

## Minerva People – Congratulated and discussed at the Scottish Parliament

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Alasdair Morgan):** The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S3M-7578, in the name of Elaine Murray, on Minerva People Ltd, modern apprenticeship learning provider of 2010. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates Minerva People Ltd of Dumfries on winning the 2010 Modern Apprenticeship Awards in the Learning Provider category on 9 December 2010; considers that Minerva People Ltd is dedicated to giving young people the opportunity to work and train at the same time by providing training in management, childcare and hospitality; considers that this provides a benefit to local businesses and the local economy, and believes that the provision of skills and employment through the modern apprenticeship programme is essential to the recovery of the Scottish economy.

17:03

**Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab):** I do not think that I have had the opportunity to welcome Angela Constance to her ministerial role, so I offer her my congratulations.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to celebrate a local success story, which ties in to the wider successes in, and importance of, vocational training and the modern apprenticeships scheme in Scotland. Minerva People started out as Minerva Training—a partnership between Tricia Hunter and Rosemary Slack. I welcome Tricia Hunter and her husband to the public gallery. Rosemary Slack retired from her post last year and is currently on holiday—I hope that she is somewhere rather sunnier than Edinburgh.

Rosemary and Tricia had both taken time out from work to bring up their children before returning to work part time in the training department of a small business in Dumfries. Prior to having their families, Rosemary had worked in her family's shoe retail business and Tricia had been a medical secretary. They started off by training themselves in the new information and communications technology of the time—things like fax machines, for those of us who remember that time. They took teaching qualifications and moved on to set up a new training centre for another local organisation. They then branched out and launched their own business in November 1998.

In the beginning, Minerva offered training in administration and office skills to

skillseekers and modern apprentices, developing its own customised vocational awards, but it did not take Rosemary and Tricia long to start to expand their company.

In 2000, they branched out into recruitment. By the following year, the company had outgrown its premises and moved to larger premises—called Queensberry house, interestingly enough—in Dumfries High Street, adding an information technology suite and a training facility and becoming approved as a branded learndirect Scotland centre. Over the next four years, management, business start-up, retail, learning and development, call handling and IT were added to its mix of training opportunities.

When Minerva became a limited company, Tricia and Rosemary purchased the Pitman Training franchise for Dumfries and Galloway. That was rapidly followed by approval as a City and Guilds centre offering child-care qualifications.

In 2008, Minerva joined the Scottish Training Federation, working with Dumfries and Galloway Council to offer courses in developing management excellence. The following year, it was approved by Skills Development Scotland to offer training for work, and by the Scottish Qualifications Authority to offer management SVQs, or Scottish vocational qualifications. Last year, it was approved to deliver vocational qualifications in administration, management, customer service, learning development and child care, and it diversified further into hospitality.

Minerva currently employs 10 full-time, one part-time and four freelance workers. More than 1,600 trainees have received certificates, and more than 650 people have been helped into work. Those are pretty impressive statistics in a rural area.

Minerva has received many nominations and awards since 2000. It was a Scottish finalist for training centre of the year in 2003, for training provider of the year in 2004, for best practice in marketing in 2007 and for a learndirect Scotland award for best practice in 2008. Last year, it won the learning provider of the year category at the modern apprenticeships awards. Sadly, the bad weather at the end of the year prevented anyone from Minerva from going up to Glasgow to accept the award, although I understand that it was delivered to the company this week.

Moreover, many of Minerva's learners have received individual accolades. One of its learners won the young learner of the year accolade in 2006. The same year, the then Minerva Training produced the first Scottish student to achieve the new management level 4 national vocational qualification, the first Scottish student to gain the new administration level 3 award and the second Scottish student to achieve that award at level 2. Seven learners have been selected as learndirect Scotland champions, and one reached the Scottish final in September 2008.

One of Minerva's business clients—the Buccleuch Arms hotel in Moffat—won the small employer category in 2009 for its work with Minerva in developing its workforce.

Minerva People states that its vision is to be the

“training and recruitment company that best understand the people and organisations within our region and exceeds their expectations though providing best quality, innovative services which are customer focused to ensure we are instinctively the first choice.”

I am delighted to have had a long relationship with Minerva. It was “instinctively” my “first choice” when a valued staff member had to take several weeks off work to recover from a tricky operation on her arm. Minerva recommended an excellent temporary replacement, who fitted in to our office extremely well. She went on from her temporary post with me to join the planning department of Dumfries and Galloway Council. I think that she fitted in pretty well elsewhere too, because she is now Tricia's daughter-in-law and recently made her a granny for the first time.

In 2004—I was speaking to Tricia about this today, and we think that it was in 2004—Tricia and Rosemary asked me whether they could bring some of their trainees up to the Scottish Parliament to celebrate their awards. I was pleased when, at fairly short notice, I was able to recruit the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning at the time, Allan Wilson; the then convener of the Enterprise and Culture Committee, Alex Neil; and Alex Fergusson, who was not Presiding Officer at the time, but was the MSP for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale. They all helped to present awards and to make the occasion especially memorable for the trainees. I think that Tricia and Rosemary must have enjoyed the trip, as they have been kind enough to invite me to present awards at subsequent ceremonies.

It will not surprise members to learn that when Tricia discovered that Dumfries and Galloway was not getting its fair share of the additional modern apprenticeships that had been negotiated by Andy Kerr and his team through the 2009 budget, she simply did not put up with it. She and I made phone calls and the situation was rectified fairly quickly and the funding was used successfully.

Minerva has been appreciative of the Government-funded initiatives that have supported it over the years. Indeed, in a recent email, Tricia urged me to mention to my party

“the successes the additional modern apprenticeship places have had down here”.

Our skills spokesperson, David Whitton, will speak later. I do not think that he needs any convincing about the modern apprenticeship programme. Indeed, there is cross-party support for continuation of the programme in future years.

Minerva People Ltd is a fantastic example of lifelong learning in action. Rosemary and Tricia started to develop their skills when they began to work together in 1990. They worked for and achieved qualifications that enabled them to set up and grow their own business. That business has allowed more than 1,600 people in Dumfries and Galloway to participate in lifelong learning, to develop their confidence and to prepare themselves to achieve new opportunities. That is a great story. Two women who returned to work after they had both had eight years out to look after children saw and seized an opportunity, from which they created something.

When the recession is over, Dumfries and Galloway—and the rest of Scotland—will need a well-trained, skilled and confident workforce to enable our economy to recover and grow. Companies such as Minerva People Ltd will train and encourage that workforce.

Minerva was the Roman goddess of—among other things—wisdom, commerce and magic. The company is well named, because its story is a combination of all three of those qualities.

17:11

**David Whitton (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab):** I congratulate my colleague Elaine Murray on securing the debate and Minerva People on its achievement. As she said, none of the Minerva team could make it to the modern apprenticeship awards ceremony in Glasgow because of the weather, so I hope that tonight's debate and a mention in the Parliament will make up for that.

Training young people has been, is and will be a key part of Labour's economic strategy. The announcement today that the number of 16 to 24-year-olds who are out of work in the United Kingdom has reached almost 1 million—the highest number since records began in 1992—should give us all pause for thought.

The UK coalition Government is being urged to think again about ending the future jobs fund, which is due to run out at the end of March. That fund is one good way of getting over-18s into the job market. Scottish Labour has said that it will launch a Scottish future jobs fund to create 10,000 places if we succeed in the forthcoming election in May.

As Elaine Murray said, for the past two budgets, we have argued for increased investment in modern apprenticeship places. I am pleased that the Scottish National Party Government eventually agreed with us and provided those places.

In the awards in which Minerva won the learning provider category, a host of other award winners covered a number of trades and professions. We should congratulate them all. One winner whom I will single out is my constituent Suzanne Murray from Kirkintilloch, who came top in the non-traditional sector category for her outstanding work in a BT call centre. I commend to the chamber my motion S3M-7591, “Call of Success from Kirkintilloch”, which acknowledges her award.

Training and education are the key to a job, and a job is the key to breaking out of the vicious cycle of unemployment and poverty. Companies such as Minerva help youngsters to break out of that cycle and should be commended for that. Terrific individuals such as Suzanne Murray, my constituent, show what someone can achieve with backing from their colleagues and their employer, and if they get training in the right place and at the right time.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call John Park.

17:13

**John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** That caught me unawares, Presiding Officer—I thought that you would call someone else.

I congratulate Elaine Murray on securing the debate and Minerva People on winning its award as an apprenticeship provider. On the list of people who were up for modern apprenticeship awards are many organisations and companies with which I have been involved or to which spoken in the past three or four years and which all play their part. I have had the benefit of visiting the facilities of Scottish Gas and City Building (Glasgow) to see at first hand the difference that what they have on site can make for young people who are looking into apprenticeships and for people who have been in work and are considering adult apprenticeships.

I am keen to highlight one runner-up for an award: Jamieann Mielnik, who lives in Lochgelly in Fife. She works for Superdrug in Dunfermline. When I spoke to a Superdrug representative at an event that was held in the Parliament and heard that Jamieann was up for an award, I was keen to meet her and find out a bit about her experience.

It was clear that as an adult apprentice, Jamieann had been given an opportunity to get skills in the workplace that she might not have got had funding not been made available for adult apprenticeships. She had worked in Superdrug for nine or 10 years before she started a modern apprenticeship. She was someone who had all the experience but none of the qualifications to back it up. The

apprenticeship represented a huge opportunity for her.

When I sat down with Jamieann on Friday, I learned a lot about what she has been through over the past few months. It was quite clear that she has gained a lot of confidence and that that has changed her outlook on work. She is someone who had been in work for a while, who enjoyed her job and who saw it as one that she intended to stay in for a good while, but now she is thinking about developing herself outside the workplace and doing further qualifications while in work, perhaps through the modern apprenticeship framework, that will help her to move on in her career. Doing a modern apprenticeship has been a great, life-changing experience for her, and from speaking to some of her colleagues, I know that the recognition that she has received has been a great source of pride for her family. We do not always recognise that, behind all the figures and targets on apprenticeship places, there are real-life experiences that make a big difference to people.

The awards show that not just the traditional sectors but the non-traditional sectors have done really well with apprenticeships. When we talk about apprenticeships, people think that we are talking about areas such as engineering, joinery and construction, but the retail sector, which Jamieann Mielnik is employed in, is an extremely important sector to the economy and one in which, in the current economic climate, if the Scottish Parliament had not agreed to the provision of support for such activity and if the Scottish Government were not providing funding for it, those training opportunities might not exist. If that were the case, I think that large high street companies in the retail sector such as Superdrug would continue to train people, but it is important that employees get qualifications that are marketable outside the workplace and not just ones that enable them to stay with one employer, and that is what a modern apprenticeship is all about.

The other important point about large high street employers, particularly those in the retail sector, is that they have the capacity to provide support to smaller independent retailers. We should look into that a bit more. It has been possible for companies with large training centres in traditional areas such as construction and engineering to provide training to supply-chain businesses in their sectors. We need to look at the development of similar arrangements in the retail sector. I think that more people like Jamieann Mielnik will have huge opportunities to gain qualifications and move on with their careers.

I again congratulate Elaine Murray on securing an important debate, Minerva on its achievement and everyone who was up for an award that night. I know that the event was not all that it could have been because of the weather, but it is important to recognise the good work that goes on throughout the year that is making a difference for the hundreds of young people and adults across Scotland who are on apprenticeships.

17:18

**The Minister for Skills and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance):** Today's debate highlights the importance to Scotland of the modern apprenticeship programme. From what Elaine Murray, John Park and David Whitton have said, it is clear that there is little doubt that, across the political parties, we all recognise the value of Scotland's apprenticeship programme. Apprenticeships are about capitalising on the aspiration of people all over Scotland and channelling it into creating a more successful economy.

Through the hard work and dedication of training providers such as Minerva People and hundreds of others across Scotland, we can convert aspiration into genuine achievement. That is why I am delighted to have the opportunity to close the debate, to support Elaine Murray's motion and, like others, to thank her for securing the debate. I warmly congratulate Minerva on its success at the modern apprenticeship awards in December. I, too, am sorry that the Minerva team did not get to accept its award on the night.

Like Elaine Murray, I was struck by the story of Minerva, which is one of two women returning to work. We should always celebrate success, particularly when we have an opportunity to celebrate the success of women in business.

The other thing that struck me about Minerva's story was that, although it has embraced technology through using e-profiles, Facebook, blogging and all the rest of it, it has not done so at the expense of the personal touch. I am interested to note that each and every apprentice is visited regularly on site at their workplace

I would also like to take the opportunity to congratulate all the other winners and nominees who participated in the awards ceremony. I will spend a moment or two sharing with the chamber some of their remarkable stories and testimonies.

One of the winners was Thomas Rennie, who overcame a devastating bereavement to be selected to go forward to WorldSkills 2011 as a member of the United Kingdom squad. After sending more than 100 letters, Carrie Crawford chose to move 150 miles to start her dream job in fabrication welding. Carrie and Thomas are great examples of the determination of our young apprentices the length and breadth of Scotland. Of course, modern apprenticeships are not just for young people. Barry Adamson, the winner in the over-20 group, was able through the MA programme to change direction in his career after redundancy.

We also have a number of companies who have shown long-term commitment to the modern apprenticeship programme, such as Dales Engineering Services in Peterhead, which has been involved in the programme for 15 years and whose former apprentices are now making a significant contribution to the business at

all levels. I also make a special mention of the apprentice of the year, Thomas Davidson, who has balanced caring commitments to his family with an extremely successful progression through his apprenticeship with the Scottish Rugby Union.

Those people are all committed to the apprenticeship programme and they deserve our commitment in return. The Scottish Government has demonstrated its commitment in maintaining high numbers of apprentices and making another 20,000 opportunities available this year, the majority of which are targeted at young people, although not exclusively. The Government has committed significant amounts of money to modern apprenticeships, investing around £60 million. We have invested at that level because we have made the apprenticeship programme a key component of Scotland's strong economic recovery.

As we have moved through the recession we have worked hard to ensure that apprentices whose employers run into difficulty have the opportunity to complete their training with an alternative employer. That is why we introduced and extended the adopt an apprentice and safeguard an apprentice schemes. The response of employers across Scotland to that has been superb and we have been able to support 1,000 apprentices whose apprenticeships were at risk.

I listened with interest to Mr Whitton's preference for retaining the future jobs fund at the UK level. He also spoke of his commitments here in Scotland. We have to be absolute in our commitment to tackling youth unemployment. The figures that were released today show that youth unemployment in Scotland is now at 17.9 per cent. Although that figure has plateaued and is marginally lower than the UK figure of 18.2 per cent, we are still talking about 70,000 unemployed young people in Scotland. The consequences of youth unemployment for individuals and for communities can have a long-term and devastating impact.

In tackling youth unemployment, the modern apprenticeship programme has distinct strengths, such as the employed status in the framework, the long-term training opportunity that it provides for young people, the opportunity that it gives them to improve their skills significantly and the fact that it gives them a qualification that they can be proud of. That is something that John Park spoke about eloquently: the pride that people who have completed an apprenticeship have in the qualification that they receive.

The modern apprenticeship programme is well received, recognised and supported by employers, and we should be pleased that the most recent figures show a 70 per cent successful completion rate. We have a credible vehicle for moving ahead and tackling youth unemployment more effectively. I am also, of course, pleased that Elaine Murray secured more apprenticeship opportunities in her area—that is very important.

The apprenticeship programme is a collective effort. That is one of its strongest attributes. The programme requires commitment from participants, employers, training providers, funding bodies and the Parliament. Today's debate has highlighted that the commitment is in place at all levels, which is good news for Scotland, its people and its economy. I support and congratulate Minerva on its continued work with apprentices in Dumfries and Galloway and I once again thank Elaine Murray for lodging a motion to highlight its success.

Meeting closed at 17:26.