



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

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

8 September 2010

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Dolores Kelly (Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Bell (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Anna Lo
Mr David McClarty
Mrs Claire McGill
Ms Sue Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Colm Fanning)
Mr Paul Fletcher) Rathbone
Mr Kevin Gallagher)
Mr George Philips)

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mrs D Kelly):

I welcome to the meeting Mr Colm Fanning, the youth engagement team leader; Paul Fletcher, director of policy and development; and George Philips and Kevin Gallagher who are Rathbone participants. Thank you for coming to the meeting.

Mr Fanning will begin with a presentation. Following the presentation, members will be permitted to ask questions or to comment on the presentation.

Mr Colm Fanning (Rathbone):

Thank you for the opportunity to attend today's Committee meeting. I will give a brief overview of the report and the work that we undertook in the workshops. Following that, I will hand over to Paul Fletcher, who will give a rundown on the wider scope of Rathbone.

Rathbone is a national charity. Last year, we engaged with over 17,500 young people around the United Kingdom. One of our projects in Northern Ireland works specifically in youth engagement, which is the area in which this work was undertaken. A lot of our work involves being on the streets and talking to young people who are not in education, employment or training and trying to re-engage them back into employment and training. We named our workshops, "Your Say, Your Way". We undertook 15 workshops, and they were attended by 135 young people. We also conducted surveys with smaller groups and individuals with whom we had been working. The workshops were spread throughout Belfast. They took in young people from south, east, north and west Belfast and the Dunmurry area of Lisburn. We had a great response from young people. They were keen to have their points heard. We interviewed 220 young people who attended and took part in workshops.

Some of our findings relate to your inquiry. One of the first issues that we looked at was the characteristics of young people who are described as NEET. One characteristic really stood out for us and impinges on our work. Of those 220 young people, 135 described themselves as having a drug or alcohol problem that is associated with the situation in which they currently find themselves in life.

Another significant finding, which surprised us, was the number of young people who had no access to the Internet and were, therefore, being held back not only from socialising but from education and finding jobs. The third finding, which was not surprising, was that a large number of those young people — 196 out of 220 — described themselves as having a negative experience of education. I do not think that anyone would be surprised to learn that the majority of young people who are NEET have a negative educational background.

The characteristics are described more fully in the report. Those were the three that stood out for us and impact on the work that we do with young people.

During the workshops, we asked young people about their normal daily activities. Again, that relates to the work that we do. Of those young people, 75% responded that their normal daily activity was to hang out on the streets, with 70% saying that they consumed alcohol daily while on the street. That compares with just 9% of young people who said that they actively seek employment or training daily. The figures clearly show the situation that those young people are in: many of them spend their time on the streets, getting involved in antisocial behaviour, drink and drugs. Those are the findings that young people have relayed back to us.

When we looked at barriers that prevent young people from re-engagement with employment, education and training, an issue that emerged over and over again in many of their responses was the absence of an appropriate adult who they could talk to about how to move forward and from whom they could seek advice and help. Many young people had negative experiences of schooling. Many had negative experiences of parenting and family life or had relationship issues. We found that a big factor was that they did not know who to turn to for help and support to get back into some form of employment, education or training and to deal with issues that were preventing them and barriers that held them back from moving forward.

When we asked young people what changes they would like to see, they said that they needed someone to be there to help them through the low points of their lives. Many of the young people whom we talk to and work with daily feel down and depressed about their current situation. Because of what is going on in their lives, they need a significant adult outside of their families to help them and to whom they can turn to ask for support. Many young people gave the same response.

We looked at tracking and monitoring best practice. In Rathbone, we have our own form of tracking and monitoring the young people whom we work with and with whom we engage daily on the streets. Through our work, we found that there is no national or local database of young people who are NEET to assist in our work and to try to pinpoint where NEET hotspots are.

There is no database that shows that a particular area has a certain number of NEETs who need to be targeted. Therefore, one of our findings under tracking and monitoring, which we have included in our report, is that it needs to be managed. As an organisation, we need to be able to look at the number of NEETs who are out there in order to decide where our work would be best targeted. A more formalised tracking and monitoring system is needed.

Rathbone uses a five-stage model. That has worked for us in our efforts to reach out to young people and to re-engage them with and reconnect them back into some form of employment, education or training. As you can see in our report, the five-stage model has worked for us and throughout the UK. It has been a great success in trying to re-engage young people with some form of employment.

Finally, when we talk about our recommendations for the strategy, a significant one that we would like to see is for NEET hotspots to be targeted through an information system that shows us where the majority of our work should be focused. We also realise and understand that that work is not a quick fix. We have made another recommendation in that regard. Long-term work is required with individuals who are NEET in order to build relationships with them, to find out the issues that hold them back and to work through those barriers. Therefore, people must realise that a quick-fix approach cannot be taken with every young person who is NEET. Time must be invested in every young person with whom we work.

Hopefully, you will have time to read through our report. We just wanted to give you a quick snapshot of where we are going. Paul will go into more depth on the overall approach that is being taken on a national scale and provide clarity on our report and how it fits into the UK-wide project.

The Chairperson:

Thank you.

Mr Paul Fletcher (Rathbone):

As Colm has just said, Rathbone has conducted a great deal of research throughout the UK. The findings from this particular piece of research — those 15 workshops in Belfast — are similar to findings from research that has been carried out into young people who are NEET throughout the UK. In particular, young people say that they feel isolated and demotivated. Even the sense of hopelessness that starts to emerge is common, whether in Scotland, Wales or England. Negative experiences of education are also commonly self-reported by young people. I will say more on that in a moment.

Colm mentioned the issue of churn in and out of NEET figures. We find that many young

people churn in and out of NEET figures rapidly. Many of them are multiple re-joiners to NEET figures. Someone might get a job, but it will be for only one week or even a couple of days. That person believes that things are changing. However, he or she will end up back in the NEET figures. Someone might go on a short course, but he or she falls off at the end and is back in the NEET figures. We are aware that there is a great deal of churn in NEET figures.

That probably relates to what we recognise throughout the UK to be the casualisation of the labour market. Young people, in particular, are attracted to agency work and short-term contracts. At Rathbone, we say that that is an unsatisfactory introduction to the world of work. Young people say that they have had one day's work with an agency. Then, they are back as NEET. Their situation remains the same.

I want to re-emphasise the role of a significant other person in a NEET young person's life. It is a common finding of research throughout the UK that young people often feel let down by the mainstream services that are out there to support them. For example, young people will say that they went to a careers service, but were told to come back in a month's time. They went back in a month's time and were given a 10-minute appointment. They were then told to come back after another month. They feel simply that they are being let down by mainstream services, whereas a significant other person would be there when they need help on a day-to-day basis.

Young people say that their negative experience of education, particularly of school, is not a rejection of learning as such, but a rejection of big institutions, particularly the school, and of classroom learning. That is the issue. Young people want to learn, but they want more practical learning and more learning in the workplace, rather than working in classrooms. They want real, work-based learning, rather than theory of work.

I can give you an example. One young man told me that it was his dream to become a chef, but that he was doing a plasterers' course because no chef courses were available. He was thinking of leaving the plasterers' course, because it was not doing it for him, and then we wonder why we have such high numbers churning in and out of the NEET figures. That young man's dream was to become a chef, but, for some reason, he was put on a plasterers' course.

Short-term courses seem to be quite a common approach, and we fund employability courses in other parts of the UK. Quite often, those are six or 12-week courses, but we are finding that

anything less than six months just does not work, because it is not long enough for young people to gain the skills and experience to be able to progress into the labour market or on to apprenticeships and other training.

As has been said very clearly here in Belfast, young people need allowances, a lot of which are means-tested, to go on training courses. It only takes mum and dad to be earning more than £20,000 for a young person to not be eligible for a training allowance, which tends to be around £30 a week. Although there is no allowance for those young people, there is an expectation that they will contribute something to the home, and they need pocket money, bus fares, and so on. If there is no allowance, it is very difficult for young people to go on a training course, even if they want to. Some allowance would help.

I want to return to the issue of the significant other, who is really somebody who the young person can trust, who believes in them and who is there for them. Often, that is somebody outside the family. The significant other tends to be embodied by the youth worker or the youth engagement worker, such as the staff who worked with Colm on the engagement project. The significant other is an advocate and a broker for the young person. They go with them to interviews. If the young person goes to look at colleges, the significant other is there to say, for example, that a young man does not want to go on a plasterers' course; he wants to be a chef, so he does not want to waste time on the wrong course. When a young person progresses to college or into employment, the significant other provides ongoing transitional support during what can be a high-risk period when things can go wrong for young people. We do not want young people dropping out after a week or so, so the youth worker or engagement worker is still there for them.

We have found that the key success factor for the work that Rathbone does, here in Belfast and in other places, is that we have to go to where the young people are. That often means our workers going out at street level into parks, housing estates and shopping areas where the NEET young people are hanging about, as was picked up in the research. You cannot send NEET young people letters and expect them to come to you, whether that is about careers, Rathbone or anything else. We have to go to them, and, when we do, the young people are easy to engage. They want to make something of their lives, and we can be quite successful. We have to put the effort in and go to them and, when we do that, we can turn those young people around.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much, Paul. Are George and Kevin going to take questions later?

Mr Kevin Gallagher (Rathbone):

We are indeed.

The Chairperson:

Thank you.

You will not be surprised to hear that some of the issues that you have raised are common to other presentations that we have heard. Obviously, it is not just about finding a cure but about prevention, and that is where some of the information that you provide comes in.

I am interested to hear from Kevin and George as to what exactly they mean by a negative experience in education. I am also struck by the fact that you mentioned a significant other. Many people would see that as being the role of a parent. You talked about family issues, but you did not really talk about what some of those issues are. There is a view that there is a need to perhaps join up support for parents with support for young people themselves.

I was struck by your comment that such young people were easy to engage because, quite often, particularly older people living in communities in which they see groups of young people wearing their hoods up are frightened by their mere presence, even though they are not doing any harm. Your submission states that people should not be judged, so how do we get over those negative images? There is no simple solution. Why is Rathbone not saying, for example, that the family member is the significant other? Why does that have to be an agency or a paid employee of some organisation? What is your view on prevention? I also want to know what Kevin and George consider a negative experience of education.

Mr Gallagher:

Often, the significant other is not a parent or family member because we want to talk to young people about lots of issues, which we also talk to Colm and some other staff about, and which relatives may not understand or which young people would be embarrassed discussing with their family. Parents respond to many of the problems that we share with friends and people we know by telling their child to get into school or into work: they are not happy for their children to take

a course for which they will receive no pay for three years or so. That is why those young people need a person outside the family to talk to.

Mr Paul Fletcher (Rathbone):

I agree with Kevin. When I used to go on drink and drugs, I could not talk to my parents and Colm was there to help me through it. He got me back into college, which got me qualifications.

The Chairperson:

Good. Did that turn your life around?

Mr Fletcher:

Yes.

Mr Bell:

How does Rathbone advertise its services? I know that there are a lot of formal links within the care system, but how do people aged 16 to 18 who are just outside or on the verge of that system know where to go? Include Youth, Opportunity Youth and your organisation are among the agencies that are available: is there any simple way for young people to map out where to go and which is the most appropriate for them? I know and commend how Rathbone finds its young people because I think that we do have to go to the mountain, as it were. However, how big is that mountain for a young person who is starting off?

Secondly, how big is the issue of alcohol and drugs? In your briefing, it was put in the top five risk factors, but some of the issues ahead of it included involvement with negative peer groups, which is probably to do with alcohol as well. How big is the impact of alcohol and drugs? In your experiences, is it the biggest single factor?

Mr Fletcher:

There is no better advertisement than one young person saying to their friends, "These guys are all right. Talk to them." We often hear that. The hardest part in a new piece of work for Rathbone is that first presence on the street and having somebody say, "These people are all right". Often, young people will say, "That's great; I have got some mates down the road. Will you come and talk to them as well?" They actually end up chaperoning us, so having young people tell other young people about us is our best advertisement, although we have leaflets and

other material.

Across the UK, drugs and alcohol are the most rapidly growing, corrosive problem that we encounter in our work with young people, particularly those who are NEET. It comes back to their sense of hopelessness and despair and the fact that drink, in particular, is cheap. Alcohol is much more an issue than drugs. It is easily available, it is a form of escape, and adults also drink, just not so visibly — adults tend not to be on the streets when they are drinking. Binge drinking is another form of the same problem, particularly on Friday and Saturday nights. One problem leads to another, such as antisocial behaviour. It is a growing problem that we must get on top of. We try to advise young people not to drink by informing them that they are much more at risk when they have taken a lot of alcohol.

The key thing that we are saying is that we have to get much further upstream with prevention through working in schools with pupils in the last year of schooling. We know the young people who are at risk of becoming NEET at 16, so we need to work with them while they are still in school. It is much easier to get to them in school rather than trying to find them on the streets and in the shadows when they have disengaged. We can work with them in school because we know who they are; any schoolteacher can tell you who is at risk. That is where we need to put more resources.

The Chairperson:

Does that mean that there should be a change in the traditional curriculum?

Mr Fletcher:

We need to introduce coping strategies for young people who are at risk. Some work that we are doing post-16 could reach into schools, with the Youth Service and with the people who are at risk. For example, we could take them out for half a day or one day a week and give them more work tasters, because young people who fall into the NEET stats do not want to spend the next two or three years in education. They usually want the world of work. A lot of people say that the world of work is a good place if it is properly regulated work with training bolted on. Apprenticeships are a particularly good option for a lot of young people. We need to get advice and guidance to young people while they are still at school so that we get the young people where they want to be.

Ms S Ramsey:

I congratulate and commend George and Kevin on their work with Rathbone. Sometimes we adults assume what young people are going through — well, these older ones assume. I know; I am young. We always try to put a strategy on it, but nine out of 10 times it does not work because we do not talk to the young people. I think that that is important. I know Kevin very well, and I think that the work that he is involved in locally has a positive impact.

With regard to your report, we have a duty to be part of the solution. A couple of points strike me in the report. Can you outline how you get the young people involved? That is crucial. The other issue is the characteristics. When you look at the top five or six, it seems that the academic route is not always the be-all and end-all for any of this. We need to have an emphasis on vocational qualifications, and that is where the Department of Education (DE) comes in. The issue about academic achievements should not outweigh the issue of vocational achievements, and I think DE is crucial in that. Has any of this information gone to DE? We are talking about a Department that can only kick in when the kids are 16 or 17. Education has a part to play, but I do not see the issue of alternative education. Can you outline how many more young people would be NEET if they were not in alternative education and the positive impact that alternative education plays with NEETs?

One thing that strikes me is that millions of pounds are spent in every constituency on training centres and job clubs, but I do not see a proactive approach between trying to get young people involved in employment outside of working with the constituency and the actual employment that is needed. I do not see the joined-up approach there. It seems to me that we could be wasting millions because we do not have a focused approach. Where do the colleges fit in? If you are talking about the vocational versus the academic, the colleges are crucial.

Finally, in your presentation and your report you talked about the lack of unskilled positions. Is there a possibility that young people who are going into employment through the Steps to Work programme could be exploited? This is on record; I need to be careful how I say it. That could have a detrimental effect on young people getting employed in some jobs. Is one part of Government doing stuff, and it is not being used properly and is having a detrimental effect?

Mr Fanning:

That is a lot of questions. We have not gone to DE with it. We have worked with DE to help

some of the young people whom we have been working with over the past year. We have been working with the Minister in relation to some young people who have been out of education.

A typical example is that of one young fella from north Belfast who left school in his third year. He had special educational needs and had a mental age of seven. He had been sitting out of school and was referred to us. However, he was not referred to us until the following January, by which time he had been out of school for half a year. We got on the case with the education and welfare officer and the Department of Education. That case was not sorted until the end of April, when he was sorted with a new place at Loughshore Educational Resource Centre.

He went through the whole of his fourth year without education, and it was only through our persistence and working up to a ministerial level that we got him back into some form of education. We look at that case and ask whether that young person will be NEET in another year's time when he leaves school at the end of fifth year. He most definitely will be.

This information does need to go to DE, and there are questions for it to answer. That is one typical example of a young fella who was referred to our facility. We fought his case to get him back into education for his fifth year, but how many other young people are sitting out there who have not been referred to us, do not know about our service or do not have parents who know the appropriate avenues to go down to get their children back into education? Young people are sitting at home because one Department is not communicating with another.

Therefore, this does need to go to DE, which needs to look at what is happening. As Paul said, at the end of fourth year, schools know who will succeed academically and who will not. I would love George to share his experience of school with you. Schools know what will happen to the young people. Are as much resources pumped in to assist those children who will not succeed academically? I will let George explain his story. What happens to the young people who schools know will fail academically and will make up the new NEET figures the following year? Are enough resources being pumped in to them in their fifth year to prepare them for when they leave school? Are they left on the back burner? Are more resources being given to those who are academic? I will let George tell the Committee about his school experience.

Mr Philips:

Where do I start? When I started secondary school, I got mixed up with the wrong crowd and

started taking drugs, sniffing aerosols and smoking. I got myself into a lot of debt because I was taking drugs, so I started to self-harm. I was not revising, doing my homework or learning, because I was always out of my head. I left school with no education. I met Colm through a youth organisation. He heard about everything, brought me into Rathbone and got me sorted out. Kids in school are facing a lot, because drugs are cheap these days. They face a hell of a life.

Mr Fanning:

Another part of George's story is that he was missing school because of his involvement in drugs. When he went back to school, the school treated him as a truant and put him in a special unit for education. As George was in that unit, he had an even more negative experience of school and did not go. It was a cycle; when he went back to school he was treated as a truant again and put back in the unit. That cycle continued until exam time when George was told that there was no point in his doing his exams, because the school knew that he would not be able to pass them. So he left school with no formal qualifications.

There is a cycle of negativity in education. What happened with regards to the Department of Education and George's education was completely wrong. However, his example just goes to show that more work needs to be done with young people who are struggling at school so that they do not end up in George's situation, where three years after he left school he wants to get qualified.

The Chairperson:

That is not something that a school can cure; George had to want to be able to turn his life around.

Mr Fanning:

Yes, definitely, but it is about coming to that realisation. That negativity has a negative impact on those experiencing it. It would be good if that information were sent to DE, because it would see that too.

Alternative education was mentioned somewhere, or at least it should have been mentioned that many young people want alternative education or something that provides them with more support in getting their qualifications. Although there are qualifications in drugs and alcohol education as well as other things that are more suitable for young people who are not academic,

alternative education delivers, first, essential skills and, secondly, life issues, such as drugs and alcohol education and the rest. A lot of young people have said that alternative education would have helped them had they been given the opportunity to try it.

The Chairperson:

Sue asked about the Steps to Work programme and engagement. George, where did the magic come from to make you want to engage and to turn your life around?

Mr Philips:

It came from talking to Colm. He found out about me and encouraged me. It is fun to learn. He got me into college, and I realised that it is fun. I am going to start college again in October.

The Chairperson:

Was it really about somebody having faith and confidence in you?

Mr Philips:

I did not have any confidence or self-esteem

The Chairperson:

He had confidence in you.

Mr Philips:

Yes, he did, and since meeting him, I have built on that.

The Chairperson:

Will you briefly answer Sue's question about employability?

Mr Fanning:

My experience of Steps to Work is that it works for some people but not others. Some see it as an opportunity. Some young people who have been on benefits and gone on to Steps to Work have benefited from it. Our advice is that they should work as hard as possible because it will build up their CVs and their employers might take them on at the end. However, others have had a negative experience, because they went to work for, for example, B&M but they did not have a genuine interest in retail, so it did not work for them.

Ms S Ramsey:

My question was more to do with — Paul touched on this — the possibility of some employers using the Steps to Work programme to their advantage by taking on young people who are on a course or training programme, which then has a detrimental effect on them. What happens when a young person is brought in for a 12-week period and then another young person comes in for the next 12 weeks?

Mr Fletcher:

We have to keep our eye on all those different initiatives. There is a temptation to chase targets and to maximise income, but that is not in the best interests of young people. You made a better point about the gap in the process. We are providing some fantastic training programmes and are spending millions of pounds on first-class training schemes, and we have a big number of NEET young people, but we cannot seem to connect the two. There is a gap in that engagement process. Pieces of work like the one that Colm is leading are about connecting to those young people. However, they are worker-intensive. We need staff who will go to where the young people are, motivate them and then connect them with that training. That is where the gap exists.

Yesterday, I talked to someone in the East Belfast Partnership who told me about the billions of pounds that are being spent on the Titanic initiative. I asked her how many jobs were being reserved or mandated in some way for young people, particularly NEETs, and she said that she did not think that that had been built in to the procurement process in awarding contracts. I said that we are missing a trick there, because millions of pounds are going to be spent on that regeneration but the companies that win the contracts are not being made to train young people and give them jobs. Somehow, we have to get that connection between the NEET young people and the opportunities that are there.

The Chairperson:

I know that some Committees and Departments are working towards that.

Mr McClarty has been very patient.

Mr McClarty:

Thank you for your presentation; it was extremely interesting. By their nature, young people

believe themselves to be invincible and indestructible. All of us are aware of the destructive nature of excess alcohol and the abuse of drugs. As you said earlier, Colm, it is escapism for the young people and, indeed, for adults. How do you get them away from the world into which they escape? Are you regarded as another do-gooder trying to preach to them, etc, etc? Do the individuals become so low that they come looking for you?

Mr Fanning:

There are different scales of drug and alcohol problems. There is the Friday night crowd, for instance, who are looking for a positive alternative and for someone to give them that positive alternative, and that can be achieved by our staff working with them or through another provider that we refer them to. There are also the people who have been more dependent on drugs and alcohol from whatever age. We have been working with 14-year-olds who have drug addictions. For those young people, it is a case of working with more professionals in the manner and area of their addictions. In some cases, we work with the families, because they are traumatised by the effects of what is happening to their son or daughter.

It is about building a full support package around individuals regarding self-motivation to get involved with things and help with addictions, for instance — looking at addiction teams and support for that — and other issues that come alongside those needs, whether it be criminality or family breakdown. A young person could be dealing with a vast range of issues, or it could be a Friday night crowd who are simply having a drink on the street. Every young person is different.

I could tell you stories about young people with addictions with whom I am working. We are working with their families, the criminal justice system, and, for one individual, addiction teams. It is about putting in place a complete support package. It is about bringing in all the different agencies. An earlier question referred to the parents or a significant adult, but sometimes they do not have the information. They do not know what is available in the community, and that is where our staff come in. We tell the individuals what they need, or what we think they should avail themselves of. We try to bring those services in. We look at the family and the young person and deal with the issues that are affecting them through the drugs and alcohol. I hope that that answers your question.

Mr McClarty:

George and Kevin, I am interested in how you became involved with Rathbone.

Mr K Gallagher:

I became involved with Rathbone through a staff member, Nicola. My story is different from Geordie's, because I had a good school life. I have all my GCSEs and A levels, but I came to a point in my life where I was not working or in education. I did not know what to do. Nicola, who worked for our local youth club, also works for Rathbone, and she told me about the organisation. I had said that I would like to speak to someone. I met Colm, Emma and all the staff. From that first meeting, they have been brilliant. They have been there for me when I have needed help and support. Now I volunteer with them, meeting other young people on the streets. It is good, because I can tell them my experiences and let them know that the people at Rathbone are not so bad and that they are not old fogeys. At the end of the month, I will start training to be a counsellor, and that is through Rathbone.

The Chairperson:

Well done.

Mr Philips:

I got involved with Rathbone through the youth organisation and through meeting Colm. I told him about my problems and he told me to come down. He told me about education and got me signed up to everything. Now I just keep going down, and every time I go there are new people there.

Mrs McGill:

I want to say congratulations to George and Kevin on the responses you have given so far. They were excellent; well done. I wish both of you well for the future. Kevin, it was interesting that your experience of education was different from that of many others. The figure of 196 people out of 220 with a negative experience of education is shameful.

Perhaps I and others are guilty of having a mindset that runs something along these lines: if someone is not academic, they then do something else. That mindset has to be absolutely changed. In my view, people are not better if they are academic. The mindset of all of us has to change, and we have to instil that from a very early age in all of those who are charged with dealing with those matters. That is something that I have felt for many years. Again, I wish George and Kevin well in whatever they do.

Paul, you made a comment that was interesting, and I concur with it — that, by and large, you do not meet young people who do not want to learn. That is my own experience. Young people do want to learn, but the circumstances, the context, the type of teachers people have and — we need to say it — the kind of school they are in all affect that. An awful lot of work needs to be done. A lot of good work is done, but I repeat that that figure of 196 out of 220 is shameful.

Finally, I want to touch on bullying, and the fact that there may not be a lot of help if there is bullying in school. Kevin and George, did you come across that individually, and did you get any help with it within the school?

Mr K Gallagher:

I can honestly say that, during my secondary school experience, I never came across bullying personally. I had friends who were bullied, and I was friends with people who were bullies. People have a negative attitude towards bullying in schools because, as people get older and begin secondary school, if they go to report bullying, a lot of the time the teacher will say that it is just messing about or a joke. They do not take it too seriously. That is OK if something only happens once, but not when it happens regularly.

That is what I found with a lot of people that I went to school with. They had reported it and they were told to grow up or start acting older, and that it was just messing about. I remember a comment made by a teacher after being told by someone that they thought they were being bullied. The teacher's response was that when they started working it would be worse. That is the sort of attitude that people come up against. I do not know if George had a different experience.

Mrs McGill:

Thank you, Kevin.

Mr Philips:

I actually agree with Kevin, because I went to the same school as him. If people said anything, the school did not take any notice of it, and if they said anything to teachers they would get beaten up after school because of it, and would be scared to tell again. I came across that before.

The Chairperson:

There is a long way to go to eradicate bullying at school.

Ms Lo:

I was struck by the number of young people —196 — with negative experiences of education. I support what Claire said about our education system being one-size-fits-all. If young people are not academic, they will struggle. As Colm said, young people find that learning theories is really very boring. They want more practical, hands-on learning, rather than learning about geography, important though that is. Many of them find it not relevant to their future working life.

Do you find that young people in that category may have mild learning difficulties, such as mild dyslexia or mild autism, but were never detected in school by teachers, and that that may have prevented them from keeping up with the teaching?

Mr Fletcher:

Certainly, young people with additional learning needs are over-represented in the NEET figures and, if we drill into what is happening, perhaps that is one of the reasons why they do not achieve well in school. However, a significant number of young people just do not thrive in big institutions and in the classroom. A lot of work has been done in Scandinavian countries where they have introduced the concept of a studio school. Young people who were not doing well in big institutions have gone into the smaller studio schools and are outperforming their peers. Perhaps we have to recognise that those young people cannot cope with the institutions, but that they do want to learn.

In a class of 30 or more, if two or three, or perhaps five or six, young people have some learning disability or learning difficulty, it will not be picked up by a single teacher. As a result, they will fall behind and get less attention because they will not achieve the grades that will help the school to achieve its targets. Perhaps we need to look more at the classroom. We do environmental projects at Rathbone, and when some of those young people are taken out of the classroom they do fantastically.

Ms Lo:

If these young people fall behind they become bored and may become disruptive, and then they are labelled as being difficult pupils and, as a result, they are excluded.

Mr Fletcher:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for your presentation. It will be included in the final inquiry findings, and you will have an opportunity to have a look at it. On behalf of the Committee, I thank Kevin and George for attending and for their honesty in giving members an understanding of what it is like to have that negative image at school and to be labelled as NEET.