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been extended to apprentices, so we can have exchanges outside the context of university students.

Obviously, we have the European social fund, which makes an enormous difference and allows us to do things that we simply could not do within our mainstream budgets. We cannot simply recoup that money, and anyone who thinks that we are going to get a big pay cheque from the UK Treasury to make up the shortfall for the European money that we would lose is in la-la land.

Reskilling Initiatives

T5. Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the reskilling initiatives for people who have either lost their jobs or who will lose their jobs as a result of the closures of JTI Gallaher and Michelin in Ballymena. (AQT 3465/11-16)

Dr Farry: The Member will know that there was a meeting yesterday of the task force, which the council is coordinating with a view to addressing a range of different points on manufacturing and skills. Obviously, my Department plays a role within that, as do DETI and some other Departments.

Beyond the broader issues, there are particular points around JTI Gallaher and Michelin. Obviously, as the Member will appreciate, the two processes are at different points. The JTI Gallaher announcement is well advanced, and we have been investing, with my Department funding some very particular interventions around courses that are not otherwise available. Also, there have been some particular interventions around essential skills for some of the staff. The process is at a different stage with Michelin, because the 90-day consultation period on the collective redundancies has not formally come to an end. That will happen at the beginning of March. At that stage, the nature of the engagement will change gear quite significantly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Before I call Mr McIlveen to ask a supplementary, I ask him and the Minister to be reasonably brief.

Mr D McIlveen: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will try my very best. As we come to the dawning of the age of the Department for Employment and Learning, there is obviously an opportunity for reflection. Whilst the Minister has been very good at delivering initiatives, some may say that he has not been so successful at delivering reform. Will the

Minister update the House on the reform that he is most proud of in his five years as Employment and Learning Minister?

Dr Farry: This is slightly separate from the original topical question but, in one word, the apprenticeship strategy.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Dr Farry: Two words. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order. Time is up.

2.45 pm

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Renewable Energy

1. Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how he will ensure a stable regulatory environment for the local development of renewable energy. (AQO 9595/11-16)

3. Mr Givan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the renewables obligation for small-scale onshore wind. (AQO 9597/11-16)

11. Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the closure of the Northern Ireland renewables obligation for onshore wind power. (AQO 9605/11-16)

Mr Bell (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 3 and 11 together. Our renewables record has been very successful to date. That has been due to a combination of being able to harness our natural resources whilst ensuring that the support costs are spread much more widely than our Northern Ireland consumer base. However, this means that we are also unavoidably influenced by national policy decisions, as borne out by the proposed early closure of the renewable obligations across the United Kingdom to onshore wind. I am mindful of the uncertainty that has been created around early closure to wind. My priority, at present, is to ensure that we have a timely and managed closure of the existing scheme in Northern Ireland. I want to provide the certainty that

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delivers the most renewable deployment for the least cost to Northern Ireland consumers.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his reply. Will he tell the Assembly what he plans to do during the next six months, under the moratorium on the new grid connections?

Mr Bell: There have been significant difficulties with the grid connections and grid connection offers. The Member is correct; NIE had to set aside its normal 90-day period for making grid connection offers due to the surge in applications that followed the regulator's determination that NIE could not require planning permission before making a grid connection. The grid simply could not accommodate the level of increase. It requires specialist analysis and, potentially, significant investment, which would have to be paid for by consumers. NIE is already committed to connecting projects which will almost double our installed renewable capacity. That is a huge challenge. I do not have powers to intervene. I cannot direct NIE or the Systems Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) to prioritise one technology over another.

Mr Givan: In discussions with the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), has it outlined what the proposed backstop power, which is now included in the Energy Bill, will mean and what the consequences of that could be for the Northern Ireland renewables obligation certificate (ROC)?

Mr Bell: DECC has included a backstop power in its proposed Energy Bill, as the Member said, to protect GB consumers should Northern Ireland take a different approach to the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO) closure than that taken in GB. The backstop power will give DECC powers to prevent GB suppliers redeeming Northern Ireland ROCs from projects that accredit from 1 April 2016 and do not meet the closure eligibility criteria that were equivalent to those in GB. This provides little comfort for those projects and has the potential to have wider implications for the whole renewables industry here.

Mr Kennedy: I am interested in the ministerial responses thus far. How does the Minister intend to deal with the ongoing uncertainty created by his decision on the NIRO issue last summer? Does he accept that the delay since his closure consultation last October has created all sorts of problems for the renewables sector here? Does he have any plans to support the development of the industry after the NIRO ends? Will he bring, and how will he

bring, certainty for investors, including many in my constituency?

Mr Bell: I want to bring certainty as soon as possible. I am considering a range of options. I think that the Member will agree that DECC changed the policy. Yes, we can do what we choose to do where we have devolved powers, but DECC changed the policy, not once but a number of times. I have spoken to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change. I went to London and I said, "Look, under the coalition Government, the previous Minister agreed with you a line which was then put out to the industry. The Conservative Party then came into power as a single party and moved the goalposts for onshore wind". They moved the goalposts, not me. They then changed their position at different times.

I want to assure the House that I will always look at what delivers the best value to Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, I have had to deal with changing positions from DECC, and that has led to the uncertainty that we have. I will try to bring it to a conclusion as quickly as possible to allow people to go forward; however, let no one misunderstand that the changing position has come from the Department of Energy and Climate Change.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas fosta leis an Aire as na freagraí go dtí seo. We all have some sympathy with the Minister in that these decisions have emerged from London, but I want to move on past the ROC to the renewable heat incentive (RHI). This morning, we spent two distressing hours in the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment listening to officials tell us that another bombshell has been dropped on the renewable industry sector and that the RHI is to be removed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order. Can we have a question, please?

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Can the Minister guarantee that he will give us clarity on that issue, work in collaboration with the sector, and include the Committee as he reaches a decision? Let the date not be next week, Minister.

Mr Bell: At the end of last year, there was an increase in demand for the renewable heat incentive scheme. My Department faces a huge budgetary pressure, given the Chancellor of the Exchequer's decision to limit the amount of money paid to Northern Ireland out of the UK pot for renewable heat. That is why, last week,

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I signalled my intention to ease that financial pressure, which could amount to over £27 million, by announcing the immediate closure of the scheme and bringing forward an order to suspend the scheme as soon as possible. I want everyone to know that I am listening to the industry and to individuals who are installing renewable heat boilers. I will come back to try to give that clarity at the earliest possible date.

Mr A Maginness: Unlike the previous questioner, I really do not have very much sympathy with the Minister in relation to his summary decision on the renewable heat initiative. It is not acceptable. It will impact adversely on many small installers. Will he review his decision or take remedial action to strengthen those small tradesmen?

Mr Bell: I think that the Member has misunderstood what the Chancellor of the Exchequer has done with regard to renewable heat and the fact that the goalposts have been moved and that a limit has been put on Northern Ireland. If we go beyond that limit, we have to bear the costs ourselves. It was introduced in November 2012 to the non-domestic sector and in 2014 to the domestic sector, and it has been taken up very successfully. To date, over 3,500 renewable heating installations have been incentivised. Uptake has been higher than in GB. We have exceeded the Northern Ireland Executive's 2015 target, which was 4%. About 6% of Northern Ireland's heating needs is now provided through renewable heating technologies. The Member would do well to look at the Chancellor's autumn statement and what follows it and also consider the costs to Northern Ireland.

Broadband: North Antrim

2. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the delivery of superfast broadband in North Antrim. (AQO 9596/11-16)

Mr Bell: In February 2014, my Department contracted BT to deliver the Northern Ireland broadband improvement project. That is primarily aimed at rural areas and seeks to extend the availability of, primarily, basic and, where possible, superfast broadband to those who have limited choice across Northern Ireland with a target of 45,000 premises. The project was scheduled to be completed by 31 December 2015. However, there was engineering complexity, and that date has been extended by three months to 31 March 2016.

Improvements have already been carried out to over 40,000 premises across Northern Ireland, including almost 5,000 in postcode areas in the North Antrim constituency.

On 22 January 2016, I announced the introduction of a satellite broadband support scheme, which falls under the auspices of the Northern Ireland broadband improvement project. It seeks to provide residents and businesses that are still experiencing speeds below two megabits per second with the option of applying for a subsidy of up to £350 towards the cost of installing a satellite broadband connection.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he aware of my constituents' concerns? It seems to be the case that BT is degrading its copper system and its other old systems. What can he do to make sure that BT meets all its obligations and does not let people wither on the vine with a copper system? People are experiencing even lower speeds than they were at Christmas.

Mr Bell: I am aware of a lot of problems, particularly in rural areas. A number of months ago, people from west Tyrone spoke to me. A number of people raised complaints with me that, if there is congestion on the system — the beam and different things — that effectively causes them not to have a service.

Not all areas will be able to access superfast broadband once the Northern Ireland broadband improvement project is completed. We awarded the contract for the second project to BT. That was the superfast broadband roll-out programme.

I will take up those specific issues with BT on behalf of the Member. I had a very detailed meeting with its senior officials last week at which I raised a number of concerns. It is unacceptable, particularly when, first, I have people coming to me whose children have either to be taken back to school or driven to the library just to get their homework done. Secondly, other children are experiencing extreme difficulties just managing against the curriculum, and we are raising that issue with BT. Thirdly, we have some hugely successful businesses in the area of computer-aided design (CAD). They must submit their programmes to tender, so people are literally leaving their machines on at night in the hope that, when they get up the next morning, their CAD or specific design, which they must use to tender for business, has come through. I will emphasise to BT that we cannot condone that set of circumstances into the future.