



Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Investment in Northern Ireland, HC 792

Wednesday 23 February 2022

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill; Scott Benton; Mr Gregory Campbell; Stephen Farry; Mary Kelly Foy; Claire Hanna; Fay Jones; Ian Paisley.

In the absence of the Chair, Sir Robert Goodwill took the Chair.

Questions 150 - 170

Witnesses

[II](#): Stephen Gillespie, Director for Business & Culture, Invest Derry City and Strabane; Eddie McGoldrick, Director, Grow the Glens CIC; Paddy McLaughlin, Director, Grow the Glens CIC.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– Eddie McGoldrick, Director and Paddy McLaughlin, Director, Grow the Glens CIC – [INI0001](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Stephen Gillespie, Eddie McGoldrick and Paddy McLaughlin.

Q150 **Chair:** I will ask you to introduce yourselves, starting with Stephen Gillespie.

Stephen Gillespie: I am the director of business and culture with Derry City and Strabane District Council.

Eddie McGoldrick: I am treasurer of Grow the Glens, which is a community interest company in Cushendall, County Antrim.

Paddy McLaughlin: Along with Eddie, I am from Grow the Glens, from a beautiful part of the Glens of Antrim—a little village called Cushendall.

Q151 **Chair:** Ian Paisley is nodding very vigorously at that. You are all very welcome indeed. I will ask the first question, which is similar to the question I asked the previous panel: what are the most significant economic and social problems facing your regions? I will link that question with: do you feel that you are getting a fair slice of the cake compared to Belfast, for example?

Stephen Gillespie: A lot of what I will say is probably similar to the previous panel. Of the challenges that we face in our region, skills is clearly top of the agenda. Where Northern Ireland would face a skills deficit and we export at least a university worth of talent, when you look at our city region the higher level provision is clearly not enough given the size of the area. Front and centre of the challenge that we face is how we grow our skills for the future and how we ensure that the higher level provision is there, so not only that we encourage our young people to stay, but also we encourage a flow of talent from the rest of the UK into the region and vice versa.

The other challenges that we face are in connectivity. If you have been up to the region you will appreciate the issues that we have with transport and travel. Rail is a big push, and we have made some serious advances over the last few years and the roads are starting to improve, but they are still a challenge. Getting the connectivity piece right and ensuring that we have transport links to all the major centres is vital. But, as I say, the skills agenda is clearly key to how we grow in the future, and it is the biggest challenge that we face.

Q152 **Chair:** Thank you, Stephen. By the way, could the other two witnesses mute? We are not getting much echo, but it can be a problem.

Obviously, Strabane is right on the border. Are there opportunities or problems because of the whole protocol Brexit situation for Strabane and City of Derry?

Stephen Gillespie: Our geography is slightly unique in that we are a cross-border city region. A lot of our talent flows backwards and forwards daily, and we have the stats that back that up. A company that is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

employing 1,000 jobs in the city will have typically 30% of its employees coming from Donegal and vice versa. That flow of talent constantly across the border would have been of initial concern, but clearly our economies are linked and anything that affects that flow of trade would affect the regional economy. At the minute those issues are there, and we have to deal with them, and business is finding a way to do business, but it is clearly a concern.

Eddie McGoldrick: The issues that we are addressing are in the area of skills, although we find that the educational underpinning in the area is very strong. It is how we get the right skills and bring them forward into meaningful jobs. Grow the Glens has been involved in coding classes in primary schools and the local secondary school for both pupils and teachers, so that we are starting to prepare the ground to grow the skills that we seek and need going forward. In our digital hub we have opportunities to create very high quality jobs, but they need the skills. Unfortunately, there is a vicious circle here where if you don't have the jobs, you don't have people taking homes in the area and you lose the skills. The district starts to hollow out and get into a vicious downward spiral.

Where do you break that circle? We have tried to break it with skills and then move it on to jobs. Housing is not our remit, but those are the areas that we are concerned about and why we have been working on this for five years.

Q153 **Chair:** We hear often that the education system in Northern Ireland is very good and delivers very good outcomes. Are these skills problems to do with the abilities that some of the students may have or is it the choices they are making at school, the advice they are getting from careers teachers or from friends and family or businesses not going out to engage with students when they decide which A-levels to take or whether not to go to university but get into an apprenticeship?

Eddie McGoldrick: We are fortunate within our committee that we have a senior ex-educationalist who was deputy chief inspector of schools for Northern Ireland. He is very clear that it is a multilayer problem. We need to have schools providing skills and businesses providing schools with clear indications of what skills are needed. Also the FE colleges play into this along with the universities. We have had very useful engagement with Northern Regional College. It has done a facility now to provide us with outreach classes when we get our digital hub built, and it is the interlocking of the education system with the requirements that makes it effective.

The skills requirements change over time—subtle things change over time. In your previous panel you talked a lot about cyber-security. You can't become a cyber-security expert unless you understand coding and you learn coding very early in schools these days. Cyber-security will morph into something else in a few years. It is having that interlocking



between the schools, the colleges and then you get the skills focused on business.

Paddy McLaughlin: Following on from what Eddie said, I come from the community angle here, and I see the issues and the opportunities in our small rural community. We are about 18 miles from the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland, and we have a big stretch of water between us, so our hinterland is the water—at least 50% of it. We need to create jobs in our local area to sustain our village, our schools, our shops. We also have a very large diaspora of people spread throughout the world who are very keen to develop jobs back in the Glens of Antrim, and if we can get the right facilities to facilitate that, we will enrich our community. Thankfully it is a very strong, inclusive, vibrant community here, but we want to keep that. I think it would work very well in parallel with what our Belfast colleagues are trying to do.

Q154 **Ian Paisley:** I welcome our panellists today. My questions are principally for Eddie McGoldrick and Paddy McLaughlin. The Glens are both a gateway and a heartland, so they serve and have a significant potential for the people who live there and for visitors to the area. Eddie, I will ask this first. As a social enterprise, what other ultimate challenges do you face? If you had a blank sheet of paper for a wish list, what would you put on it to make significant changes?

Eddie McGoldrick: We have a couple of strengths as a social enterprise. We benefit from energy in that there is real passion and commitment to do what we do. We can be incredibly agile and much more agile than larger businesses or institutions. We also have the backing of the people. We undertook a survey of the local community to get support for our digital hub, and it was very clear that people wanted it and would use it.

If I had a blank sheet of paper, what I would write at the top of it is “small is valuable”. There is a tendency for people to think that only large projects and large institutions are the way forward. Small can grow very quickly and one of the things we have been keen to push on our project is that what we have learned we are more than happy to share. Social enterprises are not like businesses. I run other businesses. Other businesses compete; social enterprises, by their definition, collaborate. It is in their absolute DNA. That gives you the opportunity to replicate, which is good. Large projects tend to be eye-catching and bring problems of governance, transparency and communication, all of which were discussed very comprehensively in the previous session.

You can grow big things from small acorns, and we are very keen that this Committee understands that the mechanisms favour large. Invest NI likes big projects, committees like big projects to review, investors like big schemes, and that is not necessarily the only way forward. We need centres of excellence in medicine, and you are not going to build that in the Glens of Antrim necessarily, but there is no reason why people in the Glens of Antrim can't contribute to that. If Covid has taught us nothing



else, it has taught us that dispersal is a very strong attribute and you disperse small.

Q155 **Ian Paisley:** I assume that digital connectivity is absolutely crucial for that. It is like the upgrades to allow the connectivity to flow and the dispersal to work.

Eddie McGoldrick: Yes, and that is why we chose to use the ex-PSNI barracks because there is very good digital connectivity. That is moving forward across Northern Ireland with Strabane and so on, so that is great to see, but Covid has taught us that without it people are completely disenfranchised.

Q156 **Ian Paisley:** I know they have the Strabane link to about 7,200 homes in County Antrim and the Glens area that previously had not been connected, which I know is making a difference and people are noticing that. Paddy, the same question to you—I don't need to repeat it—but you have a wish list opportunity here.

Paddy McLaughlin: We have already created about 10 home-working jobs here, but this is a repeatable model, as Eddie said. I would love to get this into all the villages in our Coast and Glens area. I think we have a very good model. We designed this before Covid where we knew that with home-working jobs people would get tired and want to engage with other people. I think that people are tired of working at home now and we need to have some kind of a hub to bring people together.

My wish list from a funding point of view is that we need to be involved more closely with the funding agencies on a co-design basis, not merely as applicants for funding. It is ironic that with the biggest role in the success of the economic development of any of these things, we are probably the last people to ever get involved in them. I think a lot more could go on, a bit more joined-up with Government Departments and trying to get Departments to have a timescale to come back to us. We have ticked all the boxes, we have got our proposals all done probably a year ago, but then you don't hear anything back, so you don't know if you are successful or not. We have applied for one fund, but we don't know about a second fund, and at the end of the day we are all volunteers—busy people in our own lives. We are trying everything here to move this forward for our community. I think we need Government to be a bit more joined up.

Q157 **Ian Paisley:** Paddy, just to make the point, 10 jobs in a village in a remote rural location is significant. Some people lose sight of the significance of that number in a small area. Do you want to say something about the jobs that have been created?

Paddy McLaughlin: We have aligned with two major companies. Going back three years ago when this international company visited us, it wants to place jobs in rural areas. It is very expensive to do it in cities and they want to be in the rural areas. They want to have that type of people employed, and I think our model works very well in the whole of North



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Antrim. One of those companies today is looking for about 100 workers. If I had the facilities, I could put 30 jobs in here or elsewhere. That opportunity will pass us by if we have to wait another two, three, four years when Government aligns to try to help us. I think that is a big issue and a big opportunity.

Eddie McGoldrick: I want to pick up the point you made in the previous session about the quality of jobs. These are not zero-hour contracts. These are jobs where people have flexibility, but they have commitment from the employer. They are full-term contracts. They are also jobs at varying skill levels, including recruitment jobs, financial jobs, and also we have an opportunity with another blue chip company that wants to place very high-end IT jobs. Again, you learn lessons from everything in life. Covid has shown us that with the right technology and the right skills people can collaborate on a very dispersed basis and move organisations forward. Key to that is agility and Government Departments are not agile. I am sure there are reasons for that, but they are certainly not agile.

Ian Paisley: I think that is a frustration of politicians across the piece here every day. The fact that it is here now we can use it as evidence again and make the point to Government, so thank you, gentlemen.

Q158 **Chair:** I should probably know the answer to this question but are there LEPs, local enterprise partnerships, in Northern Island? We have quite a successful one in my part of the world that engages with business and deploys Government funding in quite an effective way. Stephen, do you have something like that or something that does that?

Paddy McLaughlin: Yes, Chairman, we do. We have enterprise boards here. I sit on the board of Causeway Enterprise—I am a director of it. We have about 160 small start-up businesses very successfully doing what they do, developing, nurturing talent and outgrowing some of our facilities. I see this as a spinoff of the same type of opportunities.

Chair: That is very encouraging. I am sure there will be more roles for them to play.

Q159 **Mr Gregory Campbell:** Welcome to the panel. My question is aimed at all three, but I will start with Mr Gillespie, given that the other two men got the last round of questioning. On the issue of the European structural funds and the fact that we have moved on beyond that now, where do you see the make-up and the targeting of projects that would have been aimed at the structural funds had they still been available but now need to be targeted elsewhere? That is the first question.

Stephen Gillespie: There are aspects of the structural funds that we would like to continue. ESF has been very successful in skills and how we work with community groups and develop that side of the economy. We are very conscious of how we work with Government to replace those funds and how we work from there. We are also working as 11 councils to look at our response to Invest NI and what could be the future and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

potential of the funding and how councils could play a lot bigger role. We feel that there is a lot more that we could do—and that goes across all 11 councils—and we are working on a terms of reference and a strategy that we can present to Government to say, “This is where we feel we can play a bigger part; these are where possibly the funding could be different and could achieve different outcomes.”

We have talked a lot about skills and there are two aspects to the skills. There is the higher end, and there is no doubt that the city deal that I am involved in, the Belfast Region City Deal, is targeting the well paid, higher quality jobs, but we also have a skills deficit at the bottom, and we have to make sure that all boats rise. We have to ensure that the people who are not at the higher end of skills have opportunities to get pathways to employment. That is where ESF was very successful and where I think councils can play a much bigger role going forward in designing the funding and working with Government, as the levelling up will start to develop in the next round of funding and so on, to ensure that those are addressed as well as the higher end, quality jobs. That is where I see our role.

Eddie McGoldrick: The point I want to make first is that I am not an expert in funding. That is not our contribution, but the observation I will make is that we see new funding opportunities emerging. We have benefited from the Community Ownership Fund, and we are eagerly awaiting the levelling up funding opportunities coming up. The previous arrangements were a well-worn path that people understood and one of our concerns is that these new opportunities spring up, but they become like a thicket that nobody knows how to navigate their way through. The difficulty is that the bigger players and the better organised profit from that and the less well organised or less professionally supported will suffer from that.

We also make the observation that we should learn from some of the good aspects of the previous funding arrangements where they focused on local, and they were very keen to see locally based organisations being developed and grow. We see elements of that in the White Paper. We had Minister Conor Burns down with us a few weeks ago and he was very clear about that and was challenging us to make sure that we were prepared for that.

Our position, Mr Campbell, is that we are ready for that challenge. We have to wait and see what comes out because we don't have the clout to influence the shape of those funds, but we do know what works and those are our observations.

Paddy McLaughlin: I think with some of the EU funds—and again I am no expert—there was more emphasis on the rural areas. In the Glens of Antrim we have other aspirations about linking more with Scotland from a tourism point of view. There are lots of opportunities there. I am very unsure how at this point in the Levelling Up Fund we would try to go for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

those funds whereas I think there was a more trodden path in the past through the EU funds. I am really unsure where we will go forward with that.

Q160 Mr Gregory Campbell: A final question to all three. They say all politics are local and in Northern Ireland there is quite a few people who think that the further you get from the wider Belfast area the bigger the chip gets on somebody's shoulder, particularly about funding and unfairness and allocation, but setting that to one side—

Chair: You could read London for that as well.

Mr Gregory Campbell: You could, yes, and I also hear across the western world. A couple of you mentioned the business of the Levelling Up Fund. Particularly talking about either the Glens of Antrim or Londonderry and Strabane, the north coast and the north-west suffers in that they seem to be in the shadow of the greater Belfast area—population and so on. I don't know if you heard the first panel when I drew attention to the lack of levelling up funding that came to Northern Ireland compared to Scotland and Wales. Are you able to examine and analyse why we felt we came so far short, given how well Scotland and Wales did on the first round and then hopefully not repeat the same mistakes in the second round?

Stephen Gillespie: We were successful with all three projects that we put in as a council.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The chip on the shoulder maybe got a bit smaller there.

Stephen Gillespie: We were pleasantly surprised with that and so we have three fairly significant projects to deliver. I think the key to that and why I believe we were successful is that we have always as a council developed projects regardless of where the funding stream was coming from. That might sound odd, but we have invested in how we develop those projects—community-based projects, wider infrastructure projects or council projects—so we are ready with outlaying projects when opportunities arise such as the funding that happened. It was a tight timeframe and it pushed us to get the applications in, but we had three projects that were very ready. We are already working on whatever the next round of funding is and we will put in significant numbers of projects to get funded.

If you are asking how Northern Ireland can be more successful, we have to be ready, and it is not a matter of responding once the terms of reference come out or the applications open. We have to get ourselves in a much better position to be ready to apply. That is key for us, and we have always tried to do that as a council.

Q161 Mr Gregory Campbell: Why do you think some others are not as ready?



Stephen Gillespie: There is a risk in it, and I think that our councillors are up for that risk because they recognise the underinvestment in the region. Therefore, we have to be a bit more willing to put our own money in to develop these projects, to put our own expertise in to do that. That is a risk because sometimes you could be criticised for spending money and the project never happens or you create an expectation in the community that something will happen and then nothing happens. It is clearly a concern for all elected members when you are doing that, but if you are up for that risk and you share that risk and you take it, there are rewards when the opportunities are there, so it is recognising that.

The public sector is not very good at that. Eddie mentioned how slow it can be perceived as at times. We are not risk takers. We have got public money and we have to make sure that it is accounted for and is properly managed and that the governance structures are there, and we can stand over it with transparency. But if we are prepared to take those risks to get ourselves in a position to be ready, I think the rewards are there.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Mr McLaughlin and Mr McGoldrick, do you have anything to add to that?

Eddie McGoldrick: We have been successful with the Community Ownership Fund, and we are also seeking support from Invest NI and to participate in the growth deal in Causeway Coast and Glens. It is difficult for us with the new funds to have the foresight and understand that they may be coming.

I take on board what Derry and Strabane have done where they have positioned themselves and taken a risk position and got ready in anticipation. That is a lesson that we learned by reaching out quite early on to various funding sources. Our frustration now is having secured the Community Ownership Fund, we are having real difficulty getting traction with the growth deal and Invest NI. That is a frustration, but we learn from these things. We are resilient and adaptable, and we will learn how to play the new game as the new game emerges.

Paddy McLaughlin: We have an oven-ready deal sitting here and we have had now for quite some time. If we could just get a bit more joined up passion and energy from the different Departments to drive this on before we lose the opportunity. As Eddie says, we are just trying to deal with the different boards and the different bodies, and hours and hours of endless meetings go on. If we get a bit more co-design between the different Departments it certainly would be very helpful for us on the ground here as volunteers.

Q162 **Stephen Farry:** Picking up where Gregory left off, hopefully people are listening in to what we are discussing today and taking note of what is being said—I say that with some degree of optimism. Starting with Paddy and Eddie, you mentioned co-design and if you had a blank sheet of paper to design these new programmes, what areas would you want them to be prioritising in terms of particularly the skills base in your



area?

Eddie McGoldrick: I will lead off on this one. We have already referred to our digital hub and the skills around that to do with STEM and coding and so on, so we have explained that. We also have the maritime hub, so we have very successful boat-building businesses and maritime services businesses that we want to grow on, and they bring in engineering design skills and construction and fabrication skills, which is a broader base than purely IT skills.

That, in conjunction with providing tourism-based services, extends the scope even further, because you are then into high-end tourism products that can attract another group of people whose skills can be developed in that area. All those things go together because you want to have a skills base that is broad at the bottom and reaches very high. But it is the breadth at the bottom that adds the economic activity just as much as a handful of PhDs.

Stephen Farry: Paddy, is there anything you want to add or are you happy with Eddie's answer?

Paddy McLaughlin: I think Eddie has covered most of that.

Q163 **Stephen Farry:** Let me turn to Stephen on the same topic, but in doing so could I ask you to comment on the levels of economic inactivity in the north-west, that at times have been at the highest levels in the UK? Maybe talk a bit as to how that is a particular skills and labour market inclusion challenge and how you would foresee some of the new programmes coming along, trying to provide assistance in that regard.

Stephen Gillespie: You touched on the stubbornly high levels of economic inactivity, and I have always been concerned. We have had success in that area where we have looked at pathways to employment where we have provided paid employment for periods of time. But those programmes are costly, and we have developed that up as part of our city deal. It is not funded as part of the city deal because clearly it is about infrastructure projects, but we are very aware of that community works-type programme and how on one level it is very costly but on another level we know it works. That is something we want to get funded and that is where we will be targeting, when appropriate, where there is a scheme open that will double fund that activity. That is a concern and something we are very conscious of and something we very much want to address, while at the same time working with the university to grow the university, to grow the skills there and to work to maximise the research and innovation projects that are front and centre within our city deal.

It is about ensuring that as we develop the region—it is a very exciting time to be in the region—the level of funding that is now available from the city deal, but also from levelling up and others, means that we can start to plan and do things that we probably aspired to before but could



not deliver. But we have to make sure that, in doing that, we tackle all those difficult problems and that we ensure the skills are appropriate. That is where ESF has been key in the city, and we are very conscious of how that will be replaced going forward.

How do we make sure that level of economic inactivity does not stay at that stubbornly high level, because otherwise we would not have succeeded? We would have succeeded to a point, and I was conscious of the metrics that were asked of the previous speakers. That might not be measured within the city deal but it is something we will be uniquely measuring and making sure that as a council we drive all those initiatives for all the people, not just the higher-level, well-paid jobs.

Q164 **Claire Hanna:** My question is to Stephen about the Derry region deal, but it has been interesting to hear about Grow the Glens and just self-help in regeneration at its best. Stephen, to the best of your knowledge, what is the progress of the Derry City Strabane deal and have the right priorities gone into the heads of document, and do you see any major pitfalls in the strategy or the delivery?

Stephen Gillespie: If I tackle the second question first: is it the right projects? Where we were very lucky—and when I say lucky, we deliberately put community planning front and centre of the new council—from the very outset our elected members were very keen that we went out. We engaged right across the city and district, because we are very conscious that we have a city within a rural region and we cannot just concentrate on one or the other, to the detriment of the other. We have to make sure we help all our smaller settlements right around the city.

The community planning process spent hours and hours and thousands of engagements right across to develop what we call our strategic growth plan. Our city deal flows directly from our strategic growth plan so every project we have within the city deal has already been consulted on, talked through and worked up with all the consultees. Therefore, we were able to say with confidence that this is what this region wants.

The other thing we recognise is we call it only a start. The strategic growth plan is the ultimate mothership of all the strategies we want to do, and it is not all funded. Therefore, we can have a suite of projects we are ready to pull out when other funding opportunities become available.

How do we take that from there and grow within it? Within those deals and where we are at this point in time is we are working up the outline business cases for all the various projects. We have set ourselves an ambitious target to have those ready, at least first draft, by the end of March, but that will probably bleed into April. That is working with our partners in the university. That is working with our partners in the Western Health Trust and the council itself and right across all the various Government Departments there are regeneration projects in there, there



HOUSE OF COMMONS

are tourism projects and all those have to be worked up. At this stage that is what we are working on.

There are a number of those projects within that suite of city deal projects that are much more advanced than others. Two in particular I will pull out are the graduate entry medical school that is already started to be up and running in a site within the university, and part of the city deal will fund a new state of the art building for that project. The other one that is ready is what we call our DNA project, our maritime museum project on Ebrington, and it is at full business case. We have already had a degree of flexibility to push those on ahead of all the other projects, provided we do it within the overall funding envelope that we will have next year.

That is very encouraging, and it means while we work on all the outline business cases, while we push all the various things through—some of them are at different stages than others—we will be able to show projects on the ground, we believe, within the next year or so, and that will show visible signs of progress and allow us to develop the other projects in behind. We believe we are in a good place. We are working very hard with our Government colleagues to develop those up and get them on the ground so we can have at least a project a year over the next seven or eight years starting to be developed and built. It is an exciting time. It is challenging, but in a good way.

Chair: What is interesting is what we are not hearing. We are not hearing about bids that are unsuccessful, about wasted time and effort and energy put into bids that then do not attract funding. That is possibly a tribute to the quality of the bids that are going in but also getting the balance right between the amount of projects that can be funded and the amount that apply for that funding. Mary Kelly Foy, you have a question on foreign direct investment.

Q165 **Mary Kelly Foy:** It is your chance to show off. How attractive is Derry and Strabane as a destination for foreign direct investment? What is your opinion?

Stephen Gillespie: I would clearly say it is a wonderful place to do business. We have just been voted the second most attractive city in the UK for foreign direct investment and that is not a surprise to me. All the companies who have invested in the city over the last several decades see it as a wonderful example. Every single company that has invested in the city has reinvested within three years and some are into their third and fourth investment. A company like AXA, which came to the city initially as a fairly low-cost contact centre, is now into its third investment and those individuals have moved well up the value chain in terms of salaries, level of difficulty, their roles and what they provide back to AXA as a service.

I have always said that once we get people here we know we can keep them, and we know we have the talent and skills to do that. The difficulty



we have always had—the challenge, going back to the first question—is that connectivity piece. We have always felt, within the Northern Ireland context, we have been seen as a wee bit too far away, and that is not fair because the digital connectivity is excellent. When we sell into the States, we can show them in real time it is quicker to do business from the north-west to the east coast of the United States than it is to do business from the east coast to the west coast.

In terms of the digital connectivity piece, we have it, but that physical connectivity has always been a challenge, and it has always been a pull—to pull those FDI visits to get people up to do it—because they are busy people. When they are coming in, they have short time windows. They need to see sites very quickly and sometimes we are perceived as being a bit too far away. That is something we consistently challenge with our colleagues in a good way, and we work with Invest NI to try to solve that problem and make it easy for business to do business.

Q166 Mary Kelly Foy: What do you see as the role of Invest Derry Strabane? What is its role in improving investment opportunities in the region?

Stephen Gillespie: That is a brand we work on within council. That is how we work with foreign direct investment companies. We make it easy for them to come into the city. We make it easy for them to do that. We are happy to work with companies and we have done. We have several examples where we have found their property solutions, if that is what they require. We have helped them find talent. We have helped them set up academies. The assured skills academy is a very well-respected model that when I worked closely with our colleagues in the City of London Corporation, for instance, they are very jealous of because we can do it back to our size and pace. We can do it very quickly with the regional college, with the university.

We have also worked specifically with industry to develop those academies outside the Invest NI model who would normally fund them. That is a key area of success in how we attract those companies in and how we show them we have the talent. Those academies allow for 12 weeks of training. It is basically like a long interview almost, and very often after the 12 weeks the candidates are taken in by the companies because they have had that success. That is how we work with companies to do it and we make it easy for those businesses to come in.

Q167 Mary Kelly Foy: What about the role of Invest Northern Ireland in attracting inward investment specifically to your region?

Stephen Gillespie: Clearly, Invest NI is the agency. It has the levers in terms of the grant aid and so on previously and hopefully going forward. We have to work very closely with Invest NI. We cannot attract a company in without ultimately working with Invest NI in doing that, and we work very closely with it. That is clear as to where our roles are. Any visits that come in, Invest NI will involve us in the visits and the council will do everything it can to encourage those companies to invest and vice



versa. If we get companies that are interested in the region, we will work very closely with Invest NI to secure them. We cannot do it alone. We clearly would like more, and we are always hungry for more, but that is just the nature of my business.

Q168 Mary Kelly Foy: To Paddy and Eddie, I have noticed the huge growth in the number of social enterprises in the last decade. I think they are a wonderful and very important model. Well done for all the work you are doing there. Like the others in the charitable sector, they are often at the bottom of the pile when it comes to support and investment. What is your assessment of the economic support that the social economy has received by Invest NI?

Eddie McGoldrick: Could I take that question first of all? I want to step back to the previous question and answer. We looked at a recent Northern Ireland Assembly question that looked at the offers on FDI made by Invest NI, comparing urban and rural constituencies. We see a 3:1 disparity in favour of urban versus rural, and when you look at it in terms of heads of population you see there is an offer of support for every 7,000 urban residents versus one offer for every 44,000 non-urban residents.

There may be some structural factors there, but that raises two questions. First, are we adopting the right model and offering the right opportunities? Secondly, if FDI is predominantly going to urban, what will we do to counterbalance that for rural?

To come back to your specific question, the point I would be keen to make is rural can have very high-value jobs. Rural can also support other agendas that are equally important; for example, the climate change challenge we have. The model we see in our village of people travelling to Belfast every day is not sustainable going forward in terms of climate change. The opportunities for rural diversification will be enhanced if other skills and job types appear in rural areas.

An example of this would be farming families. As children grow up in farming families, data skills can be applied in the rural economy and can be a very powerful way of diversifying and creating economic activity in rural areas by marrying digital skills with the rural skills. We need a bit more creative thinking, rather than, "Let's go and find a big factory and drop it in here. Let's go and find another big factory and let's find another call centre and drop it into Belfast or Derry." We would be pushing very hard for a bit more creative thinking. That is why we are calling for some co-design. Come and talk to us. Listen to what we are saying rather than wait for an application from us.

Paddy McLaughlin: These types of business models are just vital. They are key for our rural communities. My village will not be sustainable and then you will end up with other social issues in years to come if you cannot have affordable housing but, secondly, jobs, which is just so important. I see it here every day where our local shops are closing



because people have to leave. We are driving people to the cities for jobs and housing, so the more we can do here and keep people in the area the better.

Q169 Mr Gregory Campbell: A very short question to Stephen. When you talk about the physical connectivity issues, particularly for the north-west, and for Londonderry and Strabane particularly, I do not think any of us should overlook the massive work that has gone on and will be completed in the next couple of months—the dual carriageway that has been long sought after for many years between the Glenshane Pass. It is the biggest road project in Northern Ireland in the past five years, and it is due to be completed in the next couple of months. That should considerably enhance the attractiveness of the region, would you agree? I know you have not mentioned it, but I am sure it was just an oversight.

Stephen Gillespie: Absolutely, the improvements in the transport links is exactly what I was targeting—that feeling that we are not a single lane through country roads, but that we have a proper dual carriageway linking the two cities. Working very closely and allowing the development is key. The completion of that road is a fantastic development and will definitely benefit the city.

Q170 Chair: It certainly sounds more deliverable than a bridge to Scotland, anyway. Finally, Mr Gillespie, we have a brand new, shiny Department for International Trade and we are hoping that Mike Freer MP, one of the Ministers, will come and give evidence to this Committee. Can I ask what support you have received, if any, from the Department for International Trade?

Stephen Gillespie: We have early engagement with the officials from DIT in Belfast. They are very keen to work with us and we are very keen to work with them. We see the advantage of the network they have, which is vast and links very closely with the ambitions we have as a region. The city deal, similar to the Belfast regional deal, is very much along the 10X agenda. It is looking at advanced manufacturing, personalised medicine, and the Centre for Industrial Digitalisation, which is the advanced manufacturing side.

How do we take that and globalise that advantage and work in with our colleagues? DIT is key because it has the network of companies. Where we are very adamant is that the research and innovation projects within the city deal that will fund buildings and the academic research is only useful if it generates economic wealth. It is not useful if it just does research for the sake of research. We are working with Invest NI, clearly, but also with DIT to build those companies right at the start of that process, to ensure when we get to the end, and we start building the actual building we can see the clear pathways to employment people will have and the clear advantages.

Taking the cyber-security centre in Belfast as an example, how do we make sure that research in a similar way is developing the real economic



HOUSE OF COMMONS

wealth? DIT is keen on that, so it is very keen to work with us. We have had initial engagement and we have follow-up meetings in the diary.

Chair: That was very encouraging. I was fearing a different answer to that question, but that is good news. I thank the second panel and thank both panels today for giving us such helpful and useful evidence, and I am sure that will guide our thoughts.

Before I close, I think it would be appropriate to mark the passing of Christopher Stalford MLA, who was the principal deputy speaker of the Stormont Assembly. His funeral will be held on Saturday and our thoughts are with his friends, colleagues and family.