



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

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

29 September 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Dolores Kelly (Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Bell (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Rev Dr Robert Coulter
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr David McClarty
Mrs Claire McGill
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Ms June Ingram)
Mr Pascal McCulla) Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Jim Walker)

The Chairperson (Mrs D Kelly):

I welcome June Ingram, director of the strategy and employment relations division; Jim Walker, head of migrant workers and NEETs branch; and Pascal McCulla. I invite you to proceed with your briefing.

Ms June Ingram (Department for Employment and Learning):

Thank you for the opportunity to update the Committee on what we have been doing in this area since March 2010, when Linda Bradley and I briefed the Committee on the emerging findings from the scoping study. As we know, during the course of the year the Committee has been undertaking an inquiry into this important issue. The scoping study report went to the Executive on 22 July 2010, and you have received a copy of it and of the executive summary. It was prepared on foot of substantial research and information-gathering with a wide range of stakeholders, and, as far as possible, it takes account of and refers to developments in other regions and the wide range of existing relevant activities, actions and evaluations that are in place. I will give you a brief update based on the executive summary, which sets the key elements of the scoping study, and an update on what we have been doing since July.

This is a brief overview of a detailed and complex issue. First, there are various data sources in Northern Ireland, each of which provides different information on young people who are not in education, employment or training. The labour force survey provides the overall figure, for both the 16-to-19-year-old and the 16-to-24-year-old age groups; training is defined as government supported, and the definition of education is restricted to full-time education. The latest labour force survey figures, which are more recent than those in the scoping study, show that, for 16-to-19-year-olds, the figures for Northern Ireland stand at 16% in quarter 2. That compares with a rate of 15% for the UK; for 16-to-24-year-olds, the proportion stands at 18%, and the comparable figure for the UK is 18%.

The report also recognises that, from 2007 onwards and particularly in recent times, as you are aware, youth unemployment levels have risen sharply in Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole. That sets the situation in the context of global and external economic factors. Work in England and Wales shows that young people not in education, employment or training can be divided into those with and those without barriers to engagement; they can be further split into three groups. The report identifies one group as “out of scope” to describe young people who are doing some form of activity that is not formally counted as education, employment or training, for example, gap-year students or young people undertaking voluntary work. In England and Wales, that group accounts for about 22% in the 16-to-19-year-old age group.

Group 2 is described as young people with an identifiable barrier: serious illness or disability, for example; some may be able to participate now while others may require help to do so. That

group accounts for about 23%. Group 3 is young people who are not in education, employment or training but who are in neither of the above categories. They have no identifiable barrier, and that group accounts for about 55%.

The young people in those categories are far from a homogenous group. There is a wide spectrum of problems; barriers can be multiple and compounded, often from the earliest years. Those characteristics may make transition stages more problematic and leave the young person needing additional support to benefit from education and make a successful transition to further education, training or employment. As the Committee is aware, the groups that are most usually associated with that are children and young people in care, who have problems with literacy or numeracy, who are parents, who have experienced drug or alcohol abuse, or who have a physical or learning disability. Those are just some examples of the groups.

The scoping study report outlined strategies for England, Scotland and Wales and initiatives in the Republic of Ireland that demonstrate a range of common characteristics in respect of a strategic approach. They tend to divide into preventative and re-engagement or intervention approaches. The report also recognises the importance of early preventative intervention and additional support; there is flexibility in response as well as interdepartmental and agency communication and co-operation. Young people's transitional stages are seen as key. Disengagement from society and the economy is, in many cases, linked to other factors of social exclusion. The identification of those factors is an important starting point in finding solutions to the problem.

It is important to recognise that, in Northern Ireland, many strategies and initiatives have been developed to address aspects of social and economic exclusion. Achieving those strategies would, in many cases, have a positive impact on the proportion of young people here who are not in education, employment or training.

I will give a brief overview of some key points of the conclusions and recommendations from the report. It can be seen that the figures for young people in Northern Ireland not in education, employment or training are no better or worse than elsewhere in the UK, but numbers have increased. The cohort is the focus of strategic interest in other regions. It is not homogenous; it comprises young people with no barriers to participation and those who have identifiable barriers to participation. Those are varied and inter-related, and many are affected by multiple and

compounded issues.

The scoping study is the result of an examination of the issue at a time of almost constant change, when the recession was having an adverse impact on the numbers of young people who were unemployed. In that regard, we need to bear in mind that danger points for young people are the transitional stages where one form of activity ends and a conscious decision needs to be made as to the next engagement. We must recognise that much is already being done by the statutory and voluntary sector to address those issues, including joint working among organisations.

The scoping study identified that there was a great deal of potential to develop existing activities further; for example, to improve data availability, to build on joint working and to share and make use of good practice. It recommended that an overarching strategy for the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training in Northern Ireland should be taken forward by a cross-departmental mechanism. Consideration should also be given to how best to improve information on that group; for example, in identifying those young people and looking at how they fall into different groups. Account should be taken of the large amount of work that has already been done, and steps should be taken to further develop partnerships and joint working, looking at those problems in an holistic way and looking at, for example, family support options.

I will briefly refer to an Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) report of last March. It was clear on the type of approach that led to a successful strategy. For example, a wide range of partners should be used in the development of the vision and there should be a readiness to align and pool resources and co-ordinate information so that success is sustained and integrated into an overall strategy. The most effective partnerships recognised the factors that were most often associated with disengagement and focused on giving early support to the young people who were most affected by those factors so that the effects may be countered. That was a quick run-through of the scoping study and executive summary.

In July 2010, the Executive agreed that a cross-departmental mechanism should be put in place to develop a strategic approach to tackling the issue. I want to update the Committee on what the Department has been doing since then. We have had a range of bilateral meetings, both internally and with officials, with the other relevant Departments to investigate more fully their perspective on what they see as their role in developing a strategic approach, as well as how that

might be done most effectively. It is important to incorporate existing relevant work as well as provide a new framework for action. We have liaised closely with stakeholders from the voluntary and community sector to examine how best to take work forward and encourage NGO engagement. All those actions are orientated towards supporting the design of a strategic approach; they will inform our recommendations to the Minister on what should be our next steps.

I want to focus on some of the themes that have emerged and areas that we might want to look at and develop through that strategic approach. I have already touched on them in my remarks about the scoping study, but I will elaborate on them a little.

First, information is a general theme. Two-way information informs us about the young people and informs them so that awareness is enhanced and information better used, co-ordinated and signposted. It helps us to think about our research needs in order to find out more about an issue following the scoping study.

Another area is identifying, developing and disseminating good practice, as well as recognising the importance of that two-strand approach of prevention and intervention. Partnership is a co-operative approach that involves linkages between agencies and sectors so that there is joined-up working on issues. That links to location — bearing in mind the theme of information, which is about knowing where those young people might be and being able to target interventions and measures more appropriately.

That links to support services and recognising the wider social or personal issues that may be barriers for those young people, as well as the role of important individuals in their lives. It covers access to programmes and progression into work, for example. It is about re-engagement and sustainability, and that links to work-focused activities, which can be most effective towards engagement and prevention of disengagement. Of course, that requires looking at resources and costs.

We also want to consider the most appropriate focus of a strategy both with regard to the most appropriate age-group — either 16- to 19-year-olds or 16- to 24-year-olds — and the spectrum of barriers, from multiple and compounded to, perhaps, no identifiable barrier. We need to look at the best and most appropriate focus and the best measurements of success, which could, perhaps,

involve looking at intervention and support. Putting a framework in place to take that forward can in itself facilitate greater co-operation and a strategic approach that recognises and reflects existing activities and strategies and attempts to address any gaps.

It is, of course, important that we take account of the Committee's inquiry, and the Committee's event on the Wednesday 6 October will also be highly important in that regard. We are keen to work together to take that forward and to develop future steps, including any pre-consultations and developmental work that we take forward.

The scoping study has provided an overview of information that is available; strategic approaches that have been developed elsewhere; relevant activities that have been carried out in Northern Ireland; and key pointers as to how improvements might be made. We want to progress that work as quickly, effectively and inclusively as possible, bearing in mind the economic and financial context.

Mr P Ramsey:

Your team is very welcome. You talk a good game, although the jury is out on whether there is any substance to it. You use all the right language. It has been a long time since we started the process, and all the groups that we have spoken to use the same language.

I am concerned that you cannot set targets for reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training. You refer to baselines. When will that happen?

The Committee has gathered considerable momentum in looking at models of good practice. However, it is difficult for us to measure those models, and that is where the Department must come in. A concern throughout the Committee's inquiry has been the lack of a cross-departmental approach. During our study visits to Wales and Scotland, we saw a very effective proactive approach between economic development, education and training, and the outcomes were clear, concise and measurable.

I never heard anyone who came to the inquiry say that the Department had consulted them. Not one group said that. You referred to stakeholders, but I am not sure whether there has been a formal engagement with the stakeholders collectively so that they can sign off on an excellent plan. The stakeholders see what is happening and they know the outcomes. The most worrying

aspect is the information that we are getting about young people. You talked about the multiple and complex needs of some young people, and that is to be welcomed. However, given the range of mental health issues, suicides and all the other issues, people need to work collectively and collaboratively in a more structured way.

I hope that the Executive's decision in July was not for the optics. With respect, I hope that something has not been done just because we are in the middle of a Committee inquiry. I hope that there is an excellent and detailed plan of all those interested parties and officials looking at a strategic approach. I would like to see the outcomes of those committee meetings. What have they proposed as the next stage? There has been tremendous momentum, and the meeting next week will be important because it will allow people to contribute to the debate.

However, you need to do much more with the voluntary and community sector, which collectively is doing considerable work; its contribution to NEETs is, without doubt, considerable, as we have all seen.

The Chairperson:

There are concerns that the Department has been working in splendid isolation. Perhaps you can respond to those concerns.

Ms Ingram:

That is quite a range of issues. I will start with the July Executive meeting, when we were tasked with developing a strategic approach or to put together proposals for a cross-departmental mechanism to develop a strategic approach. Since then, we have been looking at the how and the what to put together proposals for a strategic approach, and consulting stakeholders is an important part of that.

In putting together the scoping study, we held many conversations, discussions and investigations with the voluntary and community sector to put together information and to reflect as far as possible what is happening and using it as a basis. I will ask Pascal to cover what we have been doing with the voluntary and community sector directly since July, which is possibly where the timing issues come in.

Mr Pascal McCulla (Department for Employment and Learning):

To go back a step, the scoping study engaged with at least a dozen non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and they are listed as to what they are doing. Before I arrived, there was a conference in December 2009, which was attended by about 100 people. There is concrete evidence to show that we have been engaging with the sector up to now.

The Chairperson:

You refer to the Barnardo's conference, which was not organised by the Department.

Mr McCulla:

No, it was not necessarily organised by the Department, but the Minister was there, along with departmental officials. We can join in with what other people are working towards. Since I arrived I have met seven organisations individually and, collectively, between 25 and 30 organisations through the forum that Barnardo's is beginning to constitute and organise.

Mr P Ramsey:

The Department should be taking the lead; it should not depend on voluntary organisations that are struggling with capacity; it needs to be taking the lead in bringing stakeholders into a forum, setting up a more formal approach and having agreed outcomes.

Ms Ingram:

I hope that we will be able to do that at your event next week. Furthermore, between now and Christmas, we will be working up proposals for what we want to do, and we hope to hold an event, in the form of a pre-consultation forum, to bring everyone together.

Mr Bell:

Thank you for your presentation. The Committee for Employment and Learning can take some credit for pushing the scoping study forward and getting it completed. That work was important. However, now that we have the study and we know where we are, what are the action points to take it forward? My colleague Pat Ramsey asked about targets, but what is the action plan?

Ms Ingram:

We are drawing up a strategic approach and an action plan. I understand about timing, and it is important that we do that as quickly as possible, but we have to populate the strategy with

actions. We will base the strategy on emerging themes, such as information and research, good practice, partnership and co-operation and putting in place structures and frameworks. We must develop those themes and make sure that people work together better. In addition, we must listen to the voluntary and community sector about the role that it plays in providing support services to address wider social and personal issues, which can be very difficult to deal with, so that young people can engage in education, training and employment. We are drawing that together. The Committee's inquiry report will be important in informing us about what to do and the most appropriate and effective actions.

Mr Bell:

When will you have the action plan drawn up? What is your timeline?

Ms Ingram:

The Executive asked us to look at how a cross-departmental mechanism might be put in place to develop a strategic approach, so we want to make sure that we do that as fast as possible. We aim to have something out for consultation in the new year.

Mr Bell:

January?

Ms Ingram:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

I am sure that you appreciate that there are many concerns. Last night's 'Belfast Telegraph' referred to the "lost generation", so it is not good enough to talk merely about some time in the new year; we want definitive deadlines that the Department is working towards.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

Thank you for your presentation. I am concerned that you said little about the co-operation — or lack of it — that you are getting from the Department of Education. What is the position with that Department in what you are doing?

Ms Ingram:

As with other Departments, we have engaged in discussions with the Department of Education to see how its work can contribute best to developing a strategic approach. Those discussions are taking place as a result of the Executive's decision to develop an interdepartmental mechanism, and it is very important that the Department of Education's work is taken into account in that. It is about where we are with timing. I appreciate that we all want a product that includes clear actions, and I reassure the Committee that that is what we are working towards. However, we are in the middle of a process. We also want to ensure that the findings of the Committee's inquiry are taken into account.

Mr Lyttle:

Thank you for your presentation. On the back of the inquiry into partnerships with post-primary schools, careers guidance is an important part of any NEETs strategy. Will you give us more information about exactly how the Department is working with the Department of Education and about how it is tracking young people to assess outcomes and the quality of the careers advice that it provides?

Mr Jim Walker (Department for Employment and Learning):

The Department is trying to progress legislation to facilitate information sharing between schools and the Department. In a young person's life, their careers officer is a key source of advice and guidance that allows them to make informed decisions, and it is important that such information be available to us.

Moreover, the careers service is looking at further developments on social inclusion to take forward work for young people who are in danger of becoming socially excluded and becoming NEETs.

Ms Ingram:

The careers service has an important part to play; I understand that it will give evidence to the Committee.

The Chairperson:

Yes; it will give us a briefing.

Ms Ingram:

It may be able to answer your questions in more detail.

Mr Lyttle:

I still hear from young people who have concerns with careers guidance in general. Therefore, it will be good to hear that presentation in detail. The careers service from DEL claims to have partnership agreements with post-primary schools; I would be concerned if it did not. It will be interesting to hear a wee bit more about that. I am not being flippant: careers guidance is essential, and it is a matter of concern that in twenty-first century Northern Ireland young people still tell us that they do not get the guidance that they need to make informed choices.

The Chairperson:

That is a fair comment, and it has come up often at the workshops that the Committee has attended.

Mrs McGill:

Thank you for your work so far. The action plan was mentioned earlier. Was the meeting in July an interdepartmental one?

Ms Ingram:

It was the Executive meeting.

Mrs McGill:

Which Departments were involved?

The Chairperson:

It was a full Executive meeting; it was not a ministerial subgroup.

Mrs McGill:

June referred to it; therefore, she must have information on it, and that is relevant to our inquiry. In what way is that helpful to the scoping exercise and to the action plans? Who is involved in it?

Ms Ingram:

The Executive meeting in July endorsed the proposal to create a cross-departmental mechanism

to develop a strategic approach. Since then, we have met officials from the most relevant Departments, such as the Department for Social Development, the Department of Justice, the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and the Department of Education to discuss their role in more detail. We will meet the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety this week.

Mrs McGill:

I am still a bit unclear.

Mr P Ramsey:

They are sabotaging you, Claire.

Mrs McGill:

Not for the first time. What was DEL's contribution?

Ms Ingram:

Our Minister brought the scoping study and the recommendations to the Executive. After that, DEL officials liaised with other Departments and stakeholders to draw up proposals for a cross-departmental mechanism to develop a strategic approach. DEL co-ordinated and led that.

Mrs McGill:

Sometimes it is difficult — I speak for myself — to pin down exactly what is happening. I know that there are meetings, references to different Departments and to officials talking and the strategies that follow from that. Nevertheless, it is difficult to pin down exactly what is coming out of all the work that is being done. We need more information.

Mr P Ramsey:

I agree.

Mrs McGill

It would be helpful to know what contribution DEL is making to that exercise.

The Chairperson:

It would be helpful if officials provided us with a timetable of events since the agreement at the

Executive meeting in July. What action have you taken? How many interdepartmental meetings have taken place? How many stakeholder forums have been held? It is critical that we see some sort of deadline. We appreciate that you want to hear the outcome of our inquiry; nonetheless, the Department must work to some sort of deadline.

Mr McClarty:

Thank you for your presentation, June. We are where we are with NEETs; we have to do everything that we possibly can for people who are trapped in that situation. However, surely it is much more cost-effective — and more compassionate — to prevent people from becoming NEETs.

Ms Ingram:

Early intervention and prevention are crucial and will be an important part in drawing up the strategy and actions. I agree with that.

The Chairperson:

To do that you will need the co-operation of the Department of Education.

Mr McClarty:

Absolutely.

Ms Ingram:

Yes.

Mr S Anderson:

Thank you for your presentation, June. I have some concerns about your overarching strategy and how you want to develop your partnerships. It is like everything else that we try to do: there so many people and Departments involved that everything gets bogged down and we lose information about where the early intervention should take place. How does your action plan propose to give some people a lead role? How do we pull everything together so that we do not lose vital information along the way? That could be very detrimental to some young person's future.

Ms Ingram:

It is important for us to look at models of structures that have already worked. I can give an example of work in progress with the health sector about the employability of young people leaving care. We have brought together stakeholders from the health, careers and education sectors and the Public Health Agency in a regional steering group. That group will look at the issues and work with the employability officers in the trusts to create an action plan focused on achieving outcomes and bringing everybody together so that everybody understands their role. I understand what you are saying in that there is a multitude of agencies and sectors here, and that will make it complicated. However, that is the process that we are working through at the minute, which is meant to find the best way to ensure that we have outcomes.

The Chairperson:

It is not exactly rocket science. One has to ask why that was not done before and why it was not the established way of working.

Has a budget been identified as yet? Do you already have a pot of money?

Ms Ingram:

As you are aware, there is a difficult financial context at the moment. We do not have a specific or identified pot of money to use for this purpose, so we need to look at efficient use of resources, joined-up working and how progression and access can be encouraged through communication and working together.

The Chairperson:

Thank you all very much indeed. I look forward to meeting you again over the next couple of months before we publish our inquiry report.