



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Chairperson's Business

30 November 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr David McIlveen
Mr Alastair Ross

The Chairperson:

The brief overview of today's business is that the Committee will receive two departmental briefings: one on the January monitoring round and a second on the careers strategy. I have apologies from Sandra Overend, Pat Ramsey, Michelle Gildernew and Barry McElduff. Pat Ramsey, Michelle Gildernew and Barry McElduff wish it to be recorded that they send their apologies because they are not prepared to cross a picket line. That will be noted in the record.

There is a fair amount of information to get through in Chairperson's business. I do not want particularly to bore people, but we have had an interesting week, and it has been some time since I last spoke to you.

First, I had a meeting with Training by Choice and Belfast Metropolitan College. You may recall that Training by Choice involved the young people who were trying to do some form of computer gaming design. They had difficulties with funding and a number of people

made representations on that. We had quite a constructive meeting with Belfast Met about how we might move them forward on to level 3 training, with the prospect of getting on to level 4. The young people and their representatives have been encouraged to meet directly with Belfast Met. A business plan will be put together, and they have promised to keep us informed about that. Yesterday, I met with Willie Hamilton, chief executive of Liberty IT. Part of the issue about providing training is the question of whether we can get them some employment, either temporary or otherwise. We heard positive noises about that. So, that particular issue is moving forward.

The Clerk and I visited Bombardier on the invitation of Ofqual — the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation. It was a most interesting visit. We learned about the skills required for people to be able to deal with things on the shop floor at Bombardier. We had an interesting discussion about the number of apprentices that they take. The number is down on what it used to be, but there are still high quality apprenticeships. There was some discussion around the fact that the apprentices are dealing with sheet metal, but Bombardier is moving on now to deal with composite materials, so perhaps it should be doing apprenticeships in that. I found it a really interesting visit. Some slides on the numbers have been circulated to members. It might be useful to organise a visit to Queen's Island for yourselves for some time in the new year. That is the location of the new set-up for the CSeries. I recommend that you go and have a look. They are what you might call real apprenticeships, in that people were banging things with a hammer, and so on, but there is a technical bit progressing as well. That was useful.

My next item is about Maghaberry prison and the fact that access to IT in its Donard suite is blocked. This was part of the launch of the education suite in Maghaberry. One issue was that people who were trying to do qualifications there, particularly in IT, were unable to access anything. Do I have members' permission to write to the Justice Committee to ask it to have a look at the matter?

Mr Ross:

It may be useful to find out how many people want to access the educational provision. I remember from when I was on the Justice Committee at the very beginning that it was quite concerning that the prison had a great education suite but very few people actually wanted to use it. That meant that those who did want to use it quite often found that it could not open because not enough people were signed up to the courses. I find that very concerning. Perhaps it would be useful to find out how many people want to use the service.

The Chairperson:

We will make a general enquiry.

My next item relates to affirmative resolutions on the statutory rule on paternity regulations and the Labour Relations Agency (LRA) code of practice, which will be considered at the plenary sitting on 5 December. What is the issue there?

The Committee Clerk:

You said that you would not speak on the Committee's behalf on the paternity regulations because only one word is to be changed.

The Chairperson:

Yes. Only one word is to be changed. I do not think that I need to make a speech on that. It will just go through on the nod.

I want to raise a couple of further points under Chair's business. Tom, perhaps you would like to talk about the skills conference in Brussels that you and I attended. Will you give a general overview of what you thought about it?

Mr Buchanan:

Two parts stood out. One was the session on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), when delegates from other countries described how they work and how they interlink SMEs and learning. The other interesting topic was that of getting young people into employment.

One disadvantage that I have found is the linkage between Europe and the Northern Ireland Assembly. There is a problem with getting legislation, which is in the process of coming through, here at an early stage so that the Assembly has an opportunity to feed into it. In discussion with folk there, they advised us that when legislation is introduced or they begin to look at it, they forward it to the Department here. However, although the Department has it, we do not seem to get it. One issue was the European social fund (ESF), which Basil raised at a meeting. The Department said, more or less, that it had not looked at it and did not know much about it. However, when we spoke to folk there, they told us that when it came onto the radar, if you like, in early October, they forwarded all the details to the Department. It appears that there is a disconnection that, some way or another, needs to be linked up. In talking to MEPs, they assured us that the fault did not lie with Brussels; it lay somewhere here.

Therefore, one key issue that we need to look at — perhaps not only with regard to the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) but on an overall basis — is how to ensure that when that information comes here, Committees can feed into it. It is important that we get to feed into that rather than to have legislation coming through from Europe that the Committee is asked, more or less, to rubber-stamp. We cannot make any changes to it. Our input will not make any difference to it. We are not involved at an early enough stage. That is one area where I would like to see change, in some way or another, so that we see legislation at a much earlier stage.

The Chairperson:

OK. There were a couple of other issues. Tom and I interacted on that. We just put it out to be discussed at a later time.

On the issue of apprenticeships, the Germans appear to be able to offer them for twice as long and for half the price. They also had a more proactive way to engage with young people in schools and tell them which careers they need to look at. They kept stressing the need to intervene early and tell people where the jobs are and where they need to go for training. There were a number of issues on that subject.

Another issue is people not in education, employment or training (NEETs), and that was addressed by the Swedish folk. The previous Committee produced a big report on NEETs. All indicators suggest that we should be mapping NEETs and where they go. We have still not done that. I suggest that we write to the Department to see whether there has been any update on how we track NEETs. There is a problem in that area.

The final issue on that particular subject is that youth unemployment will go through the roof. Everybody is telling us that Europe does not believe that it can create enough jobs for young people, even if that is benign. What they are really saying is that people will have to create their own jobs. That came across from everybody who spoke. Therefore, our Committee will have some serious thinking to do, and it is something that we should pick up in the new year.

Are members happy for me to move on, or does anyone want to ask a question?

Mr Douglas:

You talked about youth unemployment, which, in some areas, is sky high. We have discussed the Step Ahead programme. Is it OK if I say something about it now?

The Chairperson:

It relates to the topic, and it is right that we should look at it.

Mr Douglas:

Over the past couple of weeks, I have met local residents from the Ballymacarret/Newtownards Road area. In fact, they came up to see me and Peter Robinson as MLAs for East Belfast. They said that the Step Ahead programme is a smashing scheme. Peter Robinson also said that it was a great scheme and that we should do more to support it. I had coffee with the Minister recently, and he is also very supportive of the scheme. Obviously, there is a deficit at the moment, but those young people are given an opportunity and get a wage that is better than the minimum wage because of the tax credits. One of the organisations that I am involved with has been dealing with hundreds of community and voluntary organisations that place people there. It is a smashing programme.

The Chairperson:

It will come up in the monitoring round. We are waiting for decisions. If the Committee is looking at an issue or thematic inquiry, youth unemployment may be the big area. However, it will come up later, so we will deal with it then.

Since I have got you on the stand, you might also want to talk about last night's NOW event, which was sponsored by the Committee. We got our badges for that.

Mr Douglas:

Since I was elected in May, I have tried to attend as many events as possible up here. For me, it was the most successful and enjoyable event that I have attended. There were a lot of people there with learning difficulties, and as I said at the end of last night, the food was five star and the service was five star. Those people have tremendous skills, and it was a great opportunity for them. Chairman, I like your idea of having some sort of Parliament for people with learning difficulties. That is an excellent idea. Everybody that I spoke to thought that it was a smashing programme. Well done to Cathie and the team for organising it. Having the television link-up with the kitchen was excellent. It was by far the best event that I have ever attended. I think that you said last night that we should try to do another one in the future.

Mr Buchanan:

To reiterate what Sammy has said, I think that it was a tremendous event. We learned about

the excellent work that the NOW project does. I did not realise the work that it does, but it takes 60% of people from special schools in north and west Belfast and brings them through learning skills programmes and gets a lot of them into some type of employment, which is tremendous. The amount of work that it does was evident last night in the catering and in the way that the people presented themselves and presented the food to the folk there. When you see that, you really appreciate what they do. More needs to be done to make sure that those people are not treated in an inferior way to people in the mainstream and that they are brought forward and moved into the mainstream as well. The NOW project has to be commended for the tremendous work that it does.

The Chairperson:

I agree with my colleagues that the Committee Clerk, Cathie, and her team did the most outstanding job. Technically, it was brilliant. All the Assembly people who were there, including the Director General, thought that it was simply amazing. We were not sure what the numbers would be like, so we also had folk there from Orchardville, whom Sammy suggested be there, and the Stepping Stone project. I will say in addition that, at North West Regional College, I was entertained to lunch by folk with similar challenges. It was absolutely brilliant.

The real purpose of what the Committee was trying to do was to bring forward young people who do have a contribution to make. It was absolutely heart-warming. We made a video of it, so you will get to see what went on. I know that not everybody could stay. I appreciate that Jim was there, as, indeed, was Sandra. It was really good, and I think that the Committee should be very proud of itself. It was a collective thing. We should not underestimate, however, certain difficulties that we had to overcome. We had to be, and were, creative. I think that the event really put politics in a good light, and we will do more such events.

I want to get members' general feelings about a point that Sammy mentioned. During the discussion with the young people from Orchardville and the Stepping Stone project, one of the Assembly staff thought that she was going to be telling them what they wanted to know. However, they were very keen to stand up and say, "We know what a politician is. He or she is our elected representative." So she asked them what they wanted to talk to us about, to which they replied, "We would like to talk to them about being able to live in a house of our own." She then asked them what they needed to do that, and they said that they would need to be able to get a job. They were really able to articulate themselves given the time. So I wonder whether the Committee is minded to look at having a Parliament — since we have the

Pensioners Parliament and the Youth Parliament — where we bring people in from across the whole Province to discuss their concerns with elected representatives. I am not sure what we would call it, but are members content to look at that to see whether it would be feasible?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

There is one last issue —

Mr Allister:

Before you leave that issue, I just want to say that although I was only there at the beginning, it was obvious that it was shaping up to be an excellent event.

I really want to go back to Tom's point about the Brussels trip and the example of the dissemination of information from Brussels to the Department and of that going no further. Can we engage with the Department, specifically on that item, not generally, to get a timeline of what it did with that information, etc?

The Chairperson:

We could certainly do that for the ESF information.

Mr Allister:

It might be an interesting pilot to see what happens.

The Chairperson:

I did not go on to that point, because Tom sort of covered it. I was on a specific work group about ESF. We did it slightly differently: we did some things together and other things separately. The ESF work group that I was on went into huge detail and talked about the need for ESF to be more risk-orientated and less bureaucratic and about decisions being made by the end of the year about a new project. So, we will take your suggestion, Jim, and we will drill down into the ESF issue.

Mr Allister:

We want to avoid giving the Department the opportunity to talk to it in generalities. We want to say, "This is the programme that we want to hear about it. We want to know what you got from Brussels, when you got that, what you did about it, and why we never heard about it."

The Chairperson:

Can we make sure that we get that? We will circulate a note about it.

The Committee Clerk:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

One last thing that I wanted to mention was the discussion about San Diego. I do not propose to have a huge discussion about that at this meeting, because some members had opinions on it, and I think that they should be part of the discussion. The important point to stress is that no decision has been made on anything, be it on that trip or any other trip or any other issue. All the Committee is doing is seeking evidence and information on which it will make some choices, which may be any or none.

There is one thing that I hope came across. I obviously got a fair pasting myself. My key point — I hope that I am not doing anybody a disservice, but I stand by it — is that I have tried to be fair, open and transparent in this Committee. I take people's points of view, have discussions about them, put that above board and try to give everybody their chance to speak. If anybody thinks that I have any shortcomings in that or that I have in any way made misrepresentations, I am quite happy to hear from them either in public or in private. I try quite hard to do things in the right way.

Any decision will be taken in light of the fact that we are absolutely subject to public scrutiny, and this is the case for any subject. What we say is part of the democratic process, and we have to be able to stand by our decisions. While I was waiting for people to gather, I was thinking about the likely way forward. Those of you who were at the Queen's Island Institute for Electronics, Communications and Information Technology (ECIT) event will remember the presentation by Steve Orr, who made his money in San Diego, came back to Northern Ireland and set up the Northern Ireland Science Park's (NISP) CONNECT programme. Mary Walshok was there as well. Sandra Overend and I were at another presentation by Steve Orr, to which all members were invited. It was in the presence of Stephen Farry and Arlene Foster and was about benchmarking for research and innovation. The Committee has invited those people to come to talk to us, and that will be part and parcel of the discussion. However, there is no urgency other than that we have to deal with youth unemployment and try to create jobs, and that will be done in the new year. So that is where I stand on the matter. Does anybody want to comment?

Mr Allister:

You are indicating that the Committee will not make decisions now but in the new year. Is that right?

The Chairperson:

On anything. The particular bit that will come forward will be a presentation from Steve Orr on that issue, and I am not proposing any discussions until those times.

Mr Allister:

Let us be clear: no decision has been taken to go to San Diego or anywhere else, has it?

The Chairperson:

No.

Mr Allister:

I know that I have not been at every meeting, but my recollection is that when this matter was first mentioned, it was in the context of a trip to Boston or somewhere on the east coast. The first time that I heard about San Diego was in the public media. How did we get from A to B?

The Chairperson:

There is a complete discussion and, in fact, a transcript. You may not have been there, but it came from the Committee's meeting in Queen's Island at the Science Park.

Mr Allister:

I was not at that meeting.

The Chairperson:

They talked at some length, and the model that is coming on is based on that discussion. There was then a further meeting that, again, all members were invited to but that not everybody was able to attend in the glasshouse in Stormont Castle on 27 October when the two Ministers and Steve Orr were present. So there was a series of meetings at which ideas were put forward to try to align different areas of government and what they are doing. I would stress, Jim, that other issues were looked at, and we will make sure that all the information is available to everybody.

I will finish on this point, and it is a point for the record. I have stated in the past, and I

will state it again, that only two of the 11 members of the Committee were previously members of an Employment and Learning Committee. Moreover, the democratic process in Northern Ireland does not elect you because of skills in a particular area, and the Committee that you are on can, frankly, be different to your life skills. At some stage during the process, it is important that all of us move up a skills level and increase our understanding about the decisions that we are being asked to make. The way in which we do that is a matter for the Committee to consider, but it is self-evident that we have to do it in an appropriate way. Are there any other comments on the matter?

Mr Allister:

The only final comment that I want to make is that what has gone on with this issue probably means that trips such as that one are looking increasingly dubious.

The Chairperson:

There is no point in my having a discussion about whether they are dubious or not at this time. The information will come forward. What was said repeatedly in the meeting was that those decisions will be taken only if a robust business case can be made that can stand public scrutiny, and they will be taken in a fully open and transparent manner. People will have to argue their case one way or the other. The point that I do not want to miss is that, whatever way we do it, there are people who have been to different events, such as the NOW event, or whatever. The more we get out, the more we learn, which informs what we have to do. It is for the consideration of the Committee. As Chair, I do my best to try to reflect the disparate points of view in a fair and balanced way. I offered you the opportunity to say if you thought that I was not doing it right. I am not in charge of the Committee; I chair it, and I do so as a member of a minority party. That said, I propose to let the matter rest, unless you want to say something else, Jim?

Mr Allister:

No. If we are coming back to it in January, that is fine.

The Chairperson:

Anybody else?

Mr D McIlveen:

Speaking in a personal capacity, I agree with a lot of what you are proposing. There is a big world out there that, whether we like it or not, is doing a lot of things better than we are. It is important that we look into that and try to learn as much as we can. Also, the people who

were criticising the idea of the trip would probably be, by and large, the same people who, if we have not made a noticeable change in three or four years' time, will be asking why we were not out there looking for opportunities. I think that I have been reasonably consistent on that. My only concern — I say this as a prerequisite for the discussion in January — is that it is perhaps putting all our eggs in one basket. One of the criticisms that was levelled — I am inclined to agree with it to a large extent — was that it may not be necessary for the whole Committee to go to one place. If we look at emerging markets such as India, China and even in Europe, there are things that we can learn from those places. It may be more prudent to consider smaller groups going to different places if the budget is there to do it, rather than all of us going to one place. In my private sector life, I spent enough times in empty hotel rooms to know that it is not a holiday when you do those things, although that may be the public perception. That should perhaps be the direction in which we go. I would certainly be more comfortable with that direction.

The Chairperson:

Absolutely. Does anybody else want to come in?

Mr Allister:

Have we a definitive budget? What are the budgetary arrangements?

The Chairperson:

We do not have a budget as such. There is a centrally held budget for which Committees make application.

Mr Allister:

So they compete with other Committees?

The Chairperson:

That is correct.

Mr Allister:

Who decides?

The Chairperson:

The Chairpersons' Liaison Group. That is the procedure. Lots of Committees have gone to different places in the past. For the record, I take David's point. I think that it is important to stipulate, given that it can be open to misinterpretation, that, in the initial stages, the invitation

must go to all members of the Committee equally. It is not for me to say that I think that these three or four members should go. The issue then moves on to David's point: people could suggest a better division of labour or say that the budgetary constraints are such that we can send only a few people. The Committee can and will take that decision; it is not the Chairperson's decision, which is why I have to be careful about saying who is invited and who is not. I will not go into the detail, but I asked the Committee Clerk to check with all members about the way in which they were thinking about things.

I reiterate: in this very difficult financial era, we have to be very careful about spending taxpayers' money, but there is a question about what we do as a Committee and how best we can move things forward. We have put those things on the table. I am anxious to get on to other business, because we have gone over time a wee bit, but I do not want to stifle a debate or discussion in any way. If anybody else would like to say something, please do so.

Mr Douglas:

I want to make a couple of comments. I thought that Jim was very balanced in what he said. I heard comments from other members who are not here, and I would prefer to speak to them when they are. So I am happy enough to leave that until January.

You rightly said on the radio that there was no programme and that this is a possible visit. I prefer to call it a "visit" rather a "trip" because I used to go on Sunday school trips, which were free. We are not going to help to create 25,000 new jobs by sitting in room 29. For some of us, it is about going out there and engaging face to face with key influencers, whether they are in San Diego or Ballymena. There was never any agreement that there would be 11 plus two people going; as somebody on the news said — a football team and two subs. It was open to all members of the Committee, which is democracy and convention. We should revisit this.

One reason why I was late was that I was speaking to a pharmacist, who is not striking. He told me that some of his staff are losing 20% of their income and others are losing their jobs. There is a verse in the Bible about avoiding the appearance of evil; it is not about what we do but about what we appear to do. We need to watch some of the comments that we make on television. I am 100% supportive of you, Chair, and think that you have taken the right direction.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for that. Obviously, you can have private chats with people as you see fit.

Chris, you came in a bit late, and I appreciate your coming in. We have nearly finished talking about this issue, but I wanted to mention to you that, after your suggestion when we were at the Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust (NIABT) event, Tom and I had a really interesting meeting. Thank you for that; it was worthwhile.

Mr Lyttle:

That is a case in which there is a compelling reason. There are programmes and funding streams available to Northern Ireland in an employment and learning capacity, and there is a compelling reason for representatives to partake in that.

I will build on what other people said. With regard to the other possible work trip, there would also need to be compelling reasons for it. I do not think that anybody on the Committee is saying otherwise, and there has been some misreporting of what exactly is on the table at the moment. The public can rest assured that nothing would be done without extremely compelling reasons that there would be a serious chance of an outcome. I am happy to leave it at that.

The Chairperson:

I want to mention one last thing very briefly; it was not Committee business, but it would be of interest to you. I visited the offices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and talked about three issues with the directorates. One was the programme for international student assessment (PISA) study, which, as those of you who have been on the Education Committee might understand, ranks 34 countries throughout the world in respect of education. You can look at that study to see where Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom rank. There has been a lot of discussion about whether it is valid, right, wrong or whatever. I spoke to the man himself, and he is amenable to coming along and giving a presentation to the Committee, perhaps along with the Education Committee. Would you like more information on that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

They also produced information on an OECD report into further and higher education, which looked at Lombardy in Italy, which is a fast-growing technology area. It is a very comprehensive piece of work that was done by a different directorate. I have given information on that to the Committee Clerk, which I would like to circulate to you. Another

issue might be that we can do desk research as well as going off to these places.

Interestingly, they managed to do a report on Greece and the educational impact of its economic mess. I will make that available to members. Given the crisis that Greece was in, that report was done in two months. It was about what they would have to do, and it made interesting points about there being too many teachers but not enough teaching. Finally, there is a report into innovation and how that might be taken forward. They supported the point that Tom made about us needing to ensure that our young people are looked after. I brought those for your attention. You can decide if and when we want to do something. It is very useful. Thank you very much for your indulgence on that.

We move to the draft minutes. Minutes of the meetings held on 23 and 28 November are at tab 1 of members' packs. May I sign those on your behalf when appropriate?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Matters arising: agreed action points from the last Committee meeting are at tab 2. Are there any matters arising, Clerk?

The Committee Clerk:

No.

The Chairperson:

There are no matters arising unless anyone wants to raise anything.

Mr Douglas:

Chairman, this may not be the right part of the agenda to raise the issue of visits. However, Jim had mentioned Wrightbus. When we went to the Science Park, I was very impressed to hear about the work that Wrightbus is doing. I would love to visit Wrightbus in Ballymena; that would be excellent.

The Chairperson:

We want to do that. We will note that, Sammy. Wrightbus is on the list, but we have not heard back yet. If necessary, I will phone Billy myself and see what we can do. We should be going up there because Wrightbus is doing great stuff. Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

We will now have a departmental briefing on the January monitoring round. I wonder whether the departmental officials would come forward; they are outside. I remind members that this session will be reported by Hansard. Please take care that all electronic devices are switched off. At tab 3, there is correspondence from the Department of Finance and Personnel on the new financial process and the importance of January monitoring. Details of the DEL monitoring round submission that was e-mailed to members yesterday are also tabled. Has everyone got that?