



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Budget 2024-25, Policy and Legislative  
Programme: Mr Conor Murphy MLA, Minister  
for the Economy

26 June 2024

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Phillip Brett (Chairperson)  
Mr Gary Middleton (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Pádraig Delargy  
Mr David Honeyford  
Mr Philip McGuigan  
Ms Sinéad McLaughlin

**Witnesses:**

Mr C Murphy	Minister for the Economy
Mr Ian Snowden	Department for the Economy

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Good morning, Minister. How are you? You are looking very happy this morning.

**Mr C Murphy (The Minister for the Economy):** I am always happy to see you, Chair. I am happy to be here and not out canvassing in North Belfast. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** We have already got it won.

You are very welcome. You need no introduction to the Committee. Members will be aware that Mr Ian Snowden is now the permanent, permanent secretary since his previous appearance here. On behalf of the Committee, I say that we are delighted at your appointment. You are a stellar civil servant, and we are delighted to have you in the Department on a permanent basis. Congratulations on that.

**Mr Ian Snowden (Department for the Economy):** Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Minister, we are delighted that you have come along for your second appearance at the Committee. You made it clear to me at the start that you would be free and available to the Committee at all times, and you have honoured that, so thank you very much for that. With that, I am very content to hand over to you, sir.

**Mr C Murphy:** Thank you very much indeed. Thanks for the invitation to give an update on the progress that we have made across a range of issues, since I last appeared here on 20 March.

When I set out my economic strategy at that time, I identified the problems of our low employment rate, low productivity, low wages and severe regional imbalances as some of the big challenges that we faced. Those problems have deep roots, and many of the levers that are needed to address them rest in Westminster. Nevertheless, it was my clear view coming into the Department that, with the right approach, we could turn the dial on some of those things.

I was determined to provide a strategic focus, which, I felt, was much-needed, by setting four key objectives, with which you will be familiar. Those are good jobs; regional balance; productivity; and net zero. The overarching theme in relation to all of those — they are all interlinked — is the issue of skills. Our ability to deliver on all those things will be underpinned by improving skills and people's access to work and learning. I have tasked my officials with developing a three-year skills plan, and, hopefully, I will be in a position to outline that plan in the very near future.

As the Committee will be very much aware, the Department's key delivery arm, Invest NI, was subject to significant reform on the back of a very critical report. Its ability to be in the shape to work on those objectives will be vital. I have had discussions with the chief executive, the board and the chair of Invest NI on the need for the organisation to have a much stronger role in supporting regional balance. It is in the process of finalising plans to restructure on the back of the Lyons report.

A reverse in the drop in the number of people attending colleges is also critical. My first priority when I came into office was to ensure that the adequate budget was in place to provide a suitable pay offer for lecturers who, obviously, perform a vital role in the colleges. In turn, the colleges play a vital role in the overarching priority about people and skills. We were pleased to get that issue resolved. We are aiming to increase the number of students going to university, and we are particularly determined to see the expansion of the Magee campus. Without me having to outline it, people will know about the financial constraints that we are operating in. Nonetheless, we are still determined to find a way to increase the number of students overall and, in particular, the number of students going to Magee. We established an independent task force on Magee, under the leadership of Stephen Kelly and Nicola Skelly, which will publish its action plan before the end of this year. The funding that is required to implement its recommendations will be prioritised as part of future-year budgets.

The Executive, of course, have a key aim of providing affordable childcare as a priority. Improved access to childcare will be a key lever for my economic goals. We are committed to working with the Minister of Education as he develops and implements a bespoke early years and childcare strategy. We are also looking at the issue of in-skills and how we contribute to providing more people in that area of work. One of the areas of focus in our discussions on skills is how we make a contribution through the courses that are available to people and making sure that people have more qualifications in the childcare area. It is about creating a bigger pool of workers for that. If we can increase the number of people who are accessing that, we obviously need to increase the number of people who are working in that field. We expect an interim report on that shortly, and we are looking at the available childcare support in the various sectors that fall under our authority, including the education and further education sectors. We have asked for a report on that in the next couple of months.

We are setting up a tourism partnership board to co-design an action plan for that sector. The inaugural meeting of that board will be in the next few weeks, and I am meeting the chair of the board tomorrow. As you will know, Chair, I am a firm believer in co-design and, in whatever area of policy we are developing, involving a range of people who are in that field to assist us in developing and designing policies to make them as effective as possible and to have buy-in.

On the energy side of things, I have introduced a moratorium on onshore petroleum licensing, which will be followed by a legislative ban. We have also launched five-year energy efficiency and resource efficiency capital grants for the business sector. There are two major geothermal demonstrator projects, one of which is here on the Stormont estate and the other at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE).

With more certainty in our trading arrangements, we want to make the most of the dual market access opportunities to support more local businesses to export and to attract inward investment. We have worked with Queen's University and the UK Trade Policy Observatory (TPO) to publish information that helps businesses to better understand the types of products and sectors where dual market access opportunities could potentially be exploited. Rather than saying to everybody to just get into that field where there are opportunities, we are trying to provide some accurate information that points to the areas that will benefit most from development.

Building on that, the Department and Invest NI recently held their first co-design workshop with a range of business representatives here. Working in collaboration with InterTradeIreland and the relevant partners in Britain, Invest NI plans to establish a dedicated team to maximise dual market opportunities. We also intend to make the most of the all-Ireland economy opportunities in that context. Despite the very difficult financial context, we have increased the budgets for InterTradeIreland and Tourism Ireland. The first joint trade mission will be later in the year. That will be led jointly by the Minister from the South and me and will involve agencies from both North and South.

Another issue that I mentioned is a comprehensive employment rights Bill that we intend to launch very soon. That is needed in order to ensure that there is a legal framework to support good jobs. I will launch the consultation on the Bill next week. We have already given the Committee a heads up on that, and I have asked for space to make a statement on it in the Assembly next week. The consultation will invite views on a range of issues including zero-hours contracts, work-life balance and measures to strengthen the role of the trade unions.

On the Department's budget, we received £767 million resource funding and £222 million capital funding. We have agreed draft budget allocations for the Department and its partner organisations. Following equality screening, I will examine the impacts before confirming the final budget allocations. The allocation is less than we requested. It is a small cash increase from last year's position, and I will work constructively within that allocation to maximise the impact of the Department and its partner organisations.

The Department of Finance recently commissioned a June monitoring exercise. We had hoped that there would be — we certainly want there to be — an Executive meeting this week so that we could get June monitoring and one or two other issues resolved. I am told that the meeting may happen in the coming days. An additional £32 million of Treasury-earmarked funding is due to be allocated to the Department in the June monitoring round, which would consist of £16 million to fund ongoing work related to the protocol and the Windsor framework and £16 million to support additional skills and entrepreneurship programmes and to advance international expansion. Those are key aspects of the vision, and you can see that we are very keen for the Executive meeting to happen so that funding from June monitoring can be issued across the Departments, particularly to our own.

We will continue to seek out additional funding sources to advance the actions required to grow the economy. For example, the Department recently secured £17 million from the Shared Prosperity Fund to advance vital work on skills, innovation, research and development and decarbonisation. That funding will flow from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) later in the financial year, in line with the normal budgetary processes.

As the Committee is aware, we have £11.8 million resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) that is still to be allocated. As recently as yesterday, we have been looking at and discussing with officials prioritisation of that budget for skills, but we will have to consider the full range of pressures in the Department. Given that the Department is still attempting to plug the gap left by the non-replacement of EU funding that was used primarily for skills and training purposes and given that there is a vital need to grow the economy to get more people into skills and learning and to upskill people both within work and to access work, we are trying to focus that additional money on that area. As I said, that work is ongoing, and we will be able to update the Committee once some decisions are taken.

That was a fair skip across some of the issues, Chair, without going into great detail on a lot of them. I am sure that we could spend days going through the detail. Of course, we are very happy to come back, and officials regularly brief the Committee on specific policy areas and on proposals that are going through the Department.

As you mentioned in your introduction, Chair, I am delighted that Ian has been appointed permanently to the post of permanent secretary. Having worked with Ian in the Department of Finance, I am very pleased that he is in post. We are bringing significant change through the Department for the Economy. We are supporting and bringing significant change to Invest NI. We are trying to focus on areas that we consider to be vital to growing the economy in the time ahead. Since I came in, we have spent a lot of time engaging with a lot of organisations that have an interest, particularly business organisations. When we have approached them, the plans that we have outlined have been very well received. People are encouraged that we are putting focus on those areas.

We have been very well supported by the Committee's scrutiny work. I am sure that we will get into that discussion. We have a challenging legislative programme, and that requires us to work very closely with the Committee to make sure that the scrutiny functions are afforded the necessary time. I

think that that will be the case across probably all the Committees and Departments. The feedback that I have had is that all the Departments are trying to do more legislation in this three-year window than was previously done in full five-year terms. That will be a challenge for us all in the time ahead, but we will commit to working very closely with you to try to make sure that we all fulfil the necessary functions in relation to doing that.

That is my introduction, Chair, unless you want to make a few opening remarks, Ian?

**Mr Snowden:** No.

**Mr C Murphy:** OK. Ian and I are happy to take any questions. If members ask questions that require specific details that we do not have to hand, we will certainly come back to the Committee in writing.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Perfect. Thank you very much for that comprehensive overview, Minister.

I will start with your legislative programme. The Committee was made aware that the Executive had agreed this year's legislative programme, and we have had sight of some requests from the Department. Could you talk the Committee through when you see the first pieces of legislation coming through?

**Mr C Murphy:** The one that we intend to announce next week and that we have given you a heads-up on and sight of is the good jobs Bill. That is fairly comprehensive: something like 75 questions are going out for consultation on elements that may be included in that Bill. As you and I know, when I am up for questions in the Assembly, there is quite a lot of focus on various aspects that might be included in that. We want to ban the use of zero-hours contracts, and we want to give more support to people who are in employment to make sure that exploitative practices are ruled out. There is a range of areas within that. That is probably the priority. That is a substantial piece of legislation in comparison with much of the legislation that goes through.

As you will be aware, I have been pressing the Executive to take a decision on the renewable heat incentive (RHI). We have managed to get a paper on the agenda for discussion at the Executive, but that needs to be resolved — the court was very clear that that needs to be resolved. My proposition in that paper is to close the scheme down but to do so in a way that is fair to the people who are participating in it fairly. However, we need to get the Executive to take that decision. You will know the pressures that are mounting from Ofgem and the other challenges that will arise if we do not do that, and, if we had taken that decision some years back, we could have avoided the continuing loss of finances available for other schemes. That is another piece of legislation.

We will be looking at the Utility Regulator, and I know that he has had a discussion with the Committee about his powers and the focus on decarbonisation. That could open up significant areas, so we will go out to consultation on that. Given the challenges that we have due to the shortness of the mandate, we will see what comes back in relation to the Utility Regulator piece. If we can do that in this mandate, we will, but, if not — there might be a lot of elements to that — we are keen to do that. We need to have a discussion with the Utility Regulator to see whether that needs to come forward as one piece of legislation, which would be large and require a lot of policy development, or whether there are bits that we can do in advance.

The petroleum licensing one will depend on what comes back in the consultation. We have an insolvency amendment Bill, which is not the hugest piece of legislation, and we will continuously be bringing through various bits.

On the good jobs Bill, we have committed that, if issues arise that could be done fairly quickly, we will bring smaller issues through and get them done. Although it is not ideal over the summer, we want to go to consultation because we have worked the clock back from the end point. You are probably talking about two and a half years from now, with the best will in the world, to when these things would need to be through and on their way to Royal Assent. It is not even to the end of the mandate. I think that the cut-off point for these things is generally about March before an election in, say, May or June. We are working our way back. If bits of the good jobs Bill can be done more quickly, we will certainly look at doing that.

For a Department, it is a significant enough programme of legislation, and I think that that will be the case. I expect that, over the next couple of years, the Assembly will have a lot of sittings and go

through a lot of legislation. That is good; that is what we are here to do, and, obviously, we are here to try to do that well. That is a rough guide. If that changes in any fashion, we will certainly be able to inform you, but the good jobs Bill and RHI will be priorities to get moving very quickly.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** I understand from press coverage that the Carnegie framework will be the framework on which you are framing the good jobs Bill. Is that correct?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes, we have said that. The Labour Relations Agency did a report that looked into that, and we have agreed that we will use that as a kind of framework for a definition of good jobs. One issue is to define what we consider to be a good job, and all the other issues to do with legislation and protections will flow from that. That underpins the Bill, but it is not the totality. There are other things such as employer good job practices that can be promoted, and there is the work that the real living wage people will do on promotion. There are things that we can do legislatively, but there are a lot of things that we can support and do ourselves on the promotion of good conditions in work, good wages and rights for workers.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** In that legislation, do you expect to legislate for the real living wage across Northern Ireland?

**Mr C Murphy:** That power is held in Westminster, but there was the opportunity to transfer it. When I was Finance Minister, we brought that into the Civil Service, and we brought it into public-sector procurement. I think that we will look at the option for legislating, but that will involve transfer. That could impact on the time frame. You co-sponsored the event last week in the Long Gallery that was trying to promote, through Advice NI, more visibility around the real living wage here. There are some things that we can do immediately through our support and promotion, and there are some things that we will do through the good jobs Bill. We will look at the issue of legislating for that, but we have to transfer it as well, and it might take some time.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Minister, I know that you are very keen to grow the number of university places. Obviously, a lot of members have a particular interest in that in different campuses. Are you still ruling out an increase in student fees to help pay for that?

**Mr C Murphy:** We have ruled out increasing student fees. Everybody here will be very familiar with the fact that we are living in a time that is very challenging for a lot of people on the cost of living. I do not think that it is fair to increase fees, and I think that it could be counterproductive. We are trying to get more people into colleges and to look at going to college as an option because that does not necessarily involve all the financial aspects. We are also trying to get more people into universities, but making that less accessible by making it more expensive for people to go could be counterproductive. It is a challenge because, clearly, we do not have the resources that we want to do that, but we are in dialogue with the universities about how we can begin to expand that, how we can try to grow that and other ways that we can come at that to try to grow the numbers. Of course, if we get a better financial outcome with the new Government than what we have currently and have had with the previous Government, we may be in a space to do more in that regard. I do not think that the onus and burden should be put on people who are trying to access university. We need people to be getting more skills, and we need people to be getting more qualifications. We do not need to make it more difficult for people to access those. While we want to create that space and, of course, keep the people who feel that they have to leave here to go to universities — an issue that we debated the other day in the Assembly — we want to be in a position where we can provide that level of support to allow the universities to grow. There are other ways that the universities can look to for how they can grow. We want to support them in doing that too.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** What does that look like? You will recall from that debate that six out of 10 people who apply to Queen's University get a place, so there are not enough places. We send thousands of students to other parts of these islands to pay triple the university prices that they pay here. Clearly, people are willing to pay that to go to university. We are saying that we are not going to increase student fees. What is the solution, then, to increasing student numbers?

**Mr C Murphy:** As we were saying the other day in the debate in the Assembly, there are a number of people who want to leave anyway. They want to go off and study elsewhere, and that is fine. It is about the people who do not — the people who put down their first option to be here and cannot get in and are forced to leave. There are other people whose motivations are not so certain. We also have high numbers of people who come back. There is always a kind of narrative that, out of everybody

who leaves, nobody comes back. That is not the case, but we do not want people to have to leave. Clearly, we want to try to accommodate that cohort, but doing that will be challenging. It will not be done overnight. It will be challenging, given the limited finances available to us.

I do not believe that the solution is to make university more inaccessible for people, because that could bring down the numbers when we are trying to go in the other direction. We have ongoing dialogue with the universities here, and we will continue that in order to look at ways that we can support increased numbers ourselves and to support universities in things that they do to increase numbers.

We will continue to make the argument to the Government for a better financial outcome, out of which we hope to get more funding. Bear in mind that growing the economy is an Executive priority as well. It is not just for the Department. We are a primary element in delivering that, but it is a priority for the Executive. The key challenge in growing the economy has been identified as getting more people to be able to access skills and learning. We will make a very strong argument for matching that priority with any increase in the resource available to us.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Turning to tourism, the Committee expected to see a tourism action plan, but, obviously, that did not come forward, following feedback on the tourism strategy that was published when Ministers were not in office. I note, Minister, that you said that you will chair a meeting of the new tourism partnership board. Have you appointed members to the board now?

**Mr C Murphy:** We have appointed the chair. We will meet the chair tomorrow. You are right: there was a tourism strategy out there before I took up office. The Department has a lot of strategies. I have always said that, had we five years, we could go back and start to look at those to see whether we could redo some of them. There was a lot of welcoming of some elements of the strategy, and there were criticisms of some other elements. The best way to bring it forward is not to go back to redesign and redraw the strategy, because we do not have time, but to bring in a co-design group and work out what implementing those elements of the strategy that are very good looks like.

Have the invitations to the board members gone out?

**Mr Snowden:** Yes.

**Mr C Murphy:** The board intends to meet over the next short period.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Who is the chair?

**Mr C Murphy:** I did not want to announce it here, in case people have not heard. Stephen McNally is the chair. We will meet him tomorrow. There are other members —.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Forgive my ignorance, Minister, but who is Stephen McNally?

**Mr C Murphy:** He is —.

**Mr Snowden:** My mind has gone completely blank; I am terribly sorry. Hold on.

**Mr C Murphy:** He is in the tourism industry.

**Mr Snowden:** He is the manager of —.

**Mr C Murphy:** We were being a bit circumspect about saying who the chair was, in case it had not been made public. Our intention is to meet him tomorrow. The members are ready to go, and we will get it up and running very soon.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** How many members will be on the board?

**Mr Snowden:** It is quite an extensive group. Over a dozen people have agreed to participate in it from across all parts of the tourism industry here, including hoteliers.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Are there fewer than 20 members?

**Mr Snowden:** I do not have the exact number, but it is less than 20.

**Mr C Murphy:** We are trying to make sure that all the various sectors have input into the board. We have people from the tourism side of things, but we are also looking at hospitality. We are looking at people across a broad range of provision.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** *[Inaudible.]* Representatives from Hospitality Ulster came to Committee a couple of weeks ago. They raised concerns that, in their view, they had not been included in a number of the bodies. Will Hospitality Ulster be represented on the board?

**Mr C Murphy:** That is our intention. I met Hospitality Ulster representatives a number of weeks ago, and they raised some of the same issues. We said that we would make sure that they had a voice at that table.

**Mr Snowden:** Mr McNally is from SERLS Hospitality Limited. It is a business that operates in the tourism sector.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Can you inform the Committee of any other members?

**Mr Snowden:** Yes, we will provide you with a list.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Can you do that now?

**Mr Snowden:** No, not right now. I can provide the list, but I do not have it to hand.

**Mr C Murphy:** We will correspond with you on that. There is no sense of anyone being excluded. We want it to be as inclusive as possible, because, as I said, co-design is about bringing all people in that area to work with us on delivery. Some people who were critical of the tourism strategy felt that there were gaps in certain areas that had not been addressed. We need to make sure that we try to fill those.

There is also a sense that, over the years, the Department might not have treated the strategy with the level of importance that it merits. In my view, it certainly merits being treated as important. We are trying to put particular emphasis on it to make sure that people recognise that it is an important issue for the Department and that their views will be respected. The strategy will reflect what we, collectively, want to see coming out of it.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Minister, your Department is keen to promote dual market access. We have been back for six months now. In that time, what has been the biggest investment or job creation as a result of that dual market access?

**Mr C Murphy:** Bear in mind that the exact terms of that — there is still some fluidity in that regard — were not made clear until the start of this year. Investment decisions are not taken over the space of a week or two weeks. There has certainly been a significant degree of investment — Invest NI has reported it — from not just the United States or the North American market but the European market. People who have an interest want to know, "What does this look like? OK, we have access to the British markets and the European markets. That looks interesting, but what does it actually mean? What does it mean for the precise business that we are in?". They know that there are variations, depending on the business.

The first piece of work was to conduct research and say, "These are the sectors that would benefit the most". We wanted to turn that into a proposition that Invest NI would then take on the road in, in the first instance, Europe. When we talked to people in the United States in March, we said, "Yes, the dual access issues now have more clarity". People then wanted to know exactly what that meant. The benefit from all of that is that people are very interested in the proposition. It is not just about investment here; companies that are here want to get into the export market to Europe and make sure that east-west trade is working correctly as well. The sense that Invest NI and InterTradeIreland have is of a very significant level of interest from which there is the potential for investments. Equally, we want a focus on the potential for our indigenous businesses to grow so that they can exploit that opportunity.



That is where we are with that. It is about getting people detailed information and developing that proposition. I was due to go to Europe with Invest NI and InterTradeIreland in May, but I was off work, and that was postponed. They have been out and used our offices to promote dual access and get a dialogue going with potential investors. We also want them, through their work, to bring that proposition to local businesses so that they understand it. As you will know, it is complex. The exact detail of how it works is not easily understood, so we need to make sure that the general sense of it being largely resolved is turned into a valuable proposition that we can put to people. That is the work that has been going on, and it is ready to go. I think, certainly from my conversations with Invest and InterTradeIreland, that that will yield results for us in the time ahead.

**Mr Snowden:** Discussions with businesses indicated that part of the difficulty is that a lot of the dual market access discussion is incredibly technical and complicated. We need to turn that information into something that is easily communicable to and understandable by the business community. Effectively, it wants to know, "What does it mean for me? What do I need to do? How can I make this work?". We need to turn a lot of that complex technical and regulatory stuff into something useful that they can work with. That came out quite strongly from our engagement with Invest NI and businesses over the past couple of months. We are working on that.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** I have two final points. The first is about air connectivity. I read part of the report that the Department commissioned York Aviation to do. What is the state of play with that in the Department? We had a review of air connectivity here in Northern Ireland. The Department already supports a number of air routes and airports. What was your takeaway from that report, Minister?

**Mr C Murphy:** I will let Ian go into the detail. You are right about the broad context. We live on an island, so air connectivity is vital to our economic development. We give a particular level of support to City of Derry Airport because it is a vital component of the connectivity of the north-west region. We had discussions recently with the Department for Infrastructure. The difficulty with airports is that they have always fallen between two stools. We learned that lesson during COVID when we were trying to provide support to them and see who was responsible for that. We have an agreement with the Department for Infrastructure that we will largely take responsibility for City of Derry Airport, which was a source of ongoing ping-pong at times between the Departments. It is our intention to take on that responsibility and try to find the resources to support that, and we have communicated that to the airport. York Aviation reported the necessity of maintaining that line. We have raised in dialogue with Dublin the issue of support for some of the public service routes. We also raised the issue of support with Whitehall.

That is the broad context. The airports are vital. It was vital to keep them open when COVID was happening. They are back with a strong connection to the economy in particular but also to tourism and investment.

**Mr Snowden:** The objective is to use air connectivity to promote foreign direct investment and inbound tourism. When we are looking at potential routes that could be developed, the focus is on those two issues.

We also have to be mindful of the net zero and climate change obligations that all of government works under at the minute. In the tourism space, rather than looking further afield, North America and Europe are our areas of focus. Those are shorter flights with less environmental impact, so we will focus on what the tourism benefits of a particular route might be.

As the Minister said, we are working with the Department for Infrastructure on bringing together responsibility for airports and air connectivity so that it is easier for the airports to know whom to deal with. However, it is still a complicated regulatory environment in which quite a lot of this stuff is devolved to us. That said, quite a lot is reserved to Westminster, so we have to keep close relationships with the Department for Transport around, for example, public service obligation routes.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** The report is now done. What are the next steps?

**Mr Snowden:** It will be published after the general election next week.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** So, we have a published report. What do we do then?

**Mr Snowden:** We will then engage with the airports and tour operators to see what can be reasonably achieved within the resources that we have available. I am sure that the Committee will be aware that there is a budgetary impact on the Department from the air passenger duty levy. We do not get any benefit from that at the minute, so we need to look at that.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Have you been speaking to Mr O'Toole? At every weekly meeting of the Finance Committee, he loves to remind me that we spend £2.5 million a year on that levy *[Laughter.]*

**Mr C Murphy:** I get that it is sitting there. The fact is that, when we go to the States, the question of a Belfast route is frequently asked, which surprises me a little, given that this is not a big island. When people come into Dublin, they are only one or two hours away from parts of the North, but people who would consider it beneficial if they could fly directly to Belfast still raise the question.

The difficulty is finding a carrier that can make it work. If we were to forgo that levy and say, "Well, that's off the table", it might make that even more of a challenge. I get people asking, "Why are you continuing to hold that?". That connectivity is regularly raised with us, in the United States in particular.

As Ian said, the report will be published, and we will engage, but we are also trying to clear a little of the clutter between Departments here to make contact easier for people when they come back to engage. We are trying to take more of the responsibility into the Department for the Economy. Clearly, there are infrastructure issues with airports, travel and transport, but a lot of the importance of our airports for us relates to the economy. We are trying to get our houses a bit more in order, so that, when it comes to the outworking of that report, we are in a better space to engage with it.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** The public-sector transformation board has requested proposals from each Department. Has the Department for the Economy submitted proposals to the transformation board?

**Mr Snowden:** We submitted two.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** OK.

**Mr Snowden:** One was in relation to increasing the usage of apprenticeships in the public sector in Northern Ireland. Currently, of 200,000 public-sector employees, only 200 are apprentices. As you are probably aware, lots of parts of the public sector have difficulties with recruitment and retention.

Apprenticeship is a route that might help and, therefore, save money, because it provides a route for people who are in part of the system to progress. It might help, for example, care assistants in Health and Social Care to progress to become nurses, or classroom assistants to progress to become teachers. There are skills shortages in large areas of the public sector, so we need to find some way of making ourselves an attractive employer — being able to recruit and retain people — in competition with the private sector. The difficulties with that are about pay.

The second proposal is about transforming the system for post-19 provision for young people with special educational needs. Last week, the Minister met Alma White, who recently campaigned on that issue. We engaged with Mrs White on that, and there is an issue: Northern Ireland is falling short in comparison with other parts of the UK. There is an economic benefit from improving provision, because people in Mrs White's position are often forced to leave their job, which has a significant impact on our economic inactivity rates. Equally, a number of young people with particular special needs or disabilities could have effective and productive careers if they were given the right support post 19. We are looking at those proposals as two ways of dealing with economic problems and improving the quality of provision for a vulnerable group in society.

**Mr C Murphy:** The second one will involve cross-departmental work. As Ian said, we have made our bid for what we would like to do, but it will involve work with other Ministers, which we are keen to start.

**Mr Snowden:** There was not enough time to work up a third proposal to submit within the time frame this time, but we are also looking at a proposition to digitalise the work of the Insolvency Service and the redundancy payments service, which use manual, paper-based processes. That would be a significant efficiency improvement.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** It sounds like an exciting task, but it is an important one. Thank you very much for that.

**Mr Middleton:** Thanks, Minister and Ian, for what you have said so far. I have a couple of questions, the first of which is about one of the most pressing issues in my constituency: support for businesses. Restaurants and the hospitality sector face pressure from rates, energy bills and all those costs. I listened carefully to you, Minister, when you talked about the position of students. You talked about not increasing fees and the need to protect them from rising costs. Unfortunately, it appears that that does not apply to the business community or those in the hospitality sector.

What do you plan to do over the remaining years of the mandate to make a real difference? I appreciate that not all the responsibility lies with you, but has that been raised in the Executive? Have you spoken to your party colleague the Finance Minister about measures that she could bring forward to address the real need that is affecting and, effectively, closing businesses in my constituency?

**Mr C Murphy:** A range of issues affects hospitality and all our retail and other businesses, some of which are beyond our control, such as the cost of energy and the cost of doing business. The more we can advance our renewables, the better, because, if we achieve the self-sufficiency that leads to stability in energy costs, we will not be subject to fluctuations, as we have been over the past number of years. People were just coming out of COVID, with all the challenges that that brought, and then, suddenly, we had the war in Ukraine — it was completely outside our ability to control any of that — and the huge hike in energy costs. That was clearly a challenge too far for a lot of businesses. We have little influence on those outside impacts, although, in the longer term, if we achieve our ambition of sustainable renewable energy on this island, we will have a stable and, hopefully, lower energy price so that those fluctuations do not become a challenge.

Rates and VAT are the two things that I was primarily asked about when I was in the Finance role. I have no doubt that Caoimhe Archibald will continue to follow through on those matters. VAT on hospitality here is much higher here than it is in the South, and that presents a significant challenge. When we made that case to Treasury a number of times, we did not get much of a response, but I know that the Finance Minister will follow through with the incoming Government to see whether there is a better option. Interestingly, the issue has been raised in the South, where a lower VAT rate is being described as too high and a barrier to hospitality and tourism. There is a balance with rates, and Ian will know about that. We have both worn that hat: he was head of Land and Property Services (LPS), and I was the Finance Minister. We reduced the rates on commercial properties by 18%. We very quickly moved into the COVID period and a complete rates holiday, and the impact of the reduction was almost lost, but rates stayed frozen at that level.

Rates bring in about 10% of our income. As I said in an answer to a question for oral answer on Monday, the balance is that, if rates are reduced to support businesses, the fund for other public services is reduced. It is a challenge for the Finance Minister, and I have no doubt that she is listening very carefully to the arguments being made on the matter.

To be proactive, we can provide support grants for businesses that are trying to use energy more efficiently, and Invest NI is handling some of that support. We can attract more tourism, and we are working on a tourism plan to try to attract more custom into the area. If we can improve the number of good jobs, there will be more salaries and more disposable income. Those are all longer-term projects to try to improve the marketing and our attractiveness to visitors to make sure that businesses benefit.

Some 70% of the tourism and visitor hospitality sector is outside Belfast, so there is a regional balance. We need to make sure that it is supported by all the work that we do in the Department to encourage more business, economic growth, better jobs and more disposable income. Those measures support hospitality, tourism, retail and other businesses.

It is a challenging time, because there are certain factors beyond our control, and we recognise that. The difficulty is that turning off some of the levers reduces the funding available for public services.

**Mr Middleton:** Thanks, Minister. It is an issue that we will come back to, but I hope that it is raised in the Executive and taken forward as a matter of urgency.

My next question is about the reform of Invest NI and the recommendations from the Lyons review. In your introductory remarks, you mentioned the stronger role for subregional plans. I appreciate that Invest NI will lead on its own remits, but will it have targets? Legislation has been mentioned, and we

have only three years left in the mandate, but will subregional targets be a key focus for Invest NI to incentivise investment across Northern Ireland?

**Mr C Murphy:** We have been engaging with Invest since I came into office, particularly over the last couple of weeks. Invest is undergoing transformation — the implementation of the report — and the Department is supporting that. The Department has recommendations to pick up as well, and it is moving forward. I am satisfied that the thrust of responding to the report appropriately is on course.

The Department has asked Invest to refocus its regional presence and what it does regionally. There has been a tendency for the Department to say to regions, "This is your plan. This is what is going to happen to you. This is what we have decided your target is". We are trying to give more of a voice to the area and to provide more support where required. The two elements that we have been discussing recently are the role of Invest in local areas and the support that we can give to others to ensure that there is capacity to develop economic strategies, ideas and propositions for each area. The Department has been looking at how we can use the general support that Invest provides to encourage those considering investment to go into areas where they have not been before: deprived areas or areas with low levels of previous investment. The Department has been looking at how to use the incentives that Invest NI provides to attract investments that are regionally balanced. The Department has provided a clear strategic focus across four areas, and that applies to Invest as well. Invest is orientating its plans to support good jobs. If it is to incentivise somebody to come in, it will be around the priorities of good jobs, regional balance, net zero and productivity. Those will become elements of consideration in how we incentivise inward investment and support local, indigenous businesses. We will want to make sure that those issues are reflected in the levels of support that Invest offers.

**Mr Middleton:** Finally, on the university at Magee, the task force has met a couple of times. We were told that the initial report would be completed by the end of the summer. Is that still on target? Have you heard from the task force?

In respect of your engagement, how regularly do you keep in touch with the work that is ongoing? When the report comes out, ultimately, it is likely that finance will be required. Are you having conversations with the Finance Minister about making money available to deliver on the recommendations that will come forward?

**Mr C Murphy:** From memory, the report was due before the end of the year rather than the end of the summer, but it will come in the next number of months, and we are now into the summer. We are in very regular contact with the task force. A departmental official sits on it to make sure that the Department is fully aware of the issues. As a matter of fact, an issue around transport that came from it was raised at the Executive.

There will be issues that the task force identifies that are not the remit of the Department for the Economy. We have already raised that issue around transport and the need for public transport to support the expansion of student numbers. We raised that at the Executive with the Minister for Infrastructure to alert him and others to some of the issues that were raised.

In respect of support, we have said that we will identify in future budgeting the elements that are required. We are already providing support for the expansion of Magee. There was support for increasing numbers for this year's intake. We will make the argument for it, because bear in mind that the expansion of Magee is a New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment. It falls largely to the Department for the Economy to deliver on that, but it is not exclusive to us.

It is an NDNA commitment, which means that it is a commitment for the Executive. We will continue to make the argument with the Finance Minister. She is also invested in the expansion of Magee. We will make an argument for resource for that, but we have committed to providing the resources that are identified in the report when it is produced.

**Mr Middleton:** I have the terms of reference here for the task force, and there is a clear commitment in those that there would be a report by the end of the summer and an action plan presented to you before the end of the year. It is important that it is addressed, because there are people out there who believe that this was an exercise in kicking the can down the road. I hope that the report will address those concerns and point to action coming forward as opposed to a can-kicking exercise. Thanks, Minister. We look forward to hearing from you again in the near future.

**Mr C Murphy:** It could be me mixing up what is a report and what is an implementation plan. The task force could well be on target. I understand the scepticism of people in the north-west, and Derry in particular, after many years of false promises around Magee.

I think that the task force group is off to a good start. There was a clear recognition in Derry that it was not simply about delivering more courses and more students; it is a whole-city and whole-region approach to try to support the expansion of Magee. That is the focus.

We have a very clear focus and a very clear commitment to supporting what comes out of the implementation plan. I continually remind the Executive that it is an Executive priority project, and it is to be delivered. Our focus is there.

I get where the scepticism comes from. I get that people want to see things happening. There already is an increase in numbers, and we want to see a further increase to give people more faith in the process, but we are off to a decent start.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** In keeping with that theme, I will move on to Sinéad.

**Mr C Murphy:** Has he stolen your thunder?

**Ms McLaughlin:** To expand on that, it is my understanding from the chair of the task force that he wants to have the report out earlier rather than later, because he is looking forward to the next financial year and wants to give plenty of time for the Department to put the funds towards it. There is a push in the task force to report early.

**Mr C Murphy:** We will not discourage it from reporting early and articulating its demands. We are very happy to receive the task force's report whenever it is ready to deliver it.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Just on that, money has been set aside in the Budget for 2024-25. Do you know the new numbers for the intake in September? What disciplines and courses are they doing? Are they additional to the maximum student number (MASN), or are the new students within the existing MASN provision for Northern Ireland? Are they taking existing courses or new courses?

**Mr C Murphy:** We have been told that the numbers are the additional numbers that we had sought. I do not have the exact course-by-course breakdown. There is an argument that Magee can exceed MASN, and we will support it to do that. We have agreed that. Those numbers are in place. I did not have the totality of them when you asked that question the other day. There will be an announcement in the very near future about the courses that will be available and the spread of those numbers. We are content, however, that they will be delivered for the incoming academic year.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Do you have a ballpark figure?

**Mr C Murphy:** I think that it is the 500 that was suggested, yes.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Does that include the oversubscribed MASN from the previous academic year?

**Mr C Murphy:** No, this —.

**Ms McLaughlin:** It was oversubscribed, but it got a bye ball for that.

**Mr Snowden:** Yes.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Those are banked, so this is an additionality. This is a new count.

**Mr Snowden:** Yes.

**Ms McLaughlin:** OK.

**Mr C Murphy:** The university will need to announce that itself. It will have the detail of the numbers for each discipline or course that is available.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Are all the numbers in Magee?

**Mr Snowden:** Yes.

**Ms McLaughlin:** OK. We had a briefing last week from Dr Lisa Wilson on the issue of quality jobs and the metrics and data in and around that. She talked about the findings of a survey that was carried out by University College Dublin (UCD) on working in Ireland. It was quite clear that, for quality jobs, where you lived mattered. In the border counties, there are significant disparities in the quality of jobs.

When it comes to regional balance, what kind of metrics and data collection and research are you engaged in, so that we have the data that will, I suppose, guide you towards legislation in the form of a good jobs Bill? Unless we know the depth of the issue, we cannot really make sure that the legislation will be transformational in delivering good jobs.

**Mr C Murphy:** There is significant data already, which we have tapped into. Lisa Wilson is an academic whose job it is to produce and analyse data on the issue. We already know that the level of wages in the north-west is much lower and that the level of unemployment there is higher. Those figures are already there. That is an assessment of where the good jobs are going, or where the prioritisation of good jobs needs to be.

Good jobs are about much more than just wages. There is a whole range of factors, and that is why we have looked at the Carnegie recommendations around the definition of good jobs. That data is there, and we will continue to gather data from economic research sources in order to ensure that any legislation that is brought forward has a good empirical evidence base to support it. We will continue to do that. Lisa Wilson has been brought in as an outside expert to assist the Department. There is quite a lot of expertise in the Department, and quite a lot of research goes on in various economic and academic institutes to provide data for all of that. We will use all the data that is available to us to make sure that we have the most effective legislation for good jobs.

That data also informs regional balance, and all of those things overlap. Our four priorities are interlinked. The four people who have come in to assist us are constantly having a circular dialogue about how those priorities work. The Department has a dialogue across all of its component parts as to how they are interlinked. Those will be the measurements of improvement in regional balance and good jobs: when you see the existing data and how we try to change and improve on that.

**Ms McLaughlin:** When we discussed it with Lisa, I asked whether a similar survey should be carried out here, and she said yes, because metrics really matter in this whole area, so —

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes.

**Ms McLaughlin:** — will your Department commit to having that sort of in-depth survey?

**Mr C Murphy:** Absolutely. It was not that there was not the facility to do that in the Department; there is plenty of research capability in the Department and a lot of research capability that is available to it. I constantly get reports on various pieces of research and data and things that support what we do so that we can make sure that it is as informed as possible. Lisa brings that outside perspective, which is a bit more holistic, and the Department has very much welcomed it. That perspective keeps a clear focus on data relating to good jobs, which is the research area that she comes from and the reason why she was asked to assist us.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I will go back to what Gary said about Invest NI and incentives. What kinds of incentives are you talking about to encourage investors to go to the places where those good jobs potentially need to go?

**Mr C Murphy:** All business agencies offer incentives. Most business agencies tailor incentivisation to the priorities that are in their particular economy. That has not necessarily always been the case with Invest NI. For many years, there was a recognition in Programmes for Government of the fact that there was a need for regional balance. The levers that are available to try to effect a change were not necessarily being used, and that is what we have tried to do.

Invest NI offers financial incentives for people to invest here and for people to grow. We are looking at land banks: where does Invest NI have land and where does it not have land? If we identify significant

areas of less growth but Invest NI does not have any land in those areas, how will we encourage growth? Invest NI is looking at areas of land. It provides a range of financial supports for businesses, such as start-up support, training support and employment support. If we say that the priorities of the Department and now of Invest NI are regional balance, good jobs, productivity and net zero, those can be built into the incentivisation so that, when a company comes here, you can say, "To be honest, we're offering support, and would like you to consider setting up in this area?". We have to have land there, and that is the challenge, because there are areas across the North where economic activity is happening and Invest NI does not own a blade of grass on them. If people look to invest in those areas and build more factories there, they have to look in other places. Some of those levers are straightforward things that can be used to do that, but they are tools that were available but had just not been used because no direction had been given to use them in a particular way.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Minister, I appreciate what you are saying, but a great deal of your vision is overlapping. Also, if regional balance is to be delivered, other Departments, such as the Department for Infrastructure, the Department for Communities and the Department of Health, need to support you. How does your vision cross all Departments? How can you deliver on that? How can you ensure, for example, that the Health Minister delivers regional balance in his portfolio?

**Mr C Murphy:** The Executive have an overarching priority to grow the economy. The areas where there is the most potential to grow the economy are those where there is the least economic activity, because you have almost full employment, so there is significant potential to grow the economy outside Belfast, in the west and the border regions. Invest NI is talking to Northern Ireland Water, for instance, about the fact that, if we develop shovel-ready facilities, we will need services to connect to them. It is already talking to people about how land can support regional balance. We will continue to talk to all the Departments when it is identified that we could do more work. I am not sure what the Department of Health could do, but the Departments for Infrastructure and Communities and other Departments are certainly involved in that work, and we will continue to make the argument that growing the economy is a priority for the Executive and that the areas with the most potential for growth are those where economic inactivity is highest. The big challenge that we have is getting people and skills, and the biggest pool of people available to us and who are not being used are those who are economically inactive, so that is where we have to look.

The Programme for Government has consistently had a piece about addressing regional imbalance. Infrastructure does that with the roads, including the A6 and the A5, as well as with the rail line into Derry and with Northern Ireland Water and where it is working to allow business to develop. We cannot have one part of government tripping up the ambitions of the entire Executive. We will be in dialogue with each Department as that issue arises with us, and I constantly repeat the refrain that the Executive priorities are regional balance and growing the economy. Those two things have to be delivered collectively.

**Ms McLaughlin:** You appreciate that regional balance has been, as you said, in the Programme for Government for many years and has not happened, so it needs a step change.

**Mr C Murphy:** Bear in mind that it has happened to a certain extent. We are not saying that nothing has happened. The A6 has been many years in development.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Levels of deprivation in Derry are greater now than they were back —.

**Mr C Murphy:** The economic challenges across the board are greater now, but, where regional balance is concerned, the A5 has been held up due not to the Executive's reluctance to do it but to legal issues and challenges. The A6 has now been completed all the way to Drumahoe, and there is more work to be done at the end of it. The railway line into Derry has been completed. The support for Derry airport has been reinforced time and time again. Financial propositions have gone to the Executive and have been supported. That has been delivered in certain areas, but it is not enough, and there are other tools that we can use to effect that. That is what we in the Department for the Economy are trying to do.

**Ms McLaughlin:** You talked about developing a workforce for childcare, which is really important. Again, it is about ensuring that there is a quality job for those who work in that industry. What engagement do you have with the childcare task force? Are you providing papers, documents and support?

**Mr C Murphy:** We are providing officials, because the Department has the experience. Ian can maybe give more detail on that. Depending on the exact pilot, the assumption is that part of it will be about investing in and supporting childcare provision. That will involve finances, which is not necessarily in the experience of the Department of Education. It has childcare policy and that aspect of it, and we have the business side of it. That is where we provide the support, and we will be willing and ready to provide any other supports that are required. Maybe Ian can give you some detail.

**Mr Snowden:** When the task force was established earlier in the year, we pulled together a group of officials who had a background in developing and designing grant funding schemes in the Department of Finance as well as in our Department and Invest NI. Those people are now working with the Department of Education to help it to develop the financial support mechanisms that they were discussing. A member of staff from Invest NI is working with the Department of Education two days a week to help it deliver this, and we have people in the skills group in the Department who are looking at the skills issues that are associated with childcare, including the barriers that come about from getting staff into work. One of the difficulties that other jurisdictions had, whether that is the Republic or in Britain, when they introduced childcare schemes was that the providers were not able to respond to the increased demand because the staff were not available. In attempting to deal with those issues downstream, we are looking at skills. That sort of ties into your previous comment about working jointly with other Departments. We find that, if we can increase the pace at which people are trained and provide the skills programmes or the apprenticeships that will allow them to come forward, we run into a bit of a barrier, which is the accreditation and registration of those people with social services. We need to work jointly with them to make sure that we do not deal with one problem only to run into another bottleneck further downstream. That is the work that we are engaging with. It is pretty proactive and pretty intensive. The response that I am getting from the staff who are engaged in it is that they are starting to see a lot more progress being made and a more significant impact on the work that is being developed. They are fairly confident that they will get a good result.

**Ms McLaughlin:** You should also be mindful of workforce development for a particular sector of early years, and that is those who work in the Irish medium in the childcare sector. They are really struggling with workforce development, and they need the Department for the Economy's support. That is not an Education piece of work. It can be a joint piece, but it is workforce development, so you should be mindful when seeing what support can be provided.

**Mr C Murphy:** We had the conversation with the skills people yesterday on the additional money that we spoke about at the start and putting that into skills and around those areas. One of the focuses was on the childcare side to make sure that we have the skills and training. Accessibility, as Ian reminded us, is an issue, because we could do all that and then run into a bottleneck with accreditation. We will certainly feed in that issue on language support.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Thank you, Sinéad. In keeping with the theme of the north-west, Pádraig is next.

**Mr Delargy:** I will stay with the north-west theme. In recent months, I have heard and seen from so many businesses, particularly those around the Magee campus, a belief for the first time ever that we can deliver that real change. It is really positive. A lot has been achieved since we came back in February. I see ambition, growth and excitement that I have not seen before in local businesses and sectors.

I want to raise three areas today: the Magee campus; the SKILL UP programme; and the night-time economy. I will turn to the Magee campus first. Conor, you have already given a commitment on it. There has been a real ambition and opportunity for growth. I am in regular contact, as you know, with representatives from the Magee campus. They are excited to see what can change and what can happen. I appreciate that there has already been a bit of engagement with Gary and Sinéad on this matter, but will you update us on where things are with the task force and how things will go forward in the next 18 or 24 months?

**Mr C Murphy:** As you know, we brought in a very good chair and deputy chair. That was partly because they are very skilled at what they do and are passionate about developing the north-west and the academic institution that is there. It was also to give confidence to people, because they are not people who would be involved were it not a serious project. It is a serious project, and they believe that to be the case.



The university is on board. It has always emphasised its commitment to the project. We want to support the university and help it to deliver it. There is, obviously, departmental support as well. We commissioned administrative support from the Department to make sure that the university has the necessary support. Quite often, if you do not have that in place, these things can end up being talking shops. You need administrative support, so we provided that resource to the task force to make sure that it can do its work and that it is supported in doing so. The university has committed its facilities and other resource support to the project as well.

That is the start that we wanted. The task force needs to get down and identify the short-, medium- and long-term issues that we have. It knows that the target is 10,000 students, which NDNA committed to. We want the task force to identify how that can be done by taking a whole-city, whole-region and whole-Executive approach and what is required for that. Some requests have already filtered through from the task force to look in the immediate term at things like public transport, which we then raised with the appropriate Departments. We will continue to do that.

We very much look forward to getting the report and the implementation plan from the task force. As I said, we will align our budgets to try to match what it asks for, and we will argue for money to do that. We have already made progress not just this year but over the past number of years on the graduate-entry medical school and some of the other improvements that have been done there. We are starting to see the numbers increase, and we want that to continue at pace. That is the ambition.

The task force has three years until the end of the mandate to do what I have asked it to do. I hope that, when the mandate has run its course, the project will be well developed and well on track to achieve what it needs to achieve. The work that the task force is doing will continue in some shape or form beyond this mandate to make sure that we deliver on all of it. I want to set a course that puts us very firmly on track to achieve a target that was talked about and agreed but never really developed in the way that it should have been. There were some good developments prior to my coming into office, such as the medical school and other growth in the campus, but we need to see a step up to meet our ambition for all that.

**Mr Delargy:** Definitely. It has been very positive. The range and diversity of skills among the task force members and its leadership are really impressive. You touched on something that has been key: in the past, the Magee campus has always been seen as just an issue for Derry. Yes, there are huge benefits for Derry, but the Department and Executive are looking at it now as an approach across our whole region and the whole of Ireland, and that is vital to seeing the work moving forward.

To touch on the second point, I know that the task force has representation from further education as well. That is an imperative, because it ties in that whole lifelong learning and accessibility piece, particularly now that we are looking at access courses and, I suppose, that broader swathe of education right across the board.

The North West Regional College has been very involved in the SKILL UP programme. There are great programmes there and in other colleges whose representatives I have met. Will you provide an update on that, please?

**Mr C Murphy:** Your broad point is about the role of colleges in all this. Magee is seen as the central catalyst in the north-west, but the bigger, and perhaps equally exciting, piece is the linkages between the colleges and Letterkenny. That is of significant interest to the Government in Dublin as well. I have had conversations with the Department there and will continue to do that, so there is a broader context to think about.

That feeds into the necessary skills agenda that is critical for economic growth. The funding of the SKILL UP project did not necessarily come from the Department but through the NIO fund, and that has come to an end. All the feedback that we have had on it says that it has been a very popular programme. It was very accessible and seems to have worked well.

The evaluation of it will be completed in the next week. We are looking at an additional amount of money that the Department has, with an emphasis on skills, while considering the other very pressing issues that the Department has to deal with. However, there has been strongly positive feedback on SKILL UP. We will want to look at that again, and we are looking at how we spend that bit of additional money on skills in the near term. That evaluation is coming in the next few days — 30 June, I think that it is.

**Mr Snowden:** By the end of the week, yes. We should have it finished, and then we can get the advice to the Minister on it.

In relation to some of the other things that are being discussed, the results of those who took part in the SKILL UP programme — this is not prejudging what the evaluation will say — are strongly skewed towards rural areas and areas west of the Bann, so it is a strong intervention in terms of regional balance. Also, the majority of those who were involved were over the age of 25. That is about skilling up the existing workforce and helping people to move on to higher-quality jobs, so it was an important intervention for that group.

**Mr Delargy:** I totally agree. What we have been hearing in Foyle, even anecdotally, is exactly that. It is about people who are in a job who maybe do not have time to do a full-time course or the opportunity or finances to commit to that. The programme has been a real opportunity for them to upskill or reskill and to go on to sectors and spheres that maybe they would never have imagined themselves in. It is a really good programme, and it is positive to hear that the Department is looking at it.

The Committee had a really useful presentation last week or the week before from Hospitality Ulster on the night-time economy, which is imperative for our entire economy — *[Inaudible.] [Long pause.]*

**The Committee Clerk:** Sorry about this, members. Just bear with us. You can talk among yourselves for a minute. *[Laughter.]* This might take a little while to come back. He was in mid flow as well. I cannot believe it.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** How much did the SKILL UP programme cost the Department?

**Mr Snowden:** The total cost of the previous iteration was £8 million.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** We also have £11 million unallocated in addition to SKILL UP funding.

**Mr Snowden:** There are a number of pressures —

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Of course.

**Mr Snowden:** — so the Minister will have to make prioritisation decisions.

**Mr C Murphy:** The feedback on SKILL UP has been very positive, and, as Ian said, the programme met a number of our objectives very well. However, we also want to look at the childcare issues, and there are a range of pressing priorities in relation to that. Obviously, the colleges are very much up for collaboration on delivery.

You mentioned the night-time economy, Pádraig, so before you get lost again, let me tell you that that is clearly not work for any single Department. It will require cross-departmental work. We have responsibility for the economy, and Communities has responsibility for streetscapes. The high street task force is in TEO. Infrastructure also has a responsibility, because one of the key issues that is mentioned to us in the context of the night-time economy is the availability of transport in and out of Belfast, whether it is taxis, bus services or train services. A key consideration in the context of the night-time economy is people returning home safely, particularly women.

We have the development of having a night-time czar in Belfast, and I think that the Department is meeting him this morning to have a conversation about that. The broad lessons that can be pulled together from how we support that role are applicable in all towns and cities across the North. I expect that we will see much more dialogue about that, but it requires collaborative work between the Departments. I keep saying that, since I came into this Executive, I have seen more evidence of cross-departmental collaborative work than I have seen in previous Executives. Quite often, that does not get any focus or attention from the media, because it is more interesting if people are knocking lamps out of each other rather than working together, but there is a significant level of cross-departmental collaboration. Part of that is born out of the fact that we do not have the resources that we need, and if we do not pool those resources in some instances, we will not get them to stretch as far as we need them to. However, it is also born out of a genuine desire to work together to get better outcomes, so we will continue to work in that vein on the night-time economy, as we are already doing on a range of other issues.

**Mr Delargy:** Thank you. I think that Gary and I keep getting kicked out of the free Zoom today. That work is essential, and it is cross-departmental stuff. I got cut off in the middle of talking about the night-time economy and the cross-departmental stuff being essential to that.

My last point is on the SKILL UP programme and the all-Ireland working. The Committee agreed a number of weeks ago to invite both Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT). That is really positive. I know that the Department is already working on that and on that all-Ireland space, because, particularly when we are looking at regional balance, we are looking at rural areas. There is a massive opportunity for people from Fermanagh to go to the institute in Sligo. That is a massive area for growth, and it really touches on all the priorities that the Department is working on. It has been a really positive first four months, and, to emphasise, that is what we have been hearing very clearly in Derry. Long may it continue.

**Mr C Murphy:** There are already very strong linkages between the colleges and the universities across Ireland, and some of the issues that we experienced with disadvantage in the border areas are the same on the other side of the border. Peripherality from the centre causes a lot of that. There are opportunities for working together and opportunities for support from things like the Shared Island Fund, which is very keen to do work in the border areas and in the north-west in particular. That encourages us to continue to work together on skills and educational output. There are significant opportunities for not only changing the dial in those areas but getting increased support, particularly from the Shared Island Fund.

**Mr Honeyford:** Thank you, Minister and Ian, for coming in. I thank you for what you said about Alma White. If ever there is a story of a parent with a mission to deliver change, she is it. It is really encouraging to hear that that change will be made.

I was looking at the Labour Party's plan — I am expecting the Labour Party to win next week — to kick-start economic growth, and the levers that it talks about are effectively all here. The only different one is that Labour said that tax will not increase beyond 25%, but all the rest are here but not necessarily in the Department for the Economy. They include rail links, road building, housing, planning, small businesses being paid on time and boosting investment. I appreciate what you said about the Executive working together, but planning is a major problem for the economy. There were three major businesses in my constituency. We have lost one, and we are fighting hard to try to get the planning through for the other two. The energy sector is also having problems. Planning is a major stumbling block to growing our economy. Have there been any discussions between the two Departments about trying to push along a reform of that system?

**Mr C Murphy:** First, I was very pleased to meet Alma White. Departmental officials met her previously, and I want to continue to meet her. I am sure that all of you, as constituency representatives, have, like me, worked on the issues where kids have hit 19 and then suddenly dropped off the edge of the system. I have had many such cases in my constituency over the years, and I have run into brick walls. We are now in a position where the issue has been raised again, and we are determined to do something about it. Obviously, we will work with other Departments on that.

When the potential Executive parties had discussions last year, planning was one of the key issues that was identified. From what I remember of the discussion, planning policy was not the problem; it was the bottlenecks in the planning system. A resource was identified. I think that most people who are interested in development want an answer. If the answer is yes, that is great, but they do not want to be waiting for an answer for five years. We had a joint meeting with the Infrastructure Minister. I know that the Department for Infrastructure is trying to get the resource. I think that it may be looking for support through the transformation fund to try to increase the resource among the consultees, if you like, to ensure that that process is sped up. I agree with you. I know of potential developments in my constituency that would have transformational impacts on towns, particularly cumulatively. However, if they are all waiting on planning but nobody is moving, that creates the impression that you are not able to do business in the place, and people will move on to other projects.

We also need consistency across the 11 council areas. We do not want a situation where it is seen to be easier to get planning approval in council A than it is in council B. That would cause a drift of potential investment across council boundaries. There is a very clear recognition that that is not working in the way that it needs to. It is not all just about economic development. As I said, my sense from the discussion was that it was not a planning policy issue; it was about resource and making sure that the system works smoothly and efficiently. We need the turnaround on decisions, whether they are yes or no, to be much quicker.

**Mr Honeyford:** Absolutely. It is about timelines. You are right: it looks as though we are closed for business. We are dealing with two at the minute that are major employers in the area. The thought of losing them to, effectively, the South is not what we want for the area. We have to create jobs.

We talked about Invest NI and dual market access. Obviously, GB is a massive market for us, but the Irish dimension is the low-hanging fruit, if you like, that we can grow so that we can get into Europe. You talked about a joint trade mission. How can we ensure that, when that happens, we are not in competition with the South but that we go in collaboration? How do we ensure that that is the case for Northern Ireland?

**Mr C Murphy:** There are different economic agencies. Enterprise Ireland is concerned with growing indigenous businesses. IDA Ireland is concerned with attracting investment. Invest NI was in that space. Even though the relationship between them was very good, there was a sense of competition. However, I think that there is a growing recognition — I certainly get this sense when I talk to Ministers in the South — that there is much more to be gained from collaboration and much more benefit. We are developing clusters across the island. There is much more to be gained from supporting our indigenous businesses to grow. Part of the emphasis of the joint missions will be about our indigenous businesses and how we assist them. It is not about going out to people and saying, "Come and invest in us"; it is about saying, "Here's what we do. Here's how you can do business. We do this very well". I think that, after the Washington stuff, there was an Invest trip to Singapore, and that was concerned particularly with green technology. It was highly impressive and received very significant interest. That involved going out and saying, "This is what firms here do. This is what we can do for you". One of the difficulties in attracting a huge amount of inward investment is in trying to find the people to fill the jobs that may be created. An equal emphasis is placed on growing our own businesses.

There has therefore been the idea of competition, but I met IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, and, in my dialogue with them and with the Ministers responsible in the South — there has been turnover there — the broad sense is that there is a lot to be gained from collaboration. There is more to be gained from collaboration than there is from competition. We can manage those relationships.

Invest NI will do what it is doing with the people to whom it is talking, and it will pursue its interests, and I am sure that IDA Ireland is doing the same, but there is not that competitive element present that there perhaps was in the past.

**Mr Snowden:** By way of an example of where that kind of thing might work in practice to the benefit of both, some parts of the Republic have had to place a moratorium on the development of new data centres because the grid connections are not available, whereas we have not had that same level of data centre growth on this side of the border. There is therefore an opportunity for us to work together on that.

Data centres and data storage availability will be critical for lots of new industries: AI, robotics and all other kinds of tech. We are able to provide the data centre infrastructure here, which could then be used on both parts of the island. That is a practical example of where we can work jointly without necessarily adversely affecting the other.

**Mr Honeyford:** I totally appreciate that there are two sides to this. There is taking our companies and selling them to the world, and then there is inward investment. On the latter, we met representatives of the American consulate general and Joe Kennedy, and they asked what they could do before the presidential election, and we replied, "Take our companies and showcase them in America".

**Mr C Murphy:** We had a conversation with Joe recently, and we are arranging for creative industries people to go out to the States —.

**Mr Honeyford:** As a cluster?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes, it is a creative industries visit. We are showcasing, first, what we have here and, secondly, the investment that has been happening in studios, particularly in north Belfast. We are therefore looking at all those issues. There are joint delegations for that particular aspect, but we and Invest are continuously working across the world, growing links and making connections.

**Mr Honeyford:** You say that here and the South should be not in competition with each other but working collaboratively. If we are looking at attracting inward investment rather than at exporting, how does that work without some sort of agreement? How do we get our fair share, if you like? To use a

football analogy, say that Arsenal and Brentford are scouting for players. They are both Premier League teams, but one is top of the league and one is a mid-table side. How do players not get attracted to the bigger team?

**Mr C Murphy:** I do not think that we can argue for the South to reduce its offer. I know that that is not what you are saying, but there are many areas — a bit like here but there are perhaps more in the South, in the Dublin area — that are almost at capacity for growth, and the South recognises that the potential areas for continued growth are in the west and north-west. There are linkages to be made there. I get a stronger sense of collaboration happening.

I do not think that we will necessarily get into a space in which we will say, "You can have two thirds, we will have a third, and that is the way in which it always has to be". Different businesses will be attracted here to different locations for different reasons. As Ian said, there are opportunities for very practical collaboration, but there are also opportunities to join up our businesses to make sure that we have clusters operating together and growing.

Inward investment was the thing for a long number of years, and that was understandable, particularly here given its low employment rate. We needed to grow people into work and get significant levels of investment locally. That balance has changed somewhat. Much more global uncertainty means that bigger firms are less inclined to take investment decisions.

There is an opportunity to grow our own businesses. That is a much stronger, more certain economic prospect for the country, on whichever side of the island you happen to be. There is an emphasis on that, and there is an understanding that there is a lot of collaboration to be done and that that will be very beneficial.

**Mr Honeyford:** I appreciate that. Wealth comes from exporting our own businesses.

I will move on to tourism, on which we heard evidence in Committee a few weeks ago. The current Aer Lingus strikes have resulted in roughly 20% of flights being cancelled. Have there been any discussions about the Aer Lingus strikes and their impact? A lot of people from here take Aer Lingus flights from Dublin, but Aer Lingus also has flights from Belfast. Are there any updates on how we are being affected here?

**Mr C Murphy:** By the industrial action?

**Mr Honeyford:** Yes.

**Mr C Murphy:** No. We do not have any direct input. Aer Lingus is still partly state-owned, and the dispute is between pilots and the employer. We hope that it does not have an impact. The industrial action is from today through to Sunday, so it is expected that about 20% of flights will be grounded. We are keeping a close watching brief on how that impacts on the airports here and on tourism on the island, because 70% of our international visitors come through Dublin. The dispute has implications, but all that we can do is hope that the issues that have caused it are resolved quickly. I saw yesterday that there has been a call for arbitration, through the Labour Court or some other kind of arbitration. I am hoping that that will resolve the matter. As I said, we have to keep a close watching brief, but we do not have any direct input into the dispute. I do not know how much input the Dublin Government have, but we will keep in contact with them. We want to see a satisfactory resolution to the issue of pay and conditions and to see the service operating as normal, not just for the sake of bringing people to the island and our tourism sector but for connectivity, which is very important.

**Mr Honeyford:** Dublin Airport has a cap of 32 million passengers. We had the guys from the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) here a couple of weeks ago to talk about tourism. We were told that tourism accounts for 5-6% of GDP, whereas for a region of this size, we would expect it to be around 10%. The rate is growing, however, so it is about getting passengers numbers in through here rather than the 70% who are coming in through Dublin. It is about transferring a portion of those passengers and rebalancing flights for Belfast.

One issue that the UUEPC representatives raised with us at that time was the infrastructure around Belfast International Airport. How can we connect flights if the airport cannot be accessed? Have there been any discussions at all, at any point, with the Department for Infrastructure about improving rail and road connections in order to increase passenger numbers into Belfast and to encourage more routes into Belfast?

**Mr C Murphy:** That will depend on the Department for Infrastructure's priorities and the level of funding that it has.

**Mr Honeyford:** Is it a priority for the Department for the Economy?

**Mr C Murphy:** No, but if you were talking about connectivity to airports and the surrounding infrastructure, there would be a role for the Department for Infrastructure to play. We have identified that connectivity from the airport to where people are going is not one of the main features. We will have more to worry about if the electronic travel authorisation (ETA) comes in. That will be more problematic for us. It is also about improving our tourism offer.

The numbers have been growing very well over the past number of years. In many cases, they are back to pre-COVID levels. The number of people who are coming up from the South is particularly growing. Quite a lot of our tourists come across from Britain and from the South, and they are not necessarily reliant on the airport infrastructure. If infrastructure is identified as being a significant issue that is deterring people from coming here, we can certainly have a conversation about that.

I imagine that the task force that we have put together will look at the broad range of issues that impact on tourism. We are moving in the right direction, but you are right that there is an imbalance, and we have a lot further to go. There are also parts of the South that have further to go, however. There are big tourist spots in the South and also outside of the South. For the Wild Atlantic Way, the figures are from Galway downwards. It is not Mayo, Sligo and Donegal that are getting the main benefit from Wild Atlantic Way tourism.

There is therefore work to be done on achieving that balance, but part of it is about improving the tourism product and its marketing. We are having discussions about improving brands and trying to attract people. A lot of that work is starting to deliver results, but we have a fair way to go to get to a level playing field.

**Mr Honeyford:** It is about helping support the airport to get those extra routes and to attract the northern half of the island, including some of the Republic, to use Belfast as a hub rather than Dublin. Dublin is so handy to access, and that was one of the things that the UUEPC witnesses picked up on.

**Mr C Murphy:** It is almost a chicken-and-egg situation. If we were to improve the product and the marketing, the number of people who would be looking to come here would mean that the air companies would put on more flights and demand more routes.

**Mr Snowden:** There is a strand to what you are saying, Mr Honeyford, that is to do with capacity being limited in the Republic. Our current model is largely one where, if people are flying in, especially on a long-haul flight, they come to Dublin and they then come North. They want to make that journey as smooth as possible, and that is the problem that the ETA creates. If there is airport capacity in the Republic, we need to think about how we can start to service the rest of the island.

**Mr Honeyford:** That is the point that I am making.

**Mr Snowden:** Tourism Ireland has been speaking to me about what needs to be done. There was support last year, of which you are probably aware, for rail connections on the island. Two items came up about improving rail connections to our airports. The current line is about 400 metres from Belfast International Airport, while the Sydenham stop is still where the old entrance to the City Airport used to be, about half a mile down the bypass. A couple of things could be changed there, but doing them would cost substantial sums of capital money, so the Executive would need to be in a position in which they have sufficient funds to be able to prioritise those kinds of projects and deliver them.

**Mr C Murphy:** Bear in mind that the debate is still going on about rail connectivity between Dublin and its airport. Even with the number of passengers that the airport is taking and the amount of funds that are available in the Dublin Exchequer, there is still a discussion about whether a light rail connection or whatever is needed from the airport into the city.

**Mr Honeyford:** Anything that the Department can do to lobby for rail links here would be great. I have been banging on about it in my area for years.

The energy support scheme is due to launch in March 2025. Is that still the target date? There is a consultation being done on smart meters for homeowners. Are there any timelines or targets for when we will see the introduction of smart meters?

**Mr Snowden:** Are you referring to the contracts for difference (CFD) scheme?

**Mr Honeyford:** The renewable energy support scheme. There was one announced of 1 MW and upwards.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** That is the contracts for difference scheme.

**Mr Snowden:** Contracts will be let in January 2026. We will get through the process, and then we have to get into the bids and assessments. The intention is to aim for contracts to be let in 2026.

**Mr Honeyford:** And smart-metering?

**Mr Snowden:** That will follow on from the consultation exercise that is under way. We need to be careful about how we approach smart-metering. It has not been a massive success in some other places because of the way in which it has been implemented, so, in designing the scheme, we need to learn all the lessons from elsewhere. It is absolutely critical to make sure that we do it right —

**Mr Honeyford:** I totally agree.

**Mr Snowden:** — rather than do it quickly. We have had a lot of discussions in the Department with officials about how we take forward the scheme and what the next portion of it will be. Technology is moving forward as well.

**Mr Honeyford:** Have you any idea of a time frame?

**Mr Snowden:** We want to do it in this mandate. That is certainly the aspiration and the intention, but, again, we will have to bring all the detail to the Committee so that we can thrash it out. No doubt you will want to make sure that some of the mistakes that have been made elsewhere are not replicated here.

**Mr McGuigan:** Given that I am last to speak, I was worried that I would have nothing left to ask you other than about the Tour de France coming to Ireland. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** You are going to ask about it anyway.

**Mr C Murphy:** Fair enough. If you want to forgo your questions, I am happy to leave.

**Mr McGuigan:** I will touch on some of the things that have already been covered, particularly departmental relationships in the Executive on issues that cover relationships on the island. Although the economy is driven by the Department, all of what you have talked about, whether it be skills, education, childcare, airports, energy, net zero or, in particular, planning, has some impact on work that has to take place. I was struck, particularly from the evidence that we have heard here from various bodies, by how much planning is a major issue. We have had different organisations and groups raise it as an issue in Committee, and there are different complications involved in the work that they are doing. When RenewableNI was in, I was struck by how its representatives talked about the level of investment that takes place in the South compared with the level of investment here. It was nearly 90:10. I am not saying that that was all down to planning, but a large part of it was.

We have the Climate Change Act 2022, and we have talked about the energy strategy. Planning is something that will have a major impact on some Executive priorities and on the stuff that you are doing. Can you elaborate a bit more on that and on its impact on some of the work that you are doing? I am heartened to hear that there is a good level of all-island cooperation. The all-island economy is important to you and therefore requires there to be relationships with the South. Tourism is important, and that also requires there to be relationships. Beyond working with Ministers, it is very important to your work that officials and even NGOs work side by side.

**Mr C Murphy:** Everybody has recognised the same issues with planning. That was even recognised in discussions among parties last year. Everybody brought up the same issues that you and other Committee members have brought up, including bottlenecks, hold-ups and inconsistency in time frames between Departments. A proposition was brought to those discussions to try to do something about them, to which a resource was attached, so we want to see that be picked up and run with quickly. We have had dialogue with John and his team, and we hold joint meetings with them. They are exercised about the issue and want to address it. They can provide answers about the time frame.

There is, however, absolutely no doubt that planning holds back areas of development. It will also have an impact on the green infrastructure that we want to build. People have the right to have a view on planning, to raise issues and to object — that goes without saying — but, where there are the bottlenecks in the system, we need to act quicker so that things do not get dragged out for years and years.

We have a number of Departments to engage with on the cross-border issue, because the Department for the Economy has a very broad remit. There are the straightforward economy pieces, about which we had a meeting with Peter Burke last week. Only a few days before that, we had an online meeting with Eamon Ryan to talk about renewable energy issues, and I had a North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting with Catherine Martin on Monday morning about tourism issues. We are instigating the formation of a group made up of the three tourism agencies and both Departments. We will meet regularly. It is therefore not just a dialogue between Departments but one that involves Tourism NI, Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Ireland and both sponsor Departments so that we make more progress on the marketing, the supports required, the brands and all the other issues that fall under the subject of tourism.

There is also the further and higher education sector to consider, the responsibility for which had sat with Simon Harris but is now with Patrick O'Donovan. We have engaged with him. Before Simon Harris was elevated to the office of Taoiseach, we were talking about doing joint work in the north-west in particular and strategies for there, and we have a desire to meet in that area and have dialogue with people who are involved in the process.

Officials from the Department meet their counterparts regularly about all those issues. There are four areas on which we engage and four Ministers with whom we engage, and there has been a turnover of those personnel.

We are also keen to work with whoever comes into office in Whitehall. There has been a bit of a revolving door there, and the situation has been fairly unstable over the past number of years, to be honest. Even when I was previously in office as Finance Minister, it was a different person in post almost every time that I went over to have a meeting. We want to build such relationships as well, because a close working relationship with the incoming Government in Whitehall will be needed across the range of issues. The best way in which to get a shared understanding and to get things done is to build connections, to have continued dialogue among officials and to have as regular engagement as possible with them, as well as with the agencies involved.

On David's point, when we were down at the NSMC meeting, we met IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland representatives. We have agreed with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) to go on a joint trade mission. All the things that I have said are important to do, because they build collaborative relationships. Everybody who is involved in politics knows that many things work a lot better when you have built up relationships with the individuals involved. Things then work much more smoothly from official to official. That relationship is very strong and is working very well. There are plans to strengthen and deepen it. We have, however, have had a number of years in which we have had a kind of dysfunctional relationship with Whitehall. I hope, as I am sure other Executive Ministers do, that, when a new Government are in place there, we will get back to having a more sustained relationship. We need to resolve quite a lot of issues with them across a range of matters, not least finance.

**Mr McGuigan:** I think that everybody is going to welcome the employment rights Bill, and we on the Committee look forward to scrutinising it. When we were a member of the EU, some of our current good practices came about as a result of EU legislation. Is the Department intent on looking at what is happening on the Continent and in the EU to try to bring best practice here as part of that Bill?

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes. Some of the issues that I brought to the Assembly yesterday in the draft Working Time (Amendment) Regulations 2024 were covered by the adoption of what were EU standards, while some might not have been. It was probably all covered, but, just to be sure, to be sure, six types of



leave, including parental and paternity leave, were addressed, and some of the regulations were carried over from EU law.

Yes, there is a standard that we want to make sure that we do not drop below. When you are talking about the work that we are doing in Europe to attract investment and take advantage of dual market access, we need to make sure that we have proper standards for workers. We are trying to set the highest standards possible for us, and a lot of those will match what those standards currently are in the EU.

The documentation that we will be putting out for consultation next week has already had strong input from the unions' side. The consultation will then be open to everybody to submit ideas and suggestions. Pre-consultation has already taken place with business organisations. It is a substantial document, and we realise that over the summer is not the ideal time to do the consultation, but, if we do not start the clock ticking now, we will potentially run out of time before the end of the mandate. We were keen to get it moving, and the more input that we have, the better it will be for making sure that it is as effective as it can be.

**Mr McGuigan:** On events tourism, anybody who is out canvassing at the moment and knocking on doors knows how important the Euros are to everybody and perhaps how unimportant elections are. The region and our economy have benefited from hosting events in the past. The Open is coming back next year. Will there be any investment made? The first time that it came, there was a substantial amount of Executive investment in infrastructure etc. What level of investment is required from the Department for next year's Open?

The Euros have been almost talked to death, but, hopefully, we are all agreed that we want the Euros to come here in 2028 and for Casement Park to be built in advance so that our economy and the region can benefit from all that would be good with regard to that.

Finally, when are you bringing the Tour de France to Ireland? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr C Murphy:** I knew that there would be a cycling sting in the tail somewhere.

We clearly benefit from hosting events. We benefited from the Giro section that was here. They bring not only visitors but attention and international exposure. Particularly with bicycle races, people are looking at the scenery as they pass through towns and villages, and that increases interest.

We have the Irish Open golf here this summer in Newcastle, and the Open is back next year in Portrush. There has already been investment, in that we have invested money this year in preparation and promotional work. I do not know what the exact figures are for next year, but I imagine that they will increase next year.

**Mr Snowden:** It is in July, so the amount of money spent next year will be less than is spent this year.

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes, because it will be happening in the next financial year.

**Mr Snowden:** We are, however, putting in money.

**Mr C Murphy:** We have put in several million pounds this year just to assist with the preparation work. That brings with it a focus, and, then, in few years' time, the Ryder Cup is going to be at Adare Manor, which will bring a focus on golf to the whole island.

When I met tour operators in the States, they thought that there were only two golf courses in the North: Newcastle and Portrush. They did not realise that there is a whole network of great golf courses, including links courses. Bringing that to their attention brings with it a greater understanding, and to have that set of tourists visiting here regularly is lucrative. Tour operators in the States also think that there are only three or four courses in the South, whereas some of the key ones are down there, so a greater understanding of what is available has to be promoted.

Investment is already going in. As I say, there will be some more investment next year, but that will be done right in the mouth of the Open, and it therefore may not be just as much. We are working closely with the organisers to make sure that it is the best event possible. It was huge the last time that it was here, and we want to make it even better and learn whatever lessons we can from the previous Open that was held here.

You can see the impact of the Euros every night on TV. Again, it is about the immediate visitors to the country, but it is also about the television exposure and the legacy of the competition. Our perspective on our ability to host the Euros here is that there is only one facility that has any remote possibility of doing so. Hosting the Euros here, by bringing Casement Park on to be able to do that, would bring enormous economic benefit not just to Belfast but to the whole region. It would also leave a legacy of continued tourist interest. There would be a legacy for soccer, because that will attract legacy funding, and for sport in general, which would be very beneficial.

From that perspective, you can see the legacy that cycling events have had in growing interest in the sport. That is good for society and good for our health, and it is good for the community generally. Those things are all win-win situations. We just need to get them up and running and working properly.

**Mr McGuigan:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Perfect. I have one final question on the renewable heat incentive. Is the Department content that the business case is as good as it needs to be? With my Finance Committee hat on, I have seen that there is ongoing correspondence between the Department of Finance and the Department for the Economy about seeking additional information on the business case. Are we now confident that the business case for the preferred option is done and dusted and that the Executive are ready to take a decision?

**Mr Snowden:** There are two business cases. The first one, which is the more important and more immediate, is for the revised tariff. The business case for closure will be predicated on the revised tariff. The business case for the revised tariff is close to completion. The Department of Finance was concerned about what the ongoing impact would be of the Ofgem notification and wanted to know what the Executive's position on the future of the scheme would be when they looked at the revised tariff business case, but we have been able to deal with those issues. We will hopefully have all the approvals and agreements in place to allow us to revise the tariff from the autumn, so before the winter period. There is also a window in the systems operation, which means that that is the optimum time in which to do it.

Closure of the scheme is for the Executive to decide, and the business case for that depends on a decision to be taken at the Executive. As the Minister said, he has, for a number of weeks, been trying to take the paper to the Executive and secure agreement on it. Once we get the Executive's direction on the way forward for the scheme politically, we will be able to work up the options. They will, broadly speaking, be about how the closure will look in practice and work in operation.

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Perfect. Gentlemen, you have been generous with your time. Thank you very much indeed. I wish you a good summer, and we will see you when we come back in the new term.

**Mr C Murphy:** Yes. We will follow up in writing with the particulars on Magee.

**Mr Snowden:** We may need to correct the numbers that we quoted to you, Ms McLaughlin, on the position for the current year. I think that I misunderstood the figures previously.

**Ms McLaughlin:** Are they higher or lower? We will play a game now.

**Mr Snowden:** The precise number is still to be worked out. It will be marginally above 500 extra places, but it is about the interaction between that and the MaSN cap from the previous year. I got myself confused with the previous briefing that I had seen saying that we were not going to do anything about the MaSN cap. Normally, there is a process —

**Ms McLaughlin:** It would be built into this —.

**Mr Snowden:** — and there are other numbers. It is part of a trajectory to take us to 1,000 additional places within two years. We need to clarify the position, however, because I do not think that what I said —.

**Ms McLaughlin:** That is important. I think that it is about 150 from the previous —.

**Mr C Murphy:** We will also give you information on the spread across courses and their positions.

**Mr Snowden:** I would not want to leave you with the wrong impression as a result of my having said something that was not entirely correct.

**Ms McLaughlin:** You will be the lead story on Radio Foyle tonight anyway, so do not disappoint.  
*[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson (Mr Brett):** Thank you very much indeed, everyone.