



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Proposed Inquiry into Young People not
in Employment, Education or Training
(NEETs)**

3 February 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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AND LEARNING**

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Education or Training (NEETs)**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Sue Ramsey (Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Bell
Mr Paul Butler
Ms Anna Lo
Mr David McClarty
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Aodhán Connolly)
Ms Orla Major) Prince's Trust
Ms Jessica Smyth)

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey):

The Prince's Trust surveyed 2,000 young people, including 200 here, and it has indicated that some of the statistics from that research are quite shocking. Hopefully, the trust will give the Committee a greater insight into the subject of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs). The trust briefed the Committee last year.

I shall hand now over to Aodhán Connolly, who will introduce himself and his colleagues and

give his presentation, after which the floor will be open for questions and comments. Thank you for coming.

Mr Aodhán Connolly (Prince's Trust):

Good morning Madam Chairman and members. Thank you for affording us the opportunity to come before the Committee again to tell it about some of the research that we have done. My name is Aodhán Connolly, and I am the head of public sector fundraising and communications for the Prince's Trust. I am accompanied by Orla Major, who is the trust's public affairs executive. I convey apologies from our director, Ian Jeffers, who, unfortunately, was called to an education and skills authority (ESA) meeting, whatever good that will do. However, I shall introduce you to someone who is much more important. Jessica Smyth is a young person who has gone through our programmes. On very short notice, she has kindly agreed to tell her story to the Committee.

Members will have heard about the cost of youth unemployment, which amounts to approximately £250 million a year. In addition, it costs over £70,000 a year to keep one young person in care and double that amount to keep a young person in custody. The economic cost of young people not being in education, employment or training is phenomenal, even for an area as small as Northern Ireland. However, after giving a lot of statistics, I shall focus on the human cost — the short- and long-term effects on young people — that the statistics arising from our research into the area represent and on how we pull that research together.

To give you a bit of background information about the trust, we work with young people who are unemployed, in care or leaving care, and with educational underachievers and those who have been through the criminal justice system. We support between 3,000 and 3,100 young people a year, which is a huge jump in numbers in the past two or three years. Previously, we supported 1,200 young people. However, we are just scratching the surface. As the Chairperson said in a debate in the Assembly on 7 December 2009, approximately 47,000 young people in Northern Ireland are in the NEETs category, so we are only able to help less than a tenth of the people who need such help.

On 4 January, we published, 'Prince's Trust Youth Index 2010', which is the second such report to be compiled by YouGov. The report reveals how young people, both those in employment, education and training and those who are not, feel about their lot in life. We

thought that this year's survey would have been along the same lines as last year's, and, in many ways, it is. However, there are some stark warnings about how not being in employment, education or training is affecting young people.

As the Chairperson said, more than 2,000 young people were surveyed, a sizeable proportion of whom are from Northern Ireland. Of the young people not in employment, education or training, 32% are down or depressed all or most of the time. A third of NEETs feel isolated all or most of the time. A quarter of them feel rejected all or most of the time, and 42% feel that their life has no direction. In addition, 33% of NEETs feel that they have lost their way in life, more than a quarter feel that they have nothing to look forward to and, most staggering of all, 35% of those not in employment, education or training had felt suicidal in the preceding year. The economic cost does not bear comparison with the fact that 35% of young people, of whom there are 47,000 to 50,000, have felt suicidal because of their situation.

'Childhood in Transition' is second piece of research in which we were involved with Queen's University and Save the Children. It was conducted across the six communities in Northern Ireland, and, specifically, members of those communities who had been most affected by poverty and the legacy of the conflict here.

In every focus group conducted with children and young people, there was evidence of diminished self-esteem impacting on their emotional well-being. Some of the young people responded by being hostile, angry and volatile — often bolstered by alcohol. Others withdrew into themselves. Young people often explained that their negative or antisocial behaviour was a response to feelings of exclusion and rejection. Identified inhibitions to attainment, in the form of qualifications or jobs, included a lack of appropriate resources in their communities, the low value that some families placed on education, poor vocational or education training, and limited local job opportunities.

Some of the young people whom we deal with are in the second or third generation of benefit-dependent families. They have no aspiration to get a job. However, we have found that when opportunities are placed in front of them, they grab them with both hands. The 'Childhood in Transition' report also found that employment aspirations and outcomes were low and were related to whatever jobs were available in the respective communities. There are no aspirations to move outside their communities or to better their lot in life. The prevailing attitude was: "If the

local chip shop was good enough for my father, it is good enough for me.” Those young people have no sense of attainment.

On completion of compulsory education, many young people attended schemes or courses with limited employment prospects, which were even more restricted in rural communities. Many people think that the NEETs problem is solely urban: it is not. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has reported on social exclusion as part of its research into rural development. As it has expanded into rural areas, the Prince’s Trust has found that young people there feel social and economic exclusion just as acutely as their counterparts in urban areas.

There are several key issues for disadvantaged young people. The first is their lack of qualifications and the associated lack of self-esteem. The current economic situation has led to graduates flooding the job market. The simple truth is that people with fewer qualifications have been pushed down the pecking order, and those with no skills or qualifications have no jobs.

Secondly, there is the issue of low self-esteem. A lack of qualifications and constant rejection lead to these young people feeling isolated and worthless. As our research proves, that can lead to depression and, in many cases, suicide. Thirdly, a lack of skills makes it difficult to find employment. The fourth issue is the current buzz phrase — a rights deficit. ‘Childhood in Transition’ highlights that many of these young people feel that they have no place in society and that even if they want to make their voices heard, no one will listen. They have few, if any, rights. All those issues are compounded by, and contribute to, poverty and deprivation.

I could go through all our solutions. The Committee knows about the Team programme, which the Department funds. Other initiatives include the Business programme, the development awards, and our schools-based XL programme. Through the Department, we now have local employment intermediary service (LEMIS) funding for two Get into programmes. We could be delivering up to 12, but two is a start. Our 1:2:1 project, which is a support programme that aims to provide young people leaving custody with the help that they need to change their lives and to break the cycle of offending, is being piloted in England and we are starting to recruit young people to that.

I will be happy to answer the question about mentoring if the Committee wishes to return to it

at the end of the evidence session.

That is basically what we do. The Committee is aware of our work from last year's briefing and from general briefings that we have given. I will now introduce you to Jessica, who could provide you with facts and statistics all day long. What Jessica has to say will put our work in focus.

Ms Jessica Smyth (Prince's Trust):

I finished the Prince's Trust team programme on 4 December, and I am now a young ambassador for the trust. Before I did that programme, I had been using drugs heavily. I left school at 16, and I could not get the education maintenance allowance (EMA) or anything like that because my parents earned too much money. I could not apply for grants or loans because I did not fall into any qualifying category. I left school with no funding and applied for further education when I was 17. I completed my first year of a veterinary nursing course. However, I had no way to fund it, so I had to drop out. My drug using grew as I had nothing to keep me from living my life that way.

My parents kicked me out when I was 18. I was on the streets, heavily addicted to crack. I was not doing anything with my life. I went to the Carlisle House residential programme in April 2009, and I have now been clean for nine months. In that time, I have taken part in the Prince's Trust programme, and it was absolutely amazing. People have asked me to explain what I got from the Prince's Trust, and, in a way, I was given my life back. I was able to go out and be with people my own age, hang out, and go on residential trips, such as abseiling. Young people just do not get those opportunities. I had loads of opportunities.

I am artistic, and I got to use my creative ability as well. We went to Ballyduff Community Centre and redecorated the whole place. It looked amazing afterwards. The mayor came out to see it; it was really good. The Team programme was amazing. If I had been given the opportunity to do the Team programme when I was 16, or if there had been something different out there for me, I would have done taken part, but there was nothing. Now I am doing my A levels, so I am back in education. It is going well. I am doing two A levels in art history and art.

Ms Orla Major (Prince's Trust):

Thanks, Jessica. I will summarise what we see as the key issues around the funding of NEETS in

Northern Ireland. First, our experience in the sector shows that there is inconsistent funding. As Aodhán mentioned, we have local employment intermediary service funding from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), which will run two six-week programmes, but we are not guaranteed any more funding after that. We have pots of money here and there, but it is very inconsistent. We cannot really be sustainable in running programmes and in helping more young people.

We think that there is a fragmentation in funding. There are small pots of money in different areas, distributed by lots of different intermediary bodies, but there is no one focal point. We also feel that there is a lack of vision and focus, which has been a problem for a few years. However, it is getting worse because of the recession. The labour force survey released a figure of 47,000 people who are unemployed. Of that 47,000, the Prince's Trust estimates that there are around 15,000 young people who are disadvantaged, and without structure or intervention, they will never get their lives working.

There may be thousands of young people among that 47,000 who may be able to enter employment or get back into education when the recession lifts, but we think that there are at least 15,000 who will not be able to do that without structured help from the Prince's Trust and other groups that are doing similar things.

What we are really asking the Committee to do is to take the lead in challenging how the money is spent, and in forming collaborations. As Dr Barry said earlier, in England, three Departments have come together to formulate strategies. That is what is required. We have mentioned health, education and employment; they are all the responsibility of different Departments, which are working on different strategies. We need them to come together to take a focused, structured, co-ordinated approach to help those 15,000-plus young people who are disadvantaged.

With our knowledge of the sector — our organisation has been around for 30-odd years — we have very good positive outcomes. At the moment, 86% of young people involved with our organisation progress to further education, training or employment. We feel that we are a key player in developing a strategy for the future of NEETs in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. Before we take questions, it would be remiss of me not to say fair play to

you, Jessica; you are a credit. Sometimes we focus too much on the problems and do not realise that there are people who get their lives back on track. You are an ambassador for young people, and I hope that this afternoon's event shows that this Committee is willing to take the lead on this issue. We are not shy in coming forward, we have proven that, and if there is a need for joined-up government, this is the critical point where we need it.

I have a couple of specific points. The funding from the European social fund is due to end in 2011. Where is the forward planning on that? If we are talking about just under 50,000 young people under the age of 25 in the NEETs category, how can you be involved in forward work programmes, how can you target people such as Jessica when there is no funding available after next year? We will consider that, and speak to the Department about it. I have a specific question for Jessica — you do not have to answer it if you do not want to. If the Prince's Trust had not been involved in your life, where do you think you would be now?

Ms Smyth:

I would be back to using drugs again; I know that. When I had just left Carlisle House, there was a two-month period when I was doing nothing; it was the hardest two months of my recovery. The Prince's Trust gave me a chance to get out of my comfort zone.

The Chairperson:

That humanises the impact; it is one thing to consider the figures, but people such as Jessica humanise the issue.

Mr Connolly:

One reason why we have such positive outcomes — this is related to what Mr Bell said about mentoring — is that we place small numbers of people on the Team programmes, with lots of those programmes running at the same time. Around 500 people each year go through the Team programme, but they do so in small groups, which creates the opportunity to form bonds and to build trust, and for people to get out of their comfort zones. That is coupled with long-term mentoring and support, which could last from six months to a year, depending on what the young person needs. It is not the sausage-factory mentality that some providers have; our mentality is about the quality.

The Prince's Trust supports over 3,000 young people every year; that is not a small number.

The important thing is how that support is delivered. One of the most frustrating things from my point of view — when looking at the funding, what we are doing, what we are trying to do, what our vision is, and what other people are doing — is that some programmes that have 10%, 15% or 20% positive outcome rates are being funded for two or three years, whereas some of our programmes that have positive outcome rates of up to 85% or 86% are finding it very difficult to get that funding. For example, over the past three years, we have pumped £320,000 of private sector funding into our Get into programme. That money was raised through us running a few fundraisers, gaining some sponsorship, and that sort of thing. Those are short four-week programmes, involving two weeks of training and two weeks of site experience in different sectors, such as cooking, social care, and other growth sectors, and they have positive outcomes. About 68% of participants go on to jobs, and another 15% to education or training. However, we cannot find mainstream funding for that.

We support 60 to 80 young people through the Get into programme each year. However, we should be supporting 150 to 200, especially in sectors such as retail, which has taken off in the border counties, and outsourcing. Those are growth industries. They are crying out for people to fill jobs, but we cannot get the funding to give those young people the basic skills that they need to get entry-level jobs in those sectors.

The Chairperson:

You spoke about an urban/rural breakdown. The Committee has invited people from rural areas, including young farmers, to the event this afternoon, because we are conscious that this is not just an urban issue. Your paper shows that 82% of the 370 young people who participated in the Team programme gained a positive outcome of progressing into training, education or employment, while 76% of the 87 who participated in the Get into programme gained similar positive outcomes. What became of the other 18% and 24%, respectively?

Mr Connolly:

A comparison must be made with other programmes that are delivering 10% or 20% in positive outcomes, although that is someone else's problem. Our problem, as you said, is the 18% or 24% with whom we engage but cannot get to move on.

We do not claim to be a panacea for every young person. Young people such as Jessica have to decide that they want to change their lives, and some will not be ready. We try to feed those

who are not capable of finishing the course back into our system through another programme. The Get into programme is for those who are more work-ready and need the basic skills. If they are not suitable for that, we would move them into the Team programme, and try to get them back round again. If they are not at even that stage, we try to signpost them.

Some young people dropped out of the courses because they had reoffended, taken up substance abuse again, or had family problems. We try to keep in contact with those young people, and tell them that there is a place for them when they are ready to come back. We are not a panacea. Our outcomes are very high. We try to do the best for every young person with whom we come into contact. Sometimes that means putting them through other programmes, and at other times, it means that we signpost them for future programmes. A lot of the time it is just to reassure them that the door is open for them should they want to come back.

Mr P Ramsey:

Jessica, I am not sure whether you are in or out of full-time education, but I hope that you return.

Ms Smyth:

I hope to return in September.

Mr P Ramsey:

Your presentation and style today was commendable. Aodhán, you spoke about 80% of your participants progressing into full-time education or work. Can you provide more detail about that on a constituency basis?

Mr Connolly:

I can provide the Committee with that information by next week, if that is OK.

Mr P Ramsey:

You have, for example, the figures for 15-year-olds in England who leave school with no qualifications, and 25% who leave with minimal attainment levels. Have you done any research into the existing referrals in your programme?

Mr Connolly:

Yes. We measure inputs by assessing the situation of individual participants when they enter our

programmes, and we measure outputs when they leave. Usually, more than 85%, and as many as 97%, of our intake of young people are educational underachievers. That can change on a monthly basis. Those percentages are based on the Government-set attainment level, which is five GCSEs at grade C or below.

We do not have records of those people who have no qualifications. I attended two Team programme graduations at which some of the young people who joined our courses and obtained their first-aid certificates were in tears because it was the first piece of paper bearing their name that they had ever had. A very high proportion of young people are below the attainment level set by the Government. The vast majority of those young people have very few qualifications, if any.

Mr P Ramsey:

Ms Major spoke about fragmentation — the cocktail of funding that you are trying to access. One of the main planks of our Programme for Government is the economy, and the Chairperson mentioned the difficulty in finding funding for mental-health services and suicide prevention. Ms Major said that there was a lack of focus. How would the Prince's Trust make funding more effective, efficient and focused?

Mr Connolly:

I believe that we need a task force, comprising this Committee, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), the Department of Education (DE), the Department for Social Development (DSD), and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), given its responsibility for young people's issues.

The Chairperson:

Some issues that should be added to that list, such as juvenile justice, are not yet devolved.

Mr P Ramsey:

We will get there.

The Chairperson:

I do not want to get into bigger political issues.

Mr McClarty:

There are talks going on, you know. *[Laughter.]*

Mr P Ramsey:

We may need to have talks about this as well, David.

The Chairperson:

Whether there are talks going on or not, juvenile justice has a key role to play.

Mr Connolly:

It certainly does. We work with the Probation Board, the Youth Justice Agency and the PSNI on a regular basis and get referrals from them all.

There are too many silos in government at the moment. In health, for example, there are issues that affect young people such as mental health and substance abuse, which Jessica Smyth mentioned earlier. However, young people who are in care or who are leaving care can be forgotten about. One of the Health Department's targets in the Programme for Government was to ensure that more than 50% of young people leaving care went into education, employment or training. The Department is failing severely in that regard; less than 1% of those young people go on to university.

University is not for everyone, but 1% is a terribly small amount. At least 50% should go on to education, employment or training. We are taking those young people to a certain level and pushing them out into the world, but the only thing that they can access is benefits. That, in my opinion, is a disgrace. We need a strategy that avoids a situation whereby the health and social care trusts or the Health Department tackle the issue of young people in care as a specific NEETs group and the Department for Employment and Learning tackles another group through LEMIS. We need a joined-up approach, and we must also look at how the money is being delivered.

The fragmentation of funding is a great problem. First, programmes are being funded that have low levels of positive outcome based on attainment. Secondly, there are too many barriers preventing funding being distributed, and, thirdly, people are setting up charities to access pots of money that deliver in one particular area of need. I am not saying that they should not do that, but if we take out all the chief executives and executive workers' salaries in particular areas

instead of using providers who have proven programmes, there are smarter and wiser ways of spending money.

We are not the only group out there, and I am not asking for a huge cheque. However, there are wiser ways of spending the money.

The Chairperson:

It is called efficiency savings.

Mr Butler:

With regard to the funding, the Team programme was delivered by the further education colleges.

Mr Connolly:

We have issues with the way in which it is funded through the funded learning unit (FLU).

The Chairperson:

Is that seasonal?

Mr Connolly:

It is chronic. The FLU funding is inconsistent, and it is also dependent on the young person. Some colleges are able to draw down up to £2,000 for each young person, and other colleges are able to draw down up to £2,700 for each young person. That means that it is more beneficial for those colleges that can draw down the larger amount.

Mr Butler:

Are you involved with all the colleges?

Mr Connolly:

Not any more. Unfortunately, because of under resourcing, the South Eastern Regional College has been unable to deliver this year. That is a particular disappointment to us for two reasons. First, we had the wonderful PR boast that no young person in Northern Ireland was more than 25 miles away from a Prince's Trust programme. However, that is now 35 miles because we do not have a programme in the South Eastern Regional College. More importantly, it means that one fifth of Northern Ireland's young people are not able to access the Team programme.

Mr Butler:

The South Eastern Regional College takes in from here to Bangor, Newtownards —

Mr Connolly:

It covers Downpatrick to Bangor.

There are issues with resourcing, and part of that involves the fact that there should be more consistency in the FLU funding. If there was an extra £200 for each young person, it would not be a problem. Jessica was on the Team programme.

Mr Butler:

Are the programmes funded by donations?

Mr Connolly:

We have spent £320,000 over the past three years to deliver those programmes. We now have discretionary funding through LEMIS for two programmes, but after that, we have nothing.

Mr Butler:

So, there is no funding from DEL?

Mr Connolly:

No, and that is a programme that provides consistently high employment outcomes — around 70%. We support not only the young person but the employer over the training period and the following six months, so if there are any problems or issues that employers find it difficult to deal with, we are there to support them as well. Since the employers are involved in the design and delivery of the programme, they get what they need for their employees. Therefore, there is more chance that the young people will get an interview and — if they prove themselves — a job.

The Chairperson:

Paul, we will find out what funding the Department gives to groups that deal with people in the NEETs category. We will also look to the Department of Education.

Mr Butler:

Mr Connolly said that the young people get into programmes and into work, and some

information on that would be helpful.

Ms Lo:

I agree totally with Mr Connolly about the strategy. England, Wales and Scotland each have a strategy on NEETs, and we are the only region still falling behind — surprise, surprise. It is important for it to be a cross-departmental strategy, because DEL cannot solve the problem on its own. In many ways, DEL is inheriting the problem from young people losing out already in early years. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, DEL, DSD and even the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) need to be involved. The Committee needs to keep on pushing for that and it should be dealt with urgently.

It is not just about the economic cost; it is about the human cost. We are losing so many young people, year in and year out. Those people, who are assets to our community, will lose their life chances and will never reach their potential, if we do not address and deal with the problem. We, therefore, need to push to get a strategy in place as soon as possible.

Jessica, thanks for coming here today. It was brave of you to talk to all of us, and it is great to hear that there are places where young people can seek help to regain their balance. You do not have to answer my next question, if it puts you on the spot. I spoke to Dr Robert Barry earlier about the research into young people's lives and asking them at what stage they fell behind in school or lost interest in education. Will you identify when and why that happened to you?

Ms Smyth:

I went off the rails after I left secondary school because I did not get the support that I needed. Even though I was in full-time education at tech, I did not receive the same support from teachers there as I did in school. There was a transition period during which I did not have anybody. That is when I put my hands up and said that I could not do it anymore.

Ms Lo:

Was the college too big and too impersonal?

Ms Smyth:

My tutors were not personable, whereas my other teachers had been. I went to tech expecting the same experience, but I did not get that.

Ms Lo:

At school, pupils are made to go to class.

Ms Smyth:

I left school with seven GCSEs. I worked hard at school, and I did my best when I was there, so when I went to tech, I thought that it was going to be exactly the same, but it was not.

Ms Lo:

I understand. I studied art at the age of 29 and look where I have ended up — I am politician. There are lots of openings after school.

The Chairperson:

I do not know whether Ms Lo is boasting or complaining.

No other members indicated that they wish to ask a question. Therefore, on the basis of what we have heard this afternoon, I suggest that the Committee goes down the road of an inquiry. This is not just a DEL issue; it affects DE, DSD, the Executive and people involved in juvenile justice. Are members content for the terms of reference to be drawn up for next week? Are they also content to use next week's meeting to address some of the other points that were raised this morning?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson:

Are you staying for the event?

Mr Connolly:

We certainly are.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for your presentation.