major announcements was about the creation of a £12 million skills fund.

We want to introduce a skills action plan. One thing that the Minister, Mrs Doherty and I are very keen on is moving past strategy development and into delivery and making sure that what we do is effective on the ground. In that, the Minister has asked us to produce a skills action plan that builds on the contents of the skills strategy but focuses on what will be deliverable in the space of the current mandate. We had hoped to get that out this autumn, but, bearing in mind that the Audit Office report has come out and that the Committee will want to have its input on that, we decided to allow that process to complete and to produce the skills action plan when we are able to take account of the Committee's recommendations.

Your final point was about not meeting the targets. I do not want people to take away the impression that we do not think that we will meet the targets. We are very much focused on making sure that we will. It is just that they are challenging targets. I am quite rightly ambitious about the fact that we need to make a step change in the delivery of skills in Northern Ireland to be able to meet the agenda that we need for the growth of the economy.

We are taking actions that include things such as, as I mentioned, the skills plan, and we are looking at new programmes that are being delivered. Some of those have been quite successful and received positive evaluations. In addition, as I mentioned in the opening statement, the creation of the Northern Ireland Skills Council is another positive development. It will help us significantly in getting buy-in from across all stakeholders in business, trade unions, academia and delivery agencies to make sure that what we put in place is as effective as it can be. We are already seeing the fruits of that in the digital skills action plan and the green skills action plan, which will be produced shortly.

Mr Delargy: Thank you. In the skills strategy, there are 50 recommendations for actions to support achieving the strategic goals. Do you think that that is too many? Is it unmanageable?

Mr Snowden: Quite a number of things need to be done to make some of the changes that we need to see in the skills agenda. Certainly, there is a risk that, when you produce a strategy with that number of recommendations, the focus can be lost. That having been said, a number of those things have already been delivered, and we are in an eight-year strategy. At this point, about 30 of the 50 recommendations have been completed or achieved. A couple of them will not be possible to achieve, and we have already accepted that, but we continue to work on the others, all of which will need to be taken forward in any event, if we are to make the progress that we want to see.

Mr Delargy: OK. Thank you. You have mainly answered my next question, which was about monitoring progress and the timeline around that. Specifically, how do you measure progress?

Mr Snowden: We have the targets in the strategy. Those are monitored by reference to statistics produced by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and also, in relation to the STEM subjects, the Higher Education Statistics Agency. I have already mentioned the analytical services division in the Department, and it is a very effective organisation that produces a lot of high-quality analysis that we use to assist us in monitoring how we are progressing. In addition to those three strategic goals, we have a raft of other statistical information that we use to monitor progress in things such as completion rates for particular programmes, schemes and training initiatives, participant uptake and so forth. Then we get the employer skills survey, which also gives us useful information from the market about what is required.

Mr Delargy: OK. I will probe that point a wee bit more. You mentioned how it is measured, but are those measured at the end of each project or process, or are they continually measured throughout? If so, at what intervals are they measured?

Mr Snowden: At the overall level of the Department's total activity, we rely on official statistics that are produced on an annual, recurring basis, but there is a time lag with some of those statistics. We also have access to information about individual schemes or training schemes, and you will get that information at various stages during the life of a project. It does not have to wait until the end, although we want to do a proper evaluation at the end. We also have information that we get from training providers and others that we can use on a more real-time basis to help manage the interventions that we deliver.

Mr Delargy: It is the real-time one that I am particularly interested in, including how you change and how you continuously update and review. Could you give me a wee bit more detail on that, please?

Mr Snowden: That might be in relation to the delivery of a particular scheme, for example. The Audit Office's report makes reference to, for example, one of the programmes in which there were very few completions of the initiative. That was a particular strand of the SKILL UP programme, which, overall, has been incredibly successful and has a very positive evaluation. The nature of that intervention was designed to be micro modules that you could do online, and we found that people were completing the modules online but did not then go on and complete the qualification piece at the end of it. As a consequence, we have adjusted how those kinds of online courses are delivered in order to make sure that we get a better output. That has been fed back into the operation of the programme as it proceeds.

Mr Delargy: OK. Thank you.

I have a final point on SMEs, and I know that Daniel touched on this. One of the key issues in my constituency — I know that colleagues experience similar — is that people find it very difficult to get apprenticeships, which will, obviously, be a key driver in skills. There are a lot of barriers around that. A lot of them are paperwork or bureaucratic issues. For example, in Derry, a lot of apprentices have spoken very highly of the work that North West Regional College and other colleges do and the relationships that they have with industry, but the barriers to a lot of those SMEs taking on apprenticeships, particularly smaller business that maybe employ two, three or four people, are to do with the paperwork and insurance. Could you give me a bit more detail on how you plan to change that and outline any processes that you will put in place to streamline that and encourage smaller businesses to take on apprentices?

Mr Snowden: If you are a small business and take on an apprentice, one of the risks is that an apprenticeship lasts two to three years, depending on the level at which the apprenticeship is undertaken. If you are a small business and do not have any surety that you will be able to fund that position in your business for two or three years, it will be a barrier. Therefore, one of the things that we are looking at is whether we can make apprenticeships a bit more portable for the individual concerned. That would reduce the risk to both the individual and the business.

In response to the Audit Office report, we have talked internally about how, given the complexity of the system and the fact that it is very difficult to navigate, we need to start to make the system easier for the people who use it so that they can understand how to get into and progress through it and to ensure that those processes are, as far as possible, straightforward and intuitive to operate. We want to do quite a bit of work on not just apprenticeships but all kinds of other schemes for FE and HE access and so forth to make sure that those pathways are as obvious and clear as possible.

Mr Delargy: That is great.

Mr Wilkinson: You make a good point. A lot of our businesses here are small businesses, and they really struggle to interface with the skills landscape. One of the successes that we have had is the Manufacturing and Engineering Growth and Advancement (MEGA) network in mid-Ulster, which works really well and which was initially funded by Invest NI. Part of the solution going forward is having collaborative networks and helping employers to engage not just in apprenticeships but in all the skills provision that we have. We have good provision, but microbusinesses, in particular, really struggle to understand that. The likes of the MEGA network in mid-Ulster is a good model. We could explore that to see whether we can roll it out further. I know that Invest NI has put additional funding into those collaborative networks, and that is really positive. Given the complexities in our economy here, it tends

to be dominated by microbusinesses, so we need to change our approach and help to support those businesses through that type of approach, which has been a real positive.

Mr Delargy: I absolutely agree with you. On the insurance piece, we hear time and time again that that is a key barrier. It is about how that specific point is addressed. As you say, over 90%, I think, of our businesses here are SMEs, so if we are going to get more apprentices in and tackle skills, to me, that is the key piece in future planning. Thanks very much for your comprehensive answers.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Before I bring in Moira, Colm Gildernew has a supplementary.

Mr Gildernew: It is about the MEGA model, which I have raised previously here and which I know really well. I come from an engineering background, so I understand the worth of it. Graeme, you mentioned expanding that type of model. Can we expect to see that type of model being hardwired into the landscape so that it has the due influence and input that it deserves and gets resourced and recognised in that sense?

Mr Wilkinson: That is why I mentioned the Invest NI investment. It is investing £16 million, I think, in those collaborative networks. I mentioned MEGA because it is the one closest to me, but those networks are available right across Northern Ireland; they are there. The approach has worked in the past, and we really want to build on it. The Skills Council's interface with that wider network is really important. We also have labour market partnerships that bring a focus on what local areas need. It is not just a one-size-fits-all approach. We need to make sure that what is being delivered in local areas meets the needs of local industries. Quite a lot of that collaboration happens day and daily, and, from my perspective, it is very effective.

Mrs Moira Doherty (Department for the Economy): To add to what Ian said, this is a really good juncture, because we are working on the next iteration of apprenticeships. Your feedback is, therefore, really helpful. We are looking to, as you would imagine, take things on and improve and evolve them. Those who were around when apprenticeships started here will know that the content was procured from England, so it was just a lift-and-shift from England. We now have 19 sectoral partnerships to co-design the content of the apprenticeship frameworks. For the next level, we are thinking about how we can make those sectoral partnerships even more effective and engaged.

On your point, there are two questions: who is and who is not around the table, and how do we make sure, given the nature of the economy here and the dominance of microbusinesses and small businesses, that those businesses are supported to access apprenticeships, which are so important for the economy? You made a really important point about bureaucracy and making sure that the routes into apprenticeships are as streamlined as possible. We can definitely take that on board.

Mr Delargy: Thanks. I really appreciate that, and I know that you have already been doing a large piece of work on that. I am definitely keen to work with you all on it in the future.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you so much for your answers so far. I want to touch on barriers to employment and skills. The increase in special educational needs and disabilities greatly concerns me. The report touches on how there needs to be greater equality in our labour market and how there is a persistent gap between people with and people without disabilities. What exactly is the Department doing to reduce that gap?

Mr Snowden: In my opening remarks, I mentioned that the skills agenda is very important not just for economic reasons but for social inclusion reasons. In order to help people get into appropriate employment, we need to equip them with the necessary skills. In the past year, we in the Department have been looking very closely at young people who have special educational needs leaving formal education and then moving into education and training. We have seen quite a large number coming through from schools and further education colleges, for example, with additional needs. There are many more than there had been in previous years. There is also a group for which there is no suitable provision at all. The Department has developed and submitted a bid for transformation funding to put in place a scheme that will allow us to support people. It will not be suitable for everybody in those conditions, because those with very complex needs need something different from an education or training perspective, but we have to have something in place for those who have the potential to have productive careers and work lives going forward.

The SKILL UP programme, which I mentioned, is also useful because a lot of it is delivered online. We have a large take-up from people from different backgrounds. In fact, it is not your typical learner profile: more people over the age of 35, more people from rural areas and more people with disabilities participate in that than in the more traditional training programmes. That programme has been very successful for inclusion.

I also mentioned in my opening remarks the Step Up programme. We were at an event in Newtownabbey college at the start of last week that was on the Step Up programme, and we talked to some of the participants in that scheme. A number of them were people who have disabilities. I was talking to one young man with an acquired brain injury. The Step Up programme has been crucial in helping him get back into a training process. There were young people there who had accidents of various kinds at an early stage in their life, and their hoped-for careers had been denied to them because of the physical impacts of their injuries. That programme was basically a life changer for them and allowed them to get back into learning and therefore have a career path that is realistic for them to achieve.

In designing skills programmes and interventions, we have to make sure that they are capable of accommodating people with those particular kinds of needs. There is more that we could do by working with the Department of Education, I think, especially on having better insight into the flow of people with special educational needs or additional needs coming out of the school system. There is a lot of data that we could work on with the Department of Education. The chief scientific and technical adviser was appointed earlier in the year and is paid for in part by my Department, and we have been talking to her about the use of data and AI. Those are avenues that we want to explore to see how we can gather and analyse the information that is not available in the school system in order to help us plan for the arrival of people with particular needs in the further or higher education system. That would certainly help the experience of the young people who are involved.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you. I was going to ask about that data. Is communication ongoing with Departments, such as Education and Communities, so that you know exactly what will come next and how you will provide for people better and plan forward?

The report touches on the disability employment strategy, which, I think, the Department for Communities was leading on but which other Departments were feeding into. Do you have any update on progress with that?

Mr Wilkinson: I sit on the board that looks after the disability employment strategy. We had a workshop looking at the types of interventions that need to be put into the strategy. That is a good example of cross-departmental working. We work very closely with the Department for Communities on different interventions. One programme that we delivered was a £40 million package that included the Step Up programme, which I just mentioned, and Job Start. We also work closely with Invest NI. I have seen a real shift to close collaborative working between Departments in order to ensure that we deliver the right things that meet individuals' needs.

At a strategic level, one of the first things that we did in implementing the strategy was establish the equality, diversity and inclusion subgroup, which Caroline van der Feltz chairs. That is a really important group for bettering our understanding of the needs of individuals with barriers that may be due to disabilities or those who are women returners or are carers. We looked in detail at what those needs are, and we designed interventions to ensure that we address those barriers. I talked about the Step Up event. That was a useful process for better understanding how individuals can be helped to address those barriers. One of the things that came out of that process was the importance of mentoring. Individuals need that mentoring support to take them through the skills. It is not just about putting on a course; it is about guiding individuals through the course to make sure that they get the best outcome possible.

One of the things that we are keen to do is work with employers on that as well. It is not just about providing the skills to do the job; we have to make sure that employers make the job opportunities as flexible as possible so that the mentoring support is not just for the skills provision but translates into employment opportunities. I am seeing a real shift in employers' attitudes and behaviours. They are much more open to being flexible and to bettering their understanding of those individuals' needs. As I said in his introductory comments, we are at full employment, so if we want to continue the economic growth, we have to change our behaviours. It is not about a nine-to-five job at the desk; it is about being much more flexible and changing how we work. I am very encouraged by what I am seeing from employers so far.

Ms Brownlee: This is a very quick question: are you communicating directly with people with disabilities and their families to get that lived experience? As you touched on, barriers are a significant challenge for people, but it is about listening to people in order to find out why they are struggling or why they cannot get into or continue with employment or skills training. That lived voice is so important in this.

Mr Wilkinson: As Ian said, we had a session where the senior management team attended the Step Up event. That was really illuminating. We, as a senior team, were able to get a feel for what the barriers are and how the programme is helping. It came across strongly that the mentoring support in those programmes is critical. It helps us to better understand what does and does not work. It is very difficult to design programmes when you are sitting in the office. Your point is essential. We have to understand how it works, what works well and maybe even what does not work so well. I assure you that that engagement happens very regularly. We work very closely with our colleges, which deliver many of our programmes very successfully.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): You said that you are keen to work with employers. What structures are in place to ensure that that happens?

Mr Snowden: We have the Northern Ireland Skills Council. Six appointed representatives on the council have business backgrounds. We also have the Northern Ireland Business Alliance (NIBA). We expect that, as part of the Skills Council's terms of reference, members who take on those roles will build, maintain and use networks in their sectors to help us engage with businesses in those sectors. Moira mentioned the sectoral partnerships. Those are very important vehicles through which we will engage with different employers' groups to talk about what they can do to help deliver the skills agenda. We have frequent meetings with sectoral representative bodies from different organisations.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Are you certain that all sectors are covered by and represented on the council?

Mr Snowden: You would have to have a council with hundreds of members if you were going to cover absolutely every sector. It has a fairly broad base, and it is linked to those sectors that have highest growth potential in the area.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I meant "covered" in the sense of generally covering the demand from employers.

Mr Snowden: From employers? It covers the majority of the demand. I would not say that it covers 100% of it, because I do not think that that will ever be possible.

Mrs Doherty: That is an important point for us to consider, because, obviously, we need to keep things manageable. It comes back to that point about who you have around the table and what the other mechanisms are for making sure that they are taking the message out and making those connections.

Recently, we launched our business plan, and we had an event with the business community. The Skills Council was just mentioned. At that event, we had an approach from the hospitality sector, which was conscious that it does not have a voice, so we had that engagement with it to see how we can make sure that we continue to broaden that message out and make sure that all those perspectives are brought forward.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): In order to ensure that those perspectives have been brought forward, how often does Skills Council meet?

Mrs Doherty: It meets four times a year.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Is that sufficient?

Mr Wilkinson: Those are the standing meetings that the Skills Council has, but a number of subgroups sit beneath the council, including the equality and diversity inclusion group that I mentioned. We had a digital skills group, and we have a green skills group, a group on labour mobility and, most recently, a group on skills and education. A lot of work happens in those subgroups

between meetings. A lot of work also happens in the intervening period between those Skills Council meetings. The most important piece happens in the work that is done between the meetings.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. I will touch on something that you mentioned, Ian, before I move on. You said that more work needs to be done with the Department of Education, basically, and that one of the key criticisms of Departments here is their silo working. How do you plan to take that forward in the long term?

Mr Snowden: We have a focus now on delivery and the practical implementation of effective interventions, so we have working partnerships on specific projects with every other Department. We can talk for a long time, if you like, about specific individual cases.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Keep it short. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Snowden: For example, we had a project with the Western Health and Social Care Trust on its skill shortages and demands. It had a very high dependency on agency and bank nurses and on other staff. In developing and implementing that project, the trust's reliance on it has increased substantially, because we are seeing the pipeline of suitably qualified people coming into the organisation. We have projects like that in operation with almost every other Department.

We do not find any reluctance to joint working. If we have a specific problem that requires a solution that two or more Departments or other organisations need to work on, there is no resistance to that at all.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. The final point from me before I move on to Diane Forsythe follows on from Pádraig Delargy's line of questioning. You might have said this, or I might have missed it. Why did the Department not publish the second annual monitoring report of March 2024?

Mr Snowden: The Minister came into the Department in the early part of the year. He had his agenda, which he wanted to see delivered. Once the report was received, he wanted to move ahead with his announcement in the Assembly on the skills agenda, so he determined that he did not want that report to be published, although we have shared it with the Committee for the Economy and with this Committee. That took into account the development of the skills agenda, but he wanted the focus to be on his agenda and action plan.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Was that draft paused or scrapped?

Mr Snowden: It was neither. It was the final draft, so it is a report of the council, as agreed.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you, all, for coming here today. I welcome your commitment to see outcomes on skills. Ian, you noted the extreme financial pressures that we are under in Northern Ireland. With almost £1 billion spent on skills in the past two years, it is obviously a significant area of spend. My question is on the fact that that significant spend does not have a clear, reportable impact and that the links to the skills strategy are not entirely clear. As you mentioned, there are a lot of schemes; there are a lot of things happening on the ground with the further education colleges, universities and the Department. How does the Department bring all that together in order to ensure that it is equipping people with the right skills to enable them contribute towards the achievement of the strategy goals?

Mr Snowden: The overall budget for skills and education makes up about 73% of the Department's total expenditure. That is, by some distance, our most significant expenditure priority. It includes all the funding for our higher education institutions — the universities, Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College — our FE colleges and the maintenance of that whole sector, as well as all the apprenticeships and other skills programmes that we have.

The complexity of the portfolio of interventions that we make indicates that we are focusing on the things that we think need to be delivered. Traditionally, you have had universities and further education colleges, but because they do not meet the needs of every learner in the economy, you need to start adding other things. That is where the apprenticeships and additional skills schemes come in. We have already talked about things like SKILL UP and Step Up, which are particular schemes that we needed to put in place in order to fill the gaps that the traditional mainstream provision is unable to meet. The way in which the overall budget is constructed reflects the fact that we are endeavouring to put in place interventions that will take us towards achieving those targets.

Ms Forsythe: You mentioned the fact that all the colleges are a significant part of the Department's budget and all the things that are going on. Will you clarify whether you have made any significant changes to how those colleges operate and how those programmes are run in order to feed into the delivery of those strategic goals, or have things continued as business as usual under a new strategy?

Mr Snowden: The colleges produce annual development plans in which they set out what they propose to deliver during the coming academic year. We engage with the colleges on those development plans. Recently, since the skills strategy was published, we have taken a much closer look at those development plans, and we are pressing the colleges on the skills programmes that they deliver. We also have to respond to the demand from young people and other learners who want to take up courses, but that is the mechanism by which we work with the colleges to help direct the delivery in the system.

Ms Forsythe: The development plans were already in place, and then the strategy came in for its purpose. Are you using the strategy to work with the existing development plans, or have there been any significant changes to programmes to bring them in line with the new strategy?

Mr Snowden: They are reviewed and updated annually. We negotiate the development plans with the colleges annually.

Ms Forsythe: Can you tell me any significant changes that there have been to any programmes to bring them in line with the strategic goals?

Mr Snowden: I do not have that detail, but Moira might.

Mrs Doherty: The college development plans for this year are being worked through. We have a strategic planning day with all six colleges in the first week of December. The purpose of that is to have a deep dive into where the Minister has set his priorities and how the development plans might need to flex to meet those. All of you will know from your constituencies about the excellent work that all the colleges do at the subregional level, as Pádraig said. The benefit of having that time together as a sectoral group and with the senior team in the Department is that we can look to see what changes could be made and what further benefit could come, particularly at that sectoral level. It comes back to the point about collaboration and sharing, because, undoubtedly, there is great scope for the colleges to build on the collaboration that they already do and to take it to the next level. We have a dedicated day in the first week of December on which we will look at those very plans.

Mr Snowden: You are probably looking for more specifics.

Ms Forsythe: Yes.

Mr Snowden: Here is an example. We have seven sectoral action plans for sectors of the economy with high growth potential. Those were published in the late spring. One of those examples is the screen industry. We pressed some of the colleges to look at what they could do for the screen industry. Unfortunately, some of the colleges found that there was very low uptake for those courses, so that provision had to be withdrawn because there simply was not the demand in the market for it. That is, however, an indication of the kinds of things that we have to do to push the colleges. We ask them to get involved in putting things in place. Where the colleges have facilities or buildings that are relatively close to each other — the South Eastern Regional College and in Belfast, for example — we make sure that they are not duplicating provision in adjacent colleges, and that makes the system more efficient. Graeme can maybe come in with some additional comments.

Mr Wilkinson: From my perspective, there has been a fundamental shift, particularly in delivery in the FE sector. One of the most significant changes that was driven by the strategy was the introduction of all-age apprenticeships. Again, that provides more opportunities for more people, so that is a significant change. I also think that we have widened the opportunity through programmes like SKILL UP. As Ian said, 70% of the individuals who are involved come from outside the greater Belfast area. They are individuals who would not ordinarily have had access to learning in the past, and they now have the opportunity to do so.

The move to online provision has been a fundamental shift in that delivery, and it has provided much more opportunity. We find that the two most significant barriers to accessing skills are time and cost, so we have tried to address those. We have tried to take the cost out for individuals by making the

provision free while making sure that that provision is economically relevant and gives the individual the opportunity to get a different job or a promotion in the job that they have. I have seen a real shift in the delivery as a result of the move to online and part-time provision. Even our Assured Skills academies, which had been hugely successful, are now being delivered on a part-time basis, and we are using online delivery. There is a real shift in the delivery model. Credit is due to the FE colleges for being very agile and responsive in making that shift to a new delivery model. It is a real positive.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you. We all know from our constituencies that a broad array of courses is available. I want to ask about the specific skills shortages that we have here. I listened to you all, and it is obvious that there is a lot of engagement and things going on. Looking at all that, might the Department be spreading itself too thin to be able to see meaningful impact on the very specific skills shortages that we have in Northern Ireland?

Mr Snowden: The Audit Office report has a figure for skills-related employment shortages of around 14,000 jobs. I do not think that we would ever be in a position to put in place provision that would produce the skills that would fill all 14,000 of those jobs. That is never going to be possible, and, potentially, it would not be that wise either, because some of those skills shortage vacancies will be in sectors of the economy that are less productive or less growth-oriented. We have those four sectoral action plans, each of which includes a reference to skills-related issues. Generally speaking, those plans are the pipeline of people coming into a particular industry; retention of people in that industry; upskilling people; and issues around inclusion and getting a wider range of people who are willing to consider a career in that industry. Those are the things that we are giving some focus to, and we are certainly looking at those growth areas in the economy.

Having said that, we have to make sure that we maintain a broad-based economy. It is not simply about picking half a dozen or 10 particularly favoured sectors and pursuing them at the expense of everything else. There are lots of components that make a healthily functioning economy, and we have to make sure that we maintain that within the scope of a very limited labour supply. There are fewer people coming out of education because of demographic changes, while growth in the economy is fuelling the demand for more labour.

Ms Forsythe: What is your opinion about offering a number of the programmes on a smaller scale and how that feeds into potentially not achieving substantial change? Are you seeing, or will you see, substantial change coming through in any areas in the short term?

Mr Snowden: I will use the example of the screen industry. About 10 to 15 years ago, before 'Game of Thrones' was filmed here, there was virtually no screen industry worth mentioning. In the early days of the growth of the industry here, virtually all the technicians and crew were imported into Northern Ireland from Great Britain. As things stand, the production crews for large productions are typically made up of around two thirds local people. That is an example of where we have increased very substantially the proportion of people who are being trained in a particular industry, and that is of great benefit to Northern Ireland. I was at an event yesterday at which Richard Williams claimed that the value of that to the economy is now approaching £1 billion per year. That is very significant.

The other area in which that has happened is the financial technology sector and cybersecurity. Again, 15 years ago, that was a very small industry in Northern Ireland, and we are now the world's top location for financial technology inward investment. That, again, has been built on the back of around 5,000 people per year who have got some kind of qualification or training in a finance and technology-related discipline that then makes them suitable for employment in that sector.

Ms Forsythe: It is good to see those examples coming through. Obviously, the Department has access to a large range of data from a number of different fields. How do you use that data to actively engage and integrate the identified needs back into provision? How reactive are you to that?

Mr Snowden: I have mentioned our analytics and statistics division a couple of times, and it does quite a lot of that work on our behalf. I also mentioned the chief scientific and technical adviser and our discussions with her about the potential to use data and AI much more effectively. That is the beginning of a significant change in the way that a lot of data is used. We in the Department certainly want to see what we can do with all that. Sometimes the problem is that there is simply too much information and too much data available, both quantitative and qualitative, and we need to find a way to harness the technology to be able to get proper analysis of the data, because, given its sheer volume, it can be overwhelming.

Ms Forsythe: I presume that your data and analytics team is looking at a whole range of surveys and picking things up through lots of different means. Who is setting the direction for which data that team is analysing? What is the process for where that analysis goes? At what level is it going through the organisation? What is the process there? I just want to know what that team is looking at, who is deciding that that is the right thing to look at and what the process is for how the data is used.

Mr Snowden: Some official statistics and national statistics are produced for the whole of Northern Ireland or, indeed, feed into statistical publications for the whole of the UK. Those are routinely and regularly replicated. We also have other surveys that are undertaken, such as the employer skills survey, the skills barometer and various other pieces of work that the team does for us. The way that the system works is that, on an annual basis, we look at a research agenda for the Department, and then we see what kind of information we need to help us address particular policy questions. The analytics and research team will then pick that up, deliver that work for us and produce information. That goes back into the policy teams, like Moira and Graeme's, which will look at that information and feed it into the policy development process. Similarly, the analytics and research team will also produce information on the evaluation of programmes, which, again, goes into the business areas. We then renew and refresh that agenda every year.

Mr Wilkinson: I will give you a practical example of that. When we were developing the business case for the SKILL UP programme, for example, we used a lot of that data to identify which courses we were going to fund. We have 300 courses, and the types of things that we identified as part of that analysis included digital skills, which are incredibly important across all sectors. You will see that heavily referenced in the courses that we have. If we want to enhance productivity, leadership and management are important pieces of that. Green skills are also an important part of our provision through the SKILL UP programme.

On the Minister's economic vision, we looked at the four areas that he wants to develop to make sure that there is alignment between the courses that we have identified and that they link back to his vision. When we develop our business case, it is about looking at the Minister's priorities and the evidence that is produced and then putting that into a business case in order to ensure that the outcomes that we want to deliver through those will match the analysis and the Minister's vision.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you.

Mr Honeyford: Thank you to all three of you. I will swap my questions from what I was going to ask so that I can follow on from Diane. I want to look at those courses and the spend on FE and in universities. When we look at the chart for the number of degrees that are being undertaken, we see that there are too many social science degrees for what the industry needs. From memory, the number of teaching degrees is also quite high. When we flip that, however, and look at the number of science and engineering degrees, we see that there is not enough supply. What is the Department doing strategically to align provision with what is needed?

Mr Snowden: We provide quite a lot of funding every year to the universities. We have introduced outcome agreements with them, whereby we try to set out in quite a lot of detail what we need them to deliver for us by way of educational and other outcomes in return for the substantial amount of funding that they receive.

Mr Honeyford: When did that happen?

Mr Snowden: We signed the first of those agreements earlier this year.

Mr Honeyford: The situation will therefore change from here on in.

Mr Snowden: We have to bear in mind that we live in a society in which people are free to choose their course of study. The universities are autonomous organisations, so neither I nor the Minister has the legal authority to direct the universities to provide only certain kinds of courses. When young people finish their A levels, we cannot make them choose to study a particular course. What we can do, however, is put in place the support mechanisms and pathways that might encourage people who would not otherwise think of studying STEM subjects to choose them, but that process needs to start in secondary school. Careers Service definitely has a role to play in that, and, indeed, it is quite active in that space. At 18, young people cannot choose to study a science or engineering degree if they do not have science-related A levels and GCSEs.

Mr Honeyford: What work is being done between the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education to make sure that the current situation ceases and that, early on, kids keep doing the subjects that we need rather than the subjects that the schools want them to do?

Mrs Doherty: That is a really important area for us to continue to develop. To go back to Ian's point, Careers Service is about providing advice, guidance and support, but, ultimately, it is for individuals to make those choices. Our Careers Service has a team that looks after the bulletins for sectors and occupations. It has just produced a bulletin on women in STEM that got really positive feedback from the sector and from schools. What we have seen is that, particularly for girls and young women, the STEM choices and options and that way of thinking about themselves in the world need to be hardwired in them from primary school. Careers Service and the Education Authority ran a pilot, the funding for which came through 'A Fair Start', that looked at young primary-school children doing a drawing of their future and thinking about the kinds of jobs and occupations that they might do. That made it really clear that, although careers advice happens in the post-primary setting, we need to build on the engagement that we have begun with colleagues in the Department of Education. We need to begin to do that at primary-school level if we are to create a pipeline for students to come through. It is therefore absolutely correct to identify that as an issue for development.

Mr Snowden: At the other end of the educational journey, on the subject of postgraduate awards, the Department provides substantial sums of money for PhD research in Northern Ireland. We fund 729 PhD places annually. So far, around 63% of those PhDs are in STEM-related subjects. We started a pilot project, which was signed off last month, to look at taking a more directive approach to PhD funding for an additional 51 places. Doing that will test the extent to which it is possible for us to use that funding, and test the way in which we approach using it, to direct PhD students towards research in areas that are more aligned with the economic vision and the Programme for Government's requirements. By necessity, that will involve more STEM-related subjects being funded.

Mr Honeyford: I will take a step back. You said that there is an agreement between the Department and the universities that will bring about a change. That happened after the report was done. If you cannot control the universities, and I appreciate that they are autonomous, what is the point of the agreement?

Mr Snowden: It is an agreement.

Mr Honeyford: For what?

Mr Snowden: In return for the money that we provide, we want to see certain policy outcomes. The consequence is that we negotiate with the universities about what they will deliver. It is not simply about the subject and the educational outcomes but about widening participation to include the more disadvantaged groups of people who would not traditionally have been in university education. It is also about, for example, the research that the universities will do, and we are lucky to have two very strong research institutions. It is a wide-ranging agreement. It covers a lot of what the universities do, but it also includes a lot of the policy outcomes that we want to achieve.

Mr Honeyford: To clarify, you are not trying to control the universities or to direct them to provide certain subjects. The universities are still free to produce graduates without their having to provide the skills that we need for jobs.

Mr Snowden: The universities will also respond to the demand from young people for the courses that they want to see delivered. I was at Queen's, and it was one of the last universities to offer, for example, Byzantine studies as a course. There is no demand for that any more, so the course has now gone. The universities will respond to what people are looking to study.

Mr Honeyford: Are we funding what people want to study rather than what the economy needs?

Mr Snowden: The universities are autonomous institutions, and people are free in our society to choose what they want to study. Take that to the next level. If the Department were to say, "You cannot provide degree courses in a particular set of subjects any longer", that would be a hugely politically contentious step for it to take. I can imagine that that would not be something that —.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): The question that David is probably trying to get to is this: how do you incentivise uptake of a particular course that we need more people to do?

Mr Snowden: Moira mentioned how far back we would need to go in order to get people to consider those courses, especially courses in STEM subjects, which women have traditionally been less likely to take up. A lot of it is therefore about encouraging people to consider options that they previously would not have considered. When I was young, my father had the idea that I should be a solicitor. I chose A-level subjects that were appropriate to study law at Queen's, yet I ended up not studying law. As it happens, my wife is an English teacher, yet my two sons have both studied STEM subjects.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I was the same and ended up as a politician. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Gildernew: Most of our fathers are probably disappointed. *[Laughter.]* May I make a small point? You are right to say that you cannot force or coerce people, but you can persuade them. A lot of it is about how we value people. We therefore need to arrive at a situation in which the young person in a boiler suit is as valued as the young person in a graduation gown, and you can do something about that. University colleges will tell us that they do not get a fair crack of the whip to get in front of young people when they are making such decisions. The schools could open themselves up to allowing colleges to explain other pathways that might link to the needs of industry. What are you doing about that?

Mr Snowden: One of the biggest successes recently has been higher-level apprenticeships. Their success has meant that quite a few people have chosen to go down a more vocational route rather than take up a university course. The evidence shows that such apprenticeships are an increasingly valued alternative to university education, particularly given the cost of tuition fees. The most recent figures show that there are currently 2,500 higher-level apprenticeships being offered in Northern Ireland. It has been a very positive thing that we have done. Moira mentioned the Careers Service. When it engages with schools, it encourages young people to consider the available course options. As I said, young people are free to choose what they want to study, and parents can choose the school to which to send their children. All those things are in the mix.

In a previous job, somebody told me about the marketing model acronym "AIDA", which stands for "awareness, information, decision and action". First, you must make people aware of the availability and give them suitable information. You must then facilitate the decisions that you want them to make. Those are three things on which we must focus. We are therefore making the opportunities available. We are helping people see what those opportunities are and hope that they will then make decisions that will start to reflect the direction in which we would like to see people's skills going.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I will bring in David again briefly. I am then going to change the running order slightly. After David, I will go back to Colin Crawford, followed by Cheryl and Colm.

Mr Honeyford: I will take a step back again. Vacancies in areas in which we have a skills shortage are about five times higher now than they were between 2015 and 2022. Are you able to explain that?

Mr Snowden: There is almost certainly a significant impact from COVID in the 2022 figures. You will recall that quite a lot of people were laid off at the start of the pandemic, because businesses did not know what was going to happen, so the increase in the number of universal credit claimants was significant. I recall that, at the time, a lot of the conversation was about economic scarring and long-term unemployment being the big risks that the pandemic posed to us. That has not turned out to be the case. Later in 2020, when the economy was reopening, there was an explosion of employers looking for employees, by which point some people had left the labour market, because, for example, they had chosen to retire early or had made different choices on the back of their pandemic experiences. There are also issues to do with long-term sickness. What we have therefore seen as a result of the impact of COVID is a significant and rapid rise in the number of vacancies in the economy, a number of which are in to areas in which there is an absence of skills.

Mr Honeyford: OK. What is the Department doing to address that?

Mr Snowden: It is doing all the things that we have been talking about. If we have a rapidly growing economy, which we currently do, and a rapid growth in employment — there are now well over 800,000 employee jobs in Northern Ireland — we have to work with employers to make sure that there is a pipeline of people coming through.

The most significant thing that we need to focus our attention on now is the number of economically inactive people in the economy. There are four main groups: students and others undergoing training;

people taking care of dependants or the home; the long-term sick and disabled; and those who retired early. The hope is that the people in education and training will come into the labour market after completing their course of study. Those who retired early are unlikely to want to re-enter the labour market, as they have made a decision to retire. That leaves us with the long-term sick and disabled and the people who are currently looking after dependants or the home.

The people who are looking after dependants or the home need flexible options. I was recently talking to Moira about a particular employer who has found it very difficult to fill logistics management posts and is now interested in having a look at providing part-time apprenticeships and part-time training opportunities in order to work around the needs of people who otherwise have caring opportunities. We need to engage with employers on whether people's almost automatic choice to go into a full-time, five-days-a-week post is the right option. Are there other options available that will work equally well for them? Those are therefore some of the things that we can do for people who are looking after dependants or the home.

One of the earlier questions was on what we are doing to support disabled people and the long-term sick back into work. We are working with the Department for Communities' employment strategy for people with disabilities to make sure that we help those people get back into employment. The most recent survey data that I saw on those two groups — it is extrapolated from the survey results, so it is not an exact figure — suggests that we might be able to get somewhere in the region of 20,000 people back into work if we were to have appropriate provision.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I am not sure that David would be keen to hear that. I am conscious of time, so I will move on.

Mr Crawford: I thank the panel for their answers this afternoon. Education and training for 14- to 19-year-olds is an area in which there is a clear need for ministerial agreement that their Departments should work together to deliver better outcomes for children and young people. There have been significant governance and implementation issues with the framework to transform 14-to-19 education and training provision, including unclear objectives. How can there be a lack of clarity in the objectives, and why has there been a failure to implement the framework successfully?

Mr Snowden: I will pass that question over to Moira, because she is the senior responsible owner (SRO) for the framework. She is the lead, so she will answer.

Mrs Doherty: I completely agree that it is absolutely critical. There is a huge amount in the framework that reflects the strength of feeling and its importance. One of the issues that we had was that, when all the actions were set out in the framework, not all of them were resourced and not all of them were capable of being taken forward at the same time. I do that work jointly with a colleague in the Department of Education, Linsey Farrell. Given the limitations that we could see with how the framework was established, Linsey and I agreed to trigger a gateway review, because we wanted to hear from outside, independent experts and for those conversations with stakeholders to be had completely honestly without either Linsey or me in the room.

Unsurprisingly, that gateway review resulted in a red rating. That was in January. We then set about asking, "Right, what can we do to refine this and focus on delivery?", and our approach to that was to say, "We are going to do a smaller number of things and place a greater focus on them". Rather than try to advance dozens of actions with the resource that we had, we decided that we would really focus. Ministers came back to us in February, and both Minister Givan and Minister Murphy were extremely clear that that is a very important area. Indeed, both were saying that they wanted to see delivery and for it to make a difference on the ground, so they then tasked us with taking careers as the first step, not only because that has been raised by many members of the Committee as an area of real importance but because, in a way, that would test how we build the capacity for joint working. Careers was therefore established as the priority area for 14- to 19-year-olds, and special educational needs was subsequently added. The careers work has been going on since February in a very involved way and at pace, and we are due to take a joint delivery plan to the Ministers before the end of the calendar year.

The gateway review team then came back in August to do an update. I was really pleased, as was Linsey, to see that the team had upgraded January's assessment of red to one of amber in August. Although nobody ever wants to get a red rating, we had invited the review team in because we had wanted to get advice and guidance to get us back on a path to achieving a green rating. One of the key lessons learned is that we often have huge ambitions — it is right to have huge ambitions — but

we need to match those ambitions to the resources that are available and do the appropriate profiling in order to have the greatest delivery confidence for the prioritised areas. That has been a really important lesson for us.

Mr Crawford: I will touch on the gateway review rating moving from red to amber. What have been the specific barriers, if any, to the two Departments' making an effective transition from the development of the framework through to its implementation?

Mrs Doherty: I could not say enough about Department of Education colleagues' commitment to working with us in a joint way. Another huge asset for us is the strength of support that we have from within the education sector, including colleagues in FE colleges and in schools.

That having been said, the two Departments are tasked with delivering a huge amount of business as usual. We can speak in detail about ours, and everybody who has a child at school knows the pressure that the education system is under. Both Departments are tasked with delivering our business as usual, and we have departmental priorities that are set. The important lesson to learn — it is a fundamental barrier — is how we identify and then profile the capacity that is required for that joint work, because, to pick up on a point that Ian made earlier, there is no shortage of desire or will among other Departments to work in a joined-up, collaborative way, but, at times, the difficulty can arise when the day job has to take priority. We have learnt from that experience and from our other collaborations that we need to focus tightly on something that is a shared ambition for both parties and work on it on that basis but do so in a very clear-eyed way, given the resources that are required and the associated timescales.

Mr Crawford: Chair, do I have time for one more question?

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Yes.

Mr Crawford: The Department for the Economy is the lead Department for many of the actions that are included in the 14-19 framework action plan. How do you work effectively with the Department of Education? How do you monitor and report on your progress individually and with the Department of Education?

Mrs Doherty: That is a really important area. I do not need to rehearse the fact that I am responsible to Ian and that he is responsible to the Minister. There are separate constitutional arrangements. I am responsible to Ian and our Minister for delivery of the Department for the Economy's areas. Linsey has a similar reporting structure in her Department. For the joint pieces of work that we are doing, particularly where they are reflected in the draft Programme for Government, we will make joint submissions to both Ministers. Where there is a cross-cutting element, that work goes to the Executive. There is definitely a development need when it comes to how we navigate those separate constitutional accountability responsibilities, but there is also a development need where we have a shared agenda. That is not an area that we have cracked perfectly. We still have work to do there.

Ms Brownlee: Some £5.5 million is spent each year on the Department's Careers Service. Looking through the lens of the strategy, has that spend been effective?

Mrs Doherty: You will forgive me for starting with a quotation. Dr Deirdre Hughes carried out a piece of independent research on the Careers Service, in which she benchmarked it against other careers services. Dr Hughes said that our Careers Service "punches above its weight". Funding for careers advice elsewhere would often be twice per capita what is spent here. I am confident in saying that we get really good value for money for our funding, based on that piece of independent research. We are going through a lot of development with the Careers Service at the moment. It is the area within my group that has the highest rate of vacancies, and that has been a real issue for careers advisers.

I am very proud of the Careers Service. It is a professional, independent and impartial service, and the members of the team are professionally qualified. I am smiling now, because every time that I meet them, they are so full of passion for what they do and are so committed. They deal with people of all ages but particularly with young people who are in transition. We are doing a lot of work at the moment on the careers ecosystem. That is an ongoing piece of joint work with the Department of Education, and we are really excited to see its outcomes.

We want to strengthen that ecosystem. When we have feedback, even from MLAs, it is often about a perceived disconnect between the careers education that careers teachers in schools deliver and our careers advice. We are therefore engaged in an ongoing piece of work to strengthen that partnership. That work looks not only at there being a really strong partnership between the Careers Service and schools but at there being engagement with young people, carers, parents and employers to make sure that everything is knitted together in order to give people the best possible chance to get the right advice so that they can fulfil their potential.

I will pick up on your earlier point. The team ran a pilot on following a particular approach for their clients who are neurodiverse. They developed a package that represented a different way of working. It was based on the needs of autistic clients in particular. They are now seeking to develop it for other client types in order to make sure that what they are delivering is tuned into the needs of the client in front of them. I am confident that Careers Service definitely gives value for money, but, in the team, there is also so much passion and a commitment to continuing to develop. In particular, we have an IT project — a careers portal — that will be a game changer for the Careers Service here.

Ms Brownlee: To prevent a postcode lottery, how is Careers Service advice standardised throughout the whole of Northern Ireland? Are there processes in place to ensure that that happens?

Mrs Doherty: Absolutely, as far as the Careers Service, which is part of our Department, goes. Our careers advisers are qualified to level 6, and they are part of a professional organisation. They undergo continuing professional development (CPD). I can therefore say with confidence that they are all held to the same professional standards.

We continue to work on engagement through, for example, the sectoral bulletins, because a balance needs to be struck. From a professional point of view, it is really important to our careers advisers that they remain impartial, but it is also about making sure that they have an awareness of the needs of all sectors of the economy. We have both things in mind at the one time.

Ms Brownlee: Do you plan to produce a careers strategy? Is that in the pipeline at all?

Mrs Doherty: We are focusing on delivery. A joint delivery plan will be produced based on work that Careers Service and our colleagues in the Department of Education have done. It is entering its final stages. The independent review of careers guidance took place in 2022. We have been implementing its recommendations. We are therefore in delivery mode.

Ms Brownlee: How does the Department monitor that delivery? Careers advice is given and received. Do you continue to monitor that pathway to see whether the advice given was the best advice possible? How is that looked at throughout a person's career? Does that happen?

Mrs Doherty: I am not sure that we do it in the sense of following up on whether people took on board the advice and seeing what they did next. One of our recent conversations has been about how people often do not travel on a linear path. Things can happen to them in life, or they can take up a course and subsequently realise that it is not for them. The destination piece is something that is important for us to reflect on.

Ms Brownlee: Do careers advisers receive continual training and education? In Northern Ireland, everything changes. What is a priority in one year may not be a priority in the next.

Mrs Doherty: Yes, they have to have CPD.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Things may have changed since I was at school. I did not think that it was that long ago, but perhaps it was.

Ms Brownlee: It was. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Is the careers adviser in schools a schoolteacher?

Mrs Doherty: No.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): That has changed. My careers adviser, who clearly steered me on an interesting path, was a PE teacher in the school. He was a great person, but, from what I picked up from being a former party education spokesperson, there is a lot of criticism of the careers advice in schools generally. I was just wondering about that.

Mrs Doherty: That is part of what we are trying to do through the joint work with the Department of Education. It is responsible for careers education. We are responsible for the Careers Service. When it comes to careers teachers in schools, that pipeline goes to the Department of Education. The careers advisers are part of our Careers Service. They go into schools but are not part of the school staff. We are very hopeful that the work that we have been doing will have positive outcomes across the board, but it is about our trying to say, "How can we support careers teachers in schools, work together better and share resources?".

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): You have touched on a very important area. The earlier that that is done, the better, but it is also about recognising the key areas in our economy that need a particular skill set and developing children or young people to achieve a particular level of qualifications that will satisfy the requirements of the job. There is big demand in IT, engineering and finance, which are the three main categories of today, along with the development of AI. What are we doing to ensure that someone with life experience in those roles can go into schools to enthuse and inspire young people to say, "I want to do that job because it is well paid and has great opportunities"? What is happening to engage at that level? If we do not get that engagement, and young people are hearing from those who do not have direct experience in the areas where we need to upskill people, we will fall short.

Mrs Doherty: We are working with our colleagues in Education. Our careers advisers attend the careers fairs in schools, but it is for the schools to organise them. There are also broader careers fairs, and I spoke at one last year. People do go into schools to speak to young people and enthuse them. That is not one of our activities, but it happens through Education and schools. Our careers advisers put a huge amount of time and effort into staying connected with what is live in the economy and providing a focus on what will be needed.

Taking it back to personal experience, my son had his transition appointment with a careers adviser. When I told the team, I said he was like a mystery shopper. When he was choosing his GCSEs, they made sure that he did not rule anything out, bearing in mind how young he was. While he was at an age at which he did not know what he wanted to do, the advisers were careful to make sure that he did not make choices that would limit his options at a later point. I am confident that it is a professional service. I was cheered to hear that we are considered to punch above our weight in that area, and I hang onto that. I am very proud of the team and the work that it does.

Mr Wilkinson: There has been a little bit of a shift. Historically, individual companies went into schools to promote their industry and sector, but we now see companies collaborating to do that because it can be difficult for those that do not have the necessary bandwidth. I talked earlier about MEGA and its effectiveness: it has been really effective in promoting its sector and the apprenticeship programme. Also, Software NI is a new industry group that is very effective at promoting its sector and giving young people an understanding of the jobs. As Ian said earlier, it is to allow young people to make a decision based on the information. It is not about the traditional careers that we studied for at university; the landscape has changed significantly. Employer engagement is important, and I like the collaboration piece because it is more impactful than individual companies going to schools on an ad hoc basis.

Mr Boylan: Chair, you seem to have done all right for yourself. Thanks for your answers so far. To follow on from the previous point, you mentioned some companies, but how does the Department engage and work with those in AI, fintech, biotech and digital services to get apprenticeships and skill sets in those areas? How are you getting that message out?

Mr Snowden: That is where the sectoral partnerships come in. They involve businesses from those sectors and help design the content of the courses that the young people will undertake, the content of the apprenticeship training and the content of any other training that we want to bring forward. That is where we get buy-in from those businesses, and the partnerships are an important mechanism in that.

Mr Boylan: You mentioned Colm Gildernew's area — Tyrone men are very good at engineering — so are we trying to align skill sets with geographical areas? Are those conversations ongoing?

Mr Wilkinson: The colleges have an important role to play because they have a much greater connection with industry and its needs. The individual colleges have a good feel for the demand from the individual companies, and they will develop courses, particularly short-term courses, to meet the needs of the companies. The challenge, and what businesses really struggle with, is the interface with the colleges in order to get a better understanding of the courses and how to access them, which is the point that Pádraig made. It is about that interface between microbusinesses and the colleges. There is definitely room for improvement there. That is why I like the collaborative networks: they are a really important conduit, because they are able to translate what industry needs are and how industry gets the skills that it needs. It is a two-way conversation. Given that industry is changing so rapidly, we need to ensure that the courses and the curriculum change regularly. The interface with the colleges is really important, as well as the sectoral partnerships that I've talked about.

Mr Boylan: OK. This is my final question. Colm mentioned the 14-19 framework. There are a number of challenges in that to be addressed, one of which is the competition among schools and the duplication of provision. What is the extent of that competition and the duplication of provision, and what is being done to address it?

Mrs Doherty: It is quite hard to say the extent of that. Committee members will be aware that there is an entitlement framework for young people. That works really well where a young person is doing, say, two A levels in school and a vocational course one day a week in an FE college. The concept of the entitlement framework is really strong. What we have increasingly seen is young people staying on at sixth form in school to do vocational courses. I am not an education expert, so I will not pass any judgement on whether that is the right or the wrong thing to do. However, I will say that the FE colleges have the industry standard spec and equipment, and they are often the best places for young people to go to, particularly if they are thinking about the kinds of vocational choices that we talked about. The issue comes up perennially. Schools will say that there are really good reasons for young people to stay with them, and colleges will say that those are young people who, in the past, would have gone to an FE college after leaving school at 16. Working through those post-16 issues, in particular, will be very important for us in the 14-19 piece.

Mr Boylan: Thank you.

Mr Gildernew: Thank you all for the presentation and for the answers so far. Daniel mentioned in passing the skills landscape, which is extremely complex and is, at times, confusing to navigate for employers and maybe even young people or people who are looking to train. The Skills Council is a key element of that, but it only meets four times a year. Do you think that the Skills Council model is an effective structure?

Mr Snowden: In its first year, it has got off to a good start. It has been fully operational since the beginning of September last year. In that period, it has produced the digital skills action plan, which is a really good piece of work. It is also very close to publishing the green skills action plan, which is a substantial piece of work. As Graeme and Moira mentioned, there are bits of work around diversity and inclusion and other issues. It has definitely got off to a good start. It seems to have got a lot of traction. It has a lot of presence and has established itself incredibly quickly. We were going to review its operation after a three-year period but, because it has made such a fast start, there is an opportunity to have a look at it a bit earlier. Therefore, next February, after 18 months, we will start to look at what else we can do around the structure to support and strengthen it. The people involved are volunteers, and the fact that they have done that amount of work in that space of time with no pay is a testament to their dedication to the subject. We need to look at what kind of support we can put in place for the Skills Council so that it is something substantial and not simply a secretariat that organises meetings and so forth. So far, it appears to be working well for us.

Mr Gildernew: I acknowledge that contribution and its voluntary element. I am also conscious that in your opening remarks you mentioned that we need "significant acceleration" to improve the pace of change. The Skills Council is undertaking a review and rationalisation exercise in that landscape. Are you saying that the review that is scheduled for 2027 will be brought forward?

Mr Snowden: That is different.

Mr Gildernew: Is the 2027 review urgent enough, given all the pressures that we are discussing? Should we look at bringing that review forward to feed into the work that we are discussing?

Mr Snowden: We have mentioned the sectoral partnerships several times. The 2027 review is an attempt to rationalise or simplify the structure below the Skills Council. It will look at all the sectoral partnerships with industries and businesses to make sure that they are correctly delineated, to look for overlaps or gaps between them and to identify any changes that can be made to make it easier for individual companies to understand the process so that they can engage more effectively. The difficulty is that we have some quite challenging targets to meet, and we have a set of partnerships that are doing effective work. We cannot start to chop that up too quickly without thinking through the needs of the stakeholders in those sectors, what could be added to or taken away from any of the individual partnerships and how they interface.

We need to make sure that the transition from the current arrangement to the new one is managed effectively without disrupting or diminishing any of the services that are provided to any individual learner or business that depends on the skills supply from the system, and we need to increase the number of people who are coming through with the relevant qualifications. That is a delicate task, and it is not something we want to rush. If the industry, business, trade union and academic members of the Skills Council advise that we need to give it two and a half or three years, I will take their advice rather than try to push it harder than is necessary.

Mr Gildernew: My concern is that, by the end of the strategy in 2030, not enough will have changed to make the significant step change that you are talking about.

Mr Snowden: There are a number of different governance arrangements. That review is about the oversight of the Skills Council and the representative partnerships. There are other things. The report mentions that we did not get to set up a full cross-departmental steering group or programme board for governance of the skills strategy. Instead, a programme was set up, which is not an appropriate mechanism for effective delivery. We have, quite rightly, pulled back from that programme arrangement to look at something more effective. A programme typically does not have a fixed end date, and if you are working on a strategy that seeks to achieve certain outputs by a particular date — in this case, 2030 — that is not an appropriate mechanism or structure for delivery. We will put in place much more effective and appropriate governance arrangements, which will start to take away the duplication. That is where you get into what the providers in different Departments do. Ourselves, the Department of Education, the Department for Communities, the Department of Health, which is interested in the health skills pipeline, and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs are the main players in that space. Then, you have the universities and the FE colleges. That is the governance structure through which we will try to drive change.

We have set up a tertiary education sector senior leaders' forum, which meets every quarter. That was initially set up to deal with some of the practical challenges of COVID, such as social distancing. Now we are using the forum to chart how we will work together much more effectively, and there has been tremendous engagement at the three meetings that I have attended, and I go to all of them. We will be successful in putting in place an arrangement that makes sure that we have a higher chance of success. Nothing is guaranteed in this world because we do not know what will happen in seven years, but if we get the right structures in place, set ourselves on the right track, think things through carefully and bring everyone along with us, we are giving ourselves the fairest chance possible.

Mr Gildernew: That very neatly leads me to my final question. It is already a complicated landscape, with 11 labour market partnerships, 15 sectoral partnerships, six FE colleges, five HE colleges and private-sector employers. In addition to all that, along the border corridor, which is a huge part of the North and includes my part of the country, colleges, employers and people from the other side of the border are part of the landscape. What work is being done to ensure that we are harmonising in those areas? I have been speaking to representatives from the South West Regional College. I did my social work degree there, but I could not have done so as a mature — very mature — student without that local access. That is a separate point. That college told me that the model of colleges in the South is much more reactive to the needs of business and that they have almost cracked it. How will we learn, coordinate and harmonise the approach along that crucial border corridor?

Mr Snowden: In September, I went to Dublin and met one of my counterparts — I have three counterparts down there — in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. We got into a discussion about a lot of the things that we are already doing on a cross-border basis. We have joint projects using PEACE PLUS funding, and we do a number of things jointly. We have been looking at things like removing the barriers to cross-border student mobility. Currently, nearly everybody in the North, when thinking about a university place, will look to Belfast or east to Britain. Everybody in the Republic looks to universities down there. In fact, it is most striking,

when you look at places like Dundalk and Newry, how stark that dividing line is at the border. There are lots of things that we can do to support that movement and make it easier for people to go across the border.

In January, as the senior leadership team in the skills and education group, we are going down to meet the senior team from the Southern Department. We will talk about what we can do to work more effectively in a joint way and join up policy, and we will discuss things that we have been working on and how effective they have been. We will also learn from what each other has been doing on delivery. We have some successful projects up here in which we are achieving, on individual schemes, more effective completion rates than similar programmes in the Republic. There are lessons that we can teach them, as well as lots of things that we can learn from them. We are building up that cross-border practical working relationship. There are lots of things that we are working on jointly regarding individual projects, but, if we get into more regular meetings with them and share that best practice and learning, we can learn a lot on both sides of the border.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Is that a recent approach, or has the Department always met its counterparts in the South? Has that relationship been enhanced in recent times?

Mr Snowden: We have always worked jointly on individual projects. There have always been cross-border skills projects with European funding, Peace money and that kind of thing. We have been working jointly in the north-west, as there is a project in the north-west involving Magee and Donegal. A lot of activity happens on a cross-border basis. I do not know what any of my predecessors did in that regard. It is simply that, when I came into the job, I realised that I did not know any of my counterparts, so I went down to meet them. That started the conversations, and we agreed that it would be very useful to meet up and have those discussions.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): You did quite well.

Mr Gildernew: There is potential for funding from the Shared Island Fund as well [*Inaudible.*]

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Yes, absolutely.

Mrs Doherty: You make a really good point about the fact that, along the border corridor, the colleges work really well with their counterparts. Indeed, we had colleagues from the FE sector in the South up on a study visit. We absolutely accept that we have a lot to learn, but our approach to capital development in the FE sector is an area where colleagues from the Republic are looking to learn from us. That operational level contact is really strong, and we are trying to reinforce it at a policy and departmental level.

Mr Gildernew: Thank you.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you for your time with us and for your answers so far. Lack of joined-up government has been a problem in the past, and it seems to be a continuing problem right across our Departments. Indeed, in your report from back in 2020, that was identified as a problem. One of the recommendations in the skills strategy is the establishment of a cross-departmental management board with representation from all Departments. Only three Departments are represented on the skills strategy programme. Why was a whole-of-government approach not achieved?

Mr Snowden: We have touched on a number of aspects of that in our answers to members' questions, but that question kind of brings it together. As for the whole-of-government approach, the skills strategy was announced, and then the Executive and the Assembly were not functioning for a period. When you do not have an Executive-agreed strategy, getting that engagement across all Departments becomes quite difficult. Again, it was to be set up as a programme board, which was not an appropriate mechanism for delivering the skills strategy. We want to look at replacing that with a more appropriate mechanism.

Instead, what we have done — this is where we will, I think, be more effective — is work jointly on projects with individual Departments. I mentioned the project with the health service, but we have examples from every Department. You may have picked up on the news yesterday that Hydebank Wood Secure College got full marks in a recent inspection, having been one of the worst young offenders' institutions in the UK 10 years ago. We have been working closely and jointly with the Prison Service on that. There are now training opportunities for the residents of that facility. It is now

called Hydebank Wood Secure College, and the reason for that is to connect with the work that we do. There are lots of examples of specific projects where we are making lots of progress on dealing with particular problems. We get a lot of buy-in from all our Departments on that.

The next stage of development will be moving beyond a lot of bilateral or, in some cases, trilateral projects, on which we work with one or two other Departments, and bringing them together on particular issues. For example, we mentioned disabled people and people with special educational needs. There are some projects into which we need to bring more Departments and bodies in order to work jointly and produce solutions. Moira may share this view, having come from the Department for Communities, but, in my experience, the best way to achieve cross-departmental working is to focus on particular solutions that are required to problems that cut across the boundaries of a number of Departments.

Mr T Buchanan: In the absence of cross-departmental arrangements, how do you find the engagement with other Departments to be when you seek to get them all together?

Mr Snowden: We found no challenge or difficulty whatsoever in getting people to work jointly on a solution to a particular issue. If we are able to assist other Departments or work jointly with them to help with a skills issue that is affecting them that they want to deal with or to deliver an outcome using the skills and education interventions, they are usually very willing to engage with us to discuss the issue and implement things.

Mr T Buchanan: Are you confident that progress is being made on that issue?

Mr Snowden: We have seen a lot of very positive activity in that area, yes.

Mr Boylan: Collaboration has been mentioned a number of times. Is it your responsibility to drive collaboration between further education colleges, education providers and the likes of CAFRE? Do you engage with a different Department in order to do that, or is that your responsibility?

Mr Snowden: Is it my responsibility? Yes. Everybody who is involved in senior management in any organisation has a responsibility to do that. I met the new principal of CAFRE at the start of the week. There are lots of opportunities for joint working. I am actively looking at where I can help to bring those agencies together and for opportunities to develop the relationships and make sure that they work. Collaboration is an easy thing to talk about; it is a bit more challenging to make it work in practice. However, if you focus on specific problems that require solutions, people are more than willing to get involved in those collaborative efforts.

Mr Gildernew: I have a quick follow-up. In your reply to the Chair's question about the Skills Council, you said that it was impossible to include everyone. I think that you said that six employers were represented. From what sectors do those six employers come?

Mr Snowden: They are public appointees. I will have to get the list out, so hold on. There is one from the digital sector. That was John Healey, who is now the chair of Invest NI. He has been replaced by Lorna McAdoo. She is with Version 1, which is a software company that is based in Belfast.

Mr Gildernew: What about sectors? I am trying to get my head around what sectors are in there.

Mr Snowden: The digital sector. Can you remember any others, Graeme?

Mr Wilkinson: We did not take a sector-based approach; there was an open competition. The sectors are delivered on through the task and finish groups. We had a task and finish group, for example, for digital, which was chaired by John Healy. We are doing the sectoral piece on a case-by-case basis. We are looking at green skills next. I made the point about collaboration, and we are working with Northern Ireland Electricity — Gordon Parkes chairs the group — the Housing Executive, Northern Ireland Water and all of the key players in that area. Where we have a particular issue that we want to drill into, we make sure that we have the right people around the table. That is how we are dealing with the sectoral piece. Rather than having lots of sectors talking about things that they do not see as relevant, we are drilling down into the issues.

Mr Gildernew: Will you send the information on the six to us, so that we can get an idea?

Mr Snowden: We will get you a list of the members.

Mrs Doherty: Separate to that, we have the sectoral partnerships and there are 19 of those for apprenticeships. For every apprenticeship framework that we have, we have a sectoral partnership wrapped around it. I made the point earlier that we had made huge progress on something that previously had simply been procured as is and implemented. However, we want to see whether we can take that to the next level.

Mr Gildernew: I am specifically trying to get my head around the Skills Council. Will you send that information through?

Mr Snowden: We will send a list of the members of the Skills Council to the Committee.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): What you were just talking about, Moira, is something that our counterparts in the South do extremely well. There is learning from best practice there that we could shadow fairly quickly.

I have one final question. We acknowledge that it is difficult to ensure that funded skills provision aligns with skills needs and the skills strategy, which is critical to success. Are you able to assure us that you have a clear way forward for achieving that?

Mr Snowden: Given that the Skills Council has got off to such a good start, and with some of the other mechanisms that I talked about, such as the work that we are doing with the tertiary education senior leaders' forum, I believe that we have a pathway to achieve that, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK, thank you. Dorinnia, is there anything that you would like to add?

Ms Dorinnia Carville (Northern Ireland Audit Office): No.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): You are happy. Stuart?

Mr Stuart Stevenson (Department of Finance): I just want to make one brief comment, Chair, if that is OK? I wanted to add to some of the earlier discussions. I know that there was a line of questioning about independent evaluation. Mr Snowden pointed to the *[Inaudible]* structure, whereby we can rotate staff in order to take a professional standards approach with a fresh pair of eyes on things, as business cases are developed on those projects. My colleagues in the Department of Finance's supplies and services division conduct an annual test-drilling exercise in which they carry out a post-project evaluation, not just for our Department but for all Departments across the *[Inaudible]*. It is helpful to recognise that that activity is in place and provides a level of accountability. It is important that that evaluation work takes place and has *[Inaudible]*.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK, thank you, Stuart. Thank you, Mr Snowden, Mr Wilkinson and Mrs Doherty, for being with us and for taking questions for two hours. We appreciate your time.

Mr Snowden: Is that all? *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): It flies in when you are having fun. We aim to publish the report in the new year, so we appreciate having had this important and critical session today. I also thank Stuart and Julie for being with us, along with Dorinnia's team from the Northern Ireland Audit Office. Thank you for your assistance with our inquiry.