



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

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

17 February 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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
Mr Trevor Clarke
Ms Anna Lo
Mr David McClarty
Mrs Claire McGill
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Ms Vivian McConvey)	
Ms Alicia Toal)	
Ms Alison McStay)	Voice of Young People in Care
Ms Mary-Claire Glennon)	
Mr James Stewart)	

The Chairperson (Ms S Ramsey):

I welcome witnesses from Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) to give evidence to the Committee's inquiry on young people who are not in education, training or employment (NEET).

Mr Bell:

I wish to declare an interest. I am a senior practitioner in an intensive support social work team for another seven days until my career break kicks in.

The Chairperson:

Members will recall that VOYPIC was present at our NEET event in Lisburn on 3 February 2010.

Vivian, we have run over time, but that is not to say that I will press you for time. I will stay here for as long as we have a quorum. Therefore, rather than make a long-winded introduction, I will hand over to you to make a presentation.

Ms Vivian McConvey (Voice of Young People in Care):

Thank you very much for the invite to come along and give a presentation to the Committee today. We hope that this will be the first meeting in our developing a relationship. We know that the Committee is on a journey and has taken the NEET issue seriously. We want to be part of that journey. Although the Committee may not get all the information that it requires today, we assure you that we will work hard with you, particularly on care-experienced children and young people. The matter has been on VOYPIC's agenda. We are a unique organisation, which, since 1998, has been dedicated only to care-experienced children and young people from birth to 25 years of age.

We will divide our presentation into two parts. First, Alicia and I will give formal input and an overview of the agency. We hope to provide the Committee with an understanding of VOYPIC's uniqueness as an agency, because it operates across Northern Ireland. Some of our information relates to monitoring and supporting initiatives for care-experienced young people who are NEET.

We have brought with us three young adults who are part of our sessional workers' training programme. They have had three very different experiences. Sometimes, when people think of care and care-experienced young people, they think only of the myths around it and demonstrate a lack of understanding. Although Alison, Mary-Claire and James are a little nervous, they have been brave enough to come along. They welcome any questions from members. Again, we realise that this is the start of the journey. There may be some questions that members want to ask them. After Alicia and I have provided an overview, we will ask the three young people to

join us at the table.

The Chairperson:

I apologise that we could not seat all five of you at the table because of a lack of microphones. That is why the meeting will be in two parts. We are not trying to place more pressure on people who come to give a presentation. It is to ensure that the microphones can pick up what witnesses say. The meeting is being recorded by Hansard for the purposes of the inquiry.

Ms McConvey:

That is great. Alicia has handed round a series of slides, which I will take you through. I will not cover all that information in detail, because there is no need to do so — members can read the slides. However, we will take you through the main points.

I am not sure whether you are aware that VOYPIC is an independent regional organisation that works right across Northern Ireland. We have four different offices. Our aim is to improve the life chances of care-experienced young people.

When we came together in 1993 to request that such an agency be set up, VOYPIC began as an organisation that had at its heart being the voice of children in care.

We have five core services. Each one of those services links into the others and can provide information to young people on education, training and employment. We have an advocacy service, which has 10 dedicated workers, two of whom are based in each trust area. Any child who has care experience can ring those workers to ask for assistance and help on any matter, such as care placement, decisions that have been made in looked-after children (LAC) reviews, and so on. Through the advocacy service, we gather a great deal of information.

We have a mentoring service, which we will discuss in more detail later. We train volunteers who must undertake a 90-hour accredited training course, in which they meet young people for up to three hours at a time during one year. We have 75 volunteers at any one time.

We have a participation project. One thing that it is important to understand about children in care is the need for engagement and coming together and the need to build self-esteem and self-confidence. We have a full range of programmes that we see as our front door into VOYPIC.

Those programmes begin to get young people engaged and build up their self-confidence to get them into more detailed programmes.

Alicia heads up our policy project, through which we are involved in anything that relates to decision-making on children in care and assisting, in a different way, in making their voice heard. Our volunteers are not policy workers but workers who facilitate children's voices in order to try to translate for Government what a unique experience care is for one child and what that means for policy and legislation that the Assembly must consider. Throughout, we have gathered research. Later, I will discuss the looked-after children in education (LACE) research project. We deliver our services across the Belfast, Lurgan, Derry and Ballymena areas.

As background to VOYPIC, our interest in education, training and employment began in 1998, when young people began to lobby the agency about their poor experiences. From that, we tried to co-ordinate an interdepartmental and inter-agency initiative, and started the LACE research project with an initial study called 'Branded a Problem?' The study was funded by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department of Education, and was the first research project really to look at the educational experience of looked-after children.

The project was never intended to be only research. With research, what can happen is that really good information is left on the shelf. More stages were always intended for that project, and, therefore, it developed on to stage 2 and stage 3. There is currently a LACE forum, membership of which made up of people from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), DHSSPS, the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the voluntary sector. Over that period, we have tried to use initiatives to influence policy and other initiatives that are happening throughout Northern Ireland.

Through its sessional project workers' programme, VOYPIC has undertaken several pieces of research. From the beginning, VOYPIC has always employed care-experienced young people — we have had a unique experience with the three young adults who are with us today — to redress the losses in education that some young people have, and to ensure that, at the heart of our agency and at all times, we have care-experienced young people to inform and develop the work that is going on. Two pieces of research were undertaken. One, which Alicia undertook, was an examination of the employment situation of looked-after children and recommendations on how

we could develop that in the agency. The other was an evaluation of the effectiveness of our training and development programme.

VOYPIC has a volunteer mentoring programme, which commenced in 2007. It is funded through the children and young people's funding package. Using a format of volunteer mentors, the programme looks at redressing young people who are specifically at risk of suspension, expulsion and non-attendance at school. Mentors have to complete an intensive 90-hour accredited training programme, because they are dealing, very directly, with children in care. For anyone dealing with children in care, the system is quite bureaucratic and involves dealing with residential children's homes, foster parents and LAC reviews. At any time, we have 75 young people on the programme, and those young people will have a mentor with them for up to three hours a week. It is a goal-focused programme, in which a young person can come in with any problem — he or she may be lacking in confidence or lacking experience in something that may seem simple to other youngsters, such as using a bus — and we will create an aim or goal for him or her. Some young people come in who are out of school completely, and, for them, the goal for the end of the year is to get them back into school. One of our great achievements was a young man who got back into school and received a pupil of the year award at his graduation, despite having only been in school for two weeks. He got that award as a result of the tremendous way in which, in those two weeks, he turned around his experience of the previous year. Volunteers are 18-plus and come from all walks of life. It is a very important programme.

What is important in VOYPIC is the understanding that young people have had a unique experience, not just of being in care but of pre-care. We assist young people in coming to terms with the care experience and in redressing many issues. The area that we think is most important is that of self-esteem, self-confidence and decision-making. The care system is very bureaucratic and diminishes young people's ability to make decisions.

We have copies of our promoting active citizenship and education (PACE) evaluation. Through our participation project, we undertake a huge range of programmes. However, of interest are the PACE programme and the Get That Job! programme. I hope that that gives the Committee a sense of some of the things that we are doing with young people.

The three young adults with me today, James, Alison and Mary-Claire, are part of our Working for Change programme, which recruits care-experienced young people between the ages

of 18 and 25 to a trainee programme. All people on VOYPIC programmes, from the volunteers up, have accredited training. That training package is recognised and accepted, and, therefore, it is a passport to other things. In our agency, the most important thing is to get young people involved, give them something to take away with them and build up their CV. The young people come out of our employment programme with Open College Network (OCN) level 2 and 3 accredited training. We have made that training the baseline qualification for project worker posts, which are the next level of posts in VOYPIC. We have tried to establish a step situation for our volunteers so that people know what a volunteer does, and what is involved in the employment scheme and the project worker scheme.

People who have successfully completed that training are employed by us on a sessional basis for a set number of hours. We find money from various funding sources to attach to a programme so that those young people work directly for VOYPIC. That is real work. Some young people move on to full-time and part-time employment in other agencies, because they now have the training and the experience, as well as a reference. They can prove that they have worked, so we lose young people to other places. However, our loss is their gain, because they move on. Other young people move on to part-time and full-time training.

I will not cover the next few slides in detail, because we do not have enough time. One can cross-reference these observations with what we know about the barriers and challenges to employability that children who are in care experience. For example, our observations on personal skills have been shaped directly by young people's experiences, by the employability skills that are required and by other issues that we need to address. Stage 1 and stage 2 of our training and employability programme list all our activities in greater detail. Members may wish to ask the young people about the group work that they have done and their real-life experiences.

Our programme is unique; it is not just a training programme. A person has to have real employment experience for which other employers will look.

The barriers to engagement are important. When I attended the NEET event in Lisburn, I sensed that the stakeholders needed to know what those barriers are, and what they needed to deal with in order to make a difference, particularly for children in care. When talking about children in care, it is important to understand the pre-care experience. The poor outcomes for children in care can be attached to the experience of being in care. In fact, for many young people, non-

attendance at school is established long before entry into care.

Following on from that, children in care have some complex learning and behavioural needs. We have to realise that the pre-care experience of children who come into care has been traumatic. They have had a series of experiences that will have an emotional impact on their learning and behaviour. There will probably have been an early failure to address literacy and numeracy problems. Our young people in care have the same experiences as the generic population.

The LACE research highlighted the low expectations of, and lack of encouragement for, young people in care. Without an aspiration in life, it is hard to get motivated, especially in the face of huge emotional challenges every day. We need to have a belief in our children in care, encourage them and have high expectations of them.

Children in care experience disruptions to schooling owing to family difficulties and placement moves, especially at exam times. Many things can happen to a child in care, in the family and in a placement, and that can have an effect on the child's schooling. Young people can often move to independence prematurely, which can lead to financial hardships and levels of debt. For example, children who leave care early at 16 or 17 years of age will have difficulty in sustaining their independence. However, the number of children who experience such difficulties is decreasing, and we will talk later about some excellent schemes that have been set up to help those children. Some young people vote with their feet and choose to walk away from the care system.

There is an absence of role models for young people in care, which is something that VOYPIC wants to challenge. Some young people have come through our programmes and have excelled, but because there is a huge stigma attached to being in care, coming forward and being a role model for children is really hard. Sometimes, there is inadequate information and guidance for young people coming out of care. That situation is improving because of the protocols that have been adopted. We will talk later about those protocols. The lack of information and guidance is one of the reasons that young people underachieve.

It is important that the Committee note that the rate of mental disorder is four to five times higher among looked-after children than it is among the general population. How emotionally

well someone is and how that individual settles into school after they have faced a trauma in their family can indicate whether he or she is suffering from a mental disorder. We have found that some young people who leave school at 16 and who then want to get back into education and training when they are 17, 18, 19 or 20 can get caught in the poverty trap because they have to try to support themselves financially in order to do that. I will now hand over to my colleague Alicia, who will take the Committee through an overview of the policy.

Ms Alicia Toal (Voice of Young People in Care):

Over the past number of years, there has been general recognition of the poor outcomes when it comes to health, homelessness and unemployment for young people who leave care before reaching adulthood. There have been a number of policy drives over the past couple of years to improve those outcomes, the first of which was the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. It tried to improve planning and preparation for young people leaving care and to dissuade them from leaving care at 16 and 17 years of age, because they would have a greater chance of stability and better outcomes if they delayed that until they were 18 years old.

The legislation also included planning and pathway plans. In the lead-up to his or her sixteenth birthday, a young people in care must undergo a comprehensive multidisciplinary assessment. After the assessment, a pathway plan is produced, which will change as it is reviewed, setting out a long-term plan for that young person's education, training and, later on, career planning, which is a particular focus of the pathway plan process, as the young person moves into adulthood.

Later, I will talk a little bit more about the detail of 'Care Matters' and its relevance for us. The Programme for Government sets out a range of targets for increasing participation in education, training and employment and for improving children and young people's school attendance. The trusts and the Government are, therefore, working towards several targets. It is also worth mentioning that the DHSSPS's 20-year vision for health and well-being in Northern Ireland has set some long-term objectives. One of its objectives is that 95% of young people in care should experience no more than three placements during any one period in care. It is clear from talking to young people and from carrying out a great deal of research that placement instability has a direct impact on whether they engage in education, training and employment. That instability can be caused by a young person's care placement, a lack of information about what is happening in the family or a lack of planning when determining where he or she will be

placed next. That has a huge impact on young people's engagement in education and training. Another objective is that at least 75% of care-leavers in education, training or employment should be at the same level as other 19-year-olds. One of targets set out in 'Care Matters' was to double the proportion of 19-year-old care-leavers in education, training and employment.

Four strands underpin the proposals in 'Care Matters'. First, education services must be empowered to support looked-after children. Education and social services need to adopt better working arrangements, because those agencies were quite bureaucratic and often did not work well together. Moreover, trusts need to establish dedicated educational teams, and a number of pilots and different tools can be used to engage and maintain young people in education or training.

Secondly, much more emphasis needs to be placed on looking at who are the significant adults around children and young people and on giving better support to foster carers and key workers in residential care and after-care teams.

Thirdly, it is important that children be involved in decisions that are made about them in education and that they be informed about with whom their information is shared.

Fourthly, it is also important that they have access to a further range of learning opportunities. It is not always about whether young people have five GCSEs or about how good their academic record is but about what other programmes or initiatives children and young people can use to achieve positive outcomes.

I wish to provide the Committee with some statistics on children in education who are looked after continuously for 12 months. Generally, the care population for any one year is 2,500, but the number of children and young people who were looked after for a full period of 12 months, as of September 2008, was 1,626. Some 77% of those young people were of school age. Some 23% of those young people had a statement of special educational needs (SEN) compared with 4% of the general population. Therefore, different needs exist.

Some 1% of the children had been permanently excluded from school; 8% had been suspended from school; and 9% had missed at least 25 days of school. It is also worth noting that, of the looked-after children who were eligible to sit GCSE or GNVQ exams in 2007-08,

50% attained at least one of those qualifications with a grade between A* and G or the points equivalent, compared with 89% of the general population in Northern Ireland.

The 'Care Matters' strategy established the 16-plus service. Traditionally, leaving and after-care services had primarily focused on those who were aged 18 and above. However, to ensure better preparation for adulthood, there was a move to engage with people at age 16.

Following on from the 'Care Matters' strategy, a regional protocol for joint working was established among Careers Service, DHSSPS and the 16-plus teams to ensure that young people who require additional support in careers guidance or training are identified early.

The strategy also aimed to increase participation in third-level education, and there has been a small but important rise in the number of people from care attending university. As I said, the document aimed to improve outcomes for young people in care and, therefore, double the proportion of care-leavers in employment, education or training of those aged 19.

Promoting Positive Outcomes is one of the other regional initiatives. That is a multi-agency approach to support care-leavers and makes recommendations to trusts on how they can improve the education, training and employability of the young people who move through care. It looks at all the issues that impact on young people in care, such as education, training and employment, identifies the types of support and training available, and tries to encourage the trusts, as corporate parents, to look within their own organisations to see how they can support placements or create entry-level jobs. People who run a family business will take their children in, support them, train them and show them the ropes, and this is similar.

The initiatives are just starting to roll out across the trusts. Some trusts are employing dedicated employability workers, and several of them are making great strides in providing supported placements and training opportunities.

The Foster Achievement scheme, which is run by the Fostering Network Northern Ireland, offers children in foster care the opportunity to avail themselves of a range of tools and equipment that will support them, such as computers or toys. The scheme also runs fun and learning summer schemes and a Letterbox system in which children can sign up to receive materials once a month through the post.

The GEM scheme — the former foster care scheme — is a particular initiative in foster care that allows young people to remain in their placement. Traditionally, young people left their foster placements when they reached 18 years of age, and the scheme allows them to stay until the age of 21 if they are engaged in education, training or employment. It also gives financial support to carers to help them to support the young people in the courses that they are doing.

The Frank Buttle Trust has also been working in Northern Ireland and awards Charter Mark status to universities that demonstrate that they are making a particular effort to support young people who have come from the care system. DEL is involved in a pilot with the Frank Buttle Trust and Belfast Metropolitan College.

It must also be remembered that, in the background, are the traditional children's services planning routes. Each of the four areas has a subgroup that is dedicated to looked-after children, to care-leavers and to looking at education and training initiatives. A regional group is being established to consider the employability initiative that is being rolled out regionally.

The next slide shows statistics for looked-after children and the care-leaver population aged 16 to 21 years from the most recent census. The number of those young people participating in higher education has been steadily increasing. The figure stands at 5.1%, which is more than the comparative figure in England.

Committee members can see from the statistics that young people who are aged 16, 17 and 18 are more likely to be engaged in education, training or employment. As they get older, they tend not to be engaged. We need to drill down a wee bit more and look at the statistics over a longer period, because that trend may be as a result of young people becoming more independent in their living arrangements and their finding it difficult to maintain their placements in education, training and employment.

Ms McConvey:

A census of people in care is carried out every year, and we have provided the Committee with the latest to be published. It provides trust-by-trust information on every youngster between the ages of 16 and 21, and, for planning purposes, below that age. That has been undertaken over three years, so we are beginning to receive trend data. The type of information that is being

produced on young people in care is getting better. The census provides statistics on age and gender, care placements and care-leavers by legal status for the entire care population. We have picked out for the Committee the elements of the census that relate to employment, further education and training. All that information is available.

Ms Toal:

Almost 61% of those young people are engaged in some form of education, training or employment.

Ms McConvey:

Around 40% are not, which is concerning.

Finally, we have tried to highlight for the Committee some of the issues that we think need to be addressed in order to break down barriers. Some of those issues are generic. Young people in care are the same as their counterparts, but they have some specific issues as a result of their being in care. The generic issues include the need to educate families on the importance of education, training and employment as a means of achieving long-term positive outcomes. We are talking about children on the edge of care. I spoke earlier about the pre-care experience. That is something that we have for other young people who are in need. We try to express the importance of education, training and employment. People are coming to us from several generations of families that have not been engaged.

Additional but non-stigmatising support is required for looked-after children in schools and colleges. Alicia mentioned the Frank Buttle Trust, which is really good in providing that support, but there is a need to get more people and schools engaged in understanding the needs of care-experienced young people, and to begin to address those needs. Some of the equality of opportunity initiatives for young people in foster care have been absolutely magnificent and have begun to show results. Over time, trend information will be compiled from the GCSE revision classes, and that information should enable measurement of what was set this year, next year and the following year. We should not forget about residential care, which is a big initiative in fostering. However, key to everything is stability in a young person's life. When we are looking at education, training and employment, we cannot forget about where young people live, about their placements or about the stresses on the availability of foster placements and residential care, and so on. Stability is a core issue.

Ms Toal:

To return to one of the points that we made earlier, there is a high prevalence of mental ill health in that particular population, and they have difficulty accessing the right support, particularly as they get older. There is a need for therapeutic supports for vulnerable young people, who should be able to access that support when they need it, which may not be Monday to Friday, nine to five, but outside office hours and at weekends, particularly if they are living completely independently. Young people also need flexible training and development programmes that are tailored to meet their needs. One would be hard pushed to get a young person who has not been engaged in education, training or employment for a long time to turn up every Monday to Friday from nine to five. A staggered approach that is more supportive of their needs is required.

In our programme, although we expect them to come in, we do not expect them to be full-time. We agree what their commitment will be at the start of the year. We will also get an external support worker on board. Our colleague Sarah Reynolds will work with them on their training needs, employability and skills, and an additional person will work with them on the outside if they are experiencing personal problems that affect their ability to come into work or that affect the quality of the work. It is about how different supports and mentoring are set up, and also about providing training for the providers. What are the issues facing the young people who will be coming across their doors?

Finally, there is a need for financial support and incentives, which do not necessarily have to be financial incentives. Much good work is being done in the community and voluntary sector to provide non-formal training and support for young people, but that work is not always formally recognised by the statutory sector. Unless they are full-time education, young people are not eligible for educational maintenance allowance (EMA). We would like to see more flexibility and creativity in the attempts to encourage children and young people from a care background to return to education, training and employment.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for your presentation. It strikes me that there is probably agreement on the need for a joined-up approach but that that approach is not having an impact on the ground. You talked about the 2002 study ‘Branded a Problem?’ and the LACE forum. The number of young people who are NEET has increased in recent years, although that is not necessarily to say that

the number of young people in care who are NEET has increased. Has the joined-up approach helped to reduce the number of young people in residential care settings who are NEET?

I agree with your comments on children leaving care. To make officials realise the need to deal with people up to the age of 21 was a long battle. Are the pathway plans having an impact? Do you agree with the Committee's view that a cross-departmental approach is needed? The Department of Education and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) must play a part, although DEL should take the lead, because the issue concerns people who are aged between 16 and 25.

Ms McConvey:

'Care Matters', in itself, is a positive outcome of joined-up work. The LACE forum acted on the recommendations for us to be more committed in linking education and social work. At the beginning, it seemed as though there were two different sets of programmes and languages that did not cross over. However, the LACE forum addressed the outworking of the crossover. Many of the 'Care Matters' initiatives are informed by the LACE project and the work that we do on the ground.

In helping to prepare 'Care Matters', we spent a great deal of time with the community and voluntary sector to find out what initiatives and changes were needed. You are right to say that a cross-departmental approach is required. There is sometimes a view that DHSSPS has a responsibility towards young people who are NEET only because they are care-experienced young people. However, DHSSPS, the Department of Education and others have a huge role to play in the lives of those children before they even reach the age of 16. We must start to tackle the issues earlier.

The legislation on leaving care has led to excellent initiatives and crossover work. We faced problems with the review of public administration (RPA) and its reform of the health trusts and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB). However, we welcome a cross-departmental approach generally and a specific cross-departmental approach to children who are NEET and to 'Care Matters'. Within the cross-departmental group, working groups will come together to progress on the 'Care Matters' initiatives.

Mr Butler:

Thank you, Vivian and Alicia, for your presentation. Alicia talked about DHSSPS's vision that 95% of young people in care should experience no more than three placements during any one period in care. Another objective was that at least 75% of care-leavers in education, training or employment should be at the same level as other 19-year-olds. Have those targets been achieved?

Ms Toal:

That is a long-term goal, but efforts are being made to improve the situation. I think that the latest statistics indicate that 20% of 19-year-olds in care have had at least one placement move.

Mr Butler:

Therefore, the statistics have not really improved over the past four years.

Ms Toal:

It was only in the past year that the figure has been at 20%. DHSSPS and the trusts have been trying to increase the choice of placements so that the range of placements can meet any assessed needs. That means that a child can have a choice of a kinship, or foster care or residential placement — whatever suits them. When there are poor assessments, or when placements are not available, that is when moves happen and relationships break down.

Mr Butler:

Evidence given to the Committee for the inquiry involves a complex group of people. At one end of the spectrum is VOYPIC, and then there are carers, single parents, and people who take a gap year from university. What would you like to see come out of our report, given that you obviously deal with the very difficult aspect of having a whole NEET spectrum?

Ms McConvey:

That is correct. I think that we should blow our own trumpet a little, because some of the initiatives undertaken have had proven results. It was fascinating to hear the Committee's evidence session earlier with the Employment Services Board (ESB). The trusts are trying to have a localised initiative, in which we look at corporate parents. The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust employs 22,000 people. In the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, even the chairperson is involved in a monitoring group that looks at how that trust is making real placements in training and employment available to young people.

We have begun to tackle some initiatives in order to meet targets. You asked a question about 19-year-olds. I attended a meeting last Friday, at which I learned that some trusts have between 50% and 62% of 19-year-olds in employment, education or training. We would like to have more of a conversation about scraping back some of the stuff that we have able to put in. Some of it is in infancy and some of it has moved along, but it has made a difference.

The Foster Achievement scheme recognises education as more than having five GCSEs. It is able to provide foster parents with finance to put towards tutoring. That encourages a range of other activities, such as hobbies, that will build children's confidence. Through that, they will get involved in other activities. There have been some good initiatives, but we tend to think of the care population as being in our own little house, and I think that we need to share some of our experience with the Committee. Does that make sense?

Mr Butler:

Yes. That is the type of experience at which we need to look.

Mr P Ramsey:

I will be brief. Your presentation was good, and I am glad that I was here for it. One main concern was also highlighted when the Prince's Trust gave evidence to the Committee. Its research found that 35% of young people involved in its study had serious mental health problems but were not suicidal. You state that rates of mental health disorder among children in care are four to five times higher than children in the general population. Have you carried out any further research on those young people after they reach the age of 25? How many of them are out of work or depending on incapacity benefit, for example? Are there any figures that we can match up with what you say?

Ms McConvey:

I am sorry, but, no, we do not have that information, because we deal only with young people up to the age of 25.

To stay on the issue of mental health, VOYPIC undertook a research project called the CASPAR project, which looked at the emotional health and well-being of looked-after children. That project went into more detail about what was required. One thing that we find in care is that

if interventions and therapeutic interventions happen at an early enough stage, the cumulative effect when children and young people reach the age of 17, 18 or 19 is not the same, and they do not have huge emotional problems.

In the employment and training initiative that the Committee is considering, several other strands need to be introduced, particularly for children in care. The Committee needs to work not just across Departments, but across whole areas, in order to include issues such as stability and mental health. Although at times it may not look as if employment, training and education are being dealt with, the foundations and the solid base on which to achieve success need to be tackled along with other Departments and areas of work. If the foundations are in place, the outcomes will be better, particularly for that group of young people.

Ms Toal:

Although there is not a great deal of local research available, research in England found that people from a care background were over-represented in the prison population, the unemployed population and the homeless population, and much of that could be linked back to mental ill health.

Mr P Ramsey:

You said that young people in care are four or five times more likely to have mental health problems. Can that figure be broken down further to determine whether those problems are mild, moderate, acute or suicidal?

Ms Toal:

It can cover the entire range. Young people have difficulty in accessing child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) unless they have a diagnosable mental illness. Those young people are struggling because they do not always get the services that they need. Therefore, it is hard to distinguish between mild and more serious cases. Small, local studies have been carried out in the former Craigavon and Banbridge Community Health and Social Services Trust, so we may be able to tease that information out a bit more.

The Chairperson:

Vivian, can you send the Committee more information on the impact that the educational maintenance allowance is having? I am conscious of the fact that you have brought other people

along with you, and it is important that we get to hear young people's views.

I welcome James, Alison and Mary-Claire to the table. The Committee is conducting an inquiry into people who are NEET, and it will not be shy in looking across all Departments at all issues. You may not like my question, but given that you are actively involved in VOYPIC, what would you like the Committee to do or what should the outcome of the inquiry be? What is not happening and what needs to change?

Mr James Stewart (Voice of Young People in Care):

Concerning employability?

The Chairperson:

What needs to change in order to get young people involved in education and into employment?

Mr Stewart:

Young people in children's homes do not get the support that they need to continue in education in the way in which they would if they were in a foster home. Young people in children's homes are left to fend for themselves when it comes to their education. People do not bother with them.

The Chairperson:

Even though there is an issue when a young person reaches the age of 21, do you believe that the state pulls back further when a young person reaches 16 years of age?

Mr Stewart:

Young people should be supported the whole way through.

The Chairperson:

Is that not happening?

Mr Stewart:

No.

Ms Alison McStay (Voice of Young People in Care):

Children in foster placements feel that they are in a proper family, and, therefore, the support is

there to go into education. I had a foster home placement, and that support was there. However, something needs to be put in place in residential care homes to allow for more encouragement and more personal care so that young people can be guided through from the age of 16.

The Chairperson:

Therefore, the pathway plans do not always work.

Ms Mary-Claire Glennon (Voice of Young People in Care):

I was in a foster placement before I went into care, and I never missed a day at school — believe it or not. However, the minute that I went into residential care, I just thought, “What is the point?” If I passed an exam, who was there to tell? There was no one there really to care whether I passed my exams or not.

The Chairperson:

That is an important point.

I do not want to put you under pressure, but I want to leave this comment with you. The Committee wants to get its inquiry right. Vivian referred to many consultation documents, recommendations and information on what has been happening over the past 10 to 12 years. The Committee does not have all the answers. Therefore, if any of you have any suggestions, feel free to let the Committee know what it should be looking to do. If we are talking about there being a proper joined-up approach, we want to have a proper joined-up approach, and that will include VOYPIC as stakeholders.

Thank you all for appearing before the Committee. I wish you all the best in whatever you choose to do in the future.