



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Fastrack to Information Technology
Northern Ireland (FIT NI):
Current Funding Issues**

12 October 2011

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr David McIlveen
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr Alastair Ross

Witness:

Mr Billy McClean) Fastrack to Information Technology Northern Ireland (FIT NI)

The Chairperson:

Billy McClean is going to talk to us about funding issues for FIT NI. Billy, you are very welcome. We look forward to hearing what you have to tell us.

Mr Billy McClean (Fastrack to Information Technology Northern Ireland (FIT NI)):

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am very pleased to be here. I want to make an apology on behalf of my chief executive, who would have liked to have been here as well. However, he is hosting a major European conference on education and learning in Dublin this morning.

I want to raise the issue of the learner access and engagement pilot (LEAP) programme, which has been funded by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) through the further education (FE) colleges over the past three years. We have been awarded contracts with various colleges but are working with two in particular at the minute: the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) and the North West Regional College. The issue is around the funding model that is used, and it seems to be a particular problem this year after two successful years of working well with those two colleges. To date, about 2,500 hard-to-reach people in the community have come through the programme. They are the folks who would maybe not think of going to a college. We have been recruited, as a provider, to stimulate their interest, motivate them and get them engaged in community education. So, the education takes place in the local community. In many cases, we bring laptops to local community centres, churches and even to public houses if that is where we will get people to meet.

The issue in question is the funding model, which is a bit complicated; so, you will need to bear with me. I tried to articulate that in my letter, and, as I was writing, it was not terribly easy to explain. DEL has funded this in a model through the FE colleges, which go out to tender. As a provider, we applied for that and were awarded contracts. So, we report to the FE college that issued those tenders. The money that is available through the DEL budget is £9 million over three years. So, each college has about £500,000 a year to provide those providers with the service and to pay them for it. In a sense, it was matched by the funding that the college would get. The FE college funding mechanism through the Department is based on the funding learning units (FLU); I am not sure whether you are aware of that. There are FLU targets, and there are targets for Essential Skills.

In September this year, the colleges said that they did not have enough funding to provide tutors, which is their responsibility, and to provide courses for Essential Skills, which are level 1 and level 2 education. All they are willing to do this year is provide very basic eight-week training, which is a computer basics course.

We had planned for 72 courses this year. Many of those courses are for people who started last year and want to progress to the next level. However, we found, right at the beginning of the year, that we are only able to potentially deliver 30 of those 72 courses. That means that there are 40 courses that we are not able to deliver to roughly 500 of the hardest-to-reach people who we

have already engaged.

That is the issue that we are seeing. A pot of money is already in the fund from DEL to run community education and provide it through the learner access and engagement pilot programme, but the colleges do not have any money to deliver it because of the situation they are in. It is like a good marriage: unless the two parties work together, it does not work. We are left disappointing up to 40 different community groups and 500 people who are asking why they cannot continue. They really enjoyed the first stage, and we do not have very good answers to go back and give them.

I am happy to stop there if you would like to ask me questions. That is the fundamental issue around coming here today. We are only able to go to the college. We have met them and been told that they would issue a letter of what we could deliver on 20 September, but we still have not received that letter. They have told us that there are only 30 computer basics classes.

We cannot go to DEL because it would be seen as going to the people who awarded the tender. That is not to say that we would not do that, but we thought that the best course of action was to come to you and explain the situation because there are people in the community who are being disadvantaged because they cannot take advantage of this training. The college also told us that we could refer those people, but many of our community groups have tried to go to there to see whether they could enrol in courses and have been told they cannot because the courses are already full.

The Chairperson:

I do not know whether you have got a copy of this letter from the Department, but I will read a few points to you that answer the original query. I think I know what it means but it is in usual Civil Service gobbledegook, so you can help me here to see whether it is right. Members, it is quite informal, some of you will have experience in this. Let me just try from my perspective to get to the essence of what we are saying here and then we will deal with questions. The second page of the letter from the departmental Assembly liaison officer (DALO), which is where you get to the meat of it, states:

“The College has advised that FITNI has fully met its contractual obligations in relation to the recruitment of Essential Skills learners under the terms of its current contract”.

What does that mean? Does it mean that you have done all the work already?

Mr McClean:

I have not seen the letter, Basil, but I hear what you say. We believe we have fulfilled all our commitments under the contract. Initially, the contract was to end in June this year, but it was extended to March next year.

The Chairperson:

I think you are saying that yes, you have already done it to June, but it has extended it, even though it only needs to extend it in a few areas. The letter goes on to state:

“remaining scope exists within the contract to recruit further learners in a number of other curriculum areas, including Computer Basics and Digital Photography.”

That is referring to the extended contract. Are you saying that you can do those but you are still not able to do the level 2-type progression?

Mr McClean:

The original contract is for any vocational course and any Essential Skills course that is on the national database of accredited qualifications. However, the college has a remit to help steer the types of courses that it would wish to deliver. Usually that is done through discussion. In June, we put forward 72 courses that we had planned for this year. We did not hear that there was an issue until 5 September. We are sitting with a lot of groups that expect to continue the education that they started last year. Those hard-to-reach people, who are not easy to get into colleges, are already committed to starting courses having done something last year.

Computer basics and digital photography are two courses that we said that we would certainly like to offer this year. However, Essential Skills classes are fundamental. We are having an issue with those courses in particular.

The Chairperson:

There is not too much more to go. I know you have not seen the letter. I just want to raise an issue with you then colleagues will come in with questions. Following on from that last point, the letter states:

“The College has also advised that it has the necessary capacity to fully meet the demand for Essential Skills provision articulated by FITNI, though its range of mainstream courses delivered across its various campuses.”

Mr McClean:

I assume that the letter is from SERC.

The Chairperson:

It is actually from the Department.

Mr Lyttle:

Chairperson, do you want me to pass a copy to Mr McClean? Is there any breach of protocol in doing so? No.

Mr McClean:

My experience has been that one particular group would have quite a significant number of classes. One example is the Atlas Women's Centre in Lisburn, which is in your own area, Chairman. Having heard that there was difficulty with Essential Skills classes, that group rang the college. It has something like 14 classes for women, many of whom are single mothers. Those folks are being told that they cannot get anything from the South Eastern Regional College. No Essential Skills classes are available. Therefore, even without reading the letter, what you have said does not add up.

The Chairperson:

That is OK. Chris has kindly passed you a copy. I will tell you what we will do, Billy. I will ask you the next question. Then, I will ask Sammy to say a little bit because I know that he has been interested in the matter. While he is doing that, you can read the letter in detail. The last bit of it states:

“Following this correspondence, the college has confirmed that it will seek details of all those learners FITNI have identified as having Essential Skills needs, in order to ensure that their learning needs are fully addressed by the College.”

It is basically saying that, if you have an issue, it will sort it out.

Mr McClean:

Well, I am sitting here on 12 October without knowledge of how that may be sorted out. I have been told that groups should contact the college. However, in many cases, we have groups that would not actually want to go into the college. For example, 150 yards away from the Lisburn campus is a group of very-hard-to-reach individuals who are doing that course in the Downtown Centre, which is connected to the First Lisburn Presbyterian Church. Those folks would be very intimidated by the thought of going across the doors of a college campus. They would like to

continue their education in the environment in which they feel comfortable and safe until they get to a level at which they feel they can go into a college. Therefore, that particular issue will not be solved purely by saying that the Department will take those details and provide something for them.

The Chairperson:

That is useful. I get it now. I usually need someone to decipher those letters for me. I understand the issues now. Sammy, I would like you to say a few words. If other members are interested in doing so, please indicate.

Mr Douglas:

Thank you, Billy, for raising the issue. Recently, I actually wrote a letter to the Minister, not about that issue, but about the new Belfast Metropolitan College. It is a superb building. It does your heart the world of good just to go to visit it. I am very impressed with it. What I said in my letter was that there are a number of outreach centres along the Newtownards Road. As Billy said, it is crucial to ensure that hard-to-reach people — indeed, I would say that some of those people are impossible to reach at times — get access to those local centres. Many of them do not have the confidence to go to a college. Certainly, I back Billy on that one.

The Chairperson:

Do you have some experience of that in your area?

Mr Douglas:

Yes. I wrote to the Minister and said that, even though there is that superb new campus, we need to ensure that local outreach centres that provide Essential Skills continue to do so and are feeder centres for colleges. One centre had hundreds of people coming through its doors. Many of them would never have had the confidence, access or opportunity to go to college. It is a crucial issue.

Mr Buchanan:

You say that there are 40 courses that the college is not doing at the minute. You have 40 courses that are ready to go and the college is not doing them, and there are another 30 that it is doing. Is it doing those 30 on the campus site?

Mr McClean:

No, it is allowing those to be done on community premises. My initial letter shows the role of the college and that of the provider. The role of the college is to provide the tuition, the tutor, the assessment and examinations, and to manage the programme. When we set up a computer basics class, the college provides the tutor and we recruit the individuals and mentor and support them. In fact, we provide the equipment, even though that is the responsibility of the college, which it reneged on last year.

The colleges were brought to the programme rather kicking their heels on community education. It is not the main thing that they do. They are more focused on the mainstream students who come through their doors and on business links. The community side has always been something that they have not really bought into. DEL has encouraged them to participate in the programme. All along, we have had various barriers. Last year, it was that the colleges would not take any more laptops out to community groups. We bought 70 laptops so that that was not an issue. We have had to overcome those barriers as we have gone through the programme. This year, the college said that it will deliver the 30 computer basics classes in the community, which we are happy with. However, it lacks the funding to provide the tutors for the other Essential Skills courses. In addition, it has already met its Essential Skills target on mainstream courses, so it does not need to do Essential Skills for community folks who are hard to reach. That having been said, the hard-to-reach guy needs Essential Skills very badly. They are the real people who need it. Although many of the mainstream people need Essential Skills, they generally have a better ability than those who are hardest to reach.

Mr Buchanan:

The letter says that the college can provide those 40 courses on the campus. How many of your students would be prepared to go to a campus setting to do their course? Do they all want to do it in the community?

Mr McClean:

I suggest very few of them. You would be lucky if you got 10% to go to a college campus. That having been said, the Atlas Women's Centre, which is only a few hundred yards from the college centre, applied to the Lisburn centre for its 14 or so Essential Skills courses. The college said that it could not provide them. The general manager has had to seek alternative solutions for those people. It is 14 classes of about 10 people, so we are talking about 140 or 150 people. In reality,

the college has not been able to provide a service for those folks.

Mr Buchanan:

It comes down to the fact that all you need is the tutors.

Mr McClean:

We need the tutors from the college. In that model of funding, each college receives £430,000. Each year, that has not been called down. Much of it has been underspent. Why does the Department not allow the college to take some money out of that budget to cover the tutor costs? The answer in the letter is that it cannot do that. If the two pots are not worked together, nothing works.

The Chairperson:

I got that point. There is an issue about —

Mr McClean:

Where the funding is from, perhaps?

The Chairperson:

There is a failure by DEL or the colleges to address hard-to-reach areas. I was always concerned about that. When funding was given to the colleges, it was taken away from the outreach centres. It was said that it was too hard to administer. The Department decided to give the funding to an FE college because it could do the administration but still give the money back out to the communities. We will get some details on the funding. If there has been an underspend, as Billy suggested, I would like to know what that has been.

Mr Lyttle:

Billy, you are very welcome this morning. Most of the issues that I was going to raise have been drawn out. I am familiar with the programme in Belfast. The Belfast umbrella group has raised concerns about the model for distribution of funds, and I have raised those with the Minister.

There is a lot of information to get through to find out whether the problem lies with the administration in the FE colleges or whether it lies with the Department. However, we as a Committee should be able to raise that in detail.

Mrs Overend:

Thank you for coming to the Committee. Could we investigate what happens in other colleges? I visited the Northern Regional College, which does a lot of work in the community. That is happening across all the colleges, and we could see whether the situation is the same elsewhere. Are there providers in other areas that are similar to FIT NI, or do colleges deliver something themselves? I think that the Northern Regional College delivers community involvement through one of its members of staff. It would be good to draw up a comparison because I do not understand the technicalities.

Mr McClean:

I appreciate that it is a complicated contract. We had contracts with five of the six colleges, and, when some of those came for retender, we did not get awarded those contracts. Therefore, there are quite a number of providers. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) carried out a longitudinal survey of the providers and gathered input from the learners, which, on the first report, seemed to be generally very positive for the learners. I think that another review is going on to look at the whole programme.

My experience of the Northern Regional College was that we were the contractor for a year initially, and we put in requests for courses, but they were not fulfilled. We had real difficulty as we had recruited and established groups and we wanted to deliver a course, but we could not get a response from the college to send anybody to that group. I had numerous meetings and wrote a letter back in February 2010, I think, which has not been responded to, so I gave up.

There are two providers and different models of working, and some of the colleges approach the matter in different ways. Some colleges give one provider the Essential Skills remit and give another provider the vocational skills remit. Therefore, in the Northern region, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) had the vocational courses, and we had the Essential Skills courses. However, that model does not work terribly well. In fact, I wrote to them to ask them to retender it, because if you go into a community group, and, suddenly, it has two providers coming through the door trying to encourage it to do two different things, it does not work.

Other colleges did it better in that they approached it on a geographical basis, where one provider for a geographic region was offering whatever was on the national database of

accredited qualifications. So, there have been different experiences in different areas. In fact, I think that the purpose of the pilot was to assess what the best mechanisms have been.

I do not want to come across as having a very negative approach about our experience and what we have been doing. We have done some amazing work with the South Eastern Regional College in having 2,500 people between it and the North West Regional College. We work in the Northland area of the north-west, and it has worked really well. However, there have been difficulties along the path, which we have tried to overcome. There is a major difficulty this year, as the learners are being left without a very clear message. I could go back and tell them to approach the college because it will be able to cater for it, but I already know that one of the major learners with 14 classes has not got satisfaction. Therefore, I do not think that that is the correct answer.

Ms Gildernew:

Billy, I missed the start of your presentation, and I apologise for that. I have to say that I am torn on this one. The fact that you are working to try to get hard-to-reach people into courses is absolutely commendable, and we need more of that. I accept that the first hurdle is getting people to do a course of any kind. To get them in for some kind of training or education is the first rung on the ladder, and what you are trying to do is keep them on that ladder. However, you obviously feel that they are not high enough up those rungs to go into the college. Community education and working with FE colleges is the right thing to do, but that is where the other side of my brain is working. I am from Tyrone, and people in Fermanagh have to travel 20 miles to their nearest FE college. What about those hard-to-reach people? The challenge for people who live in rural communities is so much greater by the time they pay for fuel to get to the college and pay for additional childcare because of the travel time to and from the college. So, when you were saying that the community facility was 150 yards down the road from the tech, I started to get a wee bit

Mr McClean:

Can I explain that a little bit more just to give you a better picture? I have a list of our courses, which I am happy to distribute. That was a specific example of a group of people who are close to the college but would not think of going in. Look at the list of where we hold our courses. I wish I had a contract for the Fermanagh area, because I am from Fermanagh originally, but another provider is providing the service there. We are out in the community in rural areas. For

example, on Monday night, we started a class in an old RAF base in Ballyhornan, 20 or 30 miles away from the nearest college. Those are the types of places that we are doing the courses in. We also work in Castlewellan and across the Province. We are not just doing them on the doorsteps of colleges.

I appreciate the point that you are making, and you are right that the people in rural communities are disadvantaged because of the college campus sites. It is fundamental that these classes take place in communities. In one case, we were holding a class in a public house, which you would not expect, but that is where the community meets. We are providing the classes in rural areas.

The Chairperson:

I think that we got the point. I will clarify for Michelle's benefit, because we had to unravel it a bit ourselves. Billy is trying to deal with people who have a psychological barrier and do not think that going to a big fancy college is for them.

Ms Gildernew:

That is what I was coming to.

The Chairperson:

I will give you a bit more information. There is a pot of money that is available to every college — £430,000 — which is not being drawn down. So, the money is there, but no one seems to be able to access it, because the colleges come back and say to people that they could do the courses on their campuses and question why they would want to do them out in the country. The answer comes back that people are halfway down a route — they may have done level 1 and want to do level 2. We were teasing out whether the money could be reallocated to facilitate —

Ms Gildernew:

OK. I certainly support the reallocation of the funding.

The Chairperson:

I have a sense that our approach to dealing with hard-to-reach people has not been as successful as it might have been. I remember the debate some years ago where the money was brought into the FE colleges because of accounting rules. It was decided that that was better way of doing the

administration. The idea was that the money would go back out to providers, but it did not work terribly well. Maybe we should ask a few questions on that.

Ms Gildernew:

Fair play to Billy and the team at FIT for getting people on that rung of the ladder. However, where there are not those access issues and where people's problems are psychological, more could be done to try to persuade people that, once they are there, they will enjoy the course. Instead of letting them think that this will always be provided, maybe they could be told that the next rung of the ladder is going into the college.

I was up with a group from Tyrone that was meeting the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. That group was talking about the facilities that they want to provide. They want children and young people to be able to go into that facility and know that they are worth something when they see that somebody has provided such a quality facility for them. Keeping people who are hard to reach in their communities is wrong when the best thing for them could be going to college. If stage 2 of their course was in the college and they had strength in numbers, those people could go to the college together and say, "Look at the facilities that are provided for us." You could use the psychological aspect to increase people's feeling of self-worth.

Mr McClean:

I agree with that strategy, and that is what we try to do. In the past year, working with the college, we have suggested that we bring every class into the college, because most people are unaware of the facilities that are available. However, when I tried to arrange those visits, I have met with difficulties in timetabling.

Ms Gildernew:

Timetabling with the group or timetabling with the college?

Mr McClean:

Timetabling with the college. College staff were not available or whatever. There were also other practical issues such as the tutor being unable to accompany candidates because they cannot be paid for days on which they do not actually teach. Those are simple things that would make a big difference. The tutor is the candidate's trusted party, yet those small issues are preventing something very meaningful happening.

Michelle, we would like to see people in the college developing and going much further. Our remit as a charitable organisation is for marginalised people to develop to a point where they have the skills that enable them to get into employment. It is not about training people to stay in their communities. It is about getting them right out to get work. That is what we are about as an organisation, and it is what we are trying to do through this programme.

Mr D McIlveen:

Thank you, Billy. I share the Chair's frustrations in wading through all the information. I have a couple of simple questions to ask. Is FIT NI considered a lead contractor in the learner access and engagement pilot programme?

Mr McClean:

There is no such thing as a lead contractor. The FE college is seen as the lead contractor. There are then subcontractors, and we are one of those. The WEA is the other larger subcontractor in the Province, and there are a number of smaller ones.

Mr D McIlveen:

What is your relationship with organisations such as the Atlas centre?

Mr McClean:

Atlas is one of the community groups that we have worked with to develop courses under this programme. We work with the Atlas centre to market the programmes to the catchment area with which it engages. We tell Atlas about the benefits of this type of programme and actually recruit learners onto it. Atlas is a bit unusual, because it is well-established and has a number of programmes.

The other context is a small group such as Scrabo Residents' Association in Ards, where a very small group of primarily men, but also women, are brought in and taken to the Model School. We pay for that school facility in the evening from the FIT budget, even though colleges are supposed to provide accommodation in the community. We get those people to do the programmes on their doorstep. There is one in a church hall in Haypark and others in Twinbrook and Poleglass. We work with ladies' groups there who use facilities in schools or community halls.

Mr D McIlveen:

Did FIT NI tender to the Department to get the contract?

Mr McClean:

Each college issued a tender. We applied to the college tender process and won the contract.

Mr D McIlveen:

I admit that I am deviating slightly, but issues have been raised about how these contracts are allocated. There is resentment at the bottom of the food chain, where groups feel that they could provide the same service at much less cost. They watch as groups further up the food chain are funded heavily from DEL's budget. We may need to investigate that as a Committee.

The Chairperson:

I am with you on that.

Mr D McIlveen:

Billy, I am curious whether you, as an insider, have encountered that or seen any such issues.

Mr McClean:

There has been a transformation around community education. The Department saw this pilot as a new way of doing it. That is why it is called a pilot; it is a test to see whether it works. In the past, community education models have maybe not engaged the same hard-to-reach learners. The same people may have come through a revolving door, done one course and then another.

The Chairperson:

Billy, the point, on which David and I are on the same page, is that funding used to go directly to small groups that deal with hard-to-reach entities. Those groups were funded, but that money was then taken away from them because administratively, or perhaps legally, it was too hard to administer. The funding was given to the FE colleges to administer and ensure that due diligence was carried out, with the expectation that the money would go back to the groups that provide outreach services.

What I detect is that many people think that the money went in but never came back out. If funds were allocated but not drawn down, we would certainly want to know about that. Small

organisations that are not able to access funds now have to go through other people to do so, because they do not know how to do it themselves.

Mr McClean:

I should say that our model of working with community groups has been about trying to recognise that. We try to develop a relationship with small community groups by rewarding them for every learner that they bring in, or incentivising them to do so. Our model gives community groups £25 for every learner who starts and another £25 for every learner who stays to complete the course. Through the funding mechanism, we tried to pass on something to community groups so that they could sustain themselves and develop. We have tried to recognise the fact that we won a tender that encourages community education by working in partnership with local community groups for the benefit of everybody. That is something that we have addressed, but I appreciate the issue that you raised.

The Chairperson:

Would anybody else like to say something before I draw this session to a close? Has everyone asked sufficient questions? Billy, it was very good of you to come here and share your insight with us. I certainly think that we should get a departmental briefing on the provision of education in hard-to-reach areas across the country, because that would draw out the issue. Is that the way forward?

Ms Gildernew:

I think so.

The Chairperson:

We will see what the Department is going to do and how successful that will be.

With regard to the case that you raised, Billy, with the Committee's permission, I will reply to the letter by saying that we are keen to pick up on the issue of people who have completed level 1 but are not yet able to start level 2 and, therefore, appear to be stranded. I want to know how the Department might deal with that, so we will ask for a written response. I will also raise the fact that the Department said that the money could not be transferred. Frankly, I do not care whether the money is transferred, but I do not like people not being allowed to progress up the ladder. When we discuss the issue at the departmental briefing, we will consider how best to get input

from you and the other providers.

Mr McClean:

Chair, there is just one point to note: you talked about people not being able to progress from level 1 to level 2. In fact, Basil, the problem is that people are not able to progress from a basics course or an entry-level course to level 1 or level 2.

I appreciate the Committee's time and interest in the issue. We welcome working with you in the future. I have some packs should anybody be interested in a bit more information about what we offer.

The Chairperson:

If you leave those with the Committee Clerk, we will dish them out. As Sandra pointed out, to ensure balance, we will need to hear from a range of providers and, perhaps, a range of community clients. I just need to work out how can do that, but it will be fine.

Mr McClean:

I have no issue with that. I appreciate that this is a difficult one for the Committee to manage and make happen. Those who do not start their courses by the beginning of November will have lost that opportunity. Given that the programme ends on 31 March, they need those intervening months to be able to complete it. I appreciate the time pressure. If that is not within your scope, I appreciate that you have at least heard what the issue is and that you will bear that in mind for future funding rounds.

The Chairperson:

Is there anything else that you need me to put in the letter, Billy?

Mr McClean:

The issue is that of provision not being offered by the colleges. We would have to hand over all of the hard work that we have done to gain learner information, but would, potentially, have no ownership of those folks' futures. Our role would stop because we would not be helping them to progress. We see ourselves as mentors to those folks. We encourage them to complete courses and go on to the next level. If we simply had to hand over a list of names and addresses and it was up to the colleges to pick up on those, we would have no way of checking whether they had

done so. We can try to keep in touch, which we will, but it takes us out of the loop of progressing those folks to the next level of their education.

The Chairperson:

OK, I get the point. I want to pursue the issue, and I want a briefing from the Department, but there is time pressure. When we write to the Department, we will ensure that a copy of the Hansard report is included and invite a reply. Billy, thank you very much for your time.