



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

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

10 February 2010

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Sue Ramsey (Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Rev Dr Robert Coulter
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Irwin
Ms Anna Lo
Mr David McClarty
Mrs Claire McGill
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Ms Margaret Kelly) Barnardo's
Ms Mary Anne Webb)

The Chairperson (Ms S Ramsey):

I want to take the opportunity to thank Margaret and Mary Anne for helping with last week's event on the issue of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) at the Lagan Valley Island conference centre.

At its meeting last week, the Committee agreed to have a public inquiry into NEETs. We have requested that the Official Report records it, and I thank Hansard. I will hand over to the

witnesses to make a presentation, following which Committee members will ask questions or make comments.

The Committee Clerk:

The version of the draft terms of reference in members' blue folders has been updated. We will copy that now and distribute it to members immediately.

The Chairperson:

That is to keep you on your toes.

Ms Margaret Kelly (Barnardo's):

I thank Sue and the rest of the Committee for allowing us to talk to you about this issue again. We agreed to give you a sense of what is included in some of the strategies that Scotland and Wales have developed and to help to inform your thinking about what an inquiry should cover.

We have re-examined the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) figures for NEET young people, and, if members do not mind, I will update the Committee on that. The figures for 2009, which are the latest available, show that 52,000 young people are NEET. Between 2000 and 2009, the total number of NEET young people in Northern Ireland doubled, and not all of that is due to the economic downturn and the recession. In 2006, 40,000 young people were NEET, yet we did not have a recession at that point. Even though some of the current growth is linked to the recession, I want to emphasise that the issue of young people who are NEET is a long-standing problem here. The evidence suggests that the problem is continuing to get worse more or less year-on-year. On that basis, I very much welcome the fact that the Committee has decided to carry out an inquiry, which I hope will create programmes of action.

I also want to draw your attention to the fact that last year's growth in the figures was entirely related to young men. The number of young women stayed the same. There were 22,000 young women who were NEET in 2008 and 2009, but the number of young men increased by 8,000 during that period. It is important that we pay attention to who those young people are and what their make-up is.

A key element of all the strategies that have been produced is knowledge of who those young people are. It is essential to properly identify young people who are NEET and to know who

moves in and out of NEET. I know that members are all familiar with the very high economic inactivity rate for Northern Ireland, and there is evidence that those young people who stay at the core of the NEET group, which is about half of the young people, move into economic inactivity in adulthood. Therefore, it is very important that you identify that core group and how to work with them to prevent that economic inactivity rate getting higher. There are young people who have not worked, and, in many cases, they will not work throughout their lives.

It is necessary to look at the geographical spread and at what are referred to in many of the strategies as NEET hot spots. Certainly, in other areas, there are particular geographical spots that have a concentration of NEET young people. Therefore, you might need to identify those spots here, because they might need a much more focused approach.

It is almost a year since the Minister asked the Department to undertake a scoping study, which was to report in September, but which the Minister then indicated would report early in the new year. I hope that that scoping study will have identified exactly the characteristics of NEET young people, including their gender and age breakdowns, and any hot spots. That will determine the kind of response that is given to those young people. I am sure that the Committee will ask for that information and use it to inform its thinking.

I have given the high-level picture of who the NEET young people are. It is essential to monitor and track them. As soon as Scotland, England and Wales recognised that the issue of NEET young people was an ongoing and core problem that they needed to do something about, they started to identify those young people. The Careers Service has told Barnardo's that one of the difficulties here is that, by the time it receives information — perhaps six months down the line — about young people who have moved out of school at the age of 16, it is almost too late. When the Careers Service follows up on those young people, it sometimes discovers that young women have become pregnant or that people have moved on and there is no contact address or mobile phone number for them. We literally lose those young people. However, that does not happen in the same way in the other jurisdictions.

The other jurisdictions have a connection service, which has a role in following up with young people, moving them from school into further education, and ensuring that, if they drop out, there is someone there to pick them back up. The other jurisdictions have legislated for that. When a young person drops out for more than three months, schools, further education colleges and

universities have a duty to follow up with that young person to see what is happening. All the evidence shows that following up within three to six months makes a difference. If a young person has dropped out for six months or more, it is very difficult to re-engage them. If you get them before that time, you are more likely to get them back into the system.

As the Committee moves forward, it might need to think about areas in which legislation might be required. We might need to include a duty about monitoring young people and where they are going or a duty about having a responsibility to go back to young people when they fall out of the system.

The strategies in the other jurisdictions have legislated for a duty to co-operate to provide services. Although Barnardo's sees the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) as having the lead role on the issue of NEET young people, it is not solely a DEL issue; it is a cross-departmental one. Other legislatures have included a duty that recognises the responsibility of health, education and the equivalent of DETI, as regards developing new jobs and strategies around that, to co-operate together to meet the needs of those young people. Again, as the Committee moves forward and is looking at what the inquiry might do, it might want to consider legislation on that.

Prevention is a key element of all the strategies. One of the key methods of reducing the number of young people who are NEET is to prevent the number of young people who are flowing into that category. It is important to reach those young people before they have left school. We tend to know those young people who are most at risk. They are young people who are not doing well educationally; who are absent from school; who have grown up in households in which no one is working and who are disadvantaged; who are young carers; who are in care; or who are disabled young people. We know quite a lot about who they are, so it is important that we put in place prevention. I encourage the Committee's inquiry to consider the role of prevention and what might need to be undertaken. Although that responsibility may lie with the Department of Education, the Committee should talk to and hear from that Department about the role of prevention.

I very much encourage the Committee to look at the proposals for the programmes of action that we want to put in place to work with young people so that we can begin to reduce the numbers of NEET young people and get them back into education, training and employment. We

must recognise that some young people will be much more ready for that than others. There are young people in the NEET group who are ready to work or to go into training and will not require a huge amount of support to get them back into work or training. However, there are some young people who are far back down that line and will need more support. I encourage the Committee to look at the proposals and to consider what it might want to put in place.

Before I answer members' questions, I want to say that I have taken part in a number of Committee inquiries. I advise that, if the Committee is putting forward proposals, it should not simply say to others that it wants them to carry out its recommendations. It should attach a cost to its proposals, having looked at what that has cost in other areas. We cannot have a debate about what needs to be done if we do not also take account of the cost. A substantial number of initiatives with funding attached have taken place in Scotland, England and Wales, but not here. We are fairly far behind, and there is some catching up to do.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much, Margaret. Before I invite members to ask questions, I want to make a couple of points. If members agree, we will write to the Minister to ask for an update on the scoping study that was promised for September 2009 and then for early in the new year. That study would be useful to our inquiry.

Ms M Kelly:

It would be essential. That work has been done, and there is no point in repeating it. It would inform the Committee's thinking.

The Chairperson:

OK. The other key point is the funding or elements. Members can see from the terms of reference that we have included that point. We need to live in the real world, and we are faced with economic pressures. Some of this work may not cost a lot of money, but it is right that the point about elements/funding is included in the terms of reference that members will be asked to agree.

I make an appeal to members, witnesses and people in the Public Gallery. We want to get this right, and we want to make sure that we will have an impact on the lives of those 52,000-plus young people so that we do not lose another generation. I suggest that, if anyone knows any

people in their constituency, community or voluntary groups, or other bodies who might be important to this inquiry, they should let us know. We do not want the inquiry to be Belfast-based or urban-based. We need to go to rural areas. At last week's event, representatives from the young farmers' clubs told us that transport and access were a factor. We want to adopt a holistic approach to our inquiry, and we are open to suggestions from members. We will put advertisements in the papers, but we will also actively target organisations that are dealing with marginalised groups in society.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

Thank you very much for coming.

I have been interested in this issue for quite some time. I want to hear your thoughts on how other legislatures have been dealing with it, especially on an interdepartmental basis. As I have said in the Chamber, it is not something that only our Committee and our Department should be interested in. The issue goes much wider than young people of a specific age. In particular, the Department of Education must be brought in at a very early stage. What is happening in Scotland and Wales in relation to an interdepartmental method of moving forward?

Ms M Kelly:

I recognise that the issue of young people not in employment, education or training is not simply one for DEL. However, it needs a lead and, to some extent, a champion. In Northern Ireland, we have 52,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in any kind of employment, education or training. The issue requires a champion, and part of what that champion must do is to bring in the other Departments and to get them to do what needs to be done.

In Wales, there is an excellent prevent-NEET programme, which is funded by the European social fund. That programme works with young people aged 11 to 14 who are already showing indicators that they are likely to drop out of education or out of the system. The programme goes in to work with them at a very early stage. For some of those young people, part of the issue is that there may be a lot of other things going on in their background, and, therefore, there may be other difficulties. Often, those young people have been turned off education and, sometimes, an academic form of education is not what they need and not what encourages them to engage. The programme in Wales looks at employability, through which employers work with young people and give them more options about partaking in shorter bursts of employment-based work and then

coming back into school. That encourages those young people to think about their learning in a different way and to consider its impact on where they are going with the rest of their lives. Some of the early results from that programme are quite promising.

In Scotland, there has been an absolute acknowledgement that what happens in schools, and the early identification of young people who are likely to drop out of education, is very important.

Even here, I can point to work that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is doing with young people in care. I am sure that the Committee is aware that there are very poor educational outcomes for young people in care. The Health Department has put in place a programme of resources so that young people's foster or residential carers can work with them on an individual basis. Easter schools and summer schools have also been put in place for young people coming up to sitting their GCSEs, and there has been a very slow but steady climb in the number of those young people getting GCSEs.

There is a recognition that the issue of young people not in employment, education or training does not just belong in DEL and that other things need to be done. However, a sense of cohesion is needed. Individual Departments doing tiny bits of work will not address the whole problem; an interdepartmental approach should pull that work together.

The Chairperson:

The Committee has always said that NEETs is a problem that DEL is faced with, but that DEL has not necessarily caused that problem. We have acknowledged that no single Department can deal with the issue and that we need a number of Departments, if not the Executive, to be involved. We want to work closely with other Departments, and we do not want that to be a battle. The issue is one that all Ministers have said that they want to deal with. Therefore, it is important to get the focus on that.

Ms M Kelly:

In December, the Minister spoke at a Barnardo's event on NEET young people. He was very concerned about the issue and very willing to pick it up and address it. When I talked to him afterwards, he said that he absolutely recognises that something must be done about the issue, and that DEL can lead on that, but that it needs other Departments to come in. I absolutely agree with him on that.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

The Education Department has an especially big role to play, and that is a point that I made during the debate on the education maintenance allowance. As members will remember, I was the only one who did not support the motion, and I was accused of being cantankerous. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson:

You had an off day.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

Apart from that, I feel that the issue is a very important one for our Committee, and, if we can champion it, by all means let us do that. However, let us do that in conjunction with the other Departments that have a real role to play.

Ms M Kelly:

That would be wonderful.

The Chairperson:

Colleges have an important role, too, in the academic versus the vocational.

Mr T Clarke:

I support what Robert said and what Margaret said in response to Robert. Last week, it was very worthwhile when we broke into groups. Robert was in foreign parts last week on Assembly business with another Committee.

The Chairperson:

We will let that go.

Mr T Clarke:

I just had to get it on the record that he had to travel to a foreign part. However, it was on Assembly business, and I am sure that it was very worthwhile.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

It was.

Mr T Clarke:

Last week, it was very interesting. We were in groups of about 10, with people who are working directly with those young people. They were crying out for someone to champion the cause. Everyone at the table who was involved in or was representing alternative educational programmes said the same thing. Their frustration is that everybody has shied away from addressing the problem. The statistics show that the problem is getting worse, and we cannot let it continue. It may be DEL that takes the lead and champions the cause. I agree with Robert that the issue is cross-departmental, but someone has to take the lead. If everyone else is shying away, then we should not shy away from our responsibility for young people.

The Chairperson:

I agree with you. Unfortunately, we are picking up the pieces when the kids become 16. However, we need to take the lead.

Ms Lo:

I do not know the workings of it, but I see it as almost a joint lead responsibility to promote the strategy. Research has shown that, even in primary schools, teachers can identify the children in P5 or P6 who are at risk of becoming NEETs. Surely, therefore, the Department of Education has a big responsibility for the issue.

When primary school teachers are seeing children in P6 beginning to fall behind, a big part of the problem is that children with learning needs, such as mild autism or mild dyslexia, have not been picked up on at the right time. Those children are allowed to fall behind, and they are made to feel stupid and uninvolved by being made to sit at the back of the classroom. It is understandable that they then drop out and become marginalised. The Department of Education has a big role to play, and we are just mopping up and seeing the consequences of the failure of the Department of Education.

Ms M Kelly:

A dual approach is needed. The issue has had a cross-departmental approach everywhere else. Part of it is about prevention. At the end of the day, however, we are sitting with 52,000 young

people who need a response. The response for that current group of young people sits to a large extent with DEL in terms of intervention; certainly, the employment and training aspect of that.

We also need to look at how to reduce the flow of young people who are going into that group. That preventative element has a strong education focus, and it is about picking up those young people. However, it is also about integrating training and employment issues into education much earlier. I have looked at some programmes that do that. They do not simply leave young people in schools. They take an approach that says: you are finding this quite difficult, so let us look at another way of learning. Let us take you out to employment and show you other vocational options that are available. It is, to some extent, about being more creative.

We need two things: early intervention and prevention and a response to those young people who are NEET. The number of our young people in the NEET group is not that much smaller than the number of our young people in universities. Those groups are almost equivalent, so we do need to respond to the 52,000 young people who are NEET.

The Chairperson:

That is why we are targeting all Departments in the Executive. We should not focus on only education or health, though they are both key. There are issues in which the Health Department needs to play a part. The Education Department's extended schools programme is relevant. The Department for Social Development has a role in supporting communities. DETI may also have a role. At last week's event at Lagan Valley Island, I commented that 1,600 young women had applied for hair and beauty courses. That means that 1,600 jobs are needed for them. When those young women finish training, they could be NEET for two or three years, so we need to reskill and upskill. Our focus is on how every Department in the Executive can play its part.

Ms M Kelly:

Bringing in DETI is important. Certainly, the Scottish and Welsh Governments did not look at the issue only in the sense that it was a waste of young people's talents and skills and in terms of the impact that it would have on their lives; they looked at it with regard to growing the economy in a way that would make use of those young people and create jobs for them. They took an economic-regeneration line. If the Committee is going to hear from different Departments, it is important that it hears from DETI on growing the economy.

It would also be important for the Committee to hear from the central anti-poverty unit in OFMDFM. On the basis of studies that have been carried out, we know that a core group of young people who are NEET — about half of them — will remain NEET for a long time. They may well move into long-term economic inactivity, which is linked to poverty. Shortly, there will be a duty with regard to the creation of a child poverty strategy and employment responses to it.

Mr Irwin:

You are very welcome.

The figures that you have provided are stark. Many of us believed that the economic downturn may have contributed to the issue. However, the figures for 2004, which had already risen by 50%, prove that that is not the case.

As others have said, the issue needs to be tackled as early as possible in the lives of teenagers. Many young people of that age do not realise the consequences of being lax about education. I am, perhaps, old-fashioned, but I believe that parents should be made aware too. Children do not fully appreciate the seriousness of the outcome of not making educational headway. It is important that strides are made to deal with that as early as possible in young people's lives, especially during their early teenage years.

Ms M Kelly:

All the evidence shows that, when a young person drops out of education, the earlier that he or she can be brought back in, the more effective it is. The longer a young person is left out of the system, the more impossible it can become to bring him or her back in.

Mr Irwin:

I understand that.

Ms M Kelly:

Northern Ireland's economic inactivity rate is the highest in the UK. Part of addressing that issue is to address the NEET issue.

The Chairperson:

Are members content with the terms of reference in the background paper and for the Committee

to consult stakeholders and other organisations? I am keen to talk to young people, particularly those who have experience of being NEET. We should feed that in.

Mr P Ramsey:

Are we formally signing off on this now?

The Committee Clerk:

The Committee can do that now, or it can leave it. Chair, I want to make one small suggestion with regard to the first bullet point in the draft terms of reference, which states:

“What tend to be the common characteristics and experiences of those young people who fall into the NEET category and what preventative strategies might be useful to limit the numbers of young people becoming NEETs.”

After the word “preventative”, I suggest putting in a slash followed by the word “intervention”, so that it would read:

“and what preventative/intervention strategies might be useful”.

Given what people have said, I believe that that might be a good idea.

Mr P Ramsey:

I suggest that we leave signing off on the terms of reference until next week.

The Chairperson:

OK. We will consider it further and sign off on it next week.

The Committee Clerk:

We will put the redrafted version in members’ packs for next week. That will be a clean version.

The Chairperson:

We have agreed to have the inquiry, so it should not stop any background work.

Ms Lo:

Instead of saying “to limit the numbers”, should that first bullet point say “to reduce the numbers”?

The Committee Clerk:

Yes, that is more positive. That will be in the redrafted version.

The Chairperson:

We will come back to it and sign off on it next week.

Margaret and Mary Anne, thank you for your attendance and, once again, for your help with last week's event. We will probably see a lot more of you during the inquiry.