



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE  
FOR EMPLOYMENT  
AND LEARNING**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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

14 April 2010

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mrs Dolores Kelly (Chairperson)  
Mr Peter Weir (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Paul Butler  
Mr Trevor Clarke  
Rev Dr Robert Coulter  
Ms Anna Lo  
Mr David McClarty  
Mrs Claire McGill  
Mr Pat Ramsey  
Ms Sue Ramsey

**Witnesses:**

Ms Caroline McCracken            )  
Mr Chris Quinn                    )     Northern Ireland Youth Forum  
Mr Neil Symington                )

**The Chairperson (Mrs D Kelly):**

I welcome Chris Quinn, transitional director of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, and his colleagues Caroline McCracken and Neil Symington.

Included in the Committee papers for members are the terms of reference for the inquiry into

young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs), which may be useful for those of us who are new to the Committee. As part of its inquiry, the Committee has already heard from a number of groups, and, following on from the formal event that the Committee hosted in February to launch the inquiry, it is hoped that members will travel to Wales and Scotland next month to see examples of projects that feed into the NEETs strategies in those areas.

You are very welcome this morning, and we look forward to hearing what inspirational ideas you have and how those might be taken forward.

**Mr Chris Quinn (Northern Ireland Youth Forum):**

We are very happy to be here today. As I speak, my colleagues are circulating our paper among members. One is a report on NEETs that, through consultation with our membership, staff and executive, tries to pull together some information for the Committee. The other is our presentation, which Neil will go through in a few moments. The paper breaks the issue down into the terms of reference as specified in the documents that we received.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much, Chris. Normal procedure is to spend five or 10 minutes on the presentation, which allows time for members to ask questions or make comments.

**Mr Quinn:**

In that case, I will pass over to Neil and Caroline.

**Mr Neil Symington (Northern Ireland Youth Forum):**

NEETs is an important issue for us, and, as Chris said, we welcome the opportunity to come to the Committee. We meet young people from across Northern Ireland, particularly those within the specified age range, and we encounter the NEETs issue all the time.

Let me begin by presenting an analogy, which has relevance. We are in the middle of a recession, which is supposed to be lifting, although I do not believe it. I have a £10 note, and I offer it to anyone in the room who wants it.

**Ms S Ramsey:**

We cannot take bribes. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Symington:**

It is not a bribe.

**Ms S Ramsey:**

You owe me money from about 20 years ago.

**Mr Symington:**

I will owe it to you.

Would anyone like this £10?

**The Chairperson:**

Of course people would take it.

**Mr Symington:**

You do not know the history of the £10 note. It is about 16 years old, but you do not know its history. Let me tell you its history, and then you can make a decision. This £10 has a colourful background. At the age of eight, when it was in P5, it was expelled from primary school. It was one of the first primary school children to be expelled. At the age of 11 or 12, it was admitted to a mainstream secondary school. It did not do too well there either. It found it difficult to sit in school and had anger issues. It attacked a few children in the class and a few teachers as well. It got involved in crime at the age of 13, and stole its first car at the age of 15. Ever since, it has been living a life of crime, and it has been in all sorts of difficulty. A few attempts to intervene have been made, but none has worked well. My question now is: do you still want this £10 note? Anyone?

We have entitled this presentation, 'Worth and Opportunity'. We believe that the £10 note, even with such a colourful background, is still worth £10. It will still get you £10 worth of food in Tesco, as would another £10 that we do not know the history of. That has a bearing on what we want to talk about. We meet young people all the time who feel that they have no worth at all, and that is the biggest issue for the inquiry. Our question is: who will provide the support or opportunity so that those young people can once again feel a sense of worth? We have called the presentation 'Worth and Opportunity' because you can have all the worth in the world, but,

without opportunity, you do not get too far. Likewise, with all the opportunities in the world but no sense of worth, you do not get too far. That is what we want to talk about, because it is a critical issue.

I want to reflect on my life and on the lives of some of the young people we have met, so our presentation is rather anecdotal. For that we apologise, but the Committee probably knows the statistics far better than we do.

Let me begin with the predictable careers talk. When I was in fifth year, at the age of 15 or 16, there were 90 pupils in my year. Each of us was asked which youth training programme (YTP) scheme we wanted to do. There was no talk of any of us going to university. It was not on the radar. Most worryingly, it was not on the radar of the teachers or the principal either. We were asked whether we wanted to do joinery, catering or another trade. At a school five miles away, pupils were filling in universities and colleges admissions service (UCAS) forms and planning what A levels they would do. We were all from the same areas, but all we were doing was planning what YTP scheme we wanted to join. There is nothing wrong with YTP schemes, but that is all that we were being offered.

That had an effect on us. At a very young age, life was set out for us. I went on a catering course because I knew that people always need to eat and that I would always have a job. It was as simple as that. At what age do you stop having dreams of being all those wonderful things? Even if you dream of being a superhero, at what age does it stop? That is what we want to talk about. There are many reasons for that, and they are critical to this inquiry.

We want to talk about self-limiting beliefs and the lack of role models for many young people. Opportunities are limited in certain areas, rural and urban. Many young people struggle in school. There is a division among schools. Even in Belfast, there are schools whose pupils are absolute geniuses and know exactly what they want to be and where they want to go, while at other schools there are pupils who do not even care where they live. The division is huge; it is the greatest inequality that we face.

There are also personal issues and community issues, and it is important to consider how they are dealt with and how they can be overcome. I have already talked about how we were laughed at in school if we talked about going to university.

Before we finish, Caroline will talk a little about the hedonistic lifestyle. Young people tend to live for the moment, and tomorrow does not matter too much to them. We come across so many young people whose lives are just about living for the moment. There is nothing out there for them. They ask: where did my dream go and how did I become worthless? At what age does that happen? For different people, it occurs at different ages. There is also negative reinforcement that tells them that they are not worth much.

We were asked to look at how those factors impact on young people. We find that the impact is that young people lack confidence, self-worth and self-belief, are less likely to gain meaningful employment or training and have a greater chance of experiencing poor physical and mental health and long-term unemployment. It is no coincidence that our mental health is in the state that it is in. Unemployment and a lack of meaningful training are strongly linked to poor mental health, and a lot of research could be carried out on that link. Young people become harder to reach and motivate and less likely to have goals and aspirations. They may enter a cycle of deprivation. I used to talk about third generation unemployment: it is now probably fourth generation. People drop out of numerous training organisations, placements and NVQ after NVQ. I know that the Committee spoke to officials from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) earlier, and they will be aware of the issues.

My short story involves a group of young people who attended one of our residential events in August, after the GCSE results came out. I asked various young people what they were going to do. One young fella said that he was going to tech next year as he was going to take up a trade. I asked what trade he was going to take up — this is his plan for his life, his career — and he said that he was getting “a lucky dip”. I asked what a lucky dip was. He replied that his daddy was going down to Workforce Training Services on the Springfield Road to pick something for him. That lad had no idea what he was going to do as his life’s career — upholstery, catering, joinery, mechanics or whatever. His dad was going to pick it for him.

I move on to the reference to “joinery in September and catering by November” in our presentation. The Youth Forum has done a lot of work in recent years, as have I in my past employment, with training organisations, such as Workforce Training Services, Springvale Training and Paragon Training, and with education other than at school (EOTAS) programmes, alternative education providers and young people who have been expelled from school. We have

found that, particularly in the Training for Success models, young people might do joinery in September, catering by October and something else by November. They are flipping courses. A lack of placements for young people is one reason that they drop out of tech and school. I do not know the statistic, but the drop-out rate in further education (FE) colleges is huge, and that needs attention.

Training for Success is not meeting real needs. Some young people face severe difficulties. We provided a democracy programme for young people on the Training for Success programmes in Larne, Carrickfergus and Antrim. I remember thinking that the issue was totally irrelevant to those young people. The issues relevant to them are the huge problems with drugs and alcohol and lack of self-belief — their heads were way down near the ground. Therefore, Training for Success was not meeting their needs.

What has worked? We run a programme on community change called Making it Happen. It is based on Paulo Freire's work in South America, particularly in Brazil, which focuses on everybody having the ability to solve their own problems. That belief must start from within a person and work outwards.

Springboard programmes have worked well. They are funded by DEL and the International Fund for Ireland (IFI). The Youth Action community leadership programme has also worked well. Job Assist centres have been successful in west Belfast. Others successes have been the Bytes project; Drive for Life in Ballymena; volunteering schemes; the Prince's Trust team programme, which works with young unemployed people and young people employed in the Civil Service; and the Time for Change programme, which is run by Challenge for Youth. I could go on providing great examples of good practice. However, they are sporadic and in bits and pieces.

In our submission, I talk about the uniqueness of youth work, because we are youth workers from youth work organisations. Therefore, we believe that the introduction of youth work skills in England, Scotland, Wales, America or anywhere else has led to hugely significant change. Why is that? It starts with the belief that all people have potential and everyone has the power to change. Taking that as our starting point places all possibilities for growth within a meaningful and trusting relationship where there is mutual respect, and it meets young people where they are at, with no predetermined outcomes. When your job is to get someone a job, sometimes you are

not meeting that person's real needs. Youth workers work in a way that attempts not to judge, and youth work can be creative in how it meets young people's needs. A programme's design is based on a person's needs; each programme can be completely different, depending on the person. Youth workers are ideally placed to deal with young people who are identified as NEETs. Youth workers work with those people every day, perhaps not in an employment capacity, although they constantly deal with employment figures.

What is the impact of youth work on young people? It provides opportunities, and, again, they are vital. I would welcome research into personal development, training and jobs, because if it were not for youth work, I would not be here today — I would not have gone to university and studied to be a professional youth worker. Youth work and social work have a huge impact on young people who are becoming professionals in their trade. Youth work creates role models for young people and helps them to create an identity. It encourages volunteering, and it helps young people to find a career and develop a sense of self-worth.

We end by suggesting a five-point way forward, and those points are detailed further in our paper to the Committee. The first point concerns investment in transitions programmes at key stages in a young person's life, in or out of school. Children in P6 and P7 are at a particularly critical stage, given that there is so much uncertainty at the moment. I have a daughter in P7, and this year has been an absolute nightmare for her. It is important to identify the issues facing young people who are already struggling at that age, and probably even before that. There must be dedicated resources. We run a programme called the P7 power experience, which, up until now, has required no funding. It has only ever been delivered in Ballymena, the area that it was piloted in. That programme has huge benefits for young people who are making the transition to post-primary education.

The second point deals with resources for teenagers in school and out of school and with identifying young people who are at the edge. It refers to alternative education provision, which has been vital in meeting the needs of young people who perhaps do not fit into the formal education system, who are struggling or who, for whatever reasons, have been expelled from school. The organisations involved in that provision are doing fantastic work, again, with little or no money.

The third point states that relevant professionals should ensure that the most marginalised



young people are not allowed to fall through the net, as has happened all too often. The integrated services model operating in England, which is being piloted in west Belfast, tries to catch those young people and get them working together. A one-stop shop approach is being piloted in north-east England, which tries to provide young people with everything that they need in one place and under one banner, regardless of whether that is benefits advice, drug and alcohol advice, counselling or therapies.

My first experience of anything to do with employment was through careers advice in school. I was sent to Marks and Spencer for work experience because I was “alright” in my class and because the advisers thought that I would do a good job. However, I never wanted to work there. Careers advice is absolutely vital. We meet young people all the time who want to do weird and wonderful things, yet they go to the nearest shop for their work experience. The system is not meeting their needs. Young people may have a vision of where they want to go, but they have no idea of which pathway to take to get them there. That area could be developed.

The fourth point concerns young people in training and FE colleges. As the inquiry will find out, not all young people leave school and go somewhere. There are some who do not go anywhere. However, those who do go somewhere need to have a very good experience to be incentivised to stay. Many of the young people who drop out do so before Christmas or in January. The numbers are astronomical, and that is something that must be looked at. For example, I do not know the policies that are in place to get young people into joinery, but if students cannot find a joinery placement, they are, all of a sudden, thrown off the course. As far as I am concerned, training organisations should not take people on unless they know that placements are available. There are huge issues around that and around young people dropping out of FE colleges.

We are aware of the underspend last year on pastoral care in FE colleges. That almost took our eyes out. Our organisation is struggling for money, and we provide that type of service for young people. That money was given to FE colleges to enable them to provide pastoral care and look at the life skills of young people, so that young people with difficulties could go and see somebody. The benefit of the service is that, as well as dealing with young people’s issues, it makes them more likely to stay in college. We believe that the Youth Forum and other organisations have a part to play in that.

The fifth point concerns those who are identified as NEET; it states the importance of programmes and services that treat them as important and that value their contribution. Some existing programmes and services are absolutely brilliant. However, there are gaps. Young people who are not involved in anything are the hardest group to engage with. We have to go out on to street corners just to find them in the first place. Those young people are not even attempting to get money from the local Training and Employment Agency. They are nowhere.

Delivering transitional programmes is something that the Youth Forum can do. We have developed programmes around inspiration and aspiration and around creative consultation with young people to find out what the issues are. The Youth Forum has vast experience of working with young people in training organisations, EOTAS provision and alternative education provision, and with different communities in other areas.

Lastly, we are the organisation that promotes the voice of young people. That voice is one of the hardest to hear, but it is one that needs to be heard. The Youth Forum has a role to play in that.

**Ms Caroline McCracken (Northern Ireland Youth Forum):**

I will draw out a few key points that Neil made. The issue of NEETS is not simplistic. Young people not in education, employment or training have different issues and face a range of inequalities. There are also serious health consequences for those young people. Yesterday, I read a startling statistic from a study that was developed in the north-east of England. It said that one in seven young people between the ages of 16 and 18 who are NEET will be dead in a decade. That completely blew my mind, and it supports what young people are telling us in the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. Neil and I are in the privileged position of working across the country with a vast array of young people from varied backgrounds, and they are telling us the same thing over and over again: they do not feel that the support mechanisms are there for those vital transition times, from as early as when they move from P7 to secondary school.

We have a culture whereby young people go through school and adults tell them what to do, and they are not asked to make decisions for themselves. However, when they reach the age of 16, they have to make their own decisions and supervise their own study, and young people are telling us that they are not prepared for that. They are also telling us about the hedonistic lifestyle that, apparently, I am an expert on. They are saying that drug and alcohol abuse is still the

foremost problem, and that leads to mental health issues. Those are some of the reasons why young people do not attend further education colleges or look for work.

A more basic point is that young people are saying that they do not even have the aspiration to think what they want to do. It comes down to the issue of whether they care if they live or die, never mind making a choice on further education or gaining employment. Therefore, we in the Youth Forum have worked really hard to challenge that mindset and flag up the problems. We have developed programmes with young people. We sit down with them, and they explore their own identity, their ethics, their skills and the things that they enjoy. We also flag up the decision-making process with them, because a lot of young people do not know how to make decisions. They do not weigh up their options, they do not think about what is best for them in the long run, and they do not see that they have to map out a plan.

We have run highly successful programmes with more than 1,000 young people in socially and economically deprived areas. We have seen young people excel and gain entrance into work and further education through our work with them to highlight what makes them tick, how they make decisions and how to work through the process. It sounds like such a simple thing, but it has a huge impact. That is what our studies highlight for us.

Neil gave the example of what is happening in Manchester and mentioned the idea of a one-stop shop with the strategic linking of vital partners. That shows an acceptance that addressing the NEETs issue requires more than a one-pronged approach. A variety of issues make a young person NEET. Therefore, it is about taking a holistic approach, bringing vital partners together under one roof and making those partners accessible to young people. If they are having housing issues, mental health issues or benefit issues, they can get all that support in one place. That is what young people are feeding back to us.

**Mr Symington:**

Lastly, there is a huge issue for young people who are motivated to seek employment, because they are now competing in a market with adults who are extremely skilled and experienced, and they are all applying for the same work. Without getting into other issues, there is an extremely enthusiastic and motivated student population who take on part-time, low-paid work to enable them to get through their courses. The young people with whom we work are being compared with those guys, so they are already at a disadvantage when they go for an interview. There is no

comparison between somebody who has a lot of zest and confidence and somebody who is being coerced into even going to an interview. Volunteering is also a huge issue that will need to be looked at in future, because it can help young people to build up experience and training.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much for one of the most vivacious presentations that I have heard in a long time, if ever.

**Mr Symington:**

I am glad that you do not have to take the tenner, by the way. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McClarty:**

Chairperson, he had convinced me, so I wanted the tenner.

**Mr Butler:**

I congratulate the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson on their appointments, and I thank Sue, the previous Chairperson, for her work.

I thank the witnesses for their presentation. You deal with vulnerable young people, and we could come away with the perception that there is no hope for any young people. What exactly is it that works for you? A lot of young people get jobs and are very successful. I take on board what you say about the importance of early years education. That is a common theme. There are many difficulties to be faced, particularly in the economic downturn. Take alternative education, for example. What is its success rate? There are young people who have had difficult histories and backgrounds, but some have been successful and have jobs. How can we monitor and assess the value of the work that is being done?

**Mr Symington:**

Chris will laugh at this, but we were having a yarn about that issue this morning. I do not think any of this is rocket science. I heard the Chairperson use that phrase just before we came in.

I am from west Belfast, where there are three providers of alternative education in a small area: Lagan Valley Education Project, Conway Education Centre and Newstart Education Centre. They have had huge success. One of the key factors is the relationship with the young

person. That sounds simplistic, but it is about someone treating you as an equal, being on your level, giving you respect and not telling you off or demeaning you. That said, sometimes a telling-off is needed; if people are going mad, you need to deal with it. That element is important, and there are programmes that meet the needs of young people.

I had a yarn the other day with someone involved in alternative education provision who talked about how young people who do not fit into the formal system and have been expelled from school are being encouraged to sit GCSEs. Already, we are facing the same issue. Such a high value is placed on those qualifications. However, the important point is perhaps to find out what the needs of young people are and to meet them. That will impact on all their other issues.

**Mr Butler:**

Where else are alternative education providers based?

**Mr Symington:**

There is one not too far down the road, which is called the Bridge Alternative Education Project. In the north east, where I am based, there is EOTAS provision, which is formal education. I do not think that it has had the same success as alternative education has had. I hope that I am not speaking out of school by saying that. I do not know about the provision of alternative education outside Belfast. I imagine that it is run on a voluntary basis.

**Ms McCracken:**

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation compiled a study on alternative education. The Committee may know of it. It is about tackling poverty in Northern Ireland. It flagged up the success of alternative education. It presented some clear statistics on the fantastic impact that alternative education has on young people's chances of entering further education and gaining employment.

**Mr Butler:**

We have so few providers of alternative education in the North of Ireland.

**Mr Symington:**

Those groups developed on their own initiative; they had identified a need. I worked in Newstart Education Centre for three years, a long time ago. At that stage, it got no money from the Belfast Education and Library Board. It was financed by trusts and foundations. We argued that the

money should follow the students. If a pupil is expelled from a school, the school should no longer get money for that pupil; it should go to whoever provides the service.

We fought that battle for years, but I do not know whether it was ever won. I know that the board now gives financial support to Newstart Education Centre, but I do not know to what extent. I work on EOTAS provision in the north east, and I know from working in that set-up that it is different, because it is run by the statutory board. There are teachers, which is not a bad thing. Youth workers are attached, and without them the service would struggle to operate. Youth workers build the relationship with the pupils.

**Mr McClarty:**

I formally welcome the new Chairperson to her position, and I look forward to working with you over the next weeks, months and, I hope, years. *[Laughter.]* I also pay tribute to Sue for all the work she did as Chairperson. I always found her easy to work with. I have no doubt that the new Chairperson will be equally —

**Ms S Ramsey:**

That is why they took me off it. There were not enough fights on the Committee. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McClarty:**

Your presentation was probably the best one that I have heard for a long time. Your enthusiasm really came across, Neil and Caroline. I have a simple, short question. How do you actively try to reach young people who are in the NEET category?

**Ms McCracken:**

We actively recruit young people in that category in a variety of ways. For instance, as Neil said, we go out and speak to alternative education providers and the EOTAS group. I do not know whether the Committee knows much about that group. It is usually made up of young people who have dropped out of further training or education after school because they feel excluded, they are about to be excluded or they have been excluded from school at some stage. We engage with them, and we also engage with young people who are not in employment groups, such as those run by the statutory Youth Service. We also actively search for groups that are already engaging with those types of young people, and we run our programmes in conjunction with them.

We run programmes within the forum, but we do not stay with the same group of young people for long periods. We use a two-pronged approach: we train youth workers to work with those young people on a long-term basis, and we run our programmes. We do not stay with the same group of young people for years at a time; that is the role of the other youth workers. Neil and I are, therefore, more akin to youth-work trainers.

**Mr Symington:**

I cover the north-east area, including Newry and Coleraine. I spoke about workers and organisations that go out onto the street to help young people. That is their thing. However, they may be helping those young people to address only one specific wee issue. However, the Youth Forum is about helping young people to realise their abilities and to see what they can give back. Some of our programmes centre on community change, which has a huge bearing on many different issues. If young people believe that they can do something for themselves, they are more likely to do something for other people too. It is all about giving something back.

As Caroline said, we work with other agencies and organisations. We work wherever there are young people, such as residential care homes. Usually, other people are already helping young people in such places, and they are our points of contact.

**Ms McCracken:**

We believe in a holistic approach. If young people have other needs that are not being met by us or by another group, we put other partners in touch with them. We, therefore, try to work in a strategic and genuine manner to meet young people's needs. Most of the young people with whom we deal do not have just one issue, but three, four or five, so their situations are not so simple to resolve. One of our roles is, therefore, to link them with key partners.

**Mr Quinn:**

The situation that Caroline has just described is akin to that age-old question about the chicken and the egg. How do you reach the unreachable? That is a big hurdle to jump in youth work or in any profession, and it presents a long-term challenge. Neil talked about the transition from childhood. Meeting the needs of young people and building up their confidence so that they can take the first step will enable us to meet that challenge, but that is a long-term goal. It is hard to reach the unreachable with a short-term quick fix. Street-based youth work and rapping on doors

are important, but it is ultimately up to the young people themselves to take a step towards us. Much of our work is about building capacity inwards. Making young people feel empowered to take that first step and to realise what they are interested in is a big issue. If young people are interested and enjoy something, they will come to us. That links back to the point about meeting needs at an early age.

**Mr McClarty:**

Thank you for your presentation. I wish you well in your work. Had you more funding, you could do much more.

**Ms S Ramsey:**

Thank you for your presentation. At the outset, I want to say that the Committee is acutely aware of the NEETs issue. That is probably why all its members supported the inquiry into NEETs. I want to put that on record.

I was struck by a number of issues in your comprehensive presentation. It is useful to hear the statistics. However, it is also useful to hear suggestions on how to move forward. Everybody is well aware of statistics and the impact of NEETs.

I declare an interest because my father is involved in the Lagan Valley Education Project, which is an alternative education provider. I believe that I have already put that on record.

There is frustration in the community and voluntary sector because Departments do not seem to take a joined-up approach. Although that is fair enough, we are now in a new dispensation. The inquiry should highlight that issue and possibly make suggestions. We are in a new era.

Although you receive funding from DEL — I am not sure whether you get funding from the Department of Education (DE) or other Departments — has it ever asked for your input, as a partner, in tackling the issue of NEETs, because it funds you, or have you simply been involved in the consultation exercise? Because you do A, B, C, D and E, have civil servants in DEL, your parent company, asked you how to tackle NEETs?

You said that you are trying to reach people who are unreachable. We must reach those young people before they become unreachable. We currently deal with more than 52,000 young people



who are categorised as NEET. Do we want to have to deal with another 52,000 in 2011 and 2012? A joined-up approach is needed.

There is also concern about unspent pastoral-care money in colleges. The Committee must follow that up. It is a concern, especially when you consider the increase in suicides and related matters. It is a mental-health issue.

We must also tackle the mindset that exists in formal education. Neil, I am well aware of where you were coming from when you made some of your comments. People look down on alternative education. I left school at 17 years of age to take up a trade. That does not mean that I am stupid, but that was the school's mindset. That school has changed. We must break that mindset. People enter alternative education for a multitude of reasons, not all of which are bad. The money that goes after the child needs to be channelled. It happens in some areas. However, it does not happen across the board. Therefore, my question relates specifically to your involvement with the Department. If you have any more information about pastoral-care money, that would be useful.

**Mr Quinn:**

Your first point was about joined-up working between Departments. Our core grant comes from the Department of Education. In the past, we received money from DEL; however, we currently do not. Neil and Caroline are employed through money that we secured from lottery funding. That gives you a snapshot of where we get our money.

It is encouraging that the Department of Education talks to us about strategies, such as Priorities for Youth and the extended schools programme. We consult young people on such matters. However, we can go a step further. Young people have told us that they want to have a say. They want to tell you guys, Departments, and their schools and training colleges what they need. Therefore, we would very much welcome more of that engagement.

To answer your question; this is the first time that we have engaged with a Committee such as this on the issue. Historically, therefore, there has been no engagement beyond the work that we have done with DE on consultations. What was your third point?

**Ms S Ramsey:**

I asked about pastoral-care money.

**Mr Symington:**

This is how simple it was: in April 2009, an article appeared in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. At the time, we were in a team meeting. I nearly dropped to the ground when I saw the article. I thought, "Flip, what could we do with that money?" I did not go off the rails or anything. However, having spoken to young people, we knew what issues existed in further education colleges. I am not saying anything against further education colleges: I went to one and quite enjoyed it. However, it was difficult. As you said, young people go to college from school, where they are pushed. Perhaps they are not pushed, but there is a lot of discipline and structure. Then, they go somewhere where they are supposed to sort themselves out. I went to college in Belfast city centre, and, once I discovered the attractions of the city centre, I found it difficult to motivate myself and stay tuned in.

There are huge retention issues and huge issues around pastoral care and life skills development, and even in mental health support, yet we discovered that there was a big pot of money that had not been spent. I wanted to pinpoint who was responsible for that. Right away, we thought that organisations such as ours could use that money to carry out work that is needed. We could sit down and compile a written response outlining how we think that the money could be spent.

**Mr Quinn:**

We became aware of that statistic. Like staff in every voluntary organisation, we do not know where our next wages will come from, especially in the current economic climate. The situation is as bleak as that.

As Neil said, when we became aware of that money, we could see a natural linkage between pastoral care and the work that we do through the Big Deal project in providing inspirational expertise and so on. Therefore, it was a bit of a shock.

What we are talking about is not rocket science; it is very basic. We need to go back to the basic needs. There is a need for further education colleges to focus on personal and social development as well as academic issues; learning is not all about reading, writing and arithmetic.

There are other aspects, and it is hard for a person to progress without those basic skills.

**The Chairperson:**

That is a question that we will take up with the Department. We will ask the Department for a report on the spent and unspent budget allocation across all FE colleges in time for the next Committee meeting.

**Ms Lo:**

My background is in social work and community work, so I know the Youth Forum and the good work that it does very well. You are all great role models for young people who have fallen through the net and want to do better.

The Committee hosted a meeting of representatives of the voluntary sector. I do not know whether you were at that meeting, but, at my table, we were talking quite a bit about the fragmentation in the voluntary sector. A large number of small projects work in different areas, and they are, perhaps, duplicating each other. Although those projects are good in themselves, they have short-term funding, work on a shoestring and do not make the impact that they should. What is your view on that?

We talked earlier about a lack of partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors. How can we make the voluntary sector stronger and more co-ordinated? I do not know whether we should make it compulsory for young people who become NEET to go to a group in the voluntary or statutory sector to help to them get out of that situation.

You provided us with examples, and I have heard it all before. I was devastated to hear about the report that you mentioned; it was horrendous to hear that one in seven of the young people who are not in employment, education or training would die within 10 years. What are we doing about that urgent problem?

Is it better to group the voluntary sector organisations to help young people? Should it be made compulsory for young people to go to an organisation in either the voluntary or the statutory sector?

**Mr Quinn:**

We are sensing a lot of frustration on that issue for a number of reasons. For as long as I have been involved in the sector, youth work in this country has been described as fragmented and duplicated. The review of public administration and all the changes that have gone on in the youth sector have further exacerbated that problem. We are in a situation where if, for example, I was a greengrocer and Neil was a butcher, I might start selling meat.

**Ms S Ramsey:**

You could open up a branch of Asda.

**Mr Quinn:**

That analogy sums up the way that the sector is; Neil might selling the stuff that I sell, and I might start selling the stuff that he sells, and, instead of talking to each other, we would be competing. That is how things work at present, and how they have worked here historically.

Every stakeholder in the statutory and voluntary and community sectors, and in even the private sector, has a role to play. However, there is a real need for us to sit down, talk and get back to basics. Why are we here? Why did we get involved in youth work in the first place? Was it to help young people, or for personal gain? I sometimes become very frustrated because of the competition, and I wonder what the motivation is. We need to meet young people's needs and not be precious about ourselves or our organisations. The real business can happen only when that baggage is left at the door and people get round the table.

How that is to be done, I do not know. I feel that, over the next few years, we will be forced to form coalitions with other organisations. I would much prefer that to happen naturally. We try to work with others in the same field. I really like the one-stop-shop idea that Caroline and Neil talked about. We tried to establish a "door" project in Belfast a few years ago where young people could access services when they needed them. A lot of work is going on in England to establish lads' and girls' clubs. They are state-of-the-art youth centres with everything under one roof: the connexions service, counselling and mentoring.

I suppose that we will get away from the fragmented approach when we start to have conversations that are open and honest. We need to remember the needs of young people and look towards more joined-up working. From what I hear, the funding that we are applying for

will require us to work more closely, and that is a good thing. However, we need to make more of an effort to remember the needs of young people, as opposed to personal or organisational gain.

**Ms McCracken:**

Before I took up this post, I worked with a strategist, doing an audit of youth services in north Belfast. I saw at first hand the amount of duplication, with six youth clubs in the one area doing the same thing and wasting money, blah, blah, blah. Before that, I worked in England, where such duplication just does not happen. As a result of our historical and political conflicts, youth clubs and youth provision have become territorial. In addition, because of the way in which such programmes are funded, every programme lasts for only one, two or three years; there is no strategic approach. The voluntary and community sector cannot be expected to move forward in leaps and bounds if it can plan for only two or three years ahead.

Even worse, when I was carrying out that audit, youth workers told me that they planned their strategies around the targets set by funders, rather than building programmes based on needs. They are chasing money to exist and to keep going, rather than identifying the needs and deciding what they will run and how they will look at the issue strategically across the board.

I was one of those young people who finished a degree at Queen's University — in my case, it was in English and psychology — and ended up working in River Island, a clothes shop. So, I went to England. I did a master's degree in community and youth work at Durham University and walked straight into a management post in children and young people's services. Youth services are much more advanced in England because they have not had the same struggles that we have had in Northern Ireland. They taught me that strategic partnership working was the key to moving forward and that funding, especially, should be more strategic and sustainable and not just short term.

**Ms Lo:**

That would have a much bigger impact in the long run, rather than everyone doing small pieces of work that are not linked.

**Ms McCracken:**

Groups do not know what the others are doing. That showed in the audit. There might have been

duplication all over the area, but groups were unaware of what other people were doing. That was not done on purpose; they just had no link-up.

**Ms Lo:**

Should the Department be giving more leadership in this area?

**The Chairperson:**

It is a useful debate, but time is running on, and other people wish to speak. The Committee could write to the junior Ministers, who have specific responsibility for issues relating to children and young people, to ask whether a way forward in the form of a youth strategy is an issue that they might address in their ministerial subgroup. Are members agreed?

*Members indicated assent.*

**Mrs McGill:**

I thank all three of you for your briefing. You presented us with a paper and you spoke to it; I always find that very helpful. Do young people know the meaning of the term “NEETs”? How do you feel about the use of that term? I note that you mentioned EOTAS. The teachers are struggling, and that is an issue.

**Mr Symington:**

The term “NEETs” sounds a bit derogatory. I heard new acronym this week, which is GRUB — graduate returner, unemployed and broke. *[Laughter.]* You might be having an inquiry about those soon.

**The Chairperson:**

I know quite a few of those.

**Mrs McGill:**

Should we use the term “NEET”?

**Mr Symington:**

I am not aware of any young people who know that term. I might be wrong.

**Mr Quinn:**

Caroline and I had a conversation yesterday about the fact that many of the youth work professionals that we engage with are not familiar with what “NEETs” means. Those people are involved at quite senior levels.

**Mrs McGill:**

The term came from England, did it not?

**Ms McCracken:**

Yes. To be honest, when the term appeared in England, academics such as Mark K Smith, the editor of *Infed*, the encyclopaedia of informal education, and other champions of youth work went nuts about it. They wrote papers in protest against that terminology.

**Mrs McGill:**

That is interesting. We should look at that.

**Mr Symington:**

Was the term formerly “status zero”? That sounded quite cool. *[Laughter.]* It was a term that was used in the late 1990s.

**The Chairperson:**

It pigeonholes people.

**Ms McCracken:**

The term “NEETs” takes away from the real issues that young people face. They may not be in education, employment or training, but that term deflects attention away from why that is happening.

**The Chairperson:**

The inquiry had to have some sort of a title. We will take your comments on board. The majority of the people whom we are trying to influence will understand which young people we are talking about. I am new to this inquiry, and it seems that the presentations that we have had are looking at the cure. However, I have not heard much about prevention, which is something that I am interested in. I serve with Sue and Claire on the Health Committee, and we have asked it to do

some research into the way in which Scotland has moved young people from the criminal justice system into health provision. What is the role of families in all this?

**Mr Symington:**

We could have talked all day about prevention, because we believe that that is the answer, but we were conscious that we were here to answer question about young people who are presently NEET.

**The Chairperson:**

We want to break the cycle. If you have more papers, we would be happy for you to return at another time.

**Mr Symington:**

The mental health issue starts when a child is born. The answer does not lie in providing £4 million worth of counselling. I would be shot in some quarters for saying that. However, it is totally a matter of building resilience and coping skills and the ability to have emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is included in our new curriculum, but the question is how much will that really be taught. Sexual health is not even being taught in half of our schools in Northern Ireland.

There are huge issues. Prevention starts with good nursery schooling. Sure Start projects are doing great work, and there are some other great projects. Half of these services should not have to exist, in all honesty. It is often a matter of empire building. Good work with children should eliminate youth probation services, youth justice services and youth conference services. It should eliminate the majority of those services because good work with children will have long-lasting effects. People are not always interested in that view because the results are too far down the road. It does not look good in reports, because we will not see a result from that work for another 10 years.

**Mr Quinn:**

There is no quick fix. It starts at pre-school level. We were talking this morning about subjects such as home economics not being on the curriculum any more. Young people are losing out on life skills, and that is part of the problem. We have mentioned needs, and we need to recognise what the needs of young people are and design training, capacity building or whatever is required



to meet those needs. It is definitely a long-term project.

It is interesting that support was mentioned. We carried out a survey around a year ago and had responses from more than 1,000 young people. They mentioned the need, at times, for information and support that was presented in a way that they understood. They also said that they would go to the Internet for information. Some respondents said they would go to family or to friends, and some said that they would go to professionals such as teachers, youth workers or social workers. That support and information is crucial. Often, it is needed in a time of crisis. How do we respond when young people need information, and how do we deliver it to them? That is a key question.

**Ms S Ramsey:**

On a point of information for the record, the Education Committee and its Chairperson have been kept up to date with what this Committee has been doing. We are well aware that some of the prevention issues are outside our remit and control. However, the Education Committee is keen to play a part, and I think that it is important that that is brought to the fore, particularly as there are new Committee members here today.

**The Chairperson:**

It is good to hear that there is some co-ordination.

The terms of reference for the inquiry include prevention, so, if you wish, you could submit further papers to the Committee.

**Ms McCracken:**

We have brought another paper with us today.

**Mr Symington:**

Yes; I will give that out.

**Ms McCracken:**

That paper maps clearly where we think the cultural shift has come from and our prevention techniques, which are mainly for children of primary-school age.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you. That will be included in the inquiry report.

**Mr Symington:**

Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson:**

We have no further questions. Thank you for your attendance and your presentation.