

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

## Public Bill Committee

### LIFELONG LEARNING (HIGHER EDUCATION FEE LIMITS) BILL

*First Sitting*

*Tuesday 21 March 2023*

*(Morning)*

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#### CONTENTS

Programme motion agreed to.  
Written evidence (Reporting to the House) motion agreed to.  
Motion to sit in private agreed to.  
Examination of witnesses.  
Adjourned till this day at Two o'clock.

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**not later than**

**Saturday 25 March 2023**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:***Chairs:* †JUDITH CUMMINS, SIR ROBERT SYMS

† Clarke-Smith, Brendan ( <i>Bassetlaw</i> ) (Con)	† Moore, Robbie ( <i>Keighley</i> ) (Con)
† Evennett, Sir David ( <i>Bexleyheath and Crayford</i> ) (Con)	† Morrissey, Joy ( <i>Beaconsfield</i> ) (Con)
† Fletcher, Katherine ( <i>South Ribble</i> ) (Con)	† Perkins, Mr Toby ( <i>Chesterfield</i> ) (Lab)
† Furniss, Gill ( <i>Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough</i> ) (Lab)	† Randall, Tom ( <i>Gedling</i> ) (Con)
† Glindon, Mary ( <i>North Tyneside</i> ) (Lab)	† Russell-Moyle, Lloyd ( <i>Brighton, Kemptown</i> ) (Lab/Co-op)
† Halfon, Robert ( <i>Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education</i> )	† Simmonds, David ( <i>Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner</i> ) (Con)
† Hughes, Eddie ( <i>Walsall North</i> ) (Con)	† Western, Matt ( <i>Warwick and Leamington</i> ) (Lab)
Hunt, Tom ( <i>Ipswich</i> ) (Con)	Sarah Thatcher, Bethan Harding, <i>Committee Clerks</i>
† Jarvis, Dan ( <i>Barnsley Central</i> ) (Lab)	
† McDonald, Andy ( <i>Middlesbrough</i> ) (Lab)	† <b>attended the Committee</b>

**Witnesses**

Professor Malcolm Press CBE, Chair of Universities UK's LLE advisory group and Vice-Chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University

Liz Bromley, Chief Executive Officer, Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group

Alun Francis OBE, Principal and Chief Executive, Oldham College

Ellen Thinnesen OBE, Chief Executive, Sunderland College

Julie Charge, Executive Director of Finance and Deputy Chief Executive, University of Salford

Professor Edward Peck, Vice-Chancellor and President, Nottingham Trent University

Sir David Bell KCB DL, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, University of Sunderland

Rachel Sandby-Thomas, Registrar, University of Warwick

## Public Bill Committee

Tuesday 21 March 2023

(Morning)

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

### Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill

9.25 am

**The Chair:** We are now sitting in public, and the proceedings are being broadcast. I have a few preliminary announcements. As per usual, *Hansard* colleagues would be grateful if Members emailed their speaking notes to [hansardnotes@parliament.uk](mailto:hansardnotes@parliament.uk). Please switch phones and electronic devices to silent. Tea and coffee are not allowed during sittings.

We will first consider the programme motion on the amendment paper. We will then consider a motion to enable the reporting of written evidence for publication, and a motion to allow us to deliberate in private about our questions before the oral evidence session. In view of the time available, I hope that we can deal with those matters formally without debate. The programme motion, standing in the Minister's name, was discussed yesterday by the Programming Sub-Committee for the Bill.

*Ordered,*

That—

1. the Committee shall (in addition to its first meeting at 9.25 am on Tuesday 21 March) meet

- (a) at 2.00 pm on Tuesday 21 March;
- (b) at 11.30 am and 2.00 pm on Thursday 23 March;
- (c) at 9.25 am and 2.00 pm on Tuesday 28 March;

2. the Committee shall hear oral evidence in accordance with the following Table:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Witness</i>
Tuesday 21 March	Until no later than 9.50 am	Universities UK
Tuesday 21 March	Until no later than 10.25 am	Liz Bromley, Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group; Alun Francis, Oldham College; Ellen Thinnesen, Sunderland College
Tuesday 21 March	Until no later than 10.55 am	Julie Charge, University of Salford; Professor Sir Edward Peck, Nottingham Trent University
Tuesday 21 March	Until no later than 11.25 am	Professor Sir David Bell KCB DL, University of Sunderland; Rachel Sandby-Thomas, University of Warwick
Tuesday 21 March	Until no later than 2.30 pm	Confederation of British Industry; Association of Employment and Learning Providers
Tuesday 21 March	Until no later than 2.45 pm	Sir Philip Augar
Tuesday 21 March	Until no later than 3.00 pm	Association of Colleges

<i>Date</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Witness</i>
Tuesday 21 March	Until no later than 3.00 pm	Dr Elizabeth Norton, Coventry University; Professor Sue Rigby, Bath Spa University

3. the proceedings shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at 5.00 pm on Tuesday 28 March.—  
(*Robert Halfon.*)

*Resolved,*

That, subject to the discretion of the Chair, any written evidence received by the Committee shall be reported to the House for publication.—(*Robert Halfon.*)

*Resolved,*

That, at this and any subsequent meeting at which oral evidence is to be heard, the Committee shall sit in private until the witnesses are admitted.—(*Robert Halfon.*)

9.26 am

*The Committee deliberated in private.*

#### Examination of Witness

*Professor Malcolm Press gave evidence.*

9.28 am

**The Chair:** Before we hear from the witness, do Members wish to make any declarations of interest in connection with the Bill?

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I am an honorary fellow of Birkbeck, University of London.

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I am an honorary governor of Middlesbrough College.

**The Chair:** We will now hear oral evidence from Professor Malcolm Press CBE, chair of University UK's advisory group on the lifelong loan entitlement and vice-chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University. Professor Press is appearing by Zoom. I remind Members that questions should be limited to matters within the scope of the Bill, and we must stick to the timings in the programme order that the Committee has agreed. We have until 9.50 am for this panel. Professor Press, could you please introduce yourself for the record?

**Professor Press:** My name is Professor Malcolm Press, and I am here in my capacity as chair of Universities UK's group working on the lifelong loan entitlement. I am also vice-chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University.

**The Chair:** You are very welcome, and thank you for your time. I am Judith Cummins, a Member of Parliament and Chair of this Bill Committee. We will take a series of questions from MPs. We start with our Minister.

**Q1 The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon):** Good morning, Professor Press. Thank you for being a witness. The chief executive of Universities UK said:

"A more flexible approach to higher education funding is right for learners, right for employers and right for providers."

In what ways would greater flexibility in the student finance system be beneficial to students? How do you think the lifelong loan entitlement will encourage more part-time students to take up learning?

**Professor Press:** The flexibility is welcome. It will help people to align their study with the other demands on their life, both their personal life and their professional career journey. It will make a big difference. For part-time learners in particular, the maintenance elements are very welcome, and the removal of the ELQ—the equivalent or lower qualification—rule will also be helpful, since for some people that has been a barrier to learning, particularly later on in life.

**Q2 Robert Halfon:** What will be the impact on universities? Obviously, it is hard to know how behaviours will change, but once level 6 is introduced under the lifelong loan entitlement, how do you think universities will respond?

**Professor Press:** The response of universities is not just dependent on level 6 being introduced; it is dependent on programmes that are not HTQs—higher technical qualifications—being opened up. That will be the key thing. At the moment, you will find that universities that want to offer HTQs will do so, and we very much welcome that, but the majority of students at the majority of universities are not doing HTQs, so the long-term success of this will depend on opening up flexibility for regular degree programmes. That is where the big transformation will come.

**Q3 Robert Halfon:** Given what you say about HTQs, and level 4 and 5, do you foresee much greater collaboration between universities and further education colleges once the lifelong loan entitlement is up and running?

**Professor Press:** There will have to be, otherwise people will leave just with a series of certificates. The challenge is that employers will find it difficult to understand what those things mean. The lifelong loan entitlement provides an opportunity to build up micro-credentials and to stack them into qualifications, and that really matters. That will require collaboration between institutions, whether they are further education or higher education.

**Q4 Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** Good morning, professor. I will start with questions about the funding model for higher education institutions. What impact do you think the introduction of the lifelong loan entitlement and the proposed funding model in the Bill will have on higher education providers, particularly given the declining unit of resource?

**Professor Press:** I think the LLE will open up opportunities for part-time learners, and that is to be welcomed enormously. The unit of resource is fixed, as we know. You might come on to ask me about this, but the bit I find most difficult to understand is the difference between the credit-based and the fixed-mechanism methods of calculating the fee cap. I hope you will ask me a question about that; I think that needs a bit of clarification. However, the sector will continue to face challenges when it comes to delivering at quality, given that the fee cap is frozen. Nevertheless, the opportunity to open up learning to new groups of students is welcome, and will be beneficial to business and the country.

**Q5 Matt Western:** Do you mind expanding on that difference between credit-based and fixed fees, for the benefit of us around the table?

**Professor Press:** As I understand it—forgive me if I have got this wrong—it is up to the Secretary of State to decide which method will apply. My understanding of what the Bill is trying to do is this: in a sense, we should enable any credit to be costed at a credit fee's cost, and it should be up to the providers to assess whether there is demand and supply—a demand for the learning at credit level—and whether, if that is opened up, businesses and employers will want to recognise the value of that. At the moment, it feels like a slightly false divide, and it leaves the decision as to what can and cannot be offered in a modular way to the Secretary of State. That is how I have understood it, but if I have got that wrong, I apologise.

**Q6 Matt Western:** May I pick up on the point raised by the Minister about collaboration between institutions, whether that is between FE and HE, or laterally, between HE and HE or FE and FE? You are in Manchester; you have a good cluster there. Do you think that this might work better in metropolitan, urban areas, but be much more difficult for a coastal or town-based FE college in a wider, open, more remote landscape?

**Professor Press:** For modular learning that is purely attendance-based, yes, I think you are right. I think it will be easier to operationalise in places such as Greater Manchester, and I suppose part of the learning that we will get as the LLE is phased in is an understanding of the obstacles that might exist. Then perhaps we can work out ways of addressing those in areas where there is not a large cluster of HE and FE providers. Of course, the largest university in the country is the Open University, and I think we have to think more flexibly about either blended or digital learning. There may be opportunities for institutions that are not clustered in the way that they are here in Manchester to take full advantage of partnerships.

**Q7 Matt Western:** So you would support remote learners being covered by this?

**Professor Press:** I would, because I think we should focus on the outcomes for learners, rather than the inputs to the learning.

**Q8 Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con):** Good morning, Professor Press. We are grateful to you for being with us today. I have two questions. First, do you think this approach is exciting for universities and offers real opportunities for advance? Secondly, what administrative challenges do you foresee for your university arising from the introduction of this approach and the courses offered?

**Professor Press:** Those are great questions. I really do think it is exciting, because it provides learners with the opportunity to study in a different way, and the more we can do to encourage people to focus on their professional development, the better it will be for our businesses and employers across the country.

The key challenge, I think, will be around the information, advice and guidance that people get about what the opportunity is, particularly for adult learners, who may not be in institutions that are used to providing that sort

of careers guidance. That will be a particular challenge for any institution. Who is responsible for doing all of that? There will be many partners responsible for doing that, and that really does matter.

The challenges for my university—I am answering as vice-chancellor, rather than as a UUK representative—will be the mechanics of how we do all this. We are used to recruiting, admitting, onboarding, educating and supporting with pastoral care students who come mostly for three or four-year programmes. We will have to evolve ways of doing that for students who come for 30-credit—or multiple 30-credit—modules. There will be an additional cost of doing that, so we will need to work out what we can offer that can be delivered sustainably, given the cost base. That means that there will need to be a sufficient supply of students wanting to take a particular module, and a demand from the workplace for those students to achieve a successful outcome. We will look very carefully at what we offer. This gives us a chance to tailor our provision to local demand from employers. It is not without its challenges, but it is an exciting prospect.

**Q9 Sir David Evennett:** Will this mean that you need more collaboration with other universities and colleges in your area, so that you are not duplicating, and so that you can fit together like a jigsaw puzzle, so that students and would-be students have the greatest choice?

**Professor Press:** That is exactly right. I will not digress too much, but in Manchester we have an organisation called the Oxford Road Corridor, which is the businesses and employers on the Oxford Road; they include my university and the University of Manchester. We are already looking at what Manchester Met and the University of Manchester can offer together to support the other members of the corridor, which are the Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, Manchester City Council and some private businesses, and to encourage local people to upskill. We are already trying to work together, and this makes it easier because it provides a mechanism and a funding stream that can assist with that.

**Sir David Evennett:** That is very encouraging; thank you.

**Q10 Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab):** On the number of new students who are likely to take up learning opportunities and would not have done so without this provision, how much of a game changer do you believe this legislation will be? Is it likely to bring lots of new students into learning, or will it just be an alternative option for those who would have studied? Secondly, is there anything you would like to see in the legislation that might enable it to be used by more learners?

**Professor Press:** Our university does not offer higher technical qualifications, and we do not validate providers that deliver HTQs. At the moment, the provision is targeted at a particular group of learners. Once it opens up in 2027-28, it will provide significant opportunities for both new and current learners who might want to space out their learning in a different way. My understanding—again, forgive me if I have misunderstood—is that this will develop slowly while we work out how we can operationalise it, and then there is a point at which it can open out and support many additional new learners.

**Q11 Mr Perkins:** What role do you believe there is for local employers in deciding which courses are on offer through the LLE?

**Professor Press:** While local employers will not provide the courses, there is not much point in us putting on modular learning if there is not a demand for the students who have gained that learning. We are a large and accessible provider of degree apprenticeships, and we work with over 500 employers in thinking about what sort of apprenticeships to run. I will be thinking about extending engagement with our apprentice employers, so that we can have the same sorts of conversations about putting on modular learning. It is through the providers that the employers will have the opportunity.

**Q12 Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab):** I was interested to hear what you said about the link to local businesses, and you mentioned the city council. I am particularly interested in the skills and educational landscape at regional level. Greater Manchester is one of two trailblazer mayoral combined authorities; the other is the West Midlands. What is your sense of the role for the Mayor and the mayoral combined authority in all this?

**Professor Press:** In Greater Manchester, we have a civic university agreement between the five higher education providers and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. We work very closely together. The proposed legislation gives us the opportunity to align much more closely what we can provide and the sorts of skills that the combined authority wishes to deliver, because of the benefit there will be to local businesses and employers. I am very positive about working with the combined authority. The key thing to note is that the relationships are good, the conversations take place and people know one another. That builds trust and confidence and enables us to have the right sorts of conversations that deliver positive outcomes.

**Q13 Matt Western:** Professor, could we come back to the financial implications and the administrative side of delivering this in institutions? Could you expand on how you think it will work? How much additional resource might be required in the delivery of short-length courses versus the traditional model for a higher education institution?

**Professor Press:** I have not done the modelling and am not sure whether anyone else has yet, but there will be an additional cost from doing this. It is clear that that is bound to be the case. If people are taking, for instance, four 30-credit modules rather than one level 4 or 5 programme, there will be onboarding and exiting costs associated with the student four times over compared with just once. As you will appreciate, Matt, universities spend a lot of time, effort and money on inducting, familiarising, briefing and onboarding students. We would have to do that every time a new student came to study a 30-credit module.

There will also be the costs and complexities associated with the production of the certificates, and if credit transfers were to take place with other organisations. It is going to be costly. I do not know what the exact costs are, so I am sorry but I am unable to answer your question in a quantitative way.

**Q14 Matt Western:** I understand that, and I do not think you are alone in not having done the modelling. I guess if you are talking about a 30-credit module versus

a traditional year of, say, 120 credits, it would not necessarily be four times the administrative burden. It will not be four times 30, but it could be three times or two times or something like that. Do you think that is a reasonable assumption?

**Professor Press:** It would depend on whether a student is a returning student or in a new body of students, and on their particular needs. Some students will benefit from this. Thinking particularly about our local context, something like half our students here at Manchester Met are the first in their family to come to university, about a third of them come from families with parental incomes of below £25,000, and about a third are from black, Asian or minority ethnic communities where they had other responsibilities, such as working or care.

We put a lot of effort into supporting these students. We put millions into our student hardship fund to help these students. There are all sorts of other complexities in addition to the technical aspects, including onboarding and those types of things that cost universities money. We invest in our students because we believe in their futures. It is much more complicated than a simple “three times” or “two times” kind of numerical argument. I am going to have to go away and do some work on that.

**The Chair:** Given our time constraints, we have time for just one quick last question.

**Q15 Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): First, I draw attention to my registered interest in the universities sector.

I am interested in what you were touching on in respect of the wraparound pastoral care that you offer students. I studied my masters over three years, part time at the University of Sussex, but I was a student throughout the whole of it, so the university was able to offer that wraparound care. In a modular system, in which people pay for modules and may come back in a year or two, how will you be able to offer that continuing care? Even if they have breaks of only a few months, they might still need some kind of care as a student. Have you considered how you would organise that?

**Professor Press:** Every university will have a different answer to that. My university provides close care—

**The Chair:** Professor Press, I am sorry but, given the constraints of time and the fact that we have many other witnesses, I am afraid I have to end your session there. I thank you immensely for taking the time to give evidence to our Committee.

### Examination of Witnesses

9.50 am

*Liz Bromley, Alun Francis and Ellen Thinnesen gave evidence.*

**Q16 The Chair:** We will now hear oral evidence from Liz Bromley, chief executive officer at Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group; Alun Francis OBE, principal and chief executive of Oldham College; and Ellen Thinnesen OBE, chief executive of Sunderland College. Both Liz and Alun will be appearing via Zoom, and we have Ellen here in person. For this panel, we have until 10.25 am. I ask the witnesses to please introduce themselves for the record once they appear on screen.

**Ellen Thinnesen:** Hello everyone. My name is Ellen Thinnesen and I am chief exec of Education Partnership North East, which includes City of Sunderland College, Northumberland College and Hartlepool Sixth Form.

**Alun Francis:** My name is Alun Francis and I am the principal and chief exec at Oldham College.

**The Chair:** I do not think we have Liz.

**Q17 Robert Halfon:** I will start with Alun Francis. It was good to visit Oldham College recently—thank you. What do you think will be the impact on your most disadvantaged students of their now having access to the lifelong loan entitlement?

**Alun Francis:** I am really sorry; I cannot hear the question. The sound is really poor.

**The Chair:** We will pause while the sound is sorted. I am very sorry. Alun, can you rejoin on Zoom? Apparently that will get rid of the glitches.

**Q18 Robert Halfon:** I will turn to Ellen. Good morning and thank you again for coming today. Which students do you think will stand to benefit most from the lifelong loan entitlement and from being able to do fairly priced short courses and modules?

**Ellen Thinnesen:** Ideally, if this works and drives forward a cultural change, it would certainly allow greater upskilling and retraining. For example, I know a young student who left the forces and wanted to get into the renewable energy sector. He was not able to gain any higher technical qualification experience and balance the demands of his job at the same time.

On the one hand, this will bring great benefit to students, whether they are from a disadvantaged background or not, but I am concerned about the ability about some of the students my college teaches and supports—64% are from disadvantaged backgrounds—who will need substantial careers advice and guidance to understand, for example, how you would stack credits in order to achieve a full qualification.

We also need to understand how employers will respond to this. Over a number of years there has been a significant decline in employer investment in delivery. I am concerned about how employers will be held to account to ensure that they do not continue to pass that cost on to employees who, through a credit-based system, would be entitled to their loan. I hope that helps.

**Q19 Robert Halfon:** Absolutely. Careers guidance will be essential to ensure that the lifelong loan entitlement works properly for students. Do you think the personal accounts that students will be given will make a difference? Each student will have a personal account, which will give them all the information in terms of what course they have done, how many credits they have left and what loan entitlement they have. We also very much hope that UCAS will take a significant role in that as well. Do you think that will make a difference in terms of the things you just discussed?

**Ellen Thinnesen:** I think there is a significant amount of benefit to having what will essentially be a portal for students to log on to and see what their account is showing, and for them to be able to utilise that account over the years they have available. Some thought needs to be given to quite a significant number of people who

do not have easy access to the internet, phones and IT equipment. Therefore, I take you back to the importance of strong, comprehensive investment in careers advice and guidance.

**Q20 Robert Halfon:** I think there will be a one-to-one service for those students, which is part of the Government service that exists already, but absolutely. I very much hope that not just UCAS but the National Careers Service, which we are doing a lot on, will have an important role in directing students to the training and retraining options that they might want to consider.

Do you not think that good employers will welcome this? We know that there is often not as much investment in training as they would like, but now students will be able to access short courses and modules, rather than having to do long courses. As you know, they will also have 12 entry points, rather than just four, throughout the year, which will make a difference. It may actually be that employers think this is a good idea and that a lot more employees are trained and retrained in the skills that employers need.

**Ellen Thinnesen:** I agree with you, actually. I think, from both an employer perspective and a further education college perspective, that it will allow greater agility to be able to meet the changing skills needs that are required. In Sunderland College, for example, we are evolving quite rapidly into electrification, but it is currently incredibly difficult to respond with agility and at pace in relation to the technical skills training needs that are required.

I do think we should be very careful, because the devil is always in the detail. We know that the Learning and Work Institute reported that employer investment in skills has fallen by 28% in real terms since 2005. We need to be really careful, as we culturally drive this change, that factors such as that are taken into account.

**Q21 Matt Western:** Thank you, Ellen. I am afraid you are very much the centre of our attention for the time being. I will ask specifically about quality, as I understand that you have a certain expertise in its delivery and measurement. How are we going to ensure that there is a consistent measure of quality across courses and providers with the LLE?

**Ellen Thinnesen:** That is a big question, and there are a number of answers to it. First, being very clear about what a credit is and what a student can expect to receive in that module—that credit—of learning is incredibly important. We know that the current system sets out the direct learning per credit that a student can expect to receive, as well as the demands on their indirect study time. We know that in the current system, as a student, you can go to two different but similar higher education providers that are delivering very similar modules. What you get in direct and indirect learning can vary considerably within that offer. So in the first instance, the publication of clear information for students about credits and what they can expect to receive in that module in teaching and learning is really important.

A significant amount of work needs to happen in colleges on the continued quality assurance of modularised study. For example, in a college, if we are to quality assure the teaching and learning, we will pay a visit to that programme to assess how well academic standards

are being delivered. The quality of that provision to students becomes incredibly difficult and the logistics increase significantly when modules are happening across a year at any given time.

**Q22 Matt Western:** Should the Bill have written into it some sort of definition of what a credit is?

**Ellen Thinnesen:** My personal and professional opinion is that it should. If we are defining fee limits attached to credits, it is really important to communicate to a student what a credit means. Essentially, a student wants to know a number of things. First, how much is this going to cost me? Secondly, what will I have to expend in effort and energy to complete this module? Thirdly, what will I get for that module and those credits from the institution that I am choosing to go to? So transparency about the relationship of credit to fees, and of credit to module content and what is expected within that, is very important.

**Q23 The Chair:** Thank you. Before any further questions, I ask Liz Bromley and Alun Francis to introduce yourselves—in your case, Alun, reintroduce yourself—for the record, please.

**Alun Francis:** Apologies, everyone, for the technical hitch. I am Alun Francis, the principal and chief executive of Oldham College.

**The Chair:** Again, you are very welcome. Liz, are you on mute?

**Liz Bromley:** My apologies—technical glitches endlessly. Apologies, too, for being late, which was another technical hitch. I am Liz Bromley, the chief executive of NCG, which is a conglomeration of seven colleges spread out across the country. I am sorry to have delayed you.

**The Chair:** Thank you. You are very welcome.

**Q24 Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con):** Good morning, everyone. One thing that might be introduced as part of this new credit-based method is the move away from the academic year to the course year. A number of advantages have been outlined, but do you foresee that there could be any problems with it?

**Alun Francis:** I think all these things will take a little getting used to. The FE sector, certainly, is a very flexible, agile sector, and I think people will get used to it. The more important questions will be about the standardisation of the credits, which Ellen has already talked about, so that learners know what they are getting and paying for. That needs to be absolutely transparent.

It is also important to say that in these technical areas there is a big difference between what learners pay for here and in a traditional degree, because some degrees are positional goods—they are paying for the credential as much as the content—but in these qualifications they are paying for the content. Learners therefore need to be clear that what they are getting is what it says on the tin. The other aspects, I think, we will just get used to.

**Liz Bromley:** I think it is going to be tricky. You will all be aware of industrial workforce relations at the moment, and one of the biggest gripes of the University and College Union is about workload. While we in



management and leadership roles might say, “This is something that we can work through—we can make it work and we can make it student first,” I think there will be significant resistance from some elements of the workforce, who see the downtime in the summer as part of their right, dare I say.

Yes, technically, it absolutely can be done. Universities in the country are offering multiple entry points during the year and delivering them perfectly effectively, but I think there will have to be a cultural transformation which, given that further education has been reclassified, may well be more of a hill to climb than we might wish.

**Q25 Brendan Clarke-Smith:** Thank you. Ellen?

**Ellen Thinnesen:** You may be aware that colleges currently submit their data via something called the ILR—the individualised learner record—which is a piece of software that we use across the sector. That software allows us to submit data returns in an academic year. Obviously, with the implementation of credits, and a course year, that would require a change. The college systems will enable that to happen because we are able to adjust the years of start and end dates within our academic year returns.

The consequence of that, around the course year, will be in relation to the greater requirement regarding data management and monitoring, which is quite substantial. There will be hundreds and thousands more entries for students studying on credit-based provision on a college’s ILR data return.

**Q26 Matt Western:** Thanks very much; it is good to have you all on the call this morning. Thanks for joining us. This is really aimed at Liz and Alun: how might employer demand be measured in deciding what courses should be initially rolled out under this new system? We will start with you, Liz.

**Liz Bromley:** I think that employers are learning that they have a much more proactive role to play with the further education sector now, as we have moved towards local skills improvement plans and working with employers to deliver the right qualifications to deliver the skills that they need. I think that that is another conversation as part of this journey.

I am a great supporter of the principles of this Bill in its entirety. Flexibility for the learner, lifelong learning and smaller bites of learning? Absolutely. However, as I think you would expect, I am almost always focused on, “Well, where is this going to be difficult to implement?”

I suppose that my nervousness is about employer engagement. The good employers will see it as a real opportunity to enable their workforce to better themselves educationally, to give them time off to help them do that, and perhaps to co-fund some elements of the module. It will be great. They will work with the colleges and the universities, and it will fly. Where you have less scrupulous employers, I can see this as a really good opportunity to shift the burden of paying for continuing professional development from the employer on to employees, who may wish to better themselves and therefore take out a loan.

Again, it goes back to giving IAG—information, advice and guidance—to the student but also to the employer, to ensure that nobody is exploited and the qualifications that come onstream in the pilot phase

will demonstrably have an impact for the employer and for employees who are developing themselves while working and learning.

**Q27 Robert Halfon:** Could I start with Alun Francis?

It was good to visit your college a few weeks ago; I had a wonderful visit. What do you think, in terms of FE, about the impact of the LLE encouraging disadvantaged students—particularly those from low-income backgrounds—to take up the LLE? What impact will it have on colleges such as yours?

**Alun Francis:** Thank you, and thank you for coming to visit us; it was a very enjoyable visit. We see this as part of a package of reforms. Just to give the context, Oldham is an extremely deprived area. Nearly 80% of our learners come from the bottom 20% of deprived boroughs. The level of English and maths on entry is one of the lowest in the country. We do not have a big private sector economy. That all sets the context in which we work, and different colleges will have different contexts. It is important to say that.

I think that we see this as part of a set of reforms that help to rebuild the opportunities for those who do not want to, or cannot, follow the route to university at 18 or 19, which has almost become the default route for higher skills. What we have seen is the collapse in that period of part-time learning and the old HNC/HND route. These are all parts of the process of rebuilding that.

There are issues. The point was made very well about where the balance will lie in whether the learner or the employer will pay for higher skills, but we see this as an important way of opening up people’s choice when coming back into learning. There is an issue about the balance between these routes and the workplace routes of apprenticeships and the levy—for SMEs funded through other means. We believe that a significant number of adults want the choice to come back into learning—perhaps after having a family or other gap, or having done some low-skilled work and now wanting to improve their skills—and traditionally we have offered them foundation degrees or degrees. This allows us to offer them a wider variety of choices, and we think there is demand for that.

It will take time for the market to grow. It is not a quick hit. It needs good information, advice and guidance. People need to know with confidence that what they are paying for is worth the loan. That is why sorting out the credits and engaging employers, so they know they are getting qualifications that are worth it, is of absolute importance. Addressing those three issues will make this work best, but I do think there is demand. We have a significant number of adults who do not want to or cannot go back to university for the full three years. Without this approach, opportunities will not be open to them. It is much more difficult than we imagine. While this approach will not solve the whole problem, it will help to solve a considerable part of it.

**Q28 Robert Halfon:** May I ask the other two witnesses, in relation to your institutions, about the impact on disadvantaged students? We know that more disadvantaged students than ever before are going into HE, but at some institutions more than at others, there are issues with their completing courses. What impact do you think this approach will have on disadvantaged students

in terms of module starts and higher completion rates? Would all three of you give us your views on the phased approach we are taking? We are starting with levels 4 and 5 in higher technical qualifications and employer-led qualifications, and moving on to level 6 later, so that we bring this through slowly and cautiously?

**The Chair:** Given the pressures on time, may I ask questioners and witnesses to be brief?

**Ellen Thinesen:** I think it will make a substantial difference to disadvantaged students. For example, many of our disadvantaged students have caring responsibilities or are single parents, so to be able to attend education and study flexibly, on a credit, modularised basis, will make a significant difference. Removing the equivalent level qualification regulation is really important, because many of our disadvantaged students have progressed into higher education but, unfortunately, have obtained HE qualifications that are not relevant to the technical careers that they want to go into. This measure allows those students to go back and retrain, upskill and relearn.

**Liz Bromley:** I endorse everything my colleagues have said. One of the greatest disadvantages that disadvantaged students have is lack of confidence—you know, they say, “Families like ours don’t go to university.” This is a wonderful opportunity to build up confidence that they can access the system and understand how it works. It helps them manage this notion of terrible debt because they can do it on a much smaller scale. While concurring absolutely with everything my colleagues say, I think this is just as important for young people as for those who are reskilling or coming back later in life. The phasing is really important, because it is part of getting their confidence built up at levels 4 and 5. It is a great way to enter the HTQ market, and that is the basis on which young people, as well as reskillers, can think, “I’ve done this. I could top up and get a full degree. I am in one of those families who can achieve.” I think that is terrific.

**Q29 Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I am interested in the workforce. Liz, you mentioned the need to manage the workforce; if we are to have, in effect, all-year-round entry, with people able to join at different points, will there be additional workforce costs? The workforce in the further education sector is one of the worst paid workforces in the education sector overall, because the funding for your sector has been among the worst overall. Are there some challenges, given that staff have never been paid as much as, say, university sector staff?

**Liz Bromley:** One of the biggest challenges that my colleagues and I face is that we have a finite amount of resource and it has to be split between pay costs and non-pay costs. I think in the implementation of the system we will incur significant non-pay costs in terms of our systems and administration, to get all the points that Ellen referred to about the ILR and the data collection correct. That will have a knock-on effect on our ability to raise pay.

We already have a real challenge in attracting people from industry—the industry experts—to come and teach, because they can earn so much more in industry. What would be wonderful—I would say this, wouldn’t I?—would be an injection of funding to see this through so that we can improve pay and address the workload issues. I think that would cause the workforce to embrace this far more willingly.

**Q30 Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Of course, in the FE sector you are paid less per head than people in schools or in universities—it kind of dips at a crucial time—so that is a fair point.

I wonder about the modularisation discussion we have been having, and employers. I am supportive of the measures, as I have heard you are, but is there a danger that employers push staff members to use their credits, and then when staff members actually want to make a career change their credits have all been used up because the employer has forced them to do modules that, really, they should have paid for? Should there be some provisions in the Bill to make it clear that credits are personal and should not be used for in-work professional development? Is that possible?

**Ellen Thinesen:** This is one of the areas that I am concerned about, knowing a number of employers that I work with, the constraints they are under and what they have done with their own professional development budgets. I would need to go away and think about that, but in the same sense I encourage you to think about it and explore the problem in a little more detail, because I do think it needs some consideration.

**Q31 Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Alun, you are nodding along; did you want to say anything about the safeguards that might need to be in the Bill?

**Alun Francis:** I am with Ellen on this: I have not thought it through sufficiently to give a really punchy answer to your question, but I do think it is a concern. It is about the balance of who should pay for training. It feels like there is the potential for it to skew perhaps too much towards the employer encouraging learners to pay for training that the employer could pay for. How we police that, I do not know. There is a variety of things that we might explore in more detail, but I cannot give you a really clear sense of how we would solve that problem right now.

**Q32 Sir David Evennett:** I am particularly interested in potential older students who are in employment and want to progress or change their careers. First, I welcome what you have said about business involvement, but now that we have a new framework—or will do, hopefully, when the Bill is passed—what can you do to try to get more employers involved who have not expressed interest in the past?

Secondly, you highlighted how hard you have worked, Ellen, to reach the disadvantaged, and I am sure that your two colleagues are doing the same. How are you doing outreach to those who are in employment to let them know what you offer?

**Ellen Thinesen:** In terms of the work we do with employers to help them to understand what is available, which I think is what the question was about, in a college such as mine, and I know in many other colleges, we employ business development teams—essentially employer liaison personnel—whose entire job is to work with employers and help them to understand how they can translate their workforce development needs into workforce solutions and upskill and reskill their workforce. That is easier for larger colleges such as mine; I can flex funding and use it in creative and different ways. We go back to the underfunded nature of colleges and the impact on smaller colleges, where it is incredibly difficult to do that.

On outreach, we employ a significant number of school liaison personnel, who are out working on a daily and weekly basis in schools giving careers information, advice and guidance, and delivering training to school teachers and staff. Again, I am able to do that, as I am sure Liz is in Newcastle College Group, because we are large enough to be able to reconfigure our budget to invest in resources such as that. Again, for smaller colleges, that is not always possible.

For example, my college merged with a sixth form in 2017, which now benefits from that service. Prior to the merger, it would never have been able to deliver that type of infrastructure to enable employers to understand what they need to do and what is available, and to enhance outreach.

**Q33 Sir David Evennett:** That is great, but what about those who are, say, 40 and coming back into the workforce—women returners and people who want to change careers? How will you get out in your community to encourage them, when this goes through, to take up the opportunities that your great colleges are providing?

**Ellen Thinesen:** For example, at Sunderland College, we have established a partnership with Sunderland City Council and the DWP, and we co-locate with the DWP. When a service user comes in to job-seek, the college is sitting side by side with the DWP and is able to provide that line of sight to educational routes. Similarly, we are working with employers and the workforce. We do a lot of workforce analysis.

**Q34 Sir David Evennett:** Brilliant. Are you doing the same in your areas?

**Alun Francis:** *indicated assent.*

**Liz Bromley:** *indicated assent.*

**Q35 Sir David Evennett:** That is really good news, because you are outreaching to people who are in jobs. Their employer may not be interested, but they may be.

**Liz Bromley:** FE colleges are absolutely part of the community. We have so many ways to engage with everybody in the community, from refugees to 16-year-olds and 60-year-olds who are looking for a change of career. We are absolutely embedded in our communities in ways that sometimes universities are not because they have a more global outlook. We have to be very fleet of foot. We have to use digital media, paper-based media, posters and, most of all, the art of engagement through conversation, which we do very well.

**Alun Francis:** I absolutely endorse what Liz just said. I will just add a couple of very quick observations. First, the way colleges work with employers to design and deliver curriculums is one of the most misunderstood parts of our job. We need to have more investment in doing that better. Under devolution, the Mayor's role can be very strong around convening powers, but the key to getting the skill system working well is the partnership between employers and providers, and FE colleges are key to that.

I will give you a very good example, which relates to the question that one of your colleagues asked a few moments ago about phasing. We endorsed phasing because it allows us to grow the capacity to do this well. In Greater Manchester, all 10 FE colleges have been collaborating for over 18 months, supported by the skills development fund, to develop the new higher technical qualifications in digital, and we are now moving

on to the structure. That is a really good example of how colleges have worked together, and engaged employers to come up with a product that we think will be very attractive for learners. We have collectively built our skillset, and we have supported that with marketing and so on. As you described, we will make that qualification work really well. That is a methodology that I think other colleges will emulate and copy.

Investment in the capacity of colleges to work with employers and the workforce issue are the two big challenges around this curriculum reform. Those are the two that we find hardest.

**Sir David Evennett:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** We just have time for one more very quick question.

**Q36 Andy McDonald:** On the staff stressor costs and employer engagement, is also there an additional administrative burden? Is there enough in this Bill to enable providers to cope with those additional costs?

**Liz Bromley:** I think there will be a significant administrative burden. There is every time you change. For me, the big one will be the change of the academic year to a course year. Every time you change something that changes the way we collect and report our data, the way we admit our students, the way we provide the support that they need on their journey to education, you increase the administrative burden. It sounds like a constant whinge, but in practicality I have worked in both universities and colleges, and it is always the infrastructure that supports the delivery of the core product of education that costs the money and takes the time. So yes, there will be an additional administrative burden that will be expensive, but we will get there.

**Q37 Andy McDonald:** Will it work without money, Alun?

**Alun Francis:** I think it depends on how big the administrative burden grows, because the bigger it gets, the more that might be a challenge. For me, it is difficult to say what that will look like now. There will be a change. I can also see some positives, though, in some of the changes around the course year. Some staff will prefer not to have an academic year—our apprenticeship teams already do not have an academic year. There will be pluses and minuses on that side. For me, the model—

**The Chair:** Order. I am afraid that that brings us to the end of the time allocated for the Committee to ask questions. Before we move on to the next panel, may I thank our witnesses on behalf of the Committee for your evidence. Thank you ever so much.

### Examination of Witnesses

10.25 am

*Julie Charge and Professor Edward Peck gave evidence.*

**The Chair:** We will now hear oral evidence from Julie Charge, chief executive and director of finance at the University of Salford, and Professor Edward Peck, vice-chancellor and president of Nottingham Trent University. The witnesses are appearing by Zoom, but Sir Edward Peck is not yet with us, so please bear with us and we will interrupt proceedings as we did previously. We have until five to 11 for this panel. Could you please introduce yourself for the record, Julie?

**Julie Charge:** Good morning everyone. My name is Julie Charge. I am the director of finance and the deputy chief director for the University of Salford.

**The Chair:** Thank you. I call the Minister.

**Q38 Robert Halfon:** Good morning. Do you expect students to respond favourably to the new system of limits per credit, instead of limits per year?

**Julie Charge:** The terminology of credit is something that is familiar to students in terms of understanding credits, but there is probably more work that we would need to do to link credits to what they might see as an overall course. Generally, when students are thinking about their degree, they are thinking about a period of time and the content of it, and not necessarily the link between the work effort and the credits themselves.

**Q39 Robert Halfon:** What work needs to be done, apart from careers guidance, to get students more familiar with the new system and the fact that they can do modules or short courses as well as long courses?

**Julie Charge:** It is the connectivity. Students will be familiar with modules as part of something that, when they are applying, they see described to them in a range of different ways. There is therefore some work that we as a university would need to do to make it easy for them to understand the relationship between the module of the course that they want to participate in and the credits.

I think there is another aspect here, which is that, again, as a university, we link hours to credits. If we can link all those things in a way that gives much more clarity for a student, by saying, “This is the undertaking in hours, which equates to number of credits, which is therefore part of a module, and the module then builds up your course,” that clarity will help with that sort of common understanding.

**Q40 Mr Perkins:** Do you anticipate that this will mainly be utilised by learners who are in work currently and are looking to develop their careers, whose employers are looking to develop their skills, or by learners who are either out of work or looking to change jobs or employers?

**Julie Charge:** Probably a combination of both. We did the pilot on short courses. It was a very small sample size in terms of the take-up, but 40% of the applicants and those who went on to do the short course were in the 26 to 30 age group—and it was a combination of retraining after some initial work or an initial degree, and some initial training. Then we saw a different group: the other big group, who were retraining and upskilling, was aged 36 to 40. Of that group, some were continuing their studies, but the majority were external and returning to do that training. I cannot comment on whether there was unemployment, but there were certainly two big groups, in terms of age profile, that were returning to do the pilot course with us.

**Q41 Mr Perkins:** At that stage of their careers, the prospect of taking on debt did not dissuade them?

**Julie Charge:** No—of the people who took part and were recruited to that course, 50% took up the lifelong learning loan entitlement.

**Q42 Mr Perkins:** Do you have any concerns about the delivery of this approach or how it would operate for learners who are transferring from one institution to another? Do you think that there is enough clarity on those aspects?

**Julie Charge:** I think there is some way to go to understand how that transfer will work in practice. Having a commonality of modules and credits per module helps with that level of understanding, but in terms of the qualifications that go alongside that and the end result, that is unclear at this stage. Further work would be needed to work out things like who the awarding power would be for a course set up in such a way.

There are also some other points regarding the outcome of the course. I will just reflect on what we have at the moment with a three-year course. As you work through your levels—through levels 4, 5 and 6—the complexity obviously builds, in terms of your learning and understanding. Therefore, when we work through this, we would need to be assured of the level of work and the level of learning that is occurring through those years, in order to be assured that at the end the student can be awarded at the right level, and we can maintain that quality.

**Q43 Mr Perkins:** Finally, there is currently no involvement of the apprenticeship levy in the design of this system. What role would you expect existing initiatives, like the apprenticeship levy, bootcamps and others, to have in interacting with this kind of approach?

**Julie Charge:** This could absolutely play into an apprenticeship arrangement. Again, if we as an institution can think a bit more creatively about how we could do that, it would align quite nicely with the degree apprenticeships that already exist. It would need a bit of work, but that could sit alongside. Again, it is really important to reflect on trying to make it as easy as possible for students to understand their options and the outcomes—what this leads to for them; it will be important to join some of the dots, with a wide range of skills routes they can take. This is about making it easy, having clarity, and students understanding their outcomes.

**Q44 Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab):** I want to dig a bit deeper into the workforce issues. Having worked in further education for many years, I am very aware of the problem that the FE sector is having with recruitment and retention now. Much of that is because of the pay differential between, for instance, school teachers and FE lecturers—as well as, obviously, higher education lecturers. A previous witness said that an injection of cash would be very welcome. Can this be successful if there is not an injection of cash?

**Julie Charge:** If I go back to the experience that we had of trialling the short courses, it is possible to set this up. The administration is slightly more complex. It does not sit comfortably within an individual module or modules, because that is not how universities work. We have a three-year degree; a number of costs are included to support students during that period, and some modules are more expensive than others. There is some work here.

One of the learnings was not so much about the marketing, but about the understanding of what was available and ensuring there was enough knowledge in

the marketplace for people to understand what they were coming into. In terms of cost, it is possible to do that, but there is something about the messaging of what is on offer, and making that clear for prospective students.

**Q45 Gill Furniss:** What impact might these changes have on the workforce and your industrial relations?

**Julie Charge:** Again, speaking for my institution, we do an awful lot of work with industry, so we are very linked to industry. Going back to the trial, this was very welcomed among employers—that constant reskilling. That is particularly because a lot of the jobs that we are training and upskilling our students for do not exist yet. We are trying to give them the skills for those future jobs. Therefore, it is really important to have those skills going across industry, and to provide that constant ability to learn—be that through credit bearing or non-credit bearing.

**Q46 The Chair:** We now have Professor Sir Edward Peck on the line as well. Would you like to introduce yourself for the record, Sir Edward?

**Professor Peck:** Yes, sorry about that slight technical challenge. My name is Professor Edward Peck; I have not yet been knighted—but, of course, you live in hope.

**Matt Western:** It's on the record!

**The Chair:** That's twice today. I call the Minister.

**Q47 Robert Halfon:** I should declare that I am an honorary professor of Nottingham Trent University. Good morning to you, Professor Edward Peck. You have written about the short course trial. Obviously, the numbers have been small at the moment, although the purpose of the trial is not about numbers. You said that focusing on the numbers taking the short course trial is missing the point. Could you explain why, and why you think there will be significant take-up of the LLE?

**Professor Peck:** Yes; thank you. I am happy to do that, Minister. The short course is only in its first year so far. It was trying to do something relatively quickly and it did not get as many students registering as you might have hoped, but I think it is premature to judge what might happen in years two and three of that pilot. There are other things we are trying to learn from that pilot about the regulatory regime and the capacity of the Student Loans Company to deal with a new form of loan for modules. There is a lot of learning coming out of the pilot.

In terms of demand, if you look at the stabilisation of foundation degrees—the two-year degrees—the demand for HNCs, HNDs or HTQs, and the number of advanced learner loan level 4 and 5 courses being run, there is a lot of evidence for sub full-degree level technical and vocational education. What the LLE will do is open up a whole new range of people who either want to do a particular module of that provision, or want to do it in bitesize chunks rather than commit to the whole programme at the outset. I think the numbers at levels 4 and 5 are already significant, and the LLE will increase those numbers even more.

**Q48 Robert Halfon:** You have talked about the advanced learner loan as well, and the numbers taking that up. Could you expand on that a bit?

**Professor Peck:** Yes, about 9,000 to 10,000 students each year are doing the advanced learner loans. There are programmes such as the diploma in social care and the diploma in construction site management, which are level 4 or 5 programmes. You will be able to take modules of those on the lifelong loan entitlement. There are some technical questions about how you work out the credit arrangements for advanced learner loans, but I know that the DfE is doing a lot more thinking about that. There will be further guidance and consultation on how advanced learner loans are integrated into the LLE in due course. I understand that is work in progress.

**Q49 Robert Halfon:** You have a close relationship with the Mansfield college. I want to understand how you think the LLE will impact both on HE and FE and also in terms of franchising to other institutions, as in the way that you are doing.

**Professor Peck:** We have a very close relationship, whereby we do all the training and education for level 4 and above for the people of Mansfield and Ashfield and the college does level 3 and below. That means we can design the programmes in the college to have really easy pathways of progression from level 3 to level 4 and, in future, we will start promoting the options around modular provision in the programmes we already run at Mansfield, in things like computing, construction management and those sorts of areas, where there is a real demand for skills.

If I can give you one example, we are seeing really high uptake in a level 4 course we are running in retrofit green construction. There is a massive demand. Eighty per cent. of the houses that we will live in in 2050 are already built, and the challenge is to retrofit them to be greener and more energy efficient. We do not have a workforce to do that. We now have a level 4 course in Mansfield where you can study that particular skill and, in future, you will be able to study it on a modular basis, which will open it up to a greater range of people who do not want to study that particular course full-time.

**Q50 Matt Western:** Hello Professor—good to see you. Likewise, I was very impressed by Mansfield when I came to visit. I am just interested to know your thoughts on the rationale of having a minimum of 30 credits. Do you think we should be considering a lower threshold?

**Professor Peck:** It is a challenge we faced on the Augar review, when we considered what the credit basis should be of a lifelong loan entitlement. Thirty credits hits a compromise between having a level of granularity where the Student Loans Company can give and administer loans for both fees and maintenance, and the bitesize learning that people are going to want to do. Thirty credits is notionally 300 hours of learning. I think it is the best compromise to start off with between those two different pressures that drive in different directions—the SLC to make it bigger, and maybe some of the requirements of learners for more bitesized learning to make it smaller. I think it is one of those things where we should just see how it rolls out as we implement and then change it if it seems like we have not quite got the balance right.

**Q51 Matt Western:** Okay. I know that in Canada, for example, they offer 10, don't they? That seems to be quite successful.

**Professor Peck:** Yes. You can bundle them, actually, can't you? You can sign up for three 10-credit modules. It is slightly clunkier than the Canadian system, but again, I think it will give people a chance to do smaller bitesize modules without having to take a loan out for every 10 credits, which I think would stretch the capacity of the Student Loans Company. I heard my colleague talking about transaction costs. If you start to get down to 10 credits per module, the transaction costs of recruiting the student, inducting them and so on gets quite large in relation to the fee you might get, so there is an economy of scale for providers around 30 credits as well.

**Q52 Matt Western:** Finally, can I just ask you about the future of the apprenticeship levy? It is currently not written into, or not within, this legislation. How do you see that sitting alongside the lifelong loan entitlement and the role for employers?

**Professor Peck:** Yes; I do think many employers will make use of the modular learning that the lifelong loan entitlement will promote. I think many employers will pay for their staff to do some of this upskilling and reskilling as part of investment in their training more broadly, which takes place outside the levy. I think there are some challenges at the moment about the levy and its size, aren't there? We might be getting to a point where much of the levy is now being committed around apprenticeships, which is a real success. The question is: how do we keep apprenticeships growing over the next five to 10 years? That is for a very different group of staff. Apprenticeships often are for new starters or people completely changing their career with an employer, whereas the LLE is about modules enabling people to upskill and reskill when they are already in the workforce and established in the workforce.

**Q53 Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** At the moment, students come and study part-time or via the workplace. Predominantly, who pays for those courses?

**Professor Peck:** It is a really mixed picture. Some are paid for by employers and some will be paid for by individuals who have the means to do so. Those are the two major sources that we currently accept.

**Q54 Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Do you have a "finger in the wind" kind of breakdown between own-paid for and employer-paid for?

**Professor Peck:** At NTU, the vast majority of UK undergraduate students are paid for by the Student Loans Company loans. We have some students undertaking short courses, which are professional qualifications and paid for by their employers, and about 2,000 apprentices who are, again, paid for by their employers. At the moment, it is heavily weighted towards full-time undergraduates, and I think that is the challenge that the LLE is trying to unlock.

**Q55 Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I was trying to exclude the full-time undergraduate. I am trying to get at if there is a danger that, for some of those who might already be accessing technical, part-time, upskilling skills courses that are paid for by their employers, the employers will shift that burden on to the students. My follow-up question, which I have asked to other panel members, is do you believe there are other things that can be done to

ensure that employers do not shift that burden—for example, in regulation putting things that make it clear that this is for personal, not professional, development?

**Professor Peck:** It is a really interesting challenge. One of the things that the short course pilot should tell us, even if they are relatively small numbers, is how many trainers are paying for themselves through taking out a loan with the SLC and how many are coming in through employers. There is a suggestion that there are bigger numbers doing those modular programmes but actually they are being paid for by employers. I have not seen the data on that yet, but I am trying to get those data to see if that is the case.

I think most employers would see it as part of their responsibility to pay for training their current employees. Indeed, they might want to do that in a different way from doing it employee by employee. In sufficient numbers, you would commission your own training; that happens already. It is important to ensure that we are not transferring the cost from employers to the individual employee. I think how you do that is a really interesting question, which probably bears more consideration, but there may be ways of ensuring that that does not happen.

**Q56 Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con):** Thank you so much for your evidence. As we transition into this new world, I am interested in hearing your expert view on where you are seeing immediate demand—for example, the renewable energy retrofit gets discussed regularly in Lancashire. Could you give us the top three from both of your perspectives?

**Julie Charge:** The main one we are seeing is around computer science; that is definitely top of the agenda. The other ones for us in terms of all the range of skills are things like the artificial intelligence and robotics space, and absolutely sustainability. That understanding of sustainability actually touches a lot of subjects, whether that is housing through the retrofit or others. Those are the three areas that are definitely at the top at the moment.

**Q57 Katherine Fletcher:** That is very interesting. It almost reflects the economic drivers in the Salford-Manchester complex at the moment, even before we get the National Cyber Force up at Salford. Sorry, Professor Peck, I wanted to make sure that was right. What are you saying, outside of retrofitting?

**Professor Peck:** We have not colluded, but I agree entirely with my colleague: we are seeing construction, digital manufacturing, digital engineering and computer science, particularly coding.

**Katherine Fletcher:** That is really interesting; thank you.

**The Chair:** If there are no further questions from Members, I thank the witnesses for their evidence, and we will move on to the next panel.

#### Examination of Witnesses

*Sir David Bell and Rachel Sandby-Thomas gave evidence.*

10.50 am

**The Chair:** We will now hear oral evidence from Sir David Bell KCB DL, vice-chancellor and chief executive of the University of Sunderland, and Rachel Sandby-Thomas, registrar at the University of Warwick. Sir David

will be appearing via Zoom, and we have Rachel with us in person. For the record, could the witnesses please introduce themselves?

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** Good morning, everybody. I am Rachel Sandby-Thomas, and I am the registrar at the University of Warwick.

**Sir David Bell:** Good morning. I am David Bell, the vice-chancellor and chief executive at the University of Sunderland.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for attending this morning.

**Q58 Robert Halfon:** Rachel, do you agree that without these measures, students who want to learn flexibly could be disproportionately affected by significant fee limits?

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** They could be. I think this measure is very helpful; we welcome it and the flexibility it introduces. I absolutely understand the rationale behind the Bill, which is to make sure that, financially, students will not be disadvantaged by adopting a modular approach.

**Q59 Robert Halfon:** We are introducing this in a phased way, starting off with levels 4 and 5 and then level 6. We want to get it right. It will be hard to predict behaviour change, although I think it will be very positive. What is your view of the phased approach and starting off with levels 4 and 5, particularly HTQs and employer-led qualifications?

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** I think it is really sensible, because we want to get this right. I welcome the fact that there has been a pilot, and I heard from a previous witness that lessons are already being learned from that, which is great. It is very sensible. Levels 4 and 5 lend themselves well to the modular and flexible approach, and then we can learn the lessons for level 6. At Warwick, we are very keen for it to be extended to level 7 at some stage, because we think that the postgraduate year could easily be subject to a modular approach too.

**Q60 Robert Halfon:** Do you imagine yourselves offering level 4 and 5 courses under the LLE to begin with?

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** We tend not to; we tend to offer levels 6 and 7. In conjunction with Jaguar Land Rover, we have done some apprenticeships where we do not do the level 4 and level 5, but we are the end of a pathway with one of our local college groups.

**Sir David Bell:** There are two good reasons for doing this in a phased way. One is to do with technical matters—I think we all accept that there is quite a bit of technical work to be done to get us to the point of implementation in the higher education sector in particular.

The second goes to your point about behaviours and trying to inform people about a new system. I know from my experience, and I am sure you know from yours, that people do not always behave the way that policymakers and Ministers would like them to behave. There will be quite a big communications job here. Others have already commented on the need for high-quality careers information, advice and guidance support, particularly for those who might be beyond school and college at the age of 18, are thinking of coming back into education, and want to understand how this opportunity sits alongside others.

**Q61 Mr Perkins:** I have a question for each of the witnesses. First, Sir David, prior to your current role, you were for a period the permanent secretary at the Department for Education. This legislation was originally intended to be in the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill but was then withdrawn, and we now have it as a separate Bill. We appreciate that the Government are rolling this out slowly. Notwithstanding that, what is your sense—we do not have the DFE responding to the Committee today—about how feasible and likely it is that the system will be in place by 2025-26, and about any barriers there might be to that operating properly?

**Sir David Bell:** I should probably remind the Committee that my experience of the Department is now long out of date, so I am not really in a position to comment on the current DFE. What I would say, however, is that the Department and the civil service more generally have always been used to managing these complex kinds of changes, so I have confidence there. I also know—this is an important part of the whole process—that the Student Loans Company is busily engaged in making all the preparations necessary to make the Bill a success. Looking in from the outside, I am confident that this will happen. Going back to the previous point, I think the time this will take is a good thing. Sometimes I am impatient about a slower pace of change, but in this case it is a very sensible and pragmatic approach.

**Q62 Mr Perkins:** Clearly, success partly depends on the number of institutions at which students will be able to access these courses. Rachel, will you spell out the incentives for higher education institutions to put on courses in a much more bite-sized model, and the barriers to them doing so?

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** I am glad you raised that because I think there are obstacles. I am not saying this to obstruct the policy; I am actually trying to be constructive. It will introduce a lot more complexity into the higher education system, both for the students and for the institutions, and at lots of levels. It will kick off with uploading the courses on to the UCAS site. That might not seem complex, but the modules, how they all fit together and how they potentially fit with other institutions' modules will actually be complex. Then, it is about how we market that clearly, because as was said, rightly, communicating clearly with prospective students is key to the success of the system.

There will need to be a lot of advice and guidance given to prospective students, who will want to know whether their prior learning will be taken into account and whether what they have done before and are proposing to do will actually form a coherent structural programme that will be recognised. You will then have the admissions. We hope that there will be a greater volume of admissions, but each of those admissions will have to be looked at very carefully on an individual basis, because of the matters of recognising prior learning and so on.

Data is another big and complex area. At the moment, the Data Futures programme is trying to get rid of the need to return data on modules, whereas this will obviously need the return of data on modules. There is a tension there that needs to be resolved. I could easily see it going into an extra framework of data returns, so that will be an issue. There is a big issue with the student information technical services, called SITS—I was going to say “fondly called”, except it is not—which is very

much programmed on a system's architecture, which is based on programmes that comprise modules, but is at that programme level. That will have to be completely refigured, which will be timely and costly.

Of course, you then have the issue of services and all the wraparound support services that we offer students, which will see an increase in volume. There are also tricky issues about how long students will have access to them. Do we know when they leave the university; how do we know when they go elsewhere for university; and do they have some sort of associated student status for a while? None of us knows the answers, but they are all things that need to be worked out. I say this because there is little by way of incentive for a business case at the moment. While I completely understand—going back to the first question—not wanting to provide a disincentive for students to do a modular course, there is a business disincentive in terms of the cost to the higher education institutions, unless they are already doing lots of modular provision.

**Matt Western:** Rachel, I am keen to understand how you see this fitting within the current regulatory landscape for higher education, particularly in the light of what it is fair to describe as an increased regulatory burden on the sector in recent years.

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** I think there will have to be differentiation between the two systems. There are quite a lot of concepts in the current OfS regulatory system that sit unhappily with this new system. For example, the concept of the completion of an award is key to the current system, but of course a student might not be completing an award as such when they are doing a module at one's institution, so that needs to be changed. In the current degree system, there is quite an emphasis, for perfectly understandable reasons, on continuation and the importance of having a student continue for a year from the beginning of the course. Quite a lot of judgment is implied in that continuation being a good thing, whereas actually whether or not a student completes a module within or outside a year is a neutral thing, judgment-wise, in a modularised approach.

We also have the question of who will “own” the student in terms of graduate outcomes. Who can claim success, or to whom can success be attributed? I am reminded of that lovely quote of how success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan. I think there might well be many fathers for these students. Again, none of these things is insurmountable by any means, but they all need to be thought about in an intelligent manner.

**Q63 Matt Western:** Who do you think is best placed to be providing the advice and guidance? Is it down to the individual institutions, or is there a role for the OfS?

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** I do not think it should necessarily be the OfS, because that is not its area of expertise. This is really tricky. An institution can do some advice and guidance, and obviously, if a student is going to do all of the modules within an institution, that is comparatively simple. It is trickier when it is inter-institutional, which is the purpose and intention behind this.

On an individual basis, when a prospective student comes, there will be quite a lot of work for the university looking at what that student has already got and their prior learning, recognising it, and seeing how it might

fit into one of their degrees or whatever. However, in a way that does not help the student very much at the beginning of the journey, because they might well have embarked on a kind of pick and mix, which might not amount to something that will end with a degree, if that is what the student wants. I do think that there is a sector-wide gap in terms of information, advice and guidance, and I think it is completely key to get that right for the success of this policy.

**Q64 Matt Western:** Sir David, may I put to you a question that has been put to previous witnesses about the funding situation across the sector? Given that you have worked in the Department for Education and also given your role today, what do you see as the risks to the sector in terms of an additional financial burden?

**Sir David Bell:** Rachel has articulated very clearly some of the additional costs that will come to the sector. There is also a question, going back to the issue of demand, about this kind of course. Some of the questions that we always ask ourselves at institutional level when we are asked to put on new programmes are: what is the demand, what are the costs of implementation, and what is the likely return? We have to think in that way. I think this is why the focus on careers information, guidance, pathways and so on will be very important, because if I might use a Scottish-ism here, I think the case for demand is not proven.

**Q65 Matt Western:** Sorry to cut across you. I think that Lord Johnson—Jo Johnson—was calling for a further pilot. Do you think that would have been a good idea?

**Sir David Bell:** The risk is, of course, that you pilot and you pilot and you pilot, and you never get there; you never get to the destination, as it were. We are part of the Department's pilot on a higher technical qualification, and that will be one of those courses presumably that would be subsumed in the period between, say, 2024-25 up to 2027. So it will be quite interesting to see how that works.

The problem we have, and I think that goes back to something that Rachel said, is that we will be operating this at considerable scale, because if we are going to do that modularisation and upload it all and make it all available, that is a really big job. It is a big technical job, but I am also worried, ironically, about choice. I am slightly concerned that people are overwhelmed by choice of modules and other kinds of study.

We also know from our previous experience—one might say our current experience—that asking careers or guidance professionals to be absolutely up to speed with new qualifications or new routes to qualifications is quite a task, and therefore there is a big training and development opportunity requirement for people who are going to be advising those who might want to follow this more modular route.

**Q66 Matt Western:** Thank you. I have a specific question, perhaps for you, Sir David. We heard a moment ago from Ellen Thinnesen from Sunderland College, and she was talking about just how well the college works not only with the university, but also with the Department for Work and Pensions and so on. In terms of what this Bill might offer, it is about getting people back into work by reskilling, retraining them and so on,



which is terrific. However, in the Bill we are looking at a cut-off at age 60—I speak personally now—so do you think that, given the fact that retirement ages are getting later and later, that should be more flexible, or higher?

**Sir David Bell:** I am not sure whether I am required to declare an interest in this matter as well. *[Laughter.]*

**Matt Western:** As much as me!

**Sir David Bell:** It is a really interesting question, and I must say that that is one of the things that slightly surprised me about the cut-off. There has been a lot of debate recently about trying to encourage more people back into the workplace post 50. And I would have thought that the opportunities afforded by the LLE would be ideal for people who might have trained in one area and then, later in life, decided they want to do something else. A module would be absolutely the right size of qualification for them, so I wonder whether that is something that could be thought about.

I mean, it's that old cliché that 70 is the new 50, as it were. So I think there is probably some consideration worth giving to that 60-to-70 age range, because I think we will see more and more people, for one reason or another, continuing in employment. And if they continue in employment, presumably they will want to continue to upskill and enhance their qualifications.

**Q67 Katherine Fletcher:** This is a very interesting debate. In terms of being overwhelmed by choice, perhaps I could start with ladies first again, but I would like both of your opinions. Is there a bigger role for employers? If I am bowling along and I have decided that my biology degree is not relevant to being an MP and I want to get a level 4, 5 or 6 qualification to be an MP—I look forward to that training course, by the way—I will come along, but I will be doing it because I am trying to gain a qualification that either helps me with existing employment or that helps me to gain new employment.

I am interested in what you will do to engage with employers, so that rather than people being overwhelmed by choice there are pathways that kind of say: “If you get to this level”—is that something that can be set out in advance? Also, are you set up to then track outcomes? That is, this suggested pathway has taken 20 people through it, and 20 people have gone on to work with Jaguar Land Rover, even when they were not employees, having gained this qualification. Is that something that you are set up to do—almost to narrow the choice of modularisation to aid industry?

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** We do a lot of work with employers, and we work with them a lot on degree apprenticeships, as you would expect, but, especially in our business school and in our Warwick Manufacturing Group, we work with employers to design courses that will be good for them. That would just be a variation on that. We would track the learning outcomes, as we call them. Again, that sits slightly oddly with this modularisation, but again, it should be able to be worked through. Those learning outcomes pertain to the student and the student's progression. We do track the students, partly because they are our alumni and partly because of graduate outcomes and what they are doing. What we might not do, although we would probably measure it by repeat business, so to speak, is track how the employer thinks that it has helped the student.

**Q68 Katherine Fletcher:** Fair, yes; I can see that is different, but a student coming in in five years' time when this is established could say, “Well, if I go through this modularisation programme and come out without a qualification, then 80% of the other people who have done it have gone and got a job in AI coding,” or whatever.

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** Because we tend to do this with specific employers, it is easier to do it within that employer. What we can say to them is, “Well, this employer did this.” That would suggest that if you do it with a similar type of employer, it should help, but without a specific conversation with that employer, you can use it only by way of analogy.

**Q69 Katherine Fletcher:** I can see how there would be a feedback loop here for almost honey-potting around in educational institutions in key industries.

Sir KCB Bell—I always start with flattery; I find it safer. Would you track outcomes to help people make informed choices to narrow down that modularisation overwhelm?

**Sir David Bell:** Yes, and I think we probably need to draw a distinction, don't we, between the individual making a choice under LLE to follow a particular route or pathway of study and the employer working with the employee to put together a programme that is very much designed to support the employer's business objectives. In both cases, you would be able to say either to the individual or to the employer, “If you put together this little package of modules, that would meet your needs.”

One of the benefits is that the LLE will not be the only show in town, if I can put it that way, because there will be employers who continue to say, rightly, that they want to offer the apprenticeships route and employers who say, “Actually, we want something that is more of a short-course opportunity, rather than more formal and modularised at 30 credits.” This is part of a suite of opportunities. Therefore, maybe it only emphasises the point even more that we have to provide good guidance to people so that they can understand the best way through.

**Q70 Katherine Fletcher:** Yes, I am very interested. Say I was to take advantage of these loans and invest my time and hard-earned money in moving from one job sector to another via the modular course, which allows me still to put food on the table while I am learning new skills, would you be tracking the successful outcomes of the pathways that those individuals had taken? I accept it is different for employers.

**Sir David Bell:** Absolutely, and I suspect that part of the regulatory regime will require us to do that. It is entirely appropriate, isn't it, that we will have to demonstrate that. However, I think Rachel made an interesting point earlier about there being perhaps a number of players involved. Let us take the example of credit transfer arrangements; we can make that work. Someone might start a module in one institution, such as a further education college, and might then go to a university and go on to another university. That needs to be sorted out, but I would have thought from the point of view of the public purse—never mind what institutions want to be able to demonstrate—you would have to have a mechanism for tracking outcomes and successful outcomes.

**Q71 Andy McDonald:** Very briefly, on the issue of cost, we have talked about the cost that may be visited on the student and the administrative cost on the institutions. I wonder whether either of you have given any thought to how the unspent apprenticeship levy fund might be utilised to mitigate some of those costs, either individually or collectively. Rachel, would you like to start?

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** It would be another source of funding if the levy were expanded outside apprenticeships, because currently it is only for apprenticeships. If that were to be amended to have wider training involved, that would be another source of funding. I do not really think it helps the university very much, because obviously the purpose of this legislation is to prescribe how much it can charge, but it could help the prospective student if the employer used the levy to contribute in order to reduce the size of the loan that the prospective student takes out.

**Andy McDonald:** Sir David, any thoughts?

**Sir David Bell:** That is a policy choice about the allocation of apprenticeship levy funding, but I would have thought that one of the tasks for policy makers is to try to ensure that we have a coherent system of funding that supports all the different routes, including apprenticeships, those who would want to study under the LLE and so on. That is important, but I do not really think it is for us to comment on the allocation of apprenticeship levy funding.

**Q72 Andy McDonald:** You appear to be somewhat sanguine about heaping yet further choice and complexity into an already complex system. Is that a genuine reflection of your concerns?

**Sir David Bell:** I do think it gets a bit more complicated, and we are in the process of trying to work out how we can address those complexities. I would go back to the point that Rachel made. I have not had the chance to say it, but I too want to say that this is a really positive development if it is giving people more opportunities to undertake additional education at different stages of life. That is a very good thing. We want to make it work, and if it is a bit more complicated than perhaps the system has been up until now, there is an onus on all of us to ensure that we provide the right kind of guidance and support. There are all kinds of players in that regard. Reference was made to the work in Sunderland through DWP, which is a really good source of advice. There is the university or college itself, and independent advice and careers guidance. All of that has to connect, so that people get the right advice in what I think will be a slightly more complicated system under this reform.

**Q73 Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I am interested in the additional costs for institutions. Rachel, you touched on that. Do you think there need to be some additional payments to institutions to incentivise them to do this? Who should look after students between modules? Who should offer that ongoing support? Should it be the institution, or should there be another body?

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** That is a really good question. Let me do the first part first, because that is a slightly easier question. I do not want to appear as if I am putting out a begging bowl and saying, “Yes, please—more money,” but I do think it would help. There are certain

one-off costs, such as the reconfiguration of SITS. Seed funding happens quite a lot. Little pilots are started, and a little bit of money is given to get a bit of resource in. Everybody gets used to the fact that it is there, and then they just keep it. Universities are very good at responding to that initial incentive, absorbing it and making it part of their resource base as they move forward, so I think that that would be welcome. If we want this policy to take hold, which we do, it would be money well spent.

The second part of your question is really tricky. I know that policy makers very often go to the most nefarious possible outcome: the wily student who might have mental health problems and thinks, “Aha! I can get a far better service if I do a 1,000 module at Warwick. I’ll just stay on for ages and ages, and get great-value mental health services that are not publicly or privately available for that money.” That would not be a good outcome. However, I am a firm believer that most people are not nefarious, and we should be regulating for the majority of players with good intent rather than evil intent.

There has to be a cut-off at some point, otherwise somebody could do one module but be able to access the library and take up library space forever and ever. On whether somebody should hold things in between, I do not quite know who that would be. There probably needs to be a bit of a time-bound associated status. You do not want to just chuck somebody out the door as soon as they have finished a course. That is not what universities want—universities want stickiness with their graduates and students—but nor do we want loads of library space blocking. There should be a bit of a time-bound lapse.

**Q74 Robert Halfon:** I want to ask you both about credit transfer. It will obviously be for the institution to decide on this—where people move their courses if they decide to transfer. There are good examples of this taking place already, as you well know. How will this work in practice? Will it be embraced by colleges and HE institutions?

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** As you rightly say, we do credit transfer sometimes, but it tends to be in the minority of students. The 2+2 course is a good example of that—generally students will do two years at a college and come to us for the final two years—but we know that college well, we know what they are teaching and we know the standards the students get to at the end of their two years at college, and that makes for an easy progression to us. That makes it much easier. There will be a lot more work if this really takes off, because we will have to get to know, assess and understand that prior learning in order to be able to recognise it. It would be a short-sighted kindness to allow a student who is not properly prepared to come on to a module if they have not reached the standard needed for that module. It might seem a kindness, but it does them no favours at all.

**Sir David Bell:** Making credit transfer work is a very important requirement if the lifelong loan entitlement is to work, because people will want to move between institutions. If we hold the mirror up to ourselves, I think universities also have to be a bit more liberal in this regard; we can at times be a bit sniffy when it comes to the qualifications that have been accrued in another

institution. As Rachel said, there are a lot of good examples of this happening where you know your partner institutions. As a sector, we have to show that we are engaged in this by having better credit transfer arrangements without putting enormous bureaucratic hurdles in the way of students, who think, “Why can’t I transfer from this place to that place?”

**Q75 Matt Western:** We heard from a previous panellist about the importance of confidence in any new scheme. I think about T-levels, which have not really taken hold in the way the Government had perhaps hoped. If we are looking at 2025-26 as the year that this system may start, how can the Government make sure that there is the massive take-up to ensure it is a success?

**Rachel Sandby-Thomas:** The T-levels example is an interesting one. The take-up has been disappointing, but most people I talk to do not really know what T-levels are. It is all about communication and understanding. There needs to be a massive, well-planned communications campaign. It will be trickier with this policy, because it is more complex than T-levels. There

have to be lots of lessons learnt from T-levels and the fact that take-up has been disappointing, and those lessons can be applied to this. It will be about communication, communication, communication—and, just when you think you have drenched people, communicate a bit more. We know what needs to be done, but sometimes it is a bit hard to do it.

**Sir David Bell:** We have had experience before with things such as accelerated degrees, where everyone thought, “Oh, there will be massive demand,” but that really did not materialise, so perhaps the lessons to learn—

**The Chair:** Order. I am afraid that that brings us to the end of the time allocated to the Committee to ask questions, and indeed the end of this morning’s sitting. On behalf of the Committee, I thank our witnesses for their evidence.

11.25 am

*The Chair adjourned the Committee without Question put (Standing Order No. 88).*

*Adjourned till this day at Two o’clock.*

