



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Delivering Success through Excellence:
Departmental Briefing

24 October 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

Delivering Success through Excellence: Departmental Briefing

24 October 2012

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mrs Catherine Bell CBE	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Victor Dukelow	Department for Employment and Learning
Ms Angela Whiteside	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: Catherine is here to tell us all about Delivering Success through Excellence. This session will be recorded for Hansard. We have been provided with the Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL) briefing paper, but it is the original one, which refers to Maria Eagle. You will now be getting the right one — the third annual report — handed to you. There is quite a lot of work in it, so I am looking forward to hearing what Catherine will tell us. So, Catherine, do you want to introduce your team? The floor is now yours.

Mrs Catherine Bell (Department for Employment and Learning): First, thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee about quality and improvement; they are extremely important. Angela Whiteside is the Department's quality adviser. Angela came from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), was initially seconded to the Department and is now employed by it. Victor Dukelow, whom you have met before, is on our research and evaluation side and is here because of the importance of research, evaluation and statistics.

Some time ago, the Department looked at the sorts of monitoring that it was doing. Obviously, we closely follow what needs to be done in financial terms, but the money is voted to the Department is to improve the skills of the people of Northern Ireland. So, four years ago, we decided that we needed to evaluate the programmes that we fund, look at their performance and come up with an action plan to improve it. Members have in front of them the third annual report, which covers 2009-2010. It was published in May this year, and, just after Christmas, we will publish the fourth annual report. A report is set against targets in the Programme for Government (PFG) in every area that the Department is responsible for. They include, for example, the higher education programmes, the further education programmes, the training programmes, ApprenticeshipsNI and Steps to Work, as well as how we perform against the Programme for Government's aims. We have also included things such as our

Bridge to Employment programme. The report is a summation of information that we have from our statistics and from our quality improvement adviser, and it sits alongside the inspectorate reports that are done on our behalf and which the Department receives. It is not just a question of recording where we are. It is for heads of divisions to take forward the actions in the report for the areas that they are responsible for. After every inspection, Angela works with the provider to help them to draw up an action plan and improve.

I also want to draw your attention to the fact that the bulk of our programmes require the organisations to carry out a self-evaluation report. We do that because organisations have to take responsibility for their quality. We cannot put quality in there; they have got to take responsibility. The self-evaluation report is based on indicators set by the Education and Training Inspectorate. Organisations submit an annual report or improvement plan to the Department, and that is then evaluated by the inspectorate, which gives us feedback. So, we continually get the organisation to take responsibility. We have seen improvements and, overall, the performance is good. However, there are pockets of poor practice that, given the tightness of budgets, we cannot tolerate. At the same time, I firmly believe that, when a person comes to a programme, whatever it is, they deserve to have the best that can possibly be delivered. That is why we take quality so seriously.

That is the introduction. We are happy to answer any questions, whether they are for Angela as the improvement adviser, Victor or me.

The Chairperson: OK; thank you very much. Catherine, forgive me if my questions move around a little. We have a series of presentations to come, so I am going to ask you a question about something that you may be sighted on but ought to be aware of. Later in the meeting, we will get the red, amber, green (RAG) analysis for the Programme for Government.

Mrs C Bell: Yes.

The Chairperson: We are going to be told that you are getting four greens for what you submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP).

Mrs C Bell: Yes, for the programme for Government.

The Chairperson: For the Programme for Government. Yet, in your opening statement, you mentioned that this report addressed some of the issues in the programme for Government.

Mrs C Bell: It would have been the previous Programme for Government; this report is for 2009-2010. The difficulty is that the report came out in May, and we are looking at it only now. We have a report coming out after Christmas, so there is a time lag for this.

The Chairperson: Yes. Nevertheless, here is where the question goes: one of the Programme for Government's bits, which I think that you signed off on, so I apologise that it is not in front of you, is to:

"increase uptake in economically relevant Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) places".

You have given that a green because the Department has met its funding obligations to the universities. However, I want to look at some of the issues that you have here. I refer, in appendix 1, to A.3.2 and A.1.5, which deal with STEM public service agreement (PSA) targets and suchlike —

Mrs C Bell: Sorry; which report?

The Chairperson: The third annual report. I am referring to the appendix at page 41 — A.1.5 and, among others, A.3.2.

Mrs C Bell: Got it.

The Chairperson: Those are two that I picked out that are just to do with STEM. There are a few others. The issue is that the statement — I guess that it was from Angela — is that there are:

"significant challenges that lie ahead if STEM PSA targets are to be attained".

A.3.2, also states:

"The Department has PSA targets in these areas and latest data show that significant progress is still required."

So, I am getting worthy but conflicting information here. What is the position on STEM?

Mrs C Bell: It is conflicting because the target in the current Programme for Government is to increase university places for STEM subjects. We have achieved that as far as we possibly can at this moment. That is why it is green. However, when you get into an internal report for the Department such as this, which is to help departmental officials to improve, we get down to the granularity. Remember that this relates to 2009-2010; not 2012-13. We are saying that, in 2009-2010, a significant amount of additional work needed to be done. At that stage, we were only writing the strategy in response to the advice that we had got from Hugh Cormican, based on his review of STEM. From that, we drew up a strategy and from that came an action plan. Five separate Departments contribute to the uptake of STEM, and we would always say that there is more to be done on STEM because it is such a priority.

The Chairperson: First, I am grateful to you for sharing the report with the Committee. I understand that it is an internal document and therefore contains some things on which you open yourself to not having succeeded. So, do not take it that I am being critical.

Mrs C Bell: No.

The Chairperson: I applaud it as a really good document that people should take time to read. That having been said, when we drill down, we see that the report mentions, for example, that we have funded the roll off of the PhD students; that is to say, the temporary hike of 300 places that we agreed in the previous mandate. We secured funding to make sure that they were funded when that was rolled out, but we are now significantly below the target number of PhD students, particularly in STEM subjects. When we talked to our university colleagues, they told us that that has a fundamental effect on their ability to do good science. That is a matter of some alarm for us. It did not really get through to us why we were, in effect, cutting the number of PhD students.

Mrs C Bell: You have the 2009-2010 figures. There was a 13% increase in PhDs. During 2010-11, there was a further 13% increase in PhDs, and those were in STEM subjects. You will not have that in front of you; I took that from our current figures.

I understand what you are saying, but we are not just targeting STEM PhD students. We are targeting STEM subjects in schools and colleges across all the areas that contribute to a good economy or to an economy in which we have identified the priority areas. I understand what you are saying about cutting the number of PhDs.

The Chairperson: Some time ago, the Committee went to the cancer research centre. I cannot remember the numbers, but I think that they said that they were down to three or four PhD students having had maybe 30 before. That is a flagship research facility. Yesterday, the vice chancellor talked about the fact that we have taken Northern Ireland's performance in cancer recovery rates from the worst in Europe to the best. Yet, we are taking away PhD students. They seem to think that that is an important issue.

Mrs C Bell: This is not me copping out, but higher education is not my responsibility, so I do not have that detail. I think that there were additional places, but I say that with caution. We will check the current position on the PhD places.

The Chairperson: I am only looking for a little bit of the detail. I realise that this is a huge document and that we could spend all day talking about —

Mrs C Bell: One page.

The Chairperson: Yes. I want to draw your attention to the bit that caught my eye, which was table 7 on page 33. I know that is not your area, but it looks quite stark in the report when you see that:

"Between 2008/09 and 2009/10 STEM enrolments in PhDs at NI HEIs have fallen by 13%".

You would expect me to pick up on that and say that it reinforces the fact that there is a problem with that issue.

Mrs C Bell: The following year it went back up again. Over the 10-year period, you will see that it went up by 28%.

The Chairperson: I am suspicious of 10-year periods when you use that measure in one place and use a three- or four-year —

Mrs C Bell: No. We have kept it consistent the whole way through. We gave the current year and a 10-year span where that was possible.

The Chairperson: Maybe I did not read it right. The next line in the table states:

"Income from Collaborative Research has increased by 232% between 2003/04 and 2009/10".

That is in the "Long-Term Trend" column. It is not the same base that you used for the long-term trend above it.

Mr Victor Dukelow (Department for Employment and Learning): I think that a fair point is being made. However, the default position for this is to try to give a decade's worth of change where that was possible. The figures relayed in the first row of that table come from data that is produced and published by the Department. The other three rows come from a Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) survey, which was only introduced in 2003-04. That is, unfortunately, the longest time series that we can present at this stage. It is drawn from the 'Higher Education — Business and Community Interaction Survey', which sets out a whole raft of different indicators for universities right across the UK, and identifies how those institutions collaborate with the business and community sectors.

The Chairperson: OK, but in the point that I was making, Victor, I was not trying to challenge you hugely. I was pointing out that, when I was reading the report and it was looking at long-term trends, I found it confusing that, perhaps over a 10-year cycle, a variety of terms were used. I understand that some programmes started later, and that is why you have to do that. Nevertheless, we are trying to get the message across that there are problems and issues. The point that really leads my thinking on it is the transfer of people from welfare into employment. You are talking about figures that are almost in the hundreds of thousands. I think that the figure was 96,000. What does taking someone from welfare into work actually mean? Is that people who found jobs on their own?

Mrs C Bell: It is both. It is about people who initially found themselves unemployed and got employment very quickly without much interaction with the Department's employment service or Steps to Work. It is also about people who got into work through the support of the employment service and people who got into employment, lost their jobs and got back into employment. We captured that as well. That is why, when we talk about the Steps to Work programme and its successor programme, Steps to Success, we refer to sustainable employment. People can get employment straight away, but may only be in it for a short time.

The Chairperson: I am going to make a few points and then invite colleagues to ask questions if they want to come in and raise issues themselves. Fra and Tom have indicated that they want to speak.

Catherine, I know that we are dealing with different datasets, but I can only ask you questions on the basis of the information I have in front of me. In the Department's red, amber and green response to the commitment to:

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

you gave yourself a green. The document also states that:

"The 2012-13 milestone calls for a total of 65,000 clients to be moved from welfare into employment".

That is a fair amount. I suspect that Committee members will be astonished at the numbers we are talking about here. In your document, you go on to state that, to the end of August, a further 14,500 had been moved into employment. That number is really large. Is that a real programme or is that just a reflection of what has happened? As I read it, this is supposed to deal with young people who are not in employment. We know that youth unemployment is going the wrong way at the moment. Given the way that that is phrased, I do not think that people will understand what it really means.

Mrs C Bell: This is the Programme for Government; therefore, the wording reflects what is in the Programme for Government. We reflect progress against what is in the Programme for Government. Although it refers to youth unemployment, it is about all unemployment.

The Chairperson: I am only going on the basis of the words:

"with an emphasis on young people".

Mrs C Bell: I appreciate that, but it is about all unemployment.

The Chairperson: OK, but that is not really my key point. I realise that we are talking about two separate papers and that we are on different timescales, but it would come as a surprise to some that the Department thought that we are doing quite well in providing young people with employment, skills and training, when youth unemployment is rather precarious.

Mrs C Bell: You are absolutely right, but we have to follow the RAG status that is set, and we have met the milestone set in the Programme for Government. We appreciate that much more is to be done; that is why the new youth employment programme is so important. That is why the work that is going on in further education and the increase of 15% in enrolments in further education is indicative of the fact that people cannot get jobs so they stay in education. That is why programme-led apprenticeships are there. We would much prefer people to be on an apprenticeship programme, but for that they have to be employed. We cannot have young people languish doing nothing. My biggest regret is that we called it "programme-led apprenticeship" and not just a "training programme". It is indicative of what is happening, but the Programme for Government measures its priorities against set milestones.

The Chairperson: I understand the parameters that you work to, but you will also understand that the Committee is anxious to drill down beneath the figures. I applauded you for providing your report, so do not take this the wrong way, but you bring up areas where you are failing. I cannot put my finger on it, but I am sure that Angela will point me in the right direction; the numbers of the population that are on level 2 and level 3 are likely to be a challenge for the Department.

Mrs C Bell: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: That is also a key indicator in other bits of the Programme for Government. I am saying that the third annual report is an excellent piece of work and we will, admittedly, see the update after Christmas. However, the detailed report gives me a better picture of what is going on than do the PFG reports. I know that it is not necessarily your responsibility, but the PFG reports do not give me a sense of the challenges that we face.

Mrs Bell: The quality and performance report is written so that we improve performance; it is written for the providers and for our various divisional directors with responsibilities for the programme; it is written so that we take the action that we must on poor quality; and it is written so that if we see a trend across organisations, we can intervene and, perhaps something that Angela would do, source expertise wherever we can. The quality and performance report's purpose is to drive up performance; that is why it is written. The inspectorate writes its annual report. Victor puts together this, based on statistics, then Angela and our contracting people look at it to establish what support we have put into those organisations and from which of them we have withdrawn contracts. The report is written in that spirit.

The Chairperson: Yes; and I have repeatedly said that I am supportive of that spirit and that the report is really good. The danger of that is that people such as my colleagues and I will ask you

questions on it. Finally — because I have taken some time to go through elements of the report, and I want my colleagues to have the chance to speak — A.1 of appendix 1, on page 38 deals with:

"Attainment of Key Public Sector Agreement (PSA) Targets".

I understand that that was —

Mrs C Bell: The past mandate.

The Chairperson: — the previous Government. However, A.1.1 states:

"Based on current trajectories, significant challenges remain in attaining these Level 2 and 3 targets".

That phrase is repeated in A.1.2, and I suspect that raises the alarm that we are not dealing with that core area. I just want to leave you with this last point, Catherine, because Fra is anxious to come in. Look at all the reports that you ask people to draw up, including the inspectorate, the CPD and the self-evaluation. There are so many audit reports on so many different issues that one might ask whether we are duplicating matters. Is there not a significant amount of red tape as we try to get to the bottom of this? I see that you are shaking your head, but there does seem to be an awful lot of oversight. I have looked at the part of your report that deals with FE colleges, and I think that you said that only two were satisfactory. I would have thought that we were trying to get to the stage of the colleges self-evaluating within appropriate safeguards. Surely, ultimately, that is the way we want to go. We want them to be autonomous, self-regulating bodies, over which you have only a light touch. That is where I get to in all of this.

Mrs C Bell: If you will allow me to come back on that, the last thing that we want is additional bureaucracy; we complain about bureaucracy. If you look at the cycle, a young person or adult who enrolls in a college or programme expects to get the qualification that they enrol for. From a statistical perspective — that is Victor's job — we want to know how each programme does when it comes to enrolments, retention and achievement. If a programme is not doing well and young people are leaving or dropping out, that is a waste of public resources. However, there is an even bigger problem. It is not fair to the person who has dropped out of a course if the provision is poor. That is purely statistical, and it feeds into funding and similar matters.

We asked the colleges and all our providers to complete a qualitative self-evaluation report. It considers the quality of teaching and learning, the standards achieved, training and learning, outcomes, ethos, management and leadership, and resources. The organisations evaluate all those factors themselves. In the early days, those were marketing papers, and the organisations wrote them thinking about what we would want to see rather than a document that they would use to improve performance. We have moved away from that. In order to ensure the efficacy of that self-evaluation, we ask the inspectorate to go in. It can go into the classroom to sample the work and to look at what is being done. It knows the organisations. Colleges and large training providers also get a great deal of public money — in fact, they get huge amounts of public money. We want to make sure that the standards that are being achieved meet the standards that are needed for the economy. That is why the inspectorate goes in.

Each report is for a specific purpose; there is no duplication or overlap. The Department draws it all together; we do not ask the colleges or providers to do that.

The Chairperson: Some of the colleges take a slightly different view, but, perhaps, they would do that.

Mrs C Bell: Absolutely.

Mr Anderson: Chair, can I ask a quick supplementary question before I leave?

The Chairperson: If you are quick. Fra is first on the list.

Mr Anderson: I know. On the back of that, you described pockets of poor performance in some organisations. What are the levels of that poor performance?

Mrs C Bell: Well —

The Chairperson: Sydney; hold that question. That is a substantive question. We will put you in next.

Mr F McCann: I was getting a bit confused about questions on the analysis of the third annual report and the report for the decade. We seemed to cross over between both.

The Chairperson: Both try to deal with the same issue but through different timescales.

Mr F McCann: In many ways, the world has changed since 2009-2010, and unemployment has increased significantly since then. That is how I deal with it.

A number of issues came up in the third annual report. One of the things that I am concerned about, and one of the major issues that has hit us in the past couple of years, is the impact of welfare reform. Thousands of people who receive ESA or incapacity benefit will be migrated to one of the working groups. Most of those people are long-term unemployed. Will you be able to cater for them? That will have a huge impact on your resources.

Mrs C Bell: Absolutely; it is a question that we have struggled with in the Department. We think that we can deal with it because we have got additional resources. However, more importantly, we have invested and continue to invest in the training of our staff. We have a group of officials who dealt with people who were disabled or who had barriers to learning — that was a specific group. They are sharing their experience.

It is a challenge, and we will work through it. It is helpful that it is coming in stages, as opposed to all at once.

Mr F McCann: It would be interesting to find out what resources have been made available to you. I understand that that will not be an easy task for people.

Mrs C Bell: We will come back to you on the resources.

Mr F McCann: The other thing is that, given some of the legacy difficulties, many people here suffer from mental health problems. What training is available for people to deal with that? What type of courses are available? How long do those courses last? How are they being trained to deal with people with mental health problems? That is all crucial in how you deal with it.

As a result of medical assessments and people being taken off benefits and put into working groups, one of the things that has been said is that a number of people have attempted suicide or have taken their own lives. Those who are involved need to be very careful. I would be interested in that information.

Mrs C Bell: We will send it to you. Our staff are being trained, but we will also contract support organisations and people with specialist support who can deal with individuals with significant barriers with whom our front-line staff are unable to deal.

Mr F McCann: I would also be interested in that. Even going back to 2007, one of the things that we asked about was what type of medical or psychiatric training people got to allow them to identify that there is a problem in the offing when they are dealing with somebody. That is important.

Mrs C Bell: You are absolutely right, and we will come back to you on that.

The Chairperson: The officials will come back to you on that, Fra, and you can return to that point later. I want to give Sydney a chance, because I know that he has to go on to the Public Accounts Committee shortly.

Mr Anderson: Thank you for letting me in. It was just that question on the levels of poor performance.

Mrs Bell: I will ask Angela to deal with that.

Ms Angela Whiteside (Department for Employment and Learning): You may, for example, have a college that is good overall, but there might be one area in it in which there is a pocket of poor practice. You might also have a training organisation in which, overall, there are more areas of poor practice than there are good.

We work very hard to make sure that those areas of poor practice are eradicated. The first thing that we do — Catherine referred to it earlier — is to ask them for an improvement plan of what they intend to do to drive up standards and address the areas for improvement. My former colleagues and I in the inspectorate evaluate the improvements plans. We then ask the inspectorate to go back in at a moment that we consider appropriate, based on the gravity of the situation, to see how the organisation is implementing the improvement plan and whether it is having the desired effect. In other words, we give each organisation an opportunity to improve. We conduct a further monitoring visit within no more than six months to see what progress has been made, and, at the end of 12 to 18 months, the organisation will have a follow-up inspection, after which it will be regraded. We find that that structure, as implemented under our quality-improvement strategy, has been incredibly successful in driving up improvement and —

The Chairperson: I think that Sidney wants to know where the —

Mr Anderson: The levels of poor practice and where the problem areas are. Are there any specific areas?

Mrs C Bell: Every organisation is different. If you went to the Belfast Met, you would find that, generally, it is very good, but there may be something — I am not going to name the area, because I will get the area wrong and I will have the wrath of God down on my head. However, it might be something different in the south-east. What frustrates us is when there is excellent practice in a college or training organisation and it is not shared. We will generally say to the principal, owner or manager that they can improve themselves, because they have lecturers and tutors there who are very good and they should let them go and work with their colleagues. At present — I am touching wood and touching my head — we do not have any organisation where provision is disastrous. We just would not tolerate it; we would remove a contract. There are organisations that we think could make considerable improvement.

Mr Anderson: Are there organisations to which you would have to go back a second or third time? At what stage do you say —

Mrs C Bell: We do not.

Mr Anderson: They always come up to the mark at the end; is that what you are saying?

Mrs C Bell: No; if they do not come back within — is it 18 months or two years?

Ms Whiteside: It is 18 months.

Mrs C Bell: If they are not up to the mark then, we have what we call a case conference. We will remove the contract. That came from a PAC hearing some years ago when we were challenged about how often we give an organisation a chance to improve. When you consider that all the people will be over 16 if they are on a full-time basis, they do not actually have a long time — one, two or perhaps three years in training. If we do not get it right, we damage their chances. Often, it is people who may have had poor experiences at school. That is why we are determined that provision is as good as we can possibly get it.

Ms Whiteside: Where you have a college or organisation that is good overall but where there may be one area of poor practice, that reinforces with us the need to develop their ability to self-evaluate, because they are obviously not evaluating effectively there. They know what good looks like, but they have failed to identify poor practice.

Mr Anderson: It was quite a debate, and I will have to leave it today, but I appreciate that.

The Chairperson: We will no doubt come back to the issue when the Christmas report is ready.

Mr Buchanan: Following on from that, if you have a delivery programme in which there is an area of poor practice, and you identify that area but you do not go back for 18 months, surely that is too long to leave it. That will have a detrimental effect on the programme being delivered for the people who are benefiting from it. Is 18 months not too long?

Ms Whiteside: That would not happen, because we would have the inspectors back in within, say, three months of the initial report to look at the improvement plan and how it has been implemented. It is easy to put an improvement plan together, but it might never be implemented, so we have the inspectors going back to make sure that progress is being made.

Mrs C Bell: It is three months or six months. If it was severe or disastrous provision, we would not allow it to continue.

Mr Buchanan: During your report to monitor the programmes have you found programmes that have not been delivering? Obviously, you have been monitoring the programmes that have been funded by DEL. Have you found any programmes that are not delivering to your satisfaction?

Mr Dukelow: When you look across the report and take it in the round, it shows strong performance across the various programmes that the Department delivers. When we look at benchmarks and attempt to draw out examples of how we compare to other parts of the UK or elsewhere, performance on quite a number of indicators is demonstrated to be strong. The report shows that there is variability across our providers; not all providers perform to the same standard. Some perform at a very high standard and others at a less high standard, and the objective of this work is to identify and understand that variability as best we can from the data that we have available to inform Angela's work and that of the inspectorate so that they can understand where standards require further improvement. That can focus efforts.

Mrs C Bell: There are now only six further education colleges, and they are huge organisations. We break it down into programme areas, such as engineering, ICT and so on. We look at the average across the colleges, what colleges are achieving in those areas and then look at a specific college. That information goes to the governing body, and it is for the governing body to challenge the principal and the senior staff. We want to be in a position where we have consistency of performance across our providers and where providers recognise that it is not just a case of throwing money at it. The investment of staff has made a significant difference over the years. For example, in further education, all staff have to be at degree level or equivalent. If they are in an industrial area, they have to have three years' experience and have GCSE English and maths or essential skills. Then they have to go through a one-year teaching programme, an introduction to teaching, and within three years become qualified teachers through the postgraduate certificate. We do not have the same control in contracted training providers because they are commercial organisations. However, we have worked with Angela and the University of Ulster, and all our training providers now get the opportunity for their staff to do training in teaching and learning and how to assess properly, and, when we run contracts, we will require any organisation that gets a contract to have trained personnel in pedagogy. That has made a significant improvement.

Mr Buchanan: That is to be welcomed. I was concerned about another issue when looking through the report. Perhaps I am getting it wrong, but did I read that there was a decrease in the number of people taking up STEM subjects? That is worrying, because we need to focus on that area. What is the Department doing to rebalance that?

Mrs C Bell: I will tell you what we are doing, and I will let Victor talk about the increase in STEM, because that is 2009-2010 and the increase is now. When we wrote the STEM strategy, five Departments were involved, mainly the Department of Education and us, but it included the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development — there are six; I need to go to an essential skills course — and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Each of those organisations has drawn up a programme of work to increase the interest in STEM and, in our case, the uptake in universities, colleges and schools. That is having a real and positive effect. The difficulty with STEM is that it is not like some other subjects where you can learn at any age. If you do not have the fundamentals, it is very difficult —

The Chairperson: Can I just challenge you? Do you think that there is an increase in the uptake of STEM subjects in schools? Did you say that?

Mrs C Bell: No; I did not. I am talking about our own increase in subjects. We need children and young people to come through from the schools.

The Chairperson: In support of what the Deputy Chairman said, my observation is that STEM subjects have become less relevant, certainly in primary schools. If you do not feed the funnel at the start, sooner or later, you are going to have a problem.

Mrs C Bell: Obviously, that is the responsibility of the Department of Education. As the senior responsible owner, all that I get is information on the kind of things that it is doing to improve that. From a read, it looks as if it is trying hard. Victor, would you like to talk about our numbers?

Mr Dukelow: STEM numbers have been showing signs of increasing after a long-term decline in STEM enrolment over the past decade. That is not unique to here; it has been experienced elsewhere. However, there seems to have been a turning point, and HE enrolments in STEM have increased overall. FE and training programmes enrolment numbers have declined of late, but that seems to have been in areas that are under pressure in the economic environment that we are in, particularly in construction —

The Chairperson: Also in electrical, which you would not have thought was an issue.

Mr Dukelow: There are some compensatory increases in essential skills enrolments on STEM programmes. In particular, enrolments in ICT essential skills at level 2 have increased dramatically, as have enrolments on numeracy courses. We had a target in our previous PSAs to increase the numbers of post 16-year-olds enrolled on STEM subjects by 5%, and that target was met.

There is a differential across the piece. There are impacts from, I suppose, the wider environment on that, and there is no doubt that it is a challenging. However, there is some positive news to be drawn out of the report with the overall enrolments in STEM subjects.

Mrs C Bell: We have to keep our foot on the pedal and keep it as a priority. We pay particular attention to two areas. One is the essential skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT, because if people cannot read, write and do hard sums, they cannot progress. The other is STEM. Those two areas get particular focus in the Department. However, as I said, we have to have the people coming through the schools as well.

The Chairperson: To make the point about the statistics, item 27 on page 15 of the report —

Mr F McCann: What report are you talking about?

The Chairperson: The report that was submitted by the Department; the briefing paper.

Mr F McCann: Is it 'Delivering Success Through Excellence' ? The three-year one? Is it the third annual report you are talking about?

The Chairperson: It is not the third annual report; it is the briefing paper from the Department.

Mr F McCann: Page 15?

The Chairperson: Yes. You have the right document. Now, just find paragraph 27 on page 15. Do you have it?

Mr F McCann: Yes.

The Chairperson: When you look at those figures and what Tom brought up, the report states that:

"STEM courses at Level 2 and above...decreased by 2% over the last year."

I know that it there was a 5% rise before that. Of the courses that seem to have been hit, you can understand construction and, perhaps, civil engineering, although I have heard from people that there are skills shortages in certain parts of the area, notably in the west of the Province. You cannot get

people there with real skills to do a job that they can get paid for. Enrolments in electrical and electronic engineering were also down by 15% and enrolments in health science were down by 36%. That seems to be surprising. Those are areas in which there is definitely a demand.

Mrs C Bell: Except that there are some aspects of the electrical industry who tell us that we are overtraining.

The Chairperson: I think that what they said was that we are overtraining people who are unable to do a job when they come out. Their real concern, I think, is part-timeism, rather than the absolute numbers. It is about getting people who can go out and wire something up without killing themselves or someone else.

Mr F McCann: On the back of that, at the start of the meeting you talked about the need for real apprenticeships that would take you through the A to Z, whether that is electrical engineering or construction work. One of my concerns is that if you go into some of the training schemes for what would probably be called the traditional trades of bricklaying, plastering and joinery, most of the rooms that are set aside are empty. Young people are becoming car mechanics and pursuing other aspects of training. The unfortunate thing is that, if there is ever an upturn in the economy, we will have lost those skills. There is a huge age gap. I know young people who were second year apprentices, who ended up working in kitchens in hotels and cafes and just gave up their trades.

Mrs C Bell: I think that the difficulty is that the apprenticeship programme is an employed programme, and apprentices have to be — I am going to use an old word — indentured to an employer. Understandably, employers are not recruiting. Young people look at the construction industry and see that the highest unemployment is in it. Therefore, they are not going to take a construction programme.

I take your point. Five years from now, not me, but others may be sitting in front of a Committee like this saying that they have skills shortage in construction.

Mr F McCann: A number of years ago when the economy was riding high, some places in Dublin, when it was booming, could not get enough construction workers and redesigned the buildings in such a way as to cut out aspects of bricklaying or plastering. It would be terrible if we got to the stage that we did not have people who are trained in those skills. That has a big impact. One of the things that we are dealing with is the growing problem of emigration. People are moving away and we are losing whatever skills they have built up. Many of those people will never return here.

One of the interesting things in the third annual report was the demographic factor. The reports states that there will be 600 fewer young people of age 16 in 2015. When you do that research, does that allow you to tailor your programmes? You obviously do everything three or four years in advance.

Mrs C Bell: What happens is that our Minister sets the priorities and we work within those priorities. In terms of the further education colleges, through the college development planning process, the head of that division works with the senior management teams and chairs of the colleges to identify — not down to the last widget — the areas that we want to see growth in. The funding is based on what is agreed with the colleges. That does not mean to say that the Department has to approve every course; it is the broad area. There are other courses that colleges want to run, and, if there is a demand for them, we will fund them. We just do not give priority funding. So, yes, we try to match the college provision to the needs of the economy.

The second thing that we try to do when we let contracts to our training providers is to make sure that we have contracts in areas that we know there is going to be growth in. That is really difficult because a contract is for three years, and we are planning contracts two years before we let the contract. Moreover, no one has ever been 100% accurate in manpower planning and what will come out. So, we try to have broad areas and not be too specific.

Mr F McCann: Chair —

The Chairperson: I am running over time now, Fra.

Mr F McCann: I just want to make one other point. I could not get in because you spoke for the first 25 minutes, Chair.

The Chairperson: That is the privilege of being Chair. It is also what happens when only the Chair managed to get the right report. I was trying to give you time to read it.

Mr F McCann: I know that, Chair. I jest.

The Chairperson: Normally, I would give people the opportunity to come in.

Mr F McCann: I was going to back you up on something.

The Chairperson: In that case, you can carry on.

Mr F McCann: Catherine, you said that some aspects fit into Education. The Chair raised a point earlier about primary schools and the way people are educated, especially in the sciences. What connection is there between you and the Department of Education to work out how people are encouraged to take up the sciences? The Chair has been very interested in that and has organised a number of very interesting seminars on sciences and so on. It is quite shocking to find out how few people are taking up that mantle, and you have to start at primary school to encourage people to do that.

Mrs C Bell: We have very strong links with the Department of Education through the monitoring of STEM and the outworking of the action plan. However, the curriculum in the schools is the responsibility of the Department of Education, and, therefore, we have no locus to intervene. At the South West College, the STEM centre in Dungannon works with a huge percentage, if not every primary and secondary school, in the area. So, the colleges can make links with the schools. The other way is through teacher education. We need to make sure that how teachers learn in Stranmillis, St Mary's, the University of Ulster or Queen's engages young people. We fund the curriculum but we do not have any locus over it.

Mr F McCann: It is crucial that the likes of DEL has the task of looking at how employment is spread across and how the need is met. You should have a say or at least point in the direction and say that, in five or six years time —

The Chairperson: OK, we get the point. Let us see what Catherine has to say about that.

Mrs C Bell: Under STEM, we have a business group, because there are responsibilities in the STEM strategy that government cannot deliver; only the business community can do that. That is to raise the profile of and create interest in the interesting jobs that require STEM skills. It has a network of connections and is working with the primary and secondary schools to help them to see the jobs and the kind of interesting work that is available if you do STEM subjects.

The Chairperson: To summarise Fra's point, you need to have a more direct input. You can say at the moment that you do not have locus over it, but you have a close working relationship with DE. If you do not fill the pipeline at the start, you will not get anything out at the end. Anecdotally, I can tell you that primary schools are not as focused on science as they once were. It is about a range of things. The background of the teacher is important. If they are science-orientated, they are, naturally, more enthusiastic about science. If they are arts-orientated, they are more enthusiastic about art. It is not that they cannot teach everything, but I just think that there is an issue coming up on this —

Mrs C Bell: The inspectorate is an organisation that works for both Departments, and it could flag that.

You mentioned a shortage in engineering. You know that our Minister has established the engineering working group, and that is representative of a wide range of employers, universities, colleges, the Department of Education and Invest NI.

The Chairperson: In this session, I have tried to take information out, and, as Fra pointed out, the information was quite technical. Catherine, can we just talk about the generalities? I think that we do a lot of process to try to reassure ourselves that we are doing the right thing, but I am not sure that we are getting to the nub of the problem yet. Employers come to this Committee and say that they cannot get the right skills. Yet, people in all regions say that they have gone to college and done this, that

and the other and cannot get a job. We appear to have something of a mismatch. I take on board the point that manpower planning is not an exact science; who knows what will happen? However, we need a flexibility of approach.

Mrs C Bell: It is the employers who set the standards for the qualifications.

The Chairperson: We will have to have a look at that as well. The employers cannot have it both ways. If they are involved in setting the standards, they cannot complain about the outcomes.

Last week, we were down at Southern Regional College, and the staff there talked to us about the efforts that they have to go to try to get people involved in certain subjects. So, there is an issue about how we reach out to people and tell them that this is what they should be doing. I have a personal opinion that I made clear at the previous meeting and which I will say to you now. We have this idea that everything that we should do should be child-centric, but you also need to work out what is good for the economy and what is good for society. Sometimes, people have an imperfect knowledge. We need to give more guidance, and the colleges and the universities need to be involved in that process.

Mrs C Bell: I do not disagree with you. However, civil servants or government or colleges cannot make the jobs attractive. The only people who can talk about what is in a job is an employer. We also need to look at the salaries that are being paid. It is not just about trying to get people into work. Young people are not stupid.

The Chairperson: I agree with you. I will stop now, because Fra will tell me off for talking even more if I go on.

Mr F McCann: I was actually going to come back on that.

The Chairperson: No, Davy has been waiting patiently, and I want to bring him in. We will have to return to this issue.

I invited the Department, and I invite you who are here today, to an inquiry that the Committee is having into careers and people's decision-making process. The Department provided a very proper departmental response that says everything and says nothing. Actually, there is an opportunity to come along here and say some hard things to people such as that you have to pay more money if you want to get people into this and that there is a danger with programme-led apprenticeships. Of all the things that I have heard you say today, the one that has really stuck in my mind is that you said that you wished that you had called it something else. I agree with you on that. That is an issue that we should tackle, and the Department should use this Committee's inquiry as an opportunity to say some of the things that need to be said. I realise that people try to be proper and say that they are doing everything already, but, actually, it is not 100% rosy out there, and we should take the opportunity to tell some people some home truths. That includes employers, young people, colleges, and it probably includes all of us around this table. You take a sharp intake of breath, so we will move on and let Davy come in.

Mr Hilditch: I go back to a few comments that you made about ICT. Recently, I have been involved in the creative industries inquiry with another Committee, and, indeed, a number of employers presented to that inquiry. The evidence that they gave was quite stark. It was talked about whether we were doing enough in that field. This evidence will become public soon, and big questions will be asked at that stage. It goes for everything from not getting employees coming through from this end to companies setting up hubs where the colleges are in the likes of Dundee.

Mrs C Bell: The one thing that our Minister did was to identify the creative industries as a growing industry that he would recognise as a priority. The Department fed the information on what we are doing to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. We have resourced the colleges — not every one — with creative industries. Our skills strategy says that there are many opportunities to bring together engineering and people who have design, and that then develops new products.

Ms Whiteside: I was at a college recently that had some issues with the quality of its media programmes, which were very traditional and very boring. As a result of an inspection, the areas for improvement were highlighted, and the college embraced it and set up exactly the kind of provision

that you are talking about. It was very dynamic with increasing numbers on it and excellent work places, and students learned a range of skills that were completely appropriate for the creative industries. We need to spread that good practice and make sure that that gets out as a benchmark for what can be done.

The Chairperson: Anybody else? I thank you, Catherine, for coming to talk to us. When will the fourth be published?

Mrs C Bell: It will be early in the new year. Remember that it will be for 2011-12 because we will not have the data for 2012-13.

The Chairperson: Nevertheless, given that we have a wee bit of momentum, it would be a good idea for you to bring that to us early.

Mrs C Bell: No problem.

The Chairperson: Can we get the agreement of the Committee that we want to see that as soon as it is available? The third session is the departmental briefing on the Programme for Government delivery plans. You have sent along John Smith, who only talks to us about finance. Why is it John and not you, since you are signing off on all that stuff? John will just tell us that the money has been spent.

Mrs C Bell: I am quite happy to stay if you want me to.

The Chairperson: We will not take as long over the next two issues because we covered quite a lot in this session. That would be useful, Catherine, if you do not mind.

The Committee made a response to the Northern Ireland Executive's draft Programme for Government and said that it is concerned that the Programme for Government is very aspirational and does not contain a sufficient level of detail to enable the Committee to adequately scrutinise the milestones and outputs contained in it. Given that the PFG milestones are so bland, how can we hold anybody to account on them? Victor talked earlier about the PSAs. The exercise that we are doing with you in this session is really useful, albeit we may need to get our head around the different data sets. However, we want to ask some more probing questions. It seems to me that we are not really informing government as to how successful we are on the issue. I do not want to deal with it now, but I want to talk to you about that rather than just have John say, "You asked for the money, we got the money, and the money has been allocated." Thank you all very much for your forbearance in the session.