



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Inquiry into Young People not in
Education, Employment or Training
(NEETs):
Fastrack to Information Technology
Northern Ireland**

13 October 2010

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Training (NEETs):
Fastrack to Information Technology Northern Ireland**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mr Peter Davitt) Fastrack to Information Technology Northern Ireland
Mr Billy McClean)

The Chairperson (Mrs D Kelly):

I formally welcome Billy McClean, programme manager from Fastrack to Information Technology Northern Ireland (FIT NI) and Peter Davitt, chief executive of FIT Ireland Ltd. Thank you for your attendance. The general format is that you have five or 10 minutes to speak to your briefing, and there will be around 20 minutes thereafter to allow members to ask questions, seek clarification and make comments on the points raised.

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

Thank you for the opportunity to come to talk to you. First, I will give a brief introduction to what FIT is, and then I will go into some of what we have been doing more recently. I will provide a summary of some of the recommendations that we are putting forward, and maybe we can discuss some of those.

Fastrack to IT was established in 1999. It is a registered charity, a not-for-profit organisation. Its board is made up of industry representatives. Most of the main blue chip IT-type organisations are part of our board. The focus of the organisation is on the young people who meet the not in education, employment or training (NEET) criteria. In that 12 years, over 8,000 jobseekers have completed FIT programmes. Over 5,000 have gone into employment, and, every year, around 2,500 people come through some of the FIT programmes. Therefore, it has a fairly high success rate of people going into jobs or further training as a result of coming through the programmes.

In Northern Ireland, we set up in around 2005. It was initially a working group, and we started working on some pilots. The main work that we have been doing over the past couple of years is on a project called Learner Access and Engagement, which is a Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) programme that is delivered through the colleges. I will come on to explain a little more about that. It is targeted at the hardest to reach in disadvantaged areas to try and bring them to a point of training and a level 2 education.

Under the Steps to Work programme, which I am sure you are familiar with, we have a contract with three of the providers in Northern Ireland. Previously, we worked on a project called Equal, which was a peace project for women coming into IT, and we have partnership programmes with Belfast Metropolitan College and Springvale Training.

I am sure that you are aware of the statistics in Northern Ireland. The latest labour market research shows 6.8% unemployment. In particular, the unemployment rate for 18-to-24-year-olds is 17.2%, and 41% of people from that age group who are unemployed have been unemployed for over one year. The statistic that stood out to us when we first started working was the high proportion of people in Northern Ireland who are economically inactive. The latest figure is 28.6%, which is the highest of any region in the UK. It stood out for us, and we were

trying to see how we could target some of those folks and get them on to some of the programmes that we are familiar with.

We have been running the Learner Access and Engagement project for the past two years. As I said, it is to engage the hardest to reach, which is the NEET category of people, in community settings. As was mentioned, DEL funds the programme through FE colleges. We tendered and were awarded contracts by five out of the six colleges initially, and we currently have two contracts with two of the major colleges. There are around 1,250 learners overall, and we have run about 135 courses. This year, we expect around 1,500 people to have come through similar programmes by the end of June, so we believe that we are trying to reach out.

The programme is about recruiting and finding those people, motivating them and engaging them to come on to the programmes and providing mentor and support services to them as they complete the programme. The colleges provide a tutor, and our role is mentor support, recruiting and engaging at the outset, and trying to encourage them to stay on the programme through to the end. At the end, we look at what the next step is that they can move to. We provide that advice to the classes, having got them through a course. We ensure that they have no issues as they go through it and that we deal with anything that might prevent them from learning and achieving their level 1 or level 2 qualification.

A major concern is about the Steps to Work programme, which we see as a natural follow-on. We have encountered difficulties in getting it to work, so we do not see a natural bridge for those, potentially, 1,200 people from last year and 1,500 people this year that would bring them on to a further programme that would develop their skills to the point where they could get employment. That is what we are about, and that is what we are trying to achieve for those young people. Perhaps we will come back and discuss that.

We see some inhibitors to training and job opportunities in Northern Ireland. There is a dependence on the welfare system — the poverty trap that we are all aware of. There is a lack of substantive training and skills development programmes in key priority industry sectors. FIT was established with the name Fastrack to Information Technology because of the growth of the information technology sector, and people with those skills are required in all sectors; 90% of jobs require some ICT skills. That is why we focus on that.

More recently, we have been looking at other areas of growth, for example, the green economy. We have been looking at maintenance of wind turbines. We look at the areas where jobs will be, the priority sectors, and we train the people towards those types of jobs. There is very little substantive training in some of the programmes that are there. Sometimes, there are small, short courses, but we have had difficulty finding six-month or full-year programmes for these folk. Steps to Work may help to do that, but we have had some difficulties in making it work. The current training and development programmes are not making the impact that they should. There are little interventions in the local community where some of those folk are at, and the impact of structural unemployment has a negative effect on them.

Perhaps we can discuss some of the points that we made in the recommendations. We went to the forum meeting last week. A collaborative approach between government, the education industry and the community is essential to make this work properly and tackle unemployment and economic inactivity. We have seen in the South of Ireland a very effective join-up between social welfare and training. We could do more in that space in Northern Ireland.

Quality training programmes must be responsive to industry needs and the standards that the industry wants. They must provide the basic skills and knowledge, and the personal and professional development, that people require. Significant technical skills require at least 26 weeks' training for someone going into that area of employment, otherwise the employer does not want to know them. There are also the issues of appropriate pedagogy, monitoring of certificate of achievement, and then individual progression pathways developed, and ongoing support for three years once in employment.

A NEET taskforce would provide closer collaboration for cross-departmental action. It was good to hear last week that something had already been set up. We are looking forward to participating in that, and we hope to go to the next meeting. We recommend introducing a similar programme to the vocational training and opportunity scheme (VTOS) in the Republic of Ireland, which has helped people in this situation get to employment.

Another programme for young people who drop out of school is Youthreach. It tries to correct that dropout and bring them through programmes that get them back into employment. There are other one-off projects that are activity-based, but lead into skills-based, such as Gaps PC, in the Wicklow Gap, and Right Skills.

Overall, the significant thing for us is that the strategy has clear targets, clear outcomes and clear impacts.

Mr Peter Davitt (Fastrack to Information Technology Northern Ireland):

We are delighted to have the opportunity to speak with you. We were at the event last Wednesday, and it was very interesting. The workshop element was particularly interesting. However, it was slightly demoralising in that 30 years ago the same debate would have gone on about what we are doing about young people and their needs — exactly the same questions in exactly the same scenario — and that is quite disconcerting. Back then I was young, but, you know.

One thing that struck me in the room was accountability on all sides. People can look to government and agencies and say “What are you doing?” or “What are you not doing?”, but accountability is for everybody. One thing that was lacking was any indication of targets or outcomes. My personal belief is that anything around any group of people to do with training and development must have targets and outcomes. For example, I make it clear to everybody in FIT that we make our living out of poverty. We earn a living because other people are unemployed, so we have an obligation to address that issue.

I have been involved in initiatives in Northern Ireland over the past five years, and have found agencies and individuals to be very receptive. It has been a very positive experience. However, we are seeing some difficulty in what I call joining up the dots. FIT works because we can get community groups and organisations to work with social welfare and recruitment selection. We work with training providers on the provision of training and with industry in the development of the curriculum and the progression pathways. We all talk to each other through some formal mechanism. That is one key component that, for me, works very effectively. The different entities need to join up the dots and talk in some effective manner. It does not need to be through long-term workshops, but there must be some mechanism for interaction.

The other thing that has really struck me about Northern Ireland is the need for industry engagement in the identification of skill needs and opportunities. That, for me, has not been as easy here as it has in the South. That may be because of the balance between small and medium-sized enterprises and larger companies, but it is the industry that knows its skills needs. There are

huge needs and opportunities out there at the present time, and we need more effective dialogue around that.

There is a lot of good news and opportunity out there. Our economies are in a difficult space, but there is tremendous opportunity in, for example, the whole area of renewable energies. We have developed a new curriculum from scratch to equip people with the skills to work with renewable energies. You do not need a PhD or a degree to work on a wind turbine. You need smart skills and to be physically able to climb up there in the middle of October to do the maintenance.

For example, in the UK over the next five to 10 years, about 36,500 jobs will come on stream in wind turbine maintenance. There are about 3,500 in the South of Ireland. On top of that, 60% of all wind turbines on mainland Europe are behind on maintenance. Therefore, there is a huge opportunity now for skills development training. In the South of Ireland, part of our strategy of recovery will be a period of emigration. However, let us give people the skills to compete for the most effective jobs out there.

There are other huge areas such as gaming, cloud technologies and maintenance of medical devices. Those are all growth sectors. However, there is little development of curriculum content to respond to industry needs, and a coherent strategy around those aspects would give direction to everybody and to jobseekers. People who are long-term unemployed might look into a database of training that offers courses in foundation training in this, or introduction to that. That will not mean very much to them. However, if there is training in databases, warehousing, PC maintenance or wind turbine maintenance, people will have a clear vision that that training will put them on a certain path. Those are my observations. We are struggling with the same issues South, but a more focused approach, engagement, joining up the dots and industry leadership will help.

Mr P Ramsey:

The point about wind turbines is interesting. When President Clinton was here recently, he said that not only is the maintenance of wind turbines an issue, but that nobody here is manufacturing them and using that niche market. He talked about the range of jobs that would result from that.

I am interested in your point about identifying skills needs. I brought that point up to previous

witnesses from the Department, and they did not answer. You mentioned the Learner Access and Engagement pilot programme and said that you have 1,250 young people on that. Where do those young people come from? Who identifies them? You talk about targets and outcomes. How many of those young people, measured over a period of time, have secured full-time employment or remained in full-time education, and how many have fallen out of those programmes? We are looking to measure outcomes.

This is a Committee inquiry. Although we are not trying to reinvent the wheel, there are exceptional circumstances in Northern Ireland, and a number of people have told us about the vulnerability, mental health problems and other issues that affect them. We are trying to identify good models with which we can go forward and ensure that the investment is put in place. While those figures are grand and look the part, we need to know about performance levels, outcomes and measurable outputs. I am not saying that I want that today, but you could send us a written submission on that.

The Chairperson:

Do you want to respond?

Mr Davitt:

With regard to targets and outcomes, very few people have gone into jobs in the North of Ireland. The reason for that is that we are the first rung of the ladder. We get people out of their houses to start training and to look at IT and other areas, but we do not have effective progression pathways.

Mr P Ramsey:

Where do those young people come from?

Mr McClean:

We recruit and engage with them through talking to community associations —

Mr P Ramsey:

Do you go into schools?

Mr McClean:

We do not focus on schools particularly. The programme focuses on people who are over 18, so it is not for people who are aged 16 or under. Therefore, in many cases, the people who we bring to the programme have already left school. We work with their local community in youth clubs, schools — clubs and things like that, but not particularly the schools, because it is below the age bracket. Also, it is a level 2 education at best, but when they finish the programme after two years, level 2 will not get them a job in IT. They need to get to level 3 or 4. Our struggle is getting them progressed into Steps to Work, for example, where we can make it work and get them the progression to get them a job.

Mr Davitt:

To be honest, we have a slight concern that we have been able to encourage people to try to go back to education, but we do not have an effective follow-on. Are we doing them a disservice by mobilising them? Would we have been better to not engage them in the first instance if we do not have effective progression pathways? What we are seeing is that a lot of people have the innate ability and skills, they want to do something, and they want to progress and pursue employment opportunities, but they are not seeing fit and effective pathways towards that end. From our experience, that has been difficult to discern, and we have been involved in this activity in the North for five years.

Mr P Ramsey:

How many people do you employ across Northern Ireland?

Mr McClean:

Eight people are employed at the minute.

Mr P Ramsey:

Is that across all of Northern Ireland?

Mr McClean:

Yes.

Mr Bell:

It is a very inspirational programme, and, if I have understood your figures, of the 8,000

jobseekers who completed the FIT programme, 5,000 are in employment.

Mr Davitt:

That is predominantly in the South. The overall numbers in Northern Ireland are small, because, as I said, we are not seeing the effective progression pathways. However, I am very much of the view that those types of numbers can be achieved in the North. Billy mentioned two programmes earlier: the VTOS focuses on long-term unemployed people who are over 21 years old. They keep their social welfare, and they go into further education or vocational training for up to two years. The Youthreach programme is for early school leavers — 15 or 16 year olds who have dropped out of school. It is vocationally focused training until they are 18 years old, with the expectation of directing them towards a job.

I like those programmes because FIT only focuses on marginalised jobseekers. We are not interested in unemployed architects or unemployed legal secretaries. Do not get me wrong, they deserve support, but our focus in FIT is on the more marginalised and disadvantaged people in society. Those programmes work well to engage them and to facilitate them to acquire the skills to compete for jobs in the labour market.

Mr Bell:

There is a highly impressive range of organisations on the FIT board, from AOL through to Apple, Microsoft and Siemens Systems. Is there a representative from each of those organisations on your board?

Mr Davitt:

Yes.

Mr Bell:

Are they involved in telling you what they need?

Mr Davitt:

Exactly.

Mr McClean:

The board comes together and decides on the curriculum, and it meets every three months to

review it. There are around 22 full-time curricula, and a number of part-time ones as well. The jobs range from PC maintenance engineer through to forklift drivers with database management skills. They are specifically job-related. Those folk help to design the curriculum that the participants go through and the certifications that they want people to have so that they can then hire them.

Mr Bell:

I find that highly progressive.

At the South Eastern Regional College, which is in my area, 650 young people are classified as NEET. What next steps need to be taken to try to get some of those 650 young people into employment, like the 62% who go into employment in the South? What lessons can be learned and put into practice here?

Mr Davitt:

There seems to be a slight bottleneck. The Learner Access and Engagement project (LAEP) works at one level and Steps to Work comes into operation when an individual goes into a jobcentre and makes a request about what they want to do next. Therefore, although LAEP reaches a huge number of people, the jobcentre facility does not enable those young people to take the next step. I do not know why. Perhaps they are not going forward to it. There is something there.

Mr McClean:

There is no natural progression for people who come off LAEP to go into Steps to Work. For people to get into Steps to Work, they need to go into a jobcentre and say what they want to do. A personal adviser then needs to suggest potential programmes and jobs that they can do, both of which are not necessarily known. We have had many cases of people who went through FIT programmes and never knew what the job was. They would not have been able to explain the job title. People just do not know what those jobs are. On the other side, sometimes, personal advisers do not have good awareness of the latest roles, particularly in the ICT sector and new areas. There is a double hit there.

For example, we had a contract with the South Eastern Regional College for more than a year. Ten people were referred, which is less than one person a month. To run a programme on a six-

month contract, we need 10, 12 or 20 people a month. We just could not do it with one candidate per month being referred. The issue is trying to fix that. We suggested to the college that we bring people in a pilot from LAEP to see whether we can bring them straight through into Steps to Work and have that continuity. We are currently in discussion to try to make that happen.

Mr Davitt:

While we have caught them, let us hold on to them and move them on, rather than let them go out the door and have to come back individually.

Mr Bell:

Maybe the Committee can come back to that issue. During my years as a social worker, I would have taken young people down to the jobcentre when they had finished their courses. They would be assigned a personal adviser, who would give them an appointment to come back. Then I had to get the young person and bring them back. We tended to meet a different adviser, who would be looking at the file for the first time. We would come back again and meet another different adviser. That was the point at which many of those young people dropped out of the system.

The Chairperson:

If you want to submit any additional detail to the Committee Clerk, I am sure that we will be happy to receive it. You can add further comments in response to the Deputy Chairperson if you wish. However, we need to move on. Perhaps you can tie it all up together.

Mr McClarty:

Thank you for that presentation. I enjoyed it thoroughly. From what Peter said in particular, it seems that our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland are much better at this than we are. They are further down the road than we are, perhaps because there are many more opportunities for NEETs in the Republic of Ireland. Can we learn from areas of best practice, either through meetings or visits?

Mr Davitt:

Initiatives such as VTOS and Youthreach are good examples in terms of their ability to focus on those more distanced from the labour market and to hold onto them. There are other good initiatives in Europe. As regards the type of cohort that we are trying to draw in, those initiatives

focus on the most distanced among them and provide industry-orientated vocational training. If members want to visit our programmes and talk to some of our candidates, I can, quite happily, facilitate that.

Mr McClarty:

That should be taken up, Chairperson.

The Chairperson:

We can follow up on a number of action points after the meeting. Thank you for that.

Mr Lyttle:

My question has largely been addressed. It was about how we can improve the bottleneck between your organisation and the Steps to Work programme. However, that was addressed and I know now that there are ongoing discussions.

As regards the wind turbine industry, a company called B9 Energy was represented last week. Do you have a good connection with that company? You also mentioned the gaming industry, and, interestingly, there is an alternative training provider in my constituency in East Belfast. It is trying to do some work with young people and NEETs in the area of gaming skills, and it seems to be an emerging industry. Do you have any links with them?

Mr Davitt:

The gaming industry and the wind turbine industry present huge opportunities. I am aware of B9 Energy. We work very closely with all of the manufacturers, and we involved all five of the major manufacturers in the development of the curriculum.

I do not know whether the Committee has seen our brochure, but we changed our tag line this year. Everyone is talking about the smart economy and the knowledge economy, and there is a general view that the smart economy or knowledge economy is about having PhDs or degrees when it really about smart people. Therefore, the tag line for the brochure is “creating an inclusive smart economy.” Even those who are NEET have the innate skills and abilities to participate in our economy and need to acquire skills in those areas. The renewable, wind, gaming and cloud industries are huge growth opportunities for Ireland incorporated. We must respond to them.

Mr S Anderson:

Thank you for your presentation. I know that we are running short on time, so I will be brief. I note Billy's good work in working with the communities here. In an earlier evidence session we were talking about the young people that we cannot touch base with and the need to identify them. I take it that your organisation is touching those people or doing its best to touch them and bring them into a programme for their future development. That is a good point that I have noted. You also mentioned the strategy recommendations and the support that you supply for a period of three years. Will you expand a wee bit on that and tell us what that means? Finally, I welcome Peter's comments and his enthusiasm for future employment. It is good to hear someone talking about future job opportunities. I hope that you are correct in everything that you said.

Mr Davitt:

I just want to make a general point on how we operate in FIT. We make a commitment to stay with people for up to three years. A FIT course will normally last for six months or a year depending on its nature, and, thereafter, the participant may go into further education or get a job. Either way, we stay with them for three years. Our view is that it is not good enough just to get our client a job, we must commence careers. People will fall off the ladder, get jobs, fall out of jobs — they require support for a period of time. If they go on to further education they should be picked up the following year on where they want to go to ensure their effective progression. Although the programme provides training, there is also a need for an ongoing period of maintenance to ensure that the person gets to where they want to go.

Mr S Anderson:

Do you monitor their progress from when they come to you until the end of that three-year period?

Mr Davitt:

Yes; exactly. Unless someone tells us to stop annoying them, we will stay with them for that period. We have a three-year commitment to anyone who does a FIT course.

The Chairperson:

Thank you both very much indeed for your presentation. I think that we strayed a bit outside of the NEETs inquiry, but it was interesting nonetheless. We would be very keen to have any

further written submissions, particularly on where you see the bottleneck and how that can be resolved through careers advice and other methods. Your invitation — David suggested that we can visit.

Mr Davitt:

You are welcome.

Mr McClean:

I have our corporate brochure and course information about LAEP. They are split into those who are close to the South Eastern Regional College area and those who are with the North West Regional College. It would be best if members took the appropriate information.

Mr Davitt:

Having pilot projects in disadvantaged areas and creating local role models is a huge incentive for people to engage.

The Chairperson:

Nevertheless, a degree of risk-taking is also warranted in some places. Thank you.