



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

**Dissolution of the Department for Employment and
Learning: Stakeholder Event, Room 29**

18 April 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

Dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning: Stakeholder Event, Room 29

18 April 2012

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann

Witnesses:

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Mr Brian McAreavey | Confederation of British Industry |
| Mr Mike Mullan | Confederation of British Industry |
| Mr Nigel Smyth | Confederation of British Industry |
| Mr Tom Mervyn | Employment Services Board |
| Mr John Simpson | Employment Services Board |
| Mr Alan Carr | Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland |
| Mr Colin Neilands | Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland |
| Ms Ann Osborne | Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland |
| Ms Linda Brown | Institute of Directors |
| Ms Joanne Stuart | Institute of Directors |
| Ms Penny Holloway | Labour Relations Agency |
| Mr Jim McCusker | Labour Relations Agency |
| Ms Liz Aiken | Mencap |
| Ms Cathy McCloskey | Mencap |
| Ms Joanne McDonald | Mencap |
| Ms Jenny Ruddy | Mencap |
| Mr Pat Conway | Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders |
| Mr Gareth Eannetta | Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders |
| Ms Fiona Browne | Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association |
| Ms Hilary Harbinson | Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association |
| Ms Cathy Moore | Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association |
| Dr Anne Heaslett | Stranmillis University College |
| Ms Margaret Haddock | The Orchardville Society |

The Chairperson: Hello. You are very welcome. This is a special meeting. We do not have a quorum requirement. Members will be coming in and out. It is an evidence-gathering session that will be reported by Hansard. This is a chance for you to talk to me, and, hopefully, some of the others will be here shortly. We have 15 minutes, and the floor is yours.

Mr Jim McCusker (Labour Relations Agency): Thank you for the opportunity to give our views on the dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). I am the chair of the Labour Relations Agency, and Penny Holloway is our director of conciliation and arbitration.

The Labour Relations Agency is in the business of employment relations. By that, we mean that we are involved in the relations between employers and unions and employers and employees. Part of that business is employment law, but it is by no means the whole business. We appreciate that, as a legislative Assembly, you normally come at that question from its employment law aspect, but it is not the totality as it relates to our business, which is employment relations.

We have a statutory duty to promote the improvement of employment relations. As we see it, good employment relations relate directly to one of the key problems of the Northern Ireland economy, which is our lower rate of productivity compared with the UK economy as a whole. Better employment relations raises productivity and higher productivity can be built only on good employment relations. Therefore, employment relations has an organic connection with the economy, and we take the view that, if DEL were to be abolished, employment relations should go the Department that, in the future, will have responsibility for the economy. Before DEL was created, employment relations rested with the Department of Economic Development. Our experience of that arrangement was that it was beneficial for employment relations.

Currently, employment relations, as you know, is brigaded with higher and further education, but we feel that there is no natural affinity with higher and further education. Nor, indeed, is there an affinity with education generally. We provide a service to the education sector, but we do that along with all other sectors such as manufacturing, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which we are particularly interested in, and micro-businesses. So, we believe that, if there is a reorganisation of government functions, it would not be appropriate for employment relations to be brigaded with education.

The Committee asked about our concerns on the dissolution of DEL. We have three primary concerns. First, we fear that there would be a loss of focus at ministerial and departmental level on employment relations. Among other things, that could have consequences for our modest budget, which is currently £3.5 million annually and places us in the minor league of public bodies. There is a tendency in government circles, especially in these times of more limited public resources, to equate importance with the size of your budget. Therefore, there is a danger that we would be regarded as an even smaller fish in a bigger pool. Our second area of concern is about the loss of expertise on employment relations that has been built up in the Department for Employment and Learning. Thirdly, we are concerned about the possible diminution in the relationship that we have built up with departmental officials. The mutually beneficial relationship that has been created has been good for employment relations and, consequently, the economy.

I hope that my remarks have indicated how we have addressed your five questions on the possible dissolution of the Department. I invite my colleague Penny to make some remarks.

The Chairperson: Penny is about to come in, but be aware that we have about seven minutes left, and I want to get some questions in.

Ms Penny Holloway (Labour Relations Agency): I have nothing to add.

The Chairperson: Colleagues, questions should be tight, because we will be moving on at 10.15 am. Questions should be short and to the point.

Do you think that it is a good idea per se that DEL be abolished?

Mr McCusker: As I have said, we have reservations about that. We are concerned that the focus on employment and particularly employment relations will be lost. At the same time, we have never been comfortable about being attached to higher and further education. There is no natural connection there, but there is a natural connection with issues relating to the economy.

The Chairperson: So, you would like to move to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) regardless of whether DEL stayed or not.

Mr McCusker: I would not say that, Chairperson. We are equivocal about that. We see ourselves faced with a political decision to abolish the Department, and we have to live with the consequences of that. If we were asked whether we would wish to stay with the present arrangement, we would be inclined to say that we think that there might be some case for reorganisation of functions because we do not rest easily with higher and further education.

The Chairperson: I am happy for members to come in. We are short of time, so speak if you want to speak.

A political decision was taken to remove a Department, and, at the moment, the finger is pointing at DEL. This is an opportunity for you to say that perhaps it should not be DEL. Perhaps there are benefits in having a Department for Employment and Learning and something else should be amalgamated. You said in your brief that you see yourself quite closely aligned with DETI.

Mr McCusker: We see ourselves quite closely aligned with the economy. The Department with which the economy should rest is a political decision. I think that we would be uncomfortable, for example, with a transfer to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment as presently named, because we believe that the focus on employment and the economy may be lost.

As a board, we have not addressed the question of the proper distribution of all government functions. To some extent, you could argue that to do so is outside our remit. Our remit is employment relations, and we have to look at where that best fits with other government functions. We see it veering towards the economy, wherever that rests.

Mr Douglas: I am sorry for being late. I will address this to you, Jim, or maybe to Penny. You mentioned the importance of the economy, and we all believe that. You may have mentioned this, but what are your views on a new Department of the economy? That has been mooted in some areas.

Mr McCusker: We are essentially saying that wherever the economy goes, employment relations should go too. We do not have a strong view on whether that should be to a new Department or an extension of DETI. I have been around for a long time, and there was, at one stage, a Department of Manpower Services. That was in the context of a much greater number of Departments, but political decisions seem to be to move to a smaller number. When we had a Department of Manpower Services, I think that we had about 10 Departments.

The Chairperson: Chris, do you want to say anything?

Mr Lyttle: I am OK. I am appreciating the comments.

The Chairperson: Would you care to express an opinion on the efficacy of reducing the number of Departments, given that you have experience going back some years?

Mr McCusker: We have not addressed that question as a board. We have accepted that it is a political decision that is being taken, and we have approached it from the point of view of where employment relations best rests. I invite Penny to go into the details.

Ms Holloway: I agree with the chairman; the board has just looked at where, if there is a reduction in Departments, a movement around or a change in functions, employment relations would best sit in the context of a rearranged set of Departments. We are saying that employment relations is a

fundamental part of any economic strategy, particularly in terms of productivity. That is where we see it.

The Chairperson: Penny, we have got that. We understand your position: given what you do, it is one of the more self-evident ones. The point that we come back to is that there is a general opportunity to say what you think. Whatever happens, this is going to be it. You cannot look back in three or four years' time and say, "Well, if only they had asked us, we would have told them." This is the chance; this is where you get to say whether there are areas that we need to look at or to think about again, because sometimes decisions are taken that need to be reviewed or that need to be taken along with other decisions. What I want to get out, in the last few minutes that we have, is whether you are excited or apprehensive at the prospect of the proposed changes to DEL.

Mr McCusker: We are apprehensive. Change is always something that people are apprehensive about. We have three primary concerns: the loss of focus on employment in the situation of being put into a much larger Department; the possible loss of expertise that rests in DEL on employment relations; and the possible diminishing of our relationships with officials through any reorganisation.

The Chairperson: OK. In that case —

Mr Lyttle: Chair, may I sneak in one last question?

The Chairperson: You cannot, Chris; I am sorry. It is 10.15 am, and we are finished. That is how it is; apologies for that.

Mr Lyttle: Fair enough. No problem.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your submission. If you think of anything else or if you feel that we did not give you the chance to say something, you are more than welcome to write to the Committee about it.

Mr McCusker: Thank you very much, Chairman.

The Chairperson: We move now to the second session. Nigel, Brian and Mike, you are very welcome. We have 15 minutes, and we will go through it fairly tightly. It will finish exactly on the minute, and your time starts now.

Mr Nigel Smyth (Confederation of British Industry): Thank you very much for providing us with the opportunity to meet the Committee. Mike Mullan chairs the CBI employment affairs committee and is the group HR and business improvement director at Moy Park, and Brian McAreavey is a director and site head of Citi. I will make a few introductory comments, and I look forward to taking questions.

This is a very important issue for our members. The success of the economy is largely dependent on the supply of talent. Ensuring that that supply is as closely aligned with the needs of the economy as possible is essential, not only for businesses but for individuals.

We have welcomed the commitment to look at the number of Departments overall. Clearly, the dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has come about for other reasons — sooner than the broader review. In principle, the CBI has supported having a smaller number of Departments. We believe that that will lead to more joined-up government, more effective policy-making and, importantly, better outcomes.

There is a unanimous view across CBI members regarding the dissolution of DEL, and I believe that it is shared more broadly in the business community. We believe that the core functions in DEL should be transferred to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). In recent years, we have seen encouraging co-operation between those Departments. We have seen greater responsiveness between the FE and HE sectors and the business community. So, there has been significant progress, and we need to build on that. We have also seen increasing links between business and the colleges and universities in research and development.

The four key functions of DEL are, therefore, unambiguously linked with economic development. We believe that their effectiveness will be enhanced through closer integration with DETI. That clearly extends to the roles that FE and HE play in developing and promoting knowledge transfer, innovation and product process development, as well as in skills. I think that there would be a disappointment in the business community if those functions were to be transferred to the Department of Education. The move to DETI came forward from the independent review of economic policy two years ago, when, on the back of that, there was a strong view of support for the creation of one Department of the economy — possibly a Department of the economy and skills.

The education system is critical overall, and there are significant challenges there. We need to realign the schools system better with the needs of the wider economy. Young people need to be better informed; we need to increase standards; and we need to have more science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills. There are, therefore, significant challenges already within the education piece.

Mr Mike Mullan (Confederation of British Industry): Our vision must be to grow jobs and opportunity through developing and harnessing the talent of our people at direct entry or through upskilling. I think that we have a big challenge. In leadership, core management and qualifications, we are, sadly, not at the top of the league table. How do we perform better? I suggest that we need three things: one integrated skills and support interface with government; local regional skills partners; and closer links between colleges and companies that are aligned. We also need to drive our colleges towards preparing our people for work, which means the economy and skills, and, in parallel, to allow schools to focus on the education agenda, which is well established.

I have a couple of practical examples. I am the deputy chair of the skills action group for the food industry. Agrifood is accepted as the largest opportunity for growth. We have people there from DEL, and we have people there from Invest NI. We should have one. We should optimise that and have a more integrated approach. Moy Park — I am pleased that Moy Park is identified as Northern Ireland's leading company — employs 5,000 people in the North and another 5,000 in GB. We are engaged at a local level with colleges in respect of business improvement, upskilling and flexibility. I would like to see more of that focus.

I am basically saying three things: I want to see skills at the heart of job creation; I want to see colleges at the centre of skills; and I think that colleges and skills need to be part of the economy. I am saying that the drive and the vehicle is to put colleges into the economy.

Mr Brian McAreavey (Confederation of British Industry): Citi Belfast is part of Citigroup, the global bank. We have over 1,000 staff in Belfast, with the vast majority of them educated to third level. We support the view articulated by the CBI; that DEL should move to DETI. That support is driven by two factors: focus and connectivity.

The point on focus is that, as an employer, we feel that the focus of skills development and further and higher education should be preparing young people with the skills they need to move into the workforce, to add value to employers and to take their place in the workforce in order to drive forward economic development and growth. Economic development is obviously the primary focus of DETI, and we feel, therefore, that there is a good fit between DETI and DEL.

The second point is around connectivity. As a private sector employer, we are known very well by DETI and DEL. There are lots of examples of our having worked closely with both of them on skills development. We meet them regularly and at all levels. They talk our language and understand our business and business needs. They also understand what employers like us need from Northern Ireland plc in order to be competitive in what is a very global marketplace for jobs. Those relationships and that level of understanding have been built up over years. We simply do not have the same network of relationships with the Department of Education.

For those two reasons — focus and connectivity — we feel that DEL would be a better fit for DETI.

The Chairperson: Why do you think that it is right for DEL to go to DETI and not for DETI, which is a much smaller Department, to come to DEL?

Mr Smyth: We were not asked that question. Ultimately, we are seeing a coming together into one Department. We are not arguing that the skills agenda is coming in underneath or at a lower level; what we want to do is to put them together. We see them conjoining, as it were. We do not see one coming in and overtaking the other. We see them joining together overall. As we have emphasised, the issue of skills is critical. That is where our competitive advantage is.

The Chairperson: There is an argument made by others that the FE Means Business programme has become more business-oriented to the disadvantage of adult learning, community learning and various other things, and that what you will get if you go down this route is a very narrow and short-term issue that could best be dealt with by the Assured Skills programme that already exists.

Mr Mullan: What I am trying to do in any of our sites or any of our business is to build capability, make us more competitive and win more business. If you do not win more business, you do not create jobs. Who are the partners that I want to talk to about that? I want to talk to Invest NI about strategic stuff. I want to talk to skills providers, and the best provider for me to talk to at a local level is the college. I want to be able to do that by talking to one body, not talking to three different bodies. What you mentioned, Basil, in relation to upskilling, adult learning, qualifications and flexibility, should come from one delivery partner based within a coherent strategy —

The Chairperson: Mike, it could be argued that where a company, which is the size of yours or the size of Citi, has very specific requirements in respect of software engineering or whatever it happens to be, the best way of dealing with that is through an Invest NI-led Assured Skills programme that finds out exactly what it wants and gives it exactly what it needs. On the other hand, a wider debate goes on about how we lift the whole raft of human endeavour and include people who have not been engaged in education. That would say that education for education's sake is a good thing, and it may not be appropriate for that to be in a target-driven economic Department.

Mr Smyth: We have welcomed the restructuring that has gone on in the FE sector. We have definitely seen a more responsive sector. There were always some FE colleges that were closer to and more responsive to business needs. We believe that the individuals going through that system would probably have a better opportunity of getting employment at the end. The issue is about relevance and priorities. We think that the most important priority for most individuals will be getting a job at the end of their training and skilling. That is not to say that there are not other areas that are important, but we have to prioritise. Ultimately, Northern Ireland has to compete. We have to earn our living. Several years ago, we had concerns that too much money was being spent in areas that were not relevant to the needs of the economy, when there were job and skills shortages. We believe, therefore, that the realignment was beneficial not only to business and the economy but to the many individuals who were going through the system.

The Chairperson: Do colleagues have any questions? I do not want to hog the questioning.

Mr Douglas: I have one quick question to be answered from a business point of view. If we were not making this decision for the future, and if you were in our position, would you think that it is a good idea? Forget about all the reasons why it has happened. Do you think that it would be a good idea to merge the two Departments, bearing in mind the arguments made about the benefits for businesses and the economy?

Mr Smyth: There was a significant amount of consultation just over two years ago, when the independent review of economic policy (IREP) report came out. It contained 54 recommendations, and that was one of them. In all the consultation at that time, there was very strong support for that idea. Indeed, there was some concern that, subsequently, nothing happened with it. I said that the view was unanimous, because nobody said that it was a foolish thing to do and that we should not be doing it. Ultimately, it is about structures. It is about the vision coming from the political leadership on the importance of education and the importance of skills and ensuring that they are aligned with the needs of the economy. That is for the benefit of not only businesses but individuals.

Mr Lyttle: My question flows on from that fairly well. How important is it to the individual and the wider economy that we realign the school system, training provision and skills more closely with economic need and opportunity?

Mr Smyth: Absolutely critical. There is a big challenge there.

Mr McAreavey: I agree with that. In the six or seven years it has been here, one of the things Citi has learned is that there is a big difference between talent and skills. Talent was the original value proposition. Companies were told to come to Northern Ireland because there was lots of great talent coming out of the universities, and so on. Lots of places can deliver talent. Our internal competitors — Budapest, Poland, India — can deliver talent. If we can help to bridge the gap between talent and skills, it is enormously helpful. We need that alignment and focus.

We do not have time to talk about them now, but there are numerous examples of where we have worked closely not only with DETI and DEL but, through them, with the universities on different programmes to help convert the raw talent into marketable and relevant skills that can add value to our business and, indeed, help attract other companies, such as Chicago Mercantile Exchange, New York Stock Exchange and others, into Northern Ireland. They will be attracted if they can see a skills base that they can tap into. From a Northern Ireland plc point of view, it is hugely critical.

I would not discount what the Chairman says about the other aspects of education and lifelong learning and development. That is all very important, but I am presenting the view of employers and driving the economy forward. I cannot comment on those other things. They will be important, but my focus is on relevance and alignment for the economy.

The Chairperson: Are you excited or apprehensive about the opportunity that is presenting itself?

Mr Mullan: Absolutely excited. It will replace frustration with opportunity and potential.

The Chairperson: Thank you for attending this morning's session.

The Chairperson: We now move to evidence from the Institute of Directors. Good morning. You are very welcome. We are operating to a very strict timetable.

Ms Linda Brown (Institute of Directors): I can see that. It is very impressive.

The Chairperson: We will finish at 10.45, so you have 15 minutes, starting now.

Ms L Brown: Thank you for the invitation. As you probably know, I am the director of the Institute of Directors in Northern Ireland, and Joanne is our immediate past chairman and a member of the Northern Ireland committee. She is also a past chairman of our education and skills committee and a current member of that committee. For a long time, we have been concerned about the overgovernance of Northern Ireland, and there is a recognition that we have possibly too many Departments. We understand the reasoning behind that. However, we have made a submission to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on the number of government Departments. We put that in after we sent the letter to this Committee. We feel that there is potential to reduce the number, possibly, to seven Departments and that there is a need for rationalisation, mainly due to the duplication that we have noticed, which is confusing and not very efficient.

Our especial concern about the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is that its aim is to support the economy, and we feel that, if the Department is to be dissolved, its functions mainly belong with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). The particular concern that we have come across is in relation to leadership and management development, where you find the functions in both DETI, through Invest Northern Ireland, and DEL. Often, businesses do not know which one they are going to. They do not know whether they are eligible for support from one or the other, so we feel that the natural home for those skills and, indeed, for other skills, lies in DETI.

Further education and higher education, which are other functions of DEL, have made exceptional efforts over the past number of years to align themselves with business, and all the skills that are being developed through those sectors would naturally lie with DETI as well. We see that the schools system up to secondary level prepares young people for life and the further and higher education sectors prepare them for work. We feel that teacher training and careers advice lie more naturally with the Department of Education.

Joanne has some particular interests on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

Ms Joanne Stuart (Institute of Directors): A lot of work is going on to develop our skills in the area of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Through MATRIX and the Northern Ireland science panel, there is a focus on industries that require STEM skills, and, again, a lot of work is being done through the STEM review and the creation of the implementation steering group, the business group and the government group to look at how we drive forward the STEM strategy. Again, it is important that we do not lose that work, because all of that requires business to be engaged in both the school sector and in further and higher education to ensure that we have people coming out with the skills that will give them the best potential to get jobs and develop their careers.

The Chairperson: I will ask a few questions. Members, we are tight for time, so let me know quickly if you want to ask a question. There will be no messing around.

There is a concern that the FE skills agenda may have become too narrow and that it is just a business-orientated facility. More work used to be done on community learning, adult learning and lifelong learning. All of those things had a general good, and some fear that, if those were put into a Department of the economy, they would be dissipated completely.

Ms L Brown: Who do you think would fear that — the colleges or their users?

The Chairperson: Some of the submissions we have had from other people talk about education as a lifelong experience. The unions, for example, would be more concerned about the generality of education and that it should not be just a short-term issue to achieve business targets.

Ms L Brown: What the colleges are delivering at the minute seems to us to cover lifelong learning, certainly for adult education and numeracy and literacy, whether through the colleges themselves or through their outreach programmes. They cover that aspect of lifelong and adult education. I cannot see it being lost just because the colleges may be governed by DETI.

The Chairperson: Your submission states that you were surprised by the sudden proposal to dissolve DEL, yet the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) mentioned that such a proposal was suggested a couple of years ago when they were looking at economic development.

Ms L Brown: It was not the suggestion, rather the speed at which it suddenly appeared.

Ms Stuart: It is also the fact that it is being done in isolation. Business organisations had called for a rationalisation of Departments. We called for a Department of the economy, which would bring skills and the other economic functions together into one Department. Therefore, you would also be looking at the functions in DETI, some of which we do not think necessarily align with a Department of the economy. It was put in the context of a wider rationalisation. What is happening here is that we are doing it in isolation and looking at only one Department rather than looking at the functions as a whole across all of government.

The Chairperson: I will come back to that point, but I am keen to bring members in.

Ms Gildemew: You are very welcome. To follow on from the Chair's point, one area that I have been working on over past years was agriculture. We brought it so far, and some functions were carried out by DETI, sometimes well and sometimes not so well. I do not think it a good idea to put all of the

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) functions into DETI. Joanne, you mention a Department of the economy, but agriculture is our biggest economy.

Ms Stuart: Yes, absolutely.

Ms Gildernew: Do you see it fitting within a Department of the economy? A lot of areas of work done by DARD would not have been done at all, I believe, if DETI had have been in charge of all of them.

To follow on from the Chair's point, businesses will focus on business, and businesses are there to make money, but sometimes people have other needs as well. Those needs also have to be met in an appropriate fashion. There were many times when I was frustrated at DETI's approach to carrying on what we had done. We got traceability from the farm to close to the fork, but we did not get the whole way. It was one recommendations of a very important report that came out during my time that all of the functions of agriculture should be in one Department, but DETI refused to let go of the import side. It is just an illustration of how things are not always as simple as they seem.

Ms L Brown: In our other submissions on the number of Departments, we would have said that the agriculture function — not all of it, but some of it — would also go into DETI as well as the rural development and regeneration sides, and that perhaps a different Department could encompass the urban regeneration part.

Ms Gildernew: Do you know what would happen? Urban regeneration would happen and rural regeneration would not. I am telling you that for a fact, because I was on the Social Development Committee a number of years ago as well. We cannot be too fixed on a single goal, because other things will suffer as a result.

Ms L Brown: Can you see a junior Minister having responsibility under the new restructuring? Say there was to be a Department of the economy; do you see a junior Minister having a portfolio specifically for the agriculture side?

Ms Gildernew: I do not think that would work.

Ms Stuart: This raises the point that functions need to be looked at as a whole, and more work needs to be done on the different functions to see which ones can move. I agree and we always know that we are facing challenges around joined-up working. We saw that with DETI in the creative industries and with the skills agenda between DETI, Invest NI and DEL. However, those were identified, and a lot of work has been done to ensure that those working relationships are in place.

I take your point; it is very difficult when you move functions around, but I think that is what we have to look at. We have to consider how best we can join up that working so that we are not losing work that is being done specifically, say, within agriculture, but maximising it with regard to the economy.

The Chairperson: Just to develop that theme, Joanne, you obviously have a huge interest in the STEM subjects. I was at a very inspirational presentation by the man who discovered the wreck of the Titanic. He said that at P7, maths is the most exciting subject for students, and, by the age of 14, it is the worst. You might argue that if you really want to get STEM-orientated, you need to get writing to the education system to say that there are some benefits in that.

Ms Stuart: There are two aspects to the STEM agenda: the current skills gap, and the development of the STEM skills. There is an absolute role to play in our education system. There is agreement that we need to start our STEM education a lot earlier — in primary school — to get pupils excited. Then, there is the area on which DEL has been working in STEM. We have jobs available now, and we do not have the people with the skills, so we are looking at retraining and how we train more quickly to get people in STEM. There are two aspects: the current need, and the demand that we will have in the future. We have to develop that.

The Chairperson: We will come back to that.

Mr Lyttle: How damaging could it be for individuals and the economy if this restructuring is done in isolation rather than as part of the wider review?

Ms L Brown: We proposed, as part of a wider review, that most of the functions should go into an economy Department anyway. It would make more sense to have a wider review done, because you could make sure that there was no duplication or overlap if it were done all together.

Mr Lyttle: Am I right in saying that you are suggesting that FE should be in the Department of Education if this proceeds in isolation?

Ms L Brown: No.

Mr Lyttle: That is understandable. That is fine.

Mr Douglas: Joanne, at some stage in your presentation, you talked about how there are some things in DETI that should not be there. I know that this is not about DETI, but it is a bit of a mix and match in some ways. What are the main areas that you have concerns about that DETI is responsible for that should not be there in respect of the overall economy?

Ms L Brown: Energy, in particular, is one area. It is Northern Ireland-wide and applies to community as well as business. Obviously, the cost of energy is a major factor for businesses. We proposed a new Department called strategic development, which would take in the likes of energy, transport, planning and those sorts of policies.

The Chairperson: Is there a danger, though, that, in doing all of this, we are just rearranging the deckchairs? Are we going to take any savings out of the changes? I am not so sure that we are; it will just be a transfer of function, budget and personnel, so there will be no savings per se. The only thing that you will see is perhaps more efficient working because you are reducing silos. Is that what we are looking at?

Ms L Brown: How it is managed is not for us to say. There is a potential for making savings, but that would most likely involve staffing losses by just bringing functions together, which is not necessarily what we are saying at all. It is about better effectiveness and making sure that we are economy proofing decisions. If fewer Departments are all focused towards the economy as the number one priority, it would be easier for them to join up to discuss things than if there were 12.

The Chairperson: You could lose focus. Our Committee spends a lot of time looking at young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), STEM and a whole range of issues. If you were to have one Department of the economy — let us say, for the sake of convenience, that you just merged DETI and DEL — you have half the amount of people looking at an issue. The actual driver in that regard is more problematic. Maybe there will be a call some time later to say that we need a Minister in charge of skills and one in charge of R&D. In our drive to concertina the Departments, I wonder whether we will end up losing focus rather than gaining it.

Ms Stuart: As we said in our response, work needs to be done to really look at the different Departments. There is not necessarily a problem with having more junior Minister portfolios; we see that in other Governments. You have a Minister who has overall responsibility. It is like a business organisation in that you will have a chief executive, but you will also have a senior executive management team that works with him or her. I do not think that that would be a bad way to move forward. The bigger the Department you have, the more you will need to have heads of specific functions.

The Chairperson: This is the last question. In general, are you anxious about the proposals or are you excited?

Ms Stuart: There is anxiety because we are not sure what will happen. From talking to staff with whom we work in the Department, we can see that it is a concerning time, because people do not know what will happen. However, as with anything, I would like to think that if we are doing something different, it

is an opportunity to look at how we do things and do them better. It depends on the outcome, but we have good relationships with the people currently in those roles and we have to maximise the opportunity.

Ms Gildernew: If I may make one tiny observation —

The Chairperson: No, sorry.

Ms Gildernew: It is a tiny observation. If I say it as the witnesses are walking out, they can listen. The worst Department for working in silos is also the biggest one — the Health Department. Just bear that in mind.

The Chairperson: You are awful. I made the rule that we would finish this session at 10.45.

Ms Gildernew: That is how you do it, Chris. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Thank you very much.

The Chairperson: We move now to evidence from Mencap. You are very welcome. Ach, there is Joanne. It is nice to see you.

Ms Joanne McDonald (Mencap): Hello, Basil. It is nice to see you too.

The Chairperson: Now, folks, we have 15 minutes. As you have probably gathered, we are trying to run closely to time, because we have a lot of people to hear. So, when the 15 minutes are up, I will tell my colleagues that that is it and we have to finish. Your 15 minutes start now, if would you like to have a little chat, and then we will ask questions.

Ms Cathy McCloskey (Mencap): Hello everybody, my name is Cathy McCloskey, and I am the sector manager across the south and west for employment and transition services in Mencap. With me are Joanne McDonald, equality officer for Mencap, and she will speak in a few moments; Jenny Ruddy, Mencap campaigns officer; and Liz Aiken, who is the parent of a son with a learning disability. You will hear Liz speak about the importance of specialist support in employment, and Joanne will talk briefly about her journey to work.

Mencap is a learning disability organisation, and it has more than 20 years' experience in supporting people with a learning disability across Northern Ireland in finding and keeping a job. We believe that the Department's function should move as a whole to one Department, preferably the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), because of the link with the economy and the link between work and inclusion. A key role of specialist agencies in supporting people with a learning disability into college and into work needs to be recognised and funded in the new structure or structures.

I will hand over to Liz, then Joanne will speak, and then we will be open to questions or continued discussions, and Jenny will close our submission.

Ms Liz Aiken (Mencap): I am the mother of a son who is soon to be 29 years old and has a severe learning difficulty and autism. I wear another hat in that I am deputy head of school at the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre. As such, I see a disproportionate number of young people in there who have, as opposed to a learning difficulty, a social impairment such as ADHD, Asperger's syndrome or some other difficulty that has caused them problems through school and probably out of school. From my point of view, because of my own son and those other young people, I really do not want them to be lost in this change. They are a small group, and I feel — just as a mother — that my son Ryan, through school, when he was in severe learning difficulties (SLD), was in a cosseted environment. He was not particularly challenged there. At transition into the adult training centres, which are abysmally funded, there was not the drive, ability or capacity to stretch Ryan in any way into making him inclusive within the community or a work placement. He was a young person who got on that yellow bus to school and who now goes on a white bus to the resource centre.

Fortunately, in the past year or so, my husband came into contact with Mencap and its employment scheme. He told Mencap that Ryan had very complex needs and would be a challenge to them, because he is very limited in his social skills and in what he would be able to do, but he managed to convince them, and they decided that it was a challenge they were prepared to rise to. I know that it does not sound like a lot, but, now, Ryan is out in the community for an hour and a half a week in a Red Cross placement. It is about trying to encourage employers to take on our young people. A lot of work needs to be done there. You can see that Ryan's self-esteem has risen from being there. He is going to work. I know that people can say it is tokenism —

The Chairperson: We take the point that it is very good for Ryan, so we are sympathetic and supportive, but we would like to know how moving DEL into DETI or the Department of Education might affect you. What are your concerns about that?

Ms Aiken: My concern relates to the transition within education. It does not continue to have a role. No one has ever tracked Ryan to see where he has gone. He has left school and gone into an adult training centre, where there is a need for the careers advice and all of those functions that DEL would have been responsible for.

The Chairperson: Do you think it would be better if the functions of DEL were in the Department of the economy, the Department of Education or somewhere else?

Ms Aiken: I think that, historically, the Department of Education has not taken on that mantle, and I think this group would be lost in the Department of Education, because they are not into university and higher and further education.

The Chairperson: That is lovely; we will come back in a wee bit.

Ms McDonald: I would like to highlight the importance of support and opportunity for all people with learning disabilities to go into training or further education to get the skills and the opportunities to gain experience and to progress in employment like anybody else in Northern Ireland. I am going to talk for a few minutes about my personal experience. I left school and went on to do an NVQ level 1. At the end of my level 1, I was told that they had a lot of concerns about progressing me on to level 2. I had to fight for my right to progress to level 2. May I point out that I was in a class with a lot of people who did not have a learning disability, and they did not have to battle? When the course was over, I progressed to employment, and a lot of individuals in the course who did not have a learning disability did not progress to employment. I was the one who had to fight for my opportunity to progress to get the skills, with the support of my family and other individuals in the community. It is very important for people to see people with a learning disability as a valued part of the workforce in Northern Ireland. The workforce should reflect the diversity in our society and the abilities, skills and qualities that people with a learning disability have. All people with a learning disability should be fully supported and encouraged to gain employment. The links between further education and employment should be fully supported for people with a learning disability, and they should be made accessible. I would like to ask the Committee to ensure that, whatever change is made, it is vital that people with a learning disability do not get lost or forgotten about in whatever system is put in place.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Joanne, and I doubt that anyone can forget you. Joanne, you did not mention that you had two days of work experience with me.

Ms McDonald: Yes, I forgot that.

The Chairperson: I will allow Chair's prerogative a bit. This shocked me. Tell them where you lived at the time and what you had to do to get here.

Ms McDonald: I still live there. I live in Tyrone, and I have to get the bus from Pomeroy to Dungannon, and then I have to get the bus from Dungannon to Europa Buscentre. I then have to get a taxi or a bus to get me to Stormont.

The Chairperson: She did all of that on her own to be here for 10.00 am.

Mr F McCann: Then she had to stick you for the day. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: She did. That was a great eye opener for me, and I draw that to your attention. We have a bit of time here. Michelle will come in. It is all right. I see the time.

Ms Gildernew: Thank you, Basil. The whole area of learning disability and vulnerable adults and young people has not had the focus that it should have had in DEL. I have been concentrating a good bit of work on that area. Parkanaur College is in my constituency, and I work closely with it. I know that that area has been the poor relation in DEL. I am telling you now that, if it goes into DETI, you will never get a look in. By the time the Institute of Directors, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and all the rest of them have the Minister's ear, very little time, resource or care will be taken with the sector, and I believe that it needs special attention. Just be careful what you wish for.

Ms McCloskey: Do you believe that it will get the special attention that it needs in DE?

Ms Gildernew: There is more chance of it happening in DE. I am delighted to hear that Ryan is making a contribution, because that is where he is at now. Liz, it is very hard when they turn 19. The first day and the last day in the special school are the two worst days of a parent's life. Education's responsibility ends and another Department takes over. Education cannot follow Ryan's progress at the minute because it is another Department's responsibility. I can understand the frustration at that gap, but I definitely think that there is a much better chance of that attention being given in DE than there would be in DETI.

Ms Aiken: Then we need DE to take a lifelong-learning approach. There should be no cut-off age at, for example, 25.

Ms Gildernew: You made a point about Ryan not getting challenged.

The Chairperson: I want to bring Fra in. We are a bit tight for time.

Ms Gildernew: The point that you made about Ryan not getting challenged also needs to be made very clear to DE, for the children who have not got to Ryan's level yet.

Mr F McCann: I agree totally with what Michelle has said. I am on the board of a community health facility in west Belfast, and a number of people with learning difficulties work and help out in it. I agree that lifelong learning is important and that there needs to be a fluency to it. An element that we have not been through yet is that some elements of DEL should be moved into the Department for Social Development (DSD), such as jobs and benefits offices, job training and perspectives and putting people into training. The other end looks after benefits. There is an attachment there. Most people have the idea that it should be divided in two, but I think that a third element there could be advanced to help.

Ms Jenny Ruddy (Mencap): Our concern about the functions being transferred to DE is that there was no mention of special educational needs within its targets in the Programme for Government. DE already has a big area of responsibility for children with a learning disability, and our concern is that, if it gets more functions, people with a learning disability will continue to be invisible within that Department. I understand that you could say the same for DETI, in that it does not have experience of working with people with a learning disability. I suppose that you could go either way.

Our main concern is that the specialist support that Liz talked about is maintained, no matter which Department it goes to, and that any links that DEL has been able to develop with the voluntary and community sector continue; for example, with the disability liaison group.

Our other main concern is that equality screening of the transfer of functions be carried out in order to assess the impact on the section 75 groups, especially on disabled people. That needs to be monitored to ensure that people are not worse off, whichever Department receives the functions. Joanne raised a really good point about moving from further education into employment, because that

was a vital stage for her. If part of those functions went to DE and part to DETI, we would be concerned that there would not be the link between learning and the employment opportunities and career guidance that Joanne received. We are concerned that such support would be lost.

The Chairperson: I have to draw this session to a close, so let us be fairly snappy. Do you think that it is a good idea or are you not sure about the idea of reducing the number of Departments per se? Would you prefer to see the number of Departments retained?

Ms McCloskey: It is more the case that we feel that it would be better to keep the transfer of DEL's functions to one Department, rather than splitting them among different Departments. Our main concern is that people still get the specialist support that is required wherever they go.

The Chairperson: OK. I have asked most people this question. Are you anxious about the proposed changes or are you excited about the opportunity?

Ms Ruddy: We have mixed feelings. We are anxious about how any change would impact on people with a learning disability, especially when you have got used to a system. Change can be difficult. We hope that, whatever Department takes on the functions, it will see it as an opportunity to improve on what is already there and to ensure that there is no detrimental effect on any of the groups that are represented within that.

Ms McCloskey: The knowledge, expertise and relationships that the voluntary sector has built up with DEL should not be lost whichever Department it falls to. We can build on that and not lose the expertise that we have invested in.

The Chairperson: Thank you all for your time. I assure you that members of this Committee are very supportive. We wish Ryan well and hope that he enjoys his one and a half hours. Joanne has been up from time to time as well. We will do our level best as individuals.

The Chairperson: We will now hear from the Orchardville Society. You are very welcome. We have 15 minutes in which to hear from you, Margaret. So, without further ado, if you talk to us for a wee bit, we will then ask some questions.

Ms Margaret Haddock (The Orchardville Society): OK. I did not prepare a formal speech or anything because the content of what I wanted to say was in —

The Chairperson: That is all right. You just talk to us.

Ms Haddock: — my response. It said "informal", so I thought that I would keep it informal.

The Chairperson: It is indeed.

Ms Haddock: I am here today representing the Orchardville Society in my role as deputy chief executive, and I also have my hat on as the president of the European Union of Supported Employment. I have concern with both hats on about the dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning, starting from a strategic point of view, in that the EU says that, for people with disability, employment should sit in the Ministry for employment. If we do away with our Ministry for employment, we could fragment the work that we do for people with disability. That is the overarching, strategic issue.

Given the nature of the work that the Orchardville Society is involved in and the questions that were asked, we feel that, if the Department is to be dissolved, the best fit for us — as an organisation, not as a sector, as I referred to in my letter — would be the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). Our reasoning for that is several-fold. First, we are working mostly with adults. We are usually dealing with people whom education has failed, so we are trying to fill a gap and move forward. The Department for Employment and Learning has offered programmes and facilities that have filled that gap accordingly. Secondly, through the type of interfaces that we do and the interventions that we offer, we already have relationships with DETI because we use social economy as

an intervention. The community and voluntary sector, in our type of work, is being continually encouraged to look at social economy as a way forward for the creation of employment in Northern Ireland and inward investment. It seems that, if we are creating jobs and upskilling people, that should sit in that area.

One of our main concerns is about the kind of precedence that DEL's strategy, if fragmented, would be given in any new Department. If it goes in pieces to different Departments, it could become a very small part of a larger Department. If the strategic plan is disseminated all over the place, its interlinkages may not be seen very clearly by those of us who work in the area.

As I said in my letter, it is not a sectoral issue; it is an activity-related issue. Orchardville currently works with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education and the Department for Social Development (DSD), and we already have difficulties in that arena because of the silos that we have here. The fragmenting of one of those silos is a main concern. An individual may access some of the current disablement advisory service programmes and some health service care and benefits, so there is a lot of interface already with different Departments. It is very time-consuming.

From a funding perspective — I am sure that you expected that — we rely heavily on EU funding currently, and we have match funding from the Department for Employment and Learning. If it goes, and we do things like essential skills and Departments, sourcing that match funding will prove to be very difficult for voluntary and community organisations' engagement. Is that enough for you?

The Chairperson: It is enough to get us started. Any questions from colleagues?

Mr Douglas: Margaret, thanks for your presentation. Obviously, you are involved in quite a number of very successful social economy initiatives. You said that you have a good relationship with DETI. If the two Departments merged, do you think that that would make your job easier and it would be more productive, effective and efficient than it is at the moment?

Ms Haddock: If DEL has to merge anywhere, that would be our choice. We run several social economies, Mr Douglas, and —

Mr Douglas: Sammy. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Margaret, we do not know who Mr Douglas is.

Ms Haddock: We run several social economy businesses, and, currently, they sit within our main European Social Fund (ESF) programme. It is our intention to make them self-sustaining, and we are moving towards that quite successfully. If all of it is sitting in one area, it is, therefore, easy to talk to people who understand. There are other issues for the expansion of social economy businesses. We have had DETI and, in particular, Invest NI out to look at issues around capital, which is a huge issue, as we are currently mostly funded for revenue only.

Mr Lyttle: I am finding the presentations useful and informative. You are answering questions in your presentation. It is very helpful. It is encouraging to hear that a level of expertise with regard to working with people with disabilities exists in the Department. It is helping me to realise that, whatever happens here, we need to redouble our efforts to ensure that that remains in place and, as Michelle alluded to earlier, is improved even further. It is extremely useful to hear from you today.

Ms Haddock: We promote supported employment, which is a model of intervention. Currently, it is not funded anywhere in Northern Ireland. We do not have a government programme for that, but other European countries do. A big EU study is about to be published directly from Brussels. It recommends that the supported employment model be used not only for people with a disability but for the disadvantaged, the long-term unemployed and ethnic minorities, for instance. The disability advisory service could take an holistic lead on that key area in the Department for Employment and Learning, because it has the experience of working with us and with that product — so to speak — for the past number of years. Due to Northern Ireland's economic situation and the fact that we are trying to get

unemployed people back to work, that model of supported employment, which is diverse, needs to move to other sectors of unemployed people. Keeping employment with DETI would make sense for the upskilling of the whole community. It is not just a disability issue.

Mr F McCann: All the discussions with people who have come to give evidence to us have been about trying to make things better, easier and more effective. You talk about disadvantage, disability, access to benefits and various aspects of employment. For me, looking at it, you look at the education end of it. You talk about a fluency of education that, more or less, takes you from the cradle to the grave. We talk about two aspects of the division of DEL. However, there may be a third option lying with DSD, which, together with DEL, runs the jobs and benefits offices. I asked a question about this previously, because there is a very close connection there between jobs and benefits and trying to get people into employment. Do you see any role there, because the two seem to work hand in glove?

Ms Haddock: That works very well with the jobs and benefits offices, at an operational level. However, if we go higher than that to a strategic level and look at how each Department currently measures its outcomes, we will see that one is not about getting people into jobs. The way in which they measure what they do is very different, and I am not sure if that match would sit well together. To put employment with jobs and benefits, at a strategic level, could give the wrong message and create a fear factor among people.

Mr F McCann: One of the aspects of what you and other people are saying is that it is not only about unemployment but about how you deal with deprivation and disadvantage. The Department for Social Development has the remit for dealing with disadvantage and deprivation, and, in the social security offices, DEL has within its remit the responsibility of trying to get people into training and employment. They work along with their colleagues in social security offices to make it happen. There seems to be a wee bit of fluidity between what is provided there, so, perhaps, you could get people into proper training and then into employment.

Ms Haddock: I do not disagree that there is some fluidity there, but I feel less favourable towards seeing the likes of the disablement advisory service (DAS) aligned, at a strategic level, with DSD. I have been working in the community and voluntary sector for 20 years. The sector's engagement with DSD is the least engagement, believe it or not, although we all know that getting people into employment will take people out of poverty and deprivation. The assistance has come from the Department for Employment and Learning through a disability advisory service and through Invest NI.

Mr Lyttle: I want to build on the point about welfare reform and the timing of the dissolution of DEL. DSD and DEL are endeavouring to work closely together to ensure that there is as much mitigation as possible of the feared changes. How much of a problem, therefore, would the dissolution of DEL be in ensuring that we achieve the best that we can for local people on that issue?

Ms Haddock: Welfare reform is the biggest issue facing the population at the moment. We do not have the final detail of that, and, until we do, I have been attending some information sessions on things such as the new universal credit. More questions than answers are coming around. There is a lot of fear about the welfare reform changes. None of us doubt that welfare reform is required, but some of the way that the disabled community has been attacked in the press has not helped the fear factor. The disabled community has come a long way in the past 20 years, and there is a fear that, with the new welfare reform, we are going backwards. A lot of people feel that.

I am conscious of my time, and I will give you one very quick example. As the head of the Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment, I had a phone call this week to say that, under the new reform, a young woman who works in Tesco for 14 hours a week has had a letter asking who is supporting her. She used to get support and came through the new deal for disabled people, which, as you know, was dissolved some time ago. Under the new benefits system, she has been asked who will support her. Currently, no organisation receives funding to support people who work for fewer than 14 hours. We are about to see that change with the work connect programme. This young woman is having to give up work. So, we have someone who works 14 hours who will have to give up work. She wrote to me to see whether there was anything that I could do.

The Chairperson: It is always the danger when you introduce change that —

Ms Haddock: People fall through the cracks.

The Chairperson: People fall through the cracks.

Mr F McCann: Huge numbers of people, thousands and thousands, will be affected by the changes to family tax credits.

The Chairperson: Absolutely.

Margaret, you have been a most excellent witness. It has been really informative. Almost everything that you have said has caused me to sit and think. It has been really great to have you here. I will close on a general question that I ask people. Are you anxious about the proposed merger or are you looking at it as an opportunity to get things better?

Ms Haddock: In the community and voluntary sector, we believe that it is out of our hands. We are nervous and anxious because it will cause us to build even more new relationships, especially around funding issues, for our organisations. However, the community and voluntary sector is always open to challenge, and with every change comes opportunity. Therefore, we see ourselves as ready to take any opportunities that present themselves. We probably all like status quo at times, but change can be good. We have put our concerns to you. We await the decision on what is happening, and, as the sector continually does, we will work with whatever the changes bring.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much indeed for your contribution, and we will do what we can for you.

The Chairperson: We move now to evidence from the Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland (FALNI). You are very welcome. We have a 15-minute slot. We are trying to get a lot of people in, so we are trying to keep it tight to time. It is much for my colleagues' benefit as for yours. When the 15 minutes is up, I will pull down the guillotine. I do not wish to be rude, but if we do not do that, we lose a minute here and a minute there and the whole thing gets out of kilter.

Without further ado, the floor is yours. Tell us what you would like to tell us, and then we will ask a few questions.

Mr Colin Neilands (Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland): No problem at all. Thank you, first of all, for the invitation to come here. You have the letter, so you have the basic response from FALNI. It is a forum that stretches across the sectors, so we represent the statutory and the community sectors. We have representatives from different organisations: Ann comes from the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, I am from the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and my colleague Alan is from the Open University, so we have a broad cross-section. We have been operating since January 2011. We came together to try to have a voice for adult education because the different players have rare opportunities to come together and look at issues of common concern. We also want to advocate for the learner as much as possible. That is one of the voices that we want to represent here today, and we want to try to encourage the Committee to take a learner-centred approach to decisions.

In response to your letter, you will notice that we ignored your question to some extent. Our group has different members, many of whom are probably presenting to you today. They have different views around which Department would best suit their particular purposes, operations and responsibilities. FALNI is interested in talking about where Government can best support adult learning and trying to return in many ways to the manifesto, which we sent out to all of you last year, prior to the Assembly elections. The main points that we want to emphasise include, first, the concern around access. Regardless of which Department takes lead responsibility, how can we best ensure that access is available for all? We are talking about access in the broadest sense of the word. Secondly, we are concerned about the broad sweep of curriculums. It is about learning that supports citizens' work and life. Thirdly, we advocate for a lifelong strategy for adult learning, which does not currently exist. That would be a great way of pulling together the disparate Departments and not just the two that are currently under discussion.

The fourth point is that, perhaps more than ever, with the dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), we advocate for there to be an all-party group to look at adult learning. As perhaps is evident from the letter that we presented, adult learning crosses many Departments, not just those discussed in this room but others, including Health, OFMDFM and Justice, and you sit on the Committees for those Departments. You can see that adult learning touches upon almost every Department, and there has to be an opportunity for those disparate voices to come together and talk about the best way forward and the best investment that can be made in adult learning. I will leave my voice silent at the moment, but my colleagues can certainly chip in.

Ms Ann Osborne (Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland): For an adult to be fully capable of managing everyday life and work, they need to have various key capabilities. Obviously, that includes literacy and numeracy skills, health literacy skills, financial capability skills and media literacy skills. When you think of things such as the welfare reform agenda, people will have to be more able to manage budgets and more able to manage online applications for benefits and so forth. Looking at a person in that respect, responsibility falls across so many government Departments. It is not only about the skills that they need for work. If a person is upskilled in that way as a person, they will function better in all of those areas of life.

Mr Alan Carr (Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland): I will develop the cross-cutting theme. For us, the issue of which Department is responsible for adult education is a second-order issue. The more important issue is that there be a distinct line of responsibility for adult education in whichever Department ends up having responsibility for it. Even more important than that, there is a recognition that it is not just an issue for one Department but is an issue that cuts across them all. Adult learning can not only contribute to the education of adults but can improve their employability and help promote community cohesion in a more civilised society. It can lead to people developing healthier lifestyles and so on. The list is almost endless. Adult learning can and should involve every Department, not just the Department that has the lead role on the issue. That is why the idea of an all-party Committee that focuses distinctively on the issue of adult education would be very useful in bringing all of that together.

The Chairperson: You could argue that the Department for Employment and Learning is pretty close to a Department for adult education in the sense that the current Department of Education could be renamed the Department of schools. Are we in danger of having what you already want and then losing it?

Ms Osborne: We may have had that in the late 1990s when we had a lifelong learning strategy that was broad enough to cover that and recognise the value of lifelong learning. We now have a very narrow skills agenda.

The Chairperson: There are two things here that we need to talk about. I understand the argument that has been made by others that the FE Means Business policy has resulted in a more narrowly based outcome. Whether that is the right policy or not is one thing. A different question is on the structure and whether the FE colleges, the higher education establishments and the training organisations should come together in a single Department. If you could get the policy sorted out, would you be better to keep with the current arrangement, or would you tilt towards some other format?

Mr Carr: There are dangers and threats to adult education wherever it ends up. If it goes to the Department of Education, there is a danger that it would be regarded as peripheral in relation to its mainstream activity, which is looking after schools. If it is in a primarily economic Department, there is, again, a danger that the exclusive focus would be on training that is related to enhancing people's employability. That is important, but there should not be an exclusive focus on that. Adult education deals with all of the other issues as well. The more important thing for us is not the Department that it is in; it is having a clearly demarcated responsibility for the promotion and oversight of adult education

The Chairperson: You called for an all-party group on adult education. There is no stronger all-party group than a Statutory Committee that oversees a Department, which is currently what we have, albeit, as you see it, not appropriately focused. Others have said the same thing.

Ms Osborne: It might be worth looking at the English model and how it operates, where, within the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), you have a Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning. Lifelong learning is still protected; it is separately funded and recognised. That Department is currently carrying out a consultation and asking communities what adult learning they need. You talked about whether it would be the right thing if DEL had the policy right. The English model appears to be working well there because there is recognition of the value of lifelong learning.

Ms Gildernew: I like the line in the last paragraph that states:

"the responsibility of one department and the duty of all".

I agree with that. I am glad that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) got a mention, because it recognises the needs of rural communities. There are quite a few all-party groups, and we are all members of them. They do not have teeth; they have no powers. There have been times when this Committee has come close to exerting powers that an all-party group does not have. I do not see that as the panacea, but there needs to be responsibility for it somewhere. We recognise that there are myriad reasons why young people do not achieve in school. They may be in care. We see the educational attainment rates of young people in care, young people in the Travelling community, young people who are carers and young people who suffer mental health issues. There is definitely a need. We do not need to say that the Department of Education has failed those young people; we need to recognise the complex myriad reasons why someone may leave school without proper formal qualifications. No matter how good our schools are, there will still need to be some form of adult learning.

Mr Neilands: Absolutely.

Ms Gildernew: We will need to decide where it goes. It is interesting that your paper did not indicate which Department you would like to be in. It shows a fear, I suppose, and that you are not sure where would be best. I feel that it would be better placed in the Department of Education than in DETI. You made the point about the strategy and the policy and the fact that we can get it right. The bigger the Department, the harder it seems to be for the minorities in that Department to have a voice. If a lot of functions go to DETI, I worry that the business areas will drive the agenda and that adults who need additional skills or basic skills will be forgotten about.

Mr Neilands: That is a particular worry of the community sector. As I said, we represent different sectors; I am singling out the community sector because that is where my work is based. We worry that that would be an even more skills- and employment-driven agenda, which does not recognise the supportive role of a lot of community based adult learning. It supplies people with that first step, which is often non-accredited. At present, the only sources to support that come from outside Government. We go for grants and Lottery funding and the like. That is not really sufficient, and it does not tie in to a strategy. That is where it kind of falls apart. It falls apart for the young people who you are talking about as well, because they come out of the statutory sector and they then fall into an abyss sometimes. The community sector and so on tries to pick up on that, but where does that tie in to something that is lifelong? We need to see a path for that individual that does not just end at 16 or 18 or whatever point at which they leave statutory provision.

Mr F McCann: Thank you for the presentation. You said that there is a danger that the exclusive focus would be on training rather than on learning or education. For me, that says it all: whether it is through lifelong learning, there needs to be a pathway for people.

Alan, you raised the point that there are many parts of that and different Departments see that they have small pieces of it. The big problem, however, is that none of them sees ownership of it. Therein lies the problem. One thing that it brought to mind was the whole question of neighbourhood renewal. First, it was seen as a great concept in how to deal with social deprivation and how to move things on.

However, because it was seen purely as the Department for Social Development's focus, but requiring departmental backing from all Departments, it did not come to fruition. That led to almost complete failure of neighbourhood renewal across the board. Therefore, we need to be careful that we do not just lift adult learning and put it into DETI or a Department of the economy, and it loses out entirely because that Department does not see ownership of it or ownership lies elsewhere.

Mr Neilands: Yes.

The Chairperson: Our time has ended. I am sorry that it was so brief. It has been interesting to hear your perspective. As a general point, for what it is worth, the focus on lifelong learning and community learning has been lost over the past number of years. Although there have been great successes in other areas, we have not recognised the benefits of community cohesion that come from that. Therefore, regardless of what happens, you have an opportunity, at least, with the discussion to come forward. You should make your voice heard on the matter. We will do our best to help.

I will finish with this question: although you did not commit yourself in the paper, are you anxious about the proposed changes or do you view them as an opportunity to put right some great wrongs?

Mr Neilands: It is probably both. *[Laughter.]* You probably keep getting that answer. Sometimes, it is a case of better the devil you know, of course, and to reform within that. There are opportunities because we are getting the chance — perhaps, like this one — to actually put forward some challenging views and to get down to fundamental questions about what we want for adult learning in Northern Ireland. There is that opportunity. I do not know whether my colleagues want to be pressed on that question either. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Osborne: The chance to take a fresh look at things may be useful.

The Chairperson: You should note that there is an opportunity to talk not only to us but to the general public. You need to win the argument, because resources are tight in a lot of areas. For what it is worth, I believe that it is a worthwhile investment. Therefore, *carpe diem*, as they say. *[Laughter.]* With that, thank you very much for your contribution.

Mr Neilands: Thank you.

The Chairperson: We will now hear evidence from the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO). Pat, it is good to see you again. We have fifteen minutes. Michelle wants you to get stuck in because apparently she thinks that I do not leave enough time for questions. *[Laughter.]* Anyway, get stuck in, Pat.

Mr Pat Conway (Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders): I will do a very quick presentation followed by questions and answers.

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to outline concerns about the potential changes to the Department for Employment and Learning. I am director of adult services in NIACRO. Gareth is responsible for looking at programmes through our Jobtrack programme. We know that you have a copy of our written submission. Rather than repeat the points that we made, we will amplify some of them. We are aware that representatives from Include Youth will provide evidence today. We broadly support the issues that they will raise. I will explain a little about NIACRO and how we work with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL); outline our concerns about the impact on front line service delivery of any potential restructuring of the Department or its functions; and hope to facilitate a discussion on any aspects that the Committee wishes to probe further.

Most people will know that NIACRO is a voluntary organisation that has been working for 40 years to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities. We work with children and young people, adults in the community, and people in prison and their families. We deliver a wide range of services across Northern Ireland to prevent offending or reoffending and to support effective resettlement of people in communities.

We have worked with DEL and its predecessors for over 10 years. We know that employment is a significant factor in reducing the risk of offending or reoffending. Over the past 12 months in particular, DEL has, in our view, developed a greater understanding of and a closer relationship with NIACRO on the issue of accessing employment opportunities involving applicants and employers and the contribution that can be made to reducing crime and the number of victims of crime. There has been a greater recognition of the barriers — legislative, structural and attitudinal — that currently exist for people to access services, and, more importantly, we have seen considerable progress in attempting to address these.

A key thing for us has been a greater alignment of the elements within DEL — further and higher education, individual beneficiaries, employers and careers advice through job centres. The European unit of DEL has, in our view, been a sectoral driver for change with regard to recognising the linkage between developing employability and a way to reach marginalised people such as those with criminal records or disabilities and lone parents or other socially disadvantaged groups.

Also of importance is the relationship between the long-term unemployed, employment opportunity and the welfare system. Put simply, NIACRO's view is that individuals benefit from employment per se. There is a tension between a low-wage economy, where most of NIACRO's clients are located, and the welfare system that can, on occasion, act as a prohibitor or an inhibitor, particularly to short-term employment opportunities. The location of the Social Security Agency (SSA) within job centres makes it more likely that this difficulty would be addressed based on two Departments working side by side. However, we must remember that, in a time of full employment a few years ago, Jobtrack, which is our major employment programme, got 30% of those who completed it into employment. That is now down to 22% and is decreasing because of the economic situation at the moment.

Research has shown beyond dispute that there is a causal link between employability and crime reduction. That is our primary interest. DEL is the only Department beyond the Department of Justice (DOJ) that understands that connection and is willing to play its part. This connectivity or cultural synergy of employment and justice is an example of cross-departmental activity that, in our view, was continuing to evolve positively.

We have some concerns for the future. Should the decision be taken to abolish DEL, we would be concerned about the loss of intra- and interdepartmental working, DEL being only one of the Departments that recognises and acts on its responsibility in delivering a safer society. We would also be concerned about the loss of momentum with regards to the gains recently achieved, because there is likely to be a loss in the short-to-medium term. The cultural re-alignment or the likely swamping that will take place is a concern. By that I mean that the dominant culture in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), we would argue, is attracting investment, and the Department of Education provides mainstream academic provision to the exclusion of vocational courses and essential skills for adults.

There is also the question of where responsibility for young adults not in education, employment or training (NEET) will be located in future arrangements. Let us be honest; the reason why they are not in education, employment or training in the first place is because they have been failed by mainstream education provision. At least, that is the argument that NIACRO would advocate.

Further questions arise over the future roles of the Department for Social Development (DSD), which is currently responsible for welfare, and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which is responsible for the provision of social housing. NIACRO's experience is that the Housing Executive is the leading example of an agency with a greater understanding of and willingness to play its part in the reduction of crime. It has a clear understanding of the benefit to its core business of engagement with organisations such as ourselves.

A clear example of the lack of understanding of crime across Departments can be seen in a cost of crime survey published by the DOJ. The headline figure was £2.9 billion in 2006-07. Of all the Departments, I think there were six that provided no information to this survey, one of which, unfortunately, was DEL, but they also included the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), DETI, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and DSD. If you were to look at the Department of Education, which provided no information, it is clearly a nonsense, because

we all know the damage that attacks on schools and damage to property are probably a weekly occurrence, yet the Department of Education could not quantify the impact of crime on it as a Department. So, for the purposes of that survey, guesstimates were made, and that is where the figure of £2.9 billion turns up.

Concerns regarding the transfer of functions to the Department of Education include swamping, because of the way that the Department operates culturally, its academic mainstream focus and its history of exclusion. There is enough turmoil over selection without increasing the burden, and we argue that, whatever Department the elements of DEL's current functions are transferred to, they need to be ring-fenced and resources need to be placed on a par with other agencies. There are concerns regarding the transfer of functions to DETI. Culturally, DETI is tuned into attracting blue-chip businesses. It is not orientated towards people who have been socially excluded or marginalised, and, therefore, resources need to be ring-fenced on a par with other agencies.

Finally, I will mention the future. We can talk only in broad terms, but we want to see the retention and the development of the alignment that has occurred in the past 12 to 24 months. The elements of successful employment and that connection with the reduction in offending behaviour requires essential skills; vocational qualifications; innovative and flexible access; access beyond the mainstream; the need for specialist intervention; the strengthening of the relationship with employers; the maintaining and the developing of the discourse between wage and welfare levels; building on gains made to date; equality of access; upskilling with connectivity to a changing labour market; and driving that potential. There are other things that need to be addressed that we think could benefit the bigger project that we are pursuing. The greater use of and access to, for example, the social investment fund that is being talked about at the moment. Another is the development of apprenticeships. That does mean a return to the ACE scheme of 20 years ago but real apprenticeships and changing that landscape and the development of social firms, which would assist in the current economic environment.

Mr Douglas: Thank you, Pat, for your presentation. You mentioned that you fear a loss of momentum. That has been expressed by a number of organisations that have built up relationships with key people in the Department. Do you see a danger in that DEL and DETI have a different culture in their attitude to ex-prisoners? You work with a number of people in DEL, but you might not have the same accessibility or find the same culture on the issue of ex-prisoners with DETI.

Mr Conway: I cannot underestimate the difficulties that we had around five years ago in our relationship with what we describe as "domestic DEL". It was not open to advances from us. We had and still have a very good relationship with what we call "European DEL", but, until fairly recently, European DEL, did not really connect with the mainstream part of DEL. I recall being at a meeting about five years ago, when a fairly senior official in DEL informed us that we were part of a periphery of a periphery. I think that that has changed and we have come more into the core. In the past 12 to 24 months, there has been a recognition by DEL that there needs to be specialist intervention with that client group — people with a criminal record. That does not need to be carried out by NIACRO, and this is not an argument by NIACRO for more resources. It is an argument for more resources for the project; it is about keeping people out of the criminal justice system and tying that into the costs of crime as it affects Departments and society in general. I make it clear that this is not a plea for more resources for NIACRO but for a realignment in the Prison Service so that it realigns security, care and resettlement functions so that people are actually prevented from going back into prison and so that it understands that an element of good prison practice would be to reduce the number of people going back to prison through employment measures. That needs a connection with DEL or whatever the subsequent structure is.

I said in the presentation that, from the outside, it looks like DETI is in the business of attracting external blue-chip investment companies to the jurisdiction and developing more home-grown investment opportunities. I am not sure that our client group would be perceived as the most attractive group for that project, and we would be concerned about that cultural imbalance.

Mr F McCann: Pat, that was an extensive presentation. I heard you holding your breath a couple of times to make sure that you got everything in. I have to say that this is the first meeting I have been at where you have not made a play for resources.

I could not work out at the end where you were arguing that, if DEL was to go, its functions would be properly placed. Members around the table probably have a range of opinions on that. However, I think that all of us would argue that there is a need for lifelong learning.

I take on board NIACRO's good work across many fields. I have worked with it on a number of projects.

You talked about domestic DEL. I have never really had any connection with European DEL, but I know that domestic DEL is not held in very high regard by many working-class communities throughout the city. In fact, they see many difficulties with it. We have discussed the whole issue of NEETs. DEL may sing the praises of the work done to help NEETs, but, when you go into certain areas, you see that that work is not making a big impact on the ground.

I would argue that DEL's functions need to be divided among not two but three Departments. You touched on DSD and how certain functions would fit into the jobs and benefits offices.

You also spoke about ACE. I know that there were difficulties with ACE and the way in which it was run. The concept, whereby young people were able to obtain a wage and were given focused training to take them through their apprenticeship, was surely a welcome one.

The Chairperson: Can I just encourage a wee bit of focus because of the time?

Mr F McCann: I was focusing myself to finish.

Mr Conway: It is ironic that the demise of ACE saw a great outpouring of grief, because the alternative

Mr F McCann: A great outpouring of emotion.

Mr Conway: That is right. We think that some pilots being run in England and Wales look suspiciously similar to ACE. A lot of people benefited from ACE: they had money coming in and the opportunity to gain what was essentially work experience, which was a good thing.

Mr F McCann: For the first time, for many of them.

Mr Conway: Yes. That cannot be denied. However, I recall that the Divis area, for example, had the highest number of HGV-qualified drivers and no HGV lorries. So, there was a kind of mismatch between training and the labour market at that time. There was great emphasis on people getting employment opportunities, and the training was piled in without regard to the employment landscape at the time. We know that IT upskilling is a big thing now and that we should push people in that direction to open up opportunities. I am not just talking about the Divis area. I was involved in running eight ACE projects all over Northern Ireland, one of which was in Omagh. We were turning out people there who were supposed to be joiners, but the area had the highest number of unemployed joiners on the planet practically, which was inappropriate. We could not change that.

Mr F McCann: Training them for the hidden economy.

The Chairperson: A couple of members have indicated. I am letting this session run on a bit, because one of the groups is not here. So, we might have a wee bit of flexibility. Frankly, I hope that they do not turn up now.

Mr Lyttle: I agree that it was an extremely helpful and perceptive presentation. You went through your preferences. Your first preference seems to be the retention of DEL; the second, to retain a link between school training opportunities and economic opportunities in the labour market, which seems to point you towards DETI; and the third, that, if training and skills is placed within the Department of Education (DE), there should be extremely strong protocols between the Department of Education and DETI. You also point to the potential need for considerable changes in ethos, structure and attitudes within DETI and/or DE, if it goes there. You rightly point out something that we, and other people, have not focused on just yet — the considerable cost of that type of reorganisation in terms of training,

rebranding and the transfer of knowledge and information. You point to some of the concerns around doing the transfer in this way. Have you any comment on the timescale that should normally be applied to this type of endeavour and/or whether it should be conducted as part of a wider review of Departments?

Mr Conway: I think that the culture of the Departments needs to be centre. Unless we get that right, we will have to deal with the legacy for years afterwards. Certainly, in another context and another Department, our client group — this was in Health — was described as "not deserving". That phrase was used, and it was about people appraised for access to mental health services. So, every Department has its own culture. When you get into the business of DETI, for example, which is about developing the economy, attracting business and all the rest of it, our client group is a very hard sell. There is a rational argument, but it is a complicated argument. It is not like saying, for example, "We have a pool of people who are ready to go and are desirous of getting into the IT sector." We have people who we train up to get involved in that part of the labour market, but it is not something I imagine that DETI would rush over to Washington with and make as a first pitch.

The Chairperson: Just a final bit, Pat, because we are under a bit of time pressure.

Ms Gildernew: Did you forget about me?

The Chairperson: No, I did not forget about you.

Ms Gildernew: Thank you, Basil. I am starting to get paranoid.

Pat and Gareth, you are both very welcome. The spake about Health, and their saying that your client group was not deserving, beggars belief, but I am not really surprised, given my —

Mr Conway: I think that you were there.

Ms Gildernew: If you look at the number of prisoners who are on medication of one sort or another, you see that it is staggering. In some of our prisons, the proportion is 80% plus. So, in a lot of ways, your client group is there because society failed them. The Health Department failed them and, possibly, the Department of Education did too. Certainly, we failed them, and that is why they end up being your client group. You do not usually hear about DETI and social disadvantage in the same sentence. From that point of view, and I thought what you said was very powerful, it is interesting that DETI is still your second preference and DE is your third. I understand, very much so, the cultural difficulties that you would have with DETI. However, DETI still scores higher in your opinion than DE. That is worrying, too.

Mr Conway: It is mainly because the client group is in an employment market or setting. The essential skills element, you would think, would sit with the Department of Education, but because that Department is mostly about mainstream primary, secondary and university education, in a sense it is too late for the adults, the over-18s. So —

Mr Lyttle: You say that the cultural difficulty in DE is the focus on mainstream education. It is focused on academic achievement as well, which would mean that a huge change in cultural ethos would be required. It may be that that is where it goes and that is what is needed, but it is interesting to hear the points raised, with regard to both of those Departments, about what changes are needed to help the people you are dealing with.

Mr Conway: Whatever way it is split, we will have to have relationships with other Departments. What we are saying is this: maintain the alignment that is evolving at the moment and make sure that there are protocols and understandings in place to ensure that resources are ring-fenced and kept as close as possible to the core of the Department's business. If it becomes marginalised, everybody loses. By that, I mean that a failure to address that is likely to lead to an increase in offending behaviour. So, if it is lost in the transition —

Mr Lyttle: May I ask a really quick question on NEETs? The Employment and Learning Committee's inquiry's number 1 recommendation, which is not talked about a lot, was that the Office of the First

Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) junior Ministers should oversee the NEET strategy. Do you have a quick comment on that?

Mr Gareth Eannetta (Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders): In our Choose to Change programme, which took over from our Youth Employability programme, we, again, commented on the NEET strategy. However, it is a difficult nut to crack, and the issues are with the training and supply sides of things. The point needs to be made that any employment interventions must be led by the needs of employers rather than the other way round, by which I mean training people to do things that there may not be jobs for. It very much has to be led by employment need.

Mr F McCann: Just a very —

The Chairperson: You have been really awful, the whole lot of you, this particular session. Go on.

Mr F McCann: I was a bit concerned; I thought that we were talking about lifelong learning, but Pat seems to be writing off people aged 18 and over.

Mr Conway: No. We would have supported organisations — for example, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) and the Ulster People's College — as potential vehicles to develop lifelong learning opportunities. What seems to have happened — we are not that close to it — is that all of that was switched to FE colleges. We are having real difficulties with some of the FE colleges about people, because of their criminal records, getting access to those courses. We think that that is a lost opportunity.

Mr F McCann: There is a difference between what I picked up on and what you are saying.

Mr Conway: No. We totally advocate lifelong learning for everybody, not just our client group.

The Chairperson: I have taken a bit of latitude with this session because somebody else has not turned up, but we have to close it now. However, it strikes me that we could be looking at creating a Department of the community. There is something else missing in this. I am not sure that you really fit into DETI, to be honest. Why did you not suggest aligning with the Department of Justice?

Mr Conway: For us to put all our resources into Justice would be reverting to a silo situation, because that is what has previously happened. We have been trying to get out of the silo of the Department of Justice. You cannot even get some of the elements within the Department of Justice to step outside their own boxes, yet that is what is clearly required. That is why my opening comment was about the intra- and interdepartmental elements that have to happen here. If everything goes back to Justice, it is seen as a Justice problem, and it is not a Justice problem. Look at the effects of crime in respect of all the other Departments, yet they cannot quantify what those effects are. In our view, that is a serious problem.

The Chairperson: OK. I acknowledge that that is your case. However, on the record, I think that there is a case for a Department of community cohesion. Whether we are talking about lifelong learning, health education or basic skills for living, there is something in this that we are not getting right, which is outside the debate that we are having about what we should do about the economy, and that is an important debate in itself.

Pat, we have had a fair whack at it. Thank you very much for the detailed nature of your submission. As you know, I have had a long association with NIACRO over many years. You have my full support, and I commend you for your work. I am sure that NIACRO will carry on, regardless of what else happens around the Departments. If you are having difficulties with people failing to properly respond to the culture and nature of your clients, you should talk to your political representatives and be assured that we will take that up. For everybody's sake, it is very important that the people who you look after are dealt with in the most appropriate manner. So, thank you very much.

Mr Conway: We would like to thank DEL for its interest and contribution to NIACRO's work, particularly in the past 24 months.

The Chairperson: Good afternoon, Anne, and thank you for coming. We are running to a strict timescale of 15 minutes, although we let the previous session overrun a wee bit because someone will be missing later on. I say that as much for my colleagues as for you. You will have a chance to say a few words, after which there will be a few questions. Fire ahead; the floor is yours.

Dr Anne Heaslett (Stranmillis University College): Thank you for the opportunity to expand on a couple of points. We have already responded to the Committee and to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on this particular matter.

Stranmillis University College's position is very clear. We feel very strongly that, because all our major policy drivers emanate from and are initiated by the Department of Education (DE), that is our natural home. In fact, we feel that, with much of our current work, we sometimes do not make the progress that we would like because of our not being firmly located in that Department. When we review our key programmes in teacher education, we benchmark them against all the key policies with which the Committee is familiar, such as the literacy and numeracy strategy and Every School a Good School. That seems to be completely natural.

Secondly, we are quite concerned that we are in danger of creating a negative narrative around some of the debate, because there is a tendency to make a distinction between teacher education programmes in Stranmillis and the so-called diversified or non-teaching programmes. This is a critical point. We feel that that is very damaging because, in practice in the college, our programmes are interrelated. People teach across different teams because we see them as complementary professional-related programmes. In particular, our early childhood and our health and leisure programmes connect to key policies in the Department of Education.

We could potentially lose sight of something that is very important to Northern Ireland. Stranmillis caters for people who wish to work in settings from early childhood through to post-primary education. Therefore, we really should be held up as exemplary in addressing the 0-6 early years strategy as well as primary and post-primary teacher education qualifications. If we narrow the debate and use the language of teacher education versus diversified courses, we will be asking the wrong questions and will likely lead ourselves into a cul-de-sac. That is an incredibly important point, and it is one of the reasons why we would emphasise the point about our home Department.

We also feel that there is an issue about seeing teacher education as being not just about initial teacher education. That point has, for example, even come up in the context of the Education Committee. It is actually the beginning of a professional journey, and you need to connect into induction, early professional development and continuous professional development.

We had the opportunity to share our annual report with the Committee for Employment and Learning. In Stranmillis, we are increasingly also focused on the professional development side. We are seeing professional development linked to issues that emerge from our partnerships with schools, our stakeholder groups that we have set up with key stakeholders in schools and beyond, and our own research base in creating tailor-made courses that meet needs. In fact, looking at the Hansard report of evidence given to the Education Committee, we could provide evidence that Stranmillis is already doing many of the things that are hailed as desirable.

We want to get that much more holistic view and to make those links. In that respect, it is also important to note that our recent history has demonstrated that, although we may be one of the smaller institutions, we have competed and been successful in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. We will make a small but specialised return, hopefully, in 2014.

Therefore, an important point to make about the restructuring of Departments, in respect of putting down a marker, is that in any changes envisaged, although we see our natural home in terms of the policy drivers, we also want to defend our position in relation to the line of research income that we share. Ourselves and the two universities are the three institutions that benefited from that. Our amount may be relatively small but —

The Chairperson: Anne, time is a bit tight, and I want to come in with a point. In your submission, you state that you see your home as being with DE. Do you see your home being with DE whether or not the universities and FE colleges go elsewhere? Would you go individually to DE?

Dr Heaslett: Ultimately, that is a Government decision. That is why I just made my last point about what is important in terms of our home being in DE. Other institutions have different views. Thought has to be given to the restructuring so that we do not get disconnected from other important elements of higher education (HE).

The Chairperson: You can surely apply. I got the point about the research income. But you are applying on your own merits for research funding, are you not? Does it matter?

Dr Heaslett: No, there is an element of the research funding that currently comes through the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) research budget.

The Chairperson: Yes, but your argument, as I understood it, was that because you are dealing mainly with schools and policy and continuous professional development etc, you would be better off with DE. However, then you said that the caveat is that you would not want to be cut off from research funding that may come from higher education institutions.

Dr Heaslett: The point I am making is that there is scholarship and research practice that underpins that work. We are just making the point that that needs to be recognised, and, if there is a line of funding that continues for research, we would want assurances that there would be a mechanism to allow that to continue.

The Chairperson: Yes.

Dr Heaslett: It is an operational thing. We are just making the point that it is important.

The Chairperson: Yes, but it is not just you and St Mary's that provide teacher education. Other universities have institutions. There is a question about what happens should two of the institutions go into the Department of Education and two do not — or three do not, if you take all five. In your opinion, does that pose problems for the way in which the sector operates?

Dr Heaslett: You cannot answer that question directly with a "yes" or "no". It depends on the operational structures. As I pointed out in my submission, we have the unhelpful situation in which certain numbers are determined by one Department and other numbers are determined by another, and funding is separated from allocation of numbers. Some careful thought needs to be given in the restructuring to how all those things are operationalised. As regards shaping that future, another point that I made is that one of the problems in the current structures is the fact that the voice is weakened, in a sense, because you are always trying to address different audiences. If there was greater coherence, planning and operating might be made easier. I think that it is my job to alert the Committee to the issues that we think are important.

The Chairperson: OK; that has been duly done. I am sorry, Anne; I want to push through.

Mr Lyttle: Concerns were raised in other presentations today that the prevailing culture of the Department of Education is one of achieving mainstream provision and solely academic achievement. Your presentation stated that the Department of Education has the responsibility for improving pupil performance. I am still a bit concerned that the curriculum and our schools are not as relevant to the real world and the employment opportunities that are out there as they could be. How exactly will that problem be dealt with by moving teachers' knowledge of the real world of curriculum-setting back into a Department with that culture?

Dr Heaslett: The Department, in inspection reports, has commended us for our practice and what we have done to address the issues that you have mentioned. We have developed strategies and programmes, such as the alternative placements programme, in which we give our students on the BE course opportunities to look at a whole range of teaching and learning experiences with different

organisations. We work with over 80 voluntary, community and business sector organisations. All our courses have placements.

Much of the innovation and the outward-looking strategies in teacher education have not really been accounted for in some of the debates. In the past year, between 25% and 30% of our students have experienced an international setting for education. We also have major incoming students. When they come in, they mix with our students. Through what we do, how we develop our courses and how we review them, we are changing the notion that our students have a very narrow and limited view of the world. I think that where we are not being successful is in communicating that, reassuring Departments and getting that message across. It is like, for example, the comment that was made about the recruitment of teachers —

The Chairperson: Anne, can I just ask you to draw your remarks to a close? Somebody else has asked to come in, and I am a bit short of time. Chris still has the floor.

Mr Lyttle: I do not want to open this up too much, but where does careers guidance lie? Is the Department of Education able to do careers guidance by itself?

Dr Heaslett: As an institution, we take responsibility for giving careers guidance and advice and opening up opportunities to our students. We do not see that as being solely the remit of the Department. OK, the Department gives us the key issues and policy, but we make that operational in reality and try to take it forward in an innovative way.

Mr Douglas: Thank you for your presentation, Anne. In your letter to the Committee, you talked about the importance of the realignment of the college with the Department of Education. At a previous session, you talked about the importance of the college merging with Queen's University. Representatives from Queen's University have made presentations to us, and they are at odds with you in relation to what Department the responsibilities of DEL should go into. They feel very strongly that this should be located in DETI. If, in the event that there was a merger further down the line, where would you stand on that?

Dr Heaslett: We would have to look at that context as it emerged. In the Chairman's letter, the invitation to this Committee meeting was for us as a college to express a professional opinion. What I have shared with the Committee is my professional opinion, as someone who currently has a leadership role in higher education with a very considerable remit for teacher education. Therefore, I give my submission to the Committee on that basis.

Mr Douglas: There is a possibility that, further down the line, the college could merge with Queen's. That is what I am trying to tease out —

The Chairperson: I would just say, Sammy, that the vice chancellor of Queen's did say that most of Queen's could go to DETI, but that the education bit could go to DE. It may not be black and white.

Mr Douglas: All I am asking is whether it would be a shock to the system if the college were to merge with Queen's and end up in DETI. You are saying that that would not be the case?

Dr Heaslett: I think the overwhelming evidence is that our policy context and natural home is the Department of Education.

Mr Douglas: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Maybe we should move Greenmount to DARD.

Ms Gildernew: To where? Greenmount is in DARD. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Oh, is it? *[Laughter.]* Anne, I am sorry that the time was so short. We are trying to do so much. I do appreciate you coming in. Thank you so much.

Dr Heaslett: I hope that I have been of some help.

The Chairperson: You have certainly clarified some matters. Obviously, the debate will carry on.

The Chairperson: We will now hear from the Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association (NISCA). You are very welcome. Unfortunately, we are cantering through this. We are pushed for time, and we are trying to keep it fairly succinct at about 15 minutes. You can say a few words to set the scene, and we will then ask you a few questions. I say that to my colleagues more than to you because, at the end of 15 minutes, I have to tell them, "That is enough", because we have some other people coming through. The floor is yours.

Ms Cathy Moore (Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association): I am the chairperson of the Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association, and we represent statutory education and the further education sector and any careers work that comes in line with that. You have our report and what NISCA represents.

We were asked to respond to the consultation on the dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), and we stated quite clearly that we believe that, in the Department of Education, there is learning at all ages and, therefore, post-16 education and higher education should probably be allied with the same Department for the continuity of young people. Learning takes place in many different environments and throughout life and, therefore, should stay with the Department of Education.

We also do a lot of work with the Careers Service Northern Ireland, which currently sits with the Department for Employment and Learning. It has very strong, long-standing partnerships with further education colleges and statutory education. We have a concern about where that would lie in the scheme of things upon dissolution, and we want to ensure that the partnerships will continue to be strong with the schools. However, we believe that the work that the Careers Service does would fit very well and be allied with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) because of the labour market information. For example, a DEL economist will be coming to address our conference in May. Anything that lies within economics and the labour market information fits in very well with DETI, and, therefore, we feel that the Careers Service would be well aligned there.

The Chairperson: OK. Any questions, folks? That was very succinct and to the point.

Mr Lyttle: Careers guidance interests me and exercises me an awful lot. One outcome of the Committee for Employment and Learning's exploration of the Careers Service over recent months and years has been that DEL Careers Service has a menu of options and tools that schools can avail themselves of in delivering careers guidance to pupils. However, as far as I can see, there is a bit of a disconnect between that menu of tools or options and the obligation on schools to avail themselves of it. We have no real control or monitoring over how much they use those, and, therefore, there is a bit of concern about the reality of careers guidance delivery in the schools. Are there any comments on how that should be improved in line with the review of Departments?

Ms Fiona Browne (Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association): Every school has its own service level agreement with the Careers Service, and it is up to each individual school to see what opportunities or help they need from the Careers Service. The three of us are sitting here nodding. My careers adviser is certainly in all the time, and we use that service very much from a guidance aspect. We feel that, in our school — you two jump in if I am speaking out of turn — we provide the information and advice, but it is very much up to the Careers Service to take the time to delve deeper into the guidance aspect. My careers adviser is very open to whatever we need and will provide anything that I request. She has never said no to any of our requests. However, I take what you are saying in that there is no obligation on a school to take a minimum and that it is very much negotiated between the two.

Ms Moore: It is a problem not just with career guidance but with careers education throughout Northern Ireland. We cover all of Northern Ireland, and we find inconsistencies. Each principal guides each

school and will allocate the budget and decide how high on the agenda careers will come. If the principal does not give value or weight to careers education or guidance, they will not allocate the resources, especially in the current economic climate when budgets are becoming much smaller. We feel really strongly about that. There should be a statutory obligation on every post-primary school and further education college to provide at least a minimum of the career guidance from the Careers Service. It can prove impartiality, and, with the entitlement framework and so many changes in education, it is really important that young people understand the full menu of options of the types and levels of qualifications. That also applies to adults, and the Careers Service also gives guidance to adults. There are so many different types of qualifications, and how is one supposed to negotiate one's way through them?

There is an implied obligation in Preparing for Success, through which DEL and DENI work together on careers. It is a step in the right direction, and we had an update from the two Departments on the progress of the implementation of Preparing for Success. We would like to see more of that.

Mr Lyttle: This is not a criticism of you but a criticism of what is out there. You are able to raise the point that it depends what weight the principal adds to careers education. Especially in the current economic climate, I cannot imagine any alternative but for that to be a high weight. Your point is quite concerning.

Ms Moore: Completely.

Ms F Browne: At my school, careers is very high on the agenda. We are on the school development plan, and we are on the action plan every year. Money is getting tighter, but, if I need something, the resources are there. I do not have a budget any more as such. It is promoted and pushed at every opportunity, but, on the other hand, we know from our experiences in NISCA that there are an awful lot of schools where that is not the case.

The Chairperson: There is still a bit of criticism from certain quarters that our schools are not producing the types of candidates that the economy is looking for.

Ms Moore: Yes, that view is very common.

The Chairperson: So, who is responsible for addressing that shortcoming?

Ms Moore: That is a good question.

Ms F Browne: For me, school is not about books as such. Yes, you have to pass your exams and so forth, but school is about preparation for life in general. We currently have an education system that is very much driven towards results at the end of the day. When teaching, I try to broaden my kids' outlook and try to give them different stuff, but, ultimately, the feeling is for them to question whether they need it for their exam. There needs to be a change so that breadth and depth is valued as opposed to ticking the right box on an exam paper.

The Chairperson: If that is the case, will it be your organisation that, ideally, will promote such a change of perception?

Ms Moore: Not necessarily on our own. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) introduced GCSE and Key Stage 3 Learning for Life and Work. Entrepreneurship and employability is a key element of that. That is delivered across all schools in Northern Ireland and is a way forward, but NISCA could not necessarily do that on its own. It is an initiative that needs to be taken, probably by the Department of Education.

The Chairperson: At the weekend, I was at a very inspirational talk by the man who discovered the wreck of Titanic. He is really into geology, which is his real work. He said that, at P7, maths is the most popular subject and by the age of 14, it is the least popular subject. He was making the pitch

that, if you do not get kids interested in their first three years of big school, as it were, you lose them. All the jobs end up requiring those subjects. He said that he has science jobs left, right and centre. Someone needs to direct people, at that age, that that is where they have an aptitude and that that is where there is a need. We hear all the time about the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) agenda. I do not know whether the responsibility is with you, but someone has to do it. The question is: if it is not you, who is it? Whoever it is, are they better in a Department of Education, a Department of the economy or some other Department?

Ms Moore: It is probably the Department of Education. If an edict does not come from the Department of Education, some schools will not pay any heed. They will say, "Yes, we know" but still stick to what they have to do with limited budgets. I do not know whether I am talking out of turn, but I think that, unless something comes from the Department of Education that provides funding for statutory education, it is not going to happen.

The Chairperson: They are very schoolmarmish, those schools.

Ms Moore: They can be.

Ms Gildernew: To follow on from that, I think that "schools" is too generic a term. The grammar sector is a law unto itself, and a lot of the academically driven stuff comes from that sector. I went to St Catherine's College in Armagh, which is a comprehensive, and it prided itself on turning out capable, well-rounded young women who were ready for the labour market, further academic study or whatever it would be. We were all educated together, and our abilities were honed towards where our careers were going to take us. There was a different focus in a school like that, where not everybody was going to get three or four A levels and go on to study law or medicine. We need to be more discerning about the term "schools".

Pardon me for going on about it, but one of the biggest areas for jobs at the moment is the agrifood sector. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) did a piece of work, in partnership with other organisations, headed up by Tony O'Kane from O'Kane's foods. Those organisations decided that they needed to go out to schools and tell young people that agrifood is an industry in which they can travel, in which there are science and technology jobs and which is not all about hairnets and wellies, and that there are career opportunities that girls in particular were not hearing about, because it was not a very sexy industry for careers advisers to point them towards. We have more scientists and computer technicians in the agrifood sector than in any other sector here. However the industry had to do that itself.

The Chairperson: I need to draw the session to a close, because the time is against us. You have certainly given us food for thought on the idea that, if it is not from the Department of Education —

Ms Moore: Apologies if I spoke out of turn. It is the reality in schools of any type.

The Chairperson: It was useful to have it. We do detect —

Mr Lyttle: Ask the question. *[Laughter.]* There is a generic question that he has asked everybody, but he has stopped asking it in case we were making fun of him.

The Chairperson: I will ask it, actually, since I have been hammered on it. I will conclude by saying that we do pick up your sense of frustration, so we have got that, and we will see how that comes forward, but it leads on to the question that I have asked a number of people. Do you see the proposed changes as something that makes you a little bit anxious, or do you see it as an opportunity to get things right?

Ms Hilary Harbinson (Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association): Personally speaking, it gives me a sense of anxiety when I think about the provision that DEL and the Careers Service provide to a head of careers like me. I come from a mixed-ability, small, integrated college, and I find the impartiality of the Careers Services's support invaluable. I feel anxious about how that provision will change and how that may affect my day-to-day working life.

The Chairperson: So you are not sure that it is change other than for change's sake?

Ms Moore: I think that, if our voices are heard here and our concerns are taken on board, we will all agree. There are so many inconsistencies in our speciality of careers throughout Northern Ireland that I am hopeful that there could be a potential to change things for the better, because I am not sure how long they can continue the way they are.

The Chairperson: Time has beaten us. I do not know what the length of time is for the Committee, because it is an ongoing thing, but we may look again at the careers issue in a bit more detail.

Ms Moore: You have our contact details.

The Chairperson: We will bring you back for that.

Mr Lyttle: That would be great. I would be keen to do that.

Ms F Browne: We would love to.

The Chairperson: Your comments will be listened to. We appreciate you taking the time to send us the paper. Thank you ever so much.

The Chairperson: We will now hear from the Employment Services Board. It is very good to see you. We have 15 minutes or thereabouts, and the floor is yours.

Mr Tom Mervyn (Employment Services Board): Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Mr John Simpson (Employment Services Board): I just want to introduce Tom, who is the hard worker who has lived through an experience which is incomplete. We are here because we are saying that there is more work to be done. Tom is the product of the creation of the Employment Services Board, covering west Belfast and the greater Shankill area, which, in turn, was an outcome from the task force of early 2002, when we wrote our words of wisdom, which are not yet as fully implemented as we would wish. Nevertheless, part of our case to you today is that there is ongoing work here, and we would like to see it given some mention so that it continues. Tom will make the case to you.

Mr Mervyn: Before we get into the issue of the potential dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), I will give you a brief overview of the Employment Services Board and the area that we represent. West Belfast and the greater Shankill area has around 50% of Belfast's unemployed, its worklessness and its income support and incapacity benefit claimants. It has worklessness rates of over 50% and as much as 65% in some individual wards. That means that almost 65% of the working-age population in those areas, including the unemployed and the otherwise economically inactive, is not working.

Given Belfast's importance in the region, the employment and employability issues that exist in west Belfast and the Shankill are not just a city problem; they are a regional problem. If we do not crack it, the region as a whole suffers, not just Belfast and certainly not just our areas, although the coal face in our areas is where the problem manifests itself most.

We also have to remember that the areas that we represent amount to the size of the city of Derry/Londonderry. It is not a small area or a neighbourhood renewal area, which is what we keep getting thrown back at us from DEL's point of view. It does not like area-based initiatives; it prefers city-based initiatives. We just want to make the point that our area is very substantial, not just in the city but in the region.

The Employment Services Board was established in 2003 and was incorporated in 2004 as a direct result of approaches from DEL. Yes, its creation was a recommendation of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill task forces, along with the employers' forum, but it was the initial contact with DEL,

when it established its employability and unemployment task force at around the same time, that led to our establishment. The early funding came from DEL through the Targeting Initiatives programme.

In the early days, there was a very collaborative approach with very strong partnership working. We had a genuine problem on which the mainstream services had failed to have an impact, and DEL was very keen to work with us, because we had plenty of ideas at a local level, to see what could be done. Unfortunately for us, over the past number of years, from 2007 onwards, there has been a complete change in DEL's attitude towards working at a local level with local partners, despite the success that we had over the period until then.

The key to our approach was the acceptance and acknowledgement that the task force area required a co-ordinated approach, not just with DEL and other statutory bodies but with community partners, local businesses, a range of providers in education and training and employment, and specific groups that worked with the likes of political ex-prisoners and people with disabilities. We wanted to use our combined expertise to make a real difference. As I said, our early evaluations showed that we were successful in doing that.

The relationship with DEL took a dip from 2007 onwards, but the other parts of that initial partnership have stayed in place. The Employers' Forum for West Belfast and the Greater Shankill still exists and is very much behind what we are doing, working with the major employers across the city. The forum is chaired by Michael Ryan from Bombardier Aerospace. We still have our providers on the ground, and, more recently, we have had a far stronger engagement at a local community level with the likes of the neighbourhood renewal partnerships, who recognise that, within the context of neighbourhood renewal, they cannot improve employment and employability on their own at a local level. So there is renewed emphasis on looking at a collaborative approach locally across west Belfast and the Shankill. It seems that there is strong support for that approach from everyone bar DEL. That is the history —

The Chairperson: Is that a natural break, Tom? I want to get a few questions from these folk, and then you can talk a wee bit more.

Ms Gildernew: I think that you just cut him off in his stride. I happy to wait a wee minute if Tom wants to finish that point.

Mr Simpson: Say something about the future of DEL. Are you getting to that?

Mr Mervyn: I was getting to that. That was the historical background.

From our point of view, none of the options arising from the potential dissolution of DEL is ideal. One of the options is to split DEL's functions. DEL used to be more naturally split between the FE and HE sectors and the preparation for work side, which looked at skills and unemployment. It would be a bit unjust to say that DEL has not made great strides in realigning the areas more appropriately over the past number of years, particularly in respect of the FE sector, where the types of courses offered are a lot more aligned to the current and future skills needs of employers. That said, we have a lot further to go, so that work is by no means done.

There has also been closer alignment of the preparation for work side, or the employability services side, with the FE and HE sectors, and that is to be greatly welcomed as well. However, again, there is a lot further to go. For us, one of the pitfalls of putting the FE and HE sectors under the Department of Education's control is that we could undo the progress that has been made to date, despite the fact that we still have a lot further to go. There is also a greater need for the preparation for work side, or the employability services side, to be far better aligned with those involved in job creation, namely the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and Invest NI. There is massive disjointedness between what DEL does and what DETI does, and there is not enough work across the two. So, there are pitfalls and problems, but there are also opportunities across the two options for the way DEL is to be split.

Ms Gildernew: That actually helps because my question follows on from that. DETI has not been that impressive over the years, given the decades of underinvestment in west Belfast and the Shankill,

multigenerational unemployment, etc. Invest NI has not exactly covered itself in glory either. I think that we can be fairly robust about that. So, I am sure that you do have anxieties. If we were to look at the unemployment rates in the area in which you work, we would see that there has not been an awful lot done to counter that. It is very worrying that there are families facing with further multigenerational unemployment. If the DEL functions that relate to your organisation were to go into DETI, would that be the best option, or do you think that there would be a better option elsewhere, be it in the Department for Social Development (DSD), the Department of Education (DE) or whatever? Do you think that DETI is where you want to be?

Mr Mervyn: It would seem to be the best option for the preparation for work side. DSD does not have a track record in creating employment or dealing with people with employability issues. In fact, as Fra knows, we are having difficulties at the minute because DSD is withdrawing funding from some of the neighbourhood renewal area initiatives that had been doing some employability stuff, albeit on the advice of DEL. That is one of our other issues. Invest NI does not have a very good track record in respect of the number of jobs created in west Belfast and Shankill. However, it is the best of a bad bunch. It seems to be the only viable option for that section. However, there is an awful lot of work to be done.

One of the key opportunities of this whole process is to look at where some of the issues with DEL have been and to try to do something about them in the process of repositioning its functions. Among them is the fact that DEL is both poacher and gamekeeper. It makes policies, and it is, by and large, the main deliverer of those policies. When we try to point out or suggest things that could be done better, it is often seen by those in the Department as a criticism of the Department and they tend to close ranks. That is why we feel that we find ourselves in such a position, where the Department has withdrawn a lot of its support, at the minute.

Mr Simpson: Incidentally, that is a criticism of the Department.

Ms Gildernew: You are more diplomatic, Tom. That is why you are doing most of the speaking.

Mr Mervyn: It is a reality. We feel that DEL has withdrawn its support for resourcing us because we challenge what is being done and how it is being done. In the early days, that was done collaboratively and positively, because the relationship was good. However, if you change people in that relationship, you can end up with a different dynamic, and that is where we find ourselves now.

Another key thing related to that is that DEL has a rule that it does not fund organisations or initiatives unless they fall within one of its programmes. That assumes a couple of things. First, it assumes that its programmes cover everything and do so suitably. Secondly, it assumes that its programmes are suitable in all circumstances and for all areas. If you look at the history of west Belfast and the Shankill, you see that that is clearly not the case. In its early days, DEL recognised that, which is why it worked so collaboratively with us. Moving forward, we worry that it seems to have backtracked from that point of view.

Mr Lyttle: That has also been an issue with alternative education and training provision. Does that problem pertain just in DEL or in Departments in general?

Mr Mervyn: It can be argued that it pertains to Departments in general. Particularly when facing funding cuts, Departments tend to look to their own stuff and what they provide in-house. Collaborative working outside tends to be the first thing to fall, which is unfortunate because if we did more of that, especially at the minute, we would probably get better results in the long run. Look at the impact of the downturn on west Belfast and the Shankill — other areas may have had a higher increase in the unemployment rate, but we still sit a good three or four percentage points above other areas of Belfast.

Not only that, the types of people that we have on our unemployment register are moving further and further from the labour market. We need to keep doing the collaborative work for those people, in particular, for whom mainstream services are not having the desired impact or as great impact as they should. If we do not keep up that work and invest more in it, we will have an even bigger differential when the economy picks up again.

Mr Lyttle: Make sure that you bring those issues to the attention of the Committee involved in whatever Department this falls to down the line, because I reckon that that has been an issue.

The Chairperson: I think that it is fair to say that there has been a certain amount of disappointment, though, Chris, that they have not been able to get their message across. It is recognised and on the record that there is something of a problem in how we deal with that. It is almost what I was talking about earlier, that we need a Department for community regeneration or something like that.

Mr Lyttle: I have direct experience of a group trying to put forward a tailored solution to meet needs that was outwith the departmental programme. So, it is an ongoing issue. Keep bringing it forward. We need to know about such issues.

Mr Douglas: I thank John and Tom for coming along this afternoon.

There has been some success in the social economy and community tourism in west Belfast and the Shankill. It appears to me that the likes of DETI and DEL worked fairly well together recently on the Titanic Belfast model in trying to engage communities and getting people into training and employment. At the launch, I was encouraged to meet young people from east Belfast who had been unemployed. Would that have been your experience in west Belfast, including the Shankill, Tom?

Mr Mervyn: I sat on the Titanic Quarter work group, and to be blunt, no, it did not have the desired effect that we would have liked. We should have been doing more to make sure that investments on that scale had a greater impact on those further removed from the labour market. We put a number of people through pre-employment training programmes and stuff, but we were really not thinking far enough ahead. We are still in the mode of reacting to opportunities as they come up and not working far enough ahead. When you look at the Oxford Economics predictions, you see that the number of entry-level jobs further down the line will reduce year by year moving into the next 15 or 20 years. That puts us in a particular position, with more disadvantaged people with lower skills. More of them will be competing for fewer jobs. We really need to use opportunities like Titanic Quarter to do longer term programmes to get people up the skills ladders, not just preparing them for the entry-level jobs. Due to the economic situation, we had unemployed people who were unemployed for longer than they would have been a few years ago. A lot of people who were termed as unemployed had pretty good work histories and success in employment in the past, whereas the ones we are really trying to target are those who are further removed from the labour market.

Mr Douglas: Could there be potential for improvement along the lines that you talked about if DEL merged with DETI?

Mr Simpson: The thrust of what Tom was saying and what is in my mind is that DEL has been moving in that direction at a pace that we would criticise very heavily. Moving the subjects towards the Department of Education would mean a change of direction. It will certainly mean that we will have to rethink things and start again. That sounds like the wrong answer. If DEL has to disappear, it is a pity. If it has to disappear, somehow or other, make the momentum of what they are trying to do even greater and tell those who are responsible for the change —

The Chairperson: John, it seems, though, that it is not tackling the same question. If you are looking at local solutions for local unemployability issues, that is more like community regeneration. I know that you do not want to be put in a neighbourhood thing because it is too small, but I am not sure whether lumping it in with DETI, which has a focus on enterprise and, perhaps, reduced labour, is the right thing to do. I am not saying that it should not be done; it needs a different type of structure.

Mr Mervyn: That is the difficulty, because neither of them has a good track record of doing things more locally. DETI does not, and we have only recently heard DEL even talking about city strategies around employment and employability. Until very recently, both said that they were regional organisations that promoted the region or employment or employability in the region. Their programmes were cut accordingly. There was not that much tailoring for local needs, local opportunities and local circumstances. It is only very recently that we have even had some meaningful-ish engagement with

Invest NI about how it operates in west Belfast and Shankill, but, again, there is still a very long way to go.

The Chairperson: They focus in a different way and their outputs are on a different thing. It needs a rethink.

I have to make sure that everybody gets equal time, so I need to bring this to a close shortly.

Mr F McCann: I welcome the presentation. I know the organisation well. I think that it will be giving us a presentation in the near future about some aspects of DEL.

Mr Douglas: That is breaking news, Fra.

Mr F McCann: Sammy talked about the Titanic Quarter. When Belfast City Council was just starting to discuss the whole question of the Titanic Quarter and the new building was going up, one of my concerns was that the wonderful building would mean nothing to the communities that lived about it, even though tens of thousands of people would come to see it. One of the arguments that I made was that you needed to meet organisations in east Belfast, west Belfast and across the city and further afield — rural areas too, Michelle — to try to ensure that employment benefits would be gained and that people would feel ownership of the thing. After all the publicity dies and everything goes away, I am not sure whether that will be the case. You may have lost another golden opportunity.

From what Tom has said, I believe that DEL has been a fairly difficult organisation to deal with; certainly, that is the case in many working-class communities. Departmental officials sat here and talked about NEETs, praising the work that they had done on that issue. However, organisations that they represent had very bad experiences. It is sad to say that many of those groups had to think outside the box to try to create employment opportunities. They were told that the Department does not think locally; it thinks regionally. That has been a major difficulty and problem.

You talk about 7%, 8% or 9% unemployment. We live in areas where there is 50% and 60% unemployment. As Michelle said, it is generational. It is about how we deal with it.

The Chairperson: I think that the point you are making, Fra, is that we need some sort of mechanism or structure for reactive local initiatives that think outside the box. I understand why Invest NI has to do what it does in certain circumstances and, even, what DEL has to do because it is macro-managing stuff. However, we all know that one size does not fit all. We have to find some sort of structure that supports real regeneration.

Mr Lyttle: Chair, we are advised that the social investment fund is set aside for that, without a great deal more detail on exactly what that will look like or what it will do. I know that we are running out of time, but it would be interesting to hear the Employment Services Board's thoughts on how that project might assist it as well.

Mr Mervyn: It is basically our lifeline. Over the past wee while, we have been running from pillar to post to try to get funding. Nobody wants to fund anything strategic. Unless you have x number of people doing x, y and z and getting x, y and z, they do not want to invest in the strategic side of things. It is one of our great hopes that there will be a more co-ordinated approach moving forward. Key to that is the word that Fra used: "local". We see local problems on the ground. Yes, they are also regional problems. However, if we are not involved and do not have some sense of ownership, not just of the solutions but of the problems, how will someone who comes from outside and fires a regional strategy on top of us make meaningful difference and change? The social investment fund is a great hope for us.

Mr Lyttle: So, you are hopeful about the social investment fund. Fair enough.

Mr Simpson: I want to add a couple of thoughts, Chairman. First, as we try to find a place for this thing — you, Chairman, were struggling with where we would put the centre of action — there is a temptation to say that DSD tends to work locally. However, bear in mind that its title is the Department for Social

Development. This is a mixture of economic and social development. DSD does not necessarily lend itself to the sort of things that we are talking about.

Secondly, in the process of running this separate organisation over the past 10 years, we have had our disagreements with Invest NI and, indeed, quite bitter arguments with it about what it might or might not have been doing. The short answer is that we needed to keep it involved. The more that we got it involved, the better. To take that away would be a mistake. Changing the structure of DEL must leave us arguing about how Invest NI is linked into the actions.

Thirdly, we started this exercise 10 years ago. By now, we should be living with the extension of the University of Ulster campus on the west Belfast/Shankill site. That died a death. Indeed, for many months, it was a misplaced emphasis. However, we still have the right emphasis on further education and the enterprise, entrepreneurship and employability (e3) project, which is now on the site. That is the right idea. It now needs to be developed and fulfilled. However, that calls for Belfast Metropolitan College to do its job even better. We are saying that we must engage further and higher education to do better, but not by splitting it away from where we think that it needs to be placed.

Mr Mervyn: And do it in partnership with us.

Mr Simpson: Preferably, yes.

The Chairperson: OK. We have got the point. I will give Fra the last word.

Mr F McCann: I know that we have been talking about DEL being divided in two between DETI and DE. However, there is another element, which is the jobs and benefits offices.

Mr Mervyn: I would put them in councils.

Mr F McCann: They complement DSD. Given that DSD deals with benefits and is supposed to deal with deprivation, there seems to be a disconnect between DEL and DSD with regard to their offices. Could you see that fitting in with a DSD approach so that the approaches were complementary?

Mr Mervyn: It is possible that it could. However, one of the worst things to happen to our local communities as a result of trying to help them move out of unemployment was the co-location of services. That worked in getting statistics down from a Government point of view —

Mr F McCann: Speculation at its best.

Mr Mervyn: Absolutely. It failed for us because, before co-location, people were engaged with DEL through the job centres — people did go into the job centres, so DEL always had a reputation for helping — but, once job centres were co-located with the other services, they became more part of the system. That was probably more detrimental to the Department than anything else over the past 10 or 15 years, because it put people completely off engaging with it if they did not have to. That is why the work that we do is so important, because we are dealing mostly with the people who will not, unless they absolutely have to, go into a jobs and benefits office.

Mr Simpson: In the process of talking to you this morning, we have not mentioned the job assist work that has been going on, which is a fundamental building block of what we have been working with.

Mr Lyttle: So, putting the job centre and the benefits office in the same building has put people off availing themselves of it as a job centre. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Mervyn: That is our experience. They feel that, if they go in to look for help in looking for a job, it is connected in some way with their benefits, and they are afraid of saying or doing something that will have a comeback.

Mr F McCann: That is more to do with the system that has been developed —

The Chairperson: This was a 15-minute résumé that Michelle managed to get into 45 minutes for me.

Ms Gildernew: Do not blame me.

The Chairperson: Yes, you. I tried to stop and you said, "No, no, no". So, I just said, "OK". I am the Committee's servant.

Ms Gildernew: This is sexism.

The Chairperson: It is as well you have the Health Committee at 2.00 pm.

Ms Gildernew: I have the Health Committee at 2.00 pm, aye.

The Chairperson: Thank you both very much, Tom and John. A report of the meeting will be published by Hansard. We will be producing a report on the deliberations. You have given us much to think about, and there may be individuals who wish to follow up. Thank you very much.