

**STATEMENT
to the Northern Ireland Assembly**

**A report on the visit of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
to the United States**

27 September 2011

Mr Speaker, I am grateful to you for the opportunity to report to the Assembly on the successful visit to the United States that the deputy First Minister and I undertook from Monday 12 to Friday 16 September. We were accompanied by the Invest NI Chief Executive, Alastair Hamilton, and for the Los Angeles leg of the visit, by the NI Screen Chief Executive, Richard Williams.

The key purpose of our visit was to promote the local economy through a series of high profile engagements where we had direct engagement with senior American executives. The visit brought us to Los Angeles, Silicon Valley, Chicago and New York. Our programme concentrated on three sectors of our economy - creative industries, ICT and business services. These sectors have been gaining significant momentum in recent months, and have stimulated the interest of potential investors in the United States. The objective was two-fold: to promote the tremendous potential that we have in these sectors, and to bring new jobs to Northern Ireland.

Over the past six months, there has been a concerted effort by Invest Northern Ireland, NI Screen and the Northern Ireland Bureau to highlight the best we have to offer in the creative industries. While in Los Angeles, we met with senior executives representing industry leaders in film and TV, video gaming and mobile applications companies. We presented the Northern Ireland proposition for TV and Film to Warner Brothers, Sony, Disney and Fox, while consolidating our existing relationship with HBO. We also broadened our discussions that, until now, have focused on production work, into the realm of post-production with Technicolor and Deluxe. On the video gaming front, we established new contacts with household names such as Activision, who are looking for just the type of game developers that are beginning to emerge from our universities.

The culmination of our time in Los Angeles was our delivery of the keynote address at the Irish Technology Leadership Group's "Innovation in Entertainment" event at Sony Pictures. An audience of nearly 300 executives, ranging from film studio presidents to the leadership of global telecom companies, was exposed to an interactive technology showcase of Northern Ireland products, followed by presentations where the deputy First Minister and I highlighted the dynamic talent pool that exists here.

On the political front, we were welcomed to City Hall by Los Angeles Mayor Villaraigosa who was keen to discuss economic development, green technology and to share best practice in dealing with disadvantaged youth. There are already close contacts between the PSNI and the LAPD, and this was an opportunity to explore additional links at political and community levels.

It is also worth noting that we had a very productive meeting with Chancellor Gene Block and his senior colleagues from the University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA). The Chancellor has put forward a proposal to establish links between UCLA, Queen's and the University of Ulster on the topic of conflict resolution. There have been a number of instances of ethnic and religious tension on campus, and he indicated that there is much to be gained from a relationship with Northern Ireland.

In Silicon Valley we met with an existing investor, Hewlett Packard, and promoted the ICT opportunities that exist in Northern Ireland at an Invest NI-hosted event involving senior business people in the tech sector.

In Chicago, our focus shifted to the development and cultivation of the business/financial services sector when we met with both potential investors, and existing ones, such as Allstate. We also took this opportunity to meet with the CEO of United Airlines to re-enforce the importance of the Newark-Belfast route to Northern Ireland.

Finally, in New York City, we opened First Derivatives' new office in the Financial District. First Derivatives, which is headquartered in Newry, counts many of the world's top investment banks, brokers and hedge funds as its customers. The opening of the New York Office is a clear demonstration that locally-grown companies can compete at the top of the financial services ladder.

We concluded our visit by attending a meeting with senior executives from the New York Stock Exchange, which is an important and high profile investor.

Throughout our visit we were able to engage directly with some of the most senior business executives in those sectors which offer the greatest potential for investment in Northern Ireland. We were also able to emphasise our personal commitment to each company and to assure them that the Executive is united in its objective of supporting inward investment.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, we are very hopeful that the continuing efforts of Invest NI and the time commitment we made will be rewarded in the near future with the creation of new, high-quality and sustainable jobs.