



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

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

12 May 2010

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AND LEARNING**

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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 William Irwin
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Pat Ramsey
Ms Sue Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Errol McMaster) Glastry College

Mr Nigel Finch) North Down Training Ltd

The Chairperson (Mrs D Kelly):

We move to the Committee's inquiry into children not in education, employment or training (NEETs). The next item on the agenda is a briefing from Errol McMaster, principal of Glastry College. Good morning, Mr McMaster. You are very welcome. Thank you very much for travelling to meet the Committee.

Although this is a very formal looking setting, the Committee members are very relaxed and

generally friendly animals. *[Laughter.]* Please be at ease. We want to hear from you anything that may be of assistance to us in our inquiry. We are trying to make the future a bit better for our young people.

Mr Errol McMaster (Glastry College):

I have copies of my presentation.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. We will pass those around. Please speak for about five or 10 minutes about your briefing paper, after which members will have the opportunity to ask questions or make comments.

Mr McMaster:

Thank you for your invitation, Mrs Kelly. I am delighted to be here. My name is Errol McMaster, and I am the principal of Glastry College. For those who do not know where Glastry is, it is about halfway down the Ards Peninsula. It is a small community with two churches and about a dozen houses. In the 1950s, when it was decided to construct the first secondary intermediate school, Glastry was chosen as the location because it was equidistant from all of the villages around the Ards.

I joined the staff in Glastry in September 1976. I have been there for a long time — 34 years. I was vice-principal for eight years, and I have been principal for two years. When I started at Glastry, the population of the school was 340 pupils and 24 staff. We have grown now to a staff of 48 teachers and myself, and 657 pupils. We still occupy the original building, although two extensions have been added in the meantime. A new school building has been on the agenda for a number of years. Originally, building was to have started in October 2008, but, for various reasons, it was delayed. In the current financial climate, I am not desperately optimistic that it will start in the near future.

The reason that I have come along today is to tell the Committee something about the exciting developments that are happening on the Ards Peninsula through our collaboration under the banner of the “North Down and Ards Consortium”. I do not believe in coercing young people into education; it is up to us to provide a relevant and attractive education that will encourage our young people to stay on.

The characteristics for why young people disengage with school are common to all schools, be they in a rural, town or city environment. The characteristics that I identify are low self-esteem, lack of ambition and poor attendance, which, unfortunately, we can identify very often when the children arrive in year 8 with their records from primary school. Such issues start at a very early age. Many of those pupils experience literacy and numeracy difficulties, which may become more pronounced throughout their period of compulsory education, unless the pupil engages meaningfully with intervention strategies that have been put in place by the school.

Barriers common to young people who are not in education, employment and training include those created by a generational legacy. Some families have demonstrated a reluctance to engage with education for several generations, and, unfortunately, that tends to be perpetuated. Poor parenting is another barrier. Increasing numbers of parents appear to have little influence or control over their children, and admit that they are incapable of ensuring that their children attend school. I have identified that those circumstances exist increasingly in families in which both parents have to or choose to work, and the children are left to equip themselves and find their own way to school in the mornings. Some of our most problematic children decide not to attend school. Family breakdown is another barrier. The increase in the number of one-parent families and changing parental liaisons inevitably affect the stability of families and the authority of the adults in the partnership. I have identified easy access to alcohol and substance abuse as a new adverse impact down the Ards Peninsula. That affects individuals, families and entire communities. I see that issue emerging as a major concern.

What prevention or intervention strategies might be useful to reduce the NEET numbers? Intervention must start as early as possible, and I identify primary school as the place in which intervention should begin. Specialist teachers and classroom assistants who are trained to provide help for pupils who are experiencing difficulty with language and numbers should be available. The Northern Ireland curriculum for Key Stage 3 has given us more freedom to develop a broader education for our children when they enter secondary school. Thinking skills and personal capabilities are now emphasised in the curriculum, and there is a focus on competency and communication using mathematics and ICT. Those are the sorts of skills that young people will need once they leave formal education. There is also an emphasis on children accepting personal responsibility, and that is important. Therefore, the focus is not on academic achievement alone.

On a more critical note, I believe that the Education Welfare Service needs to be more proactive and robust in its approach to poor attenders and school refusers. By Key Stage 4, we, inevitably, have a number of children who disengage or are problematic in school, and there is very little provision for them. The alternative education programme that is provided by the education and library boards has proven limited and largely ineffective — in our area, there are places for 15 pupils in the entire education and library board, and the facility is based at Redburn Primary School in Holywood. To travel from the lower end of the peninsula to Holywood is problematic at best, and it seems to me that it is not a viable option. Thankfully, we have very few pupils who present that kind of problem, but the provision by the boards is not adequate or relevant. I believe that you will hear attractive suggestions from Mr Nigel Finch and North Down Training Ltd. Nigel will be speaking to you later as an independent provider for that kind of young person, and I see that as very positive.

It is essential that schools and colleges seek to provide an attractive and meaningful programme of study to which young people will respond and in which they see value, particularly in the context of future job prospects. In recent times, GCSE examinations were heralded as appropriate for all Key Stage 4 pupils. Results in public examinations have been used to judge and compare schools as an indicator of competence. I believe that that has had little or limited value. In some areas, secondary schools have wisely introduced alternative programmes of study, which have less equivalence in comparative league tables, but have greater appeal and currency for pupils who find success in traditional GCSE examinations difficult. I refer to occupational studies qualifications and the programmes devised by the Prince's Trust and the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN).

What kinds of best-practice models are available to those who are working with young people who are NEET, and which of those models have been shown to be particularly effective in our local situation? In Glaxo, we have a number of strategies in place to keep young people engaged. The school and college community must become almost like an extended family. Children must feel valued and welcomed in that community, and, to do that, we have introduced a number of positive behaviour award schemes, as all schools do. We report regularly to parents, invite them in, send postcards of praise home when children achieve, and make children feel valued.

In the past couple of years, we have introduced a scheme that is similar to the lottery and

which aims to improve attendance in years 11 and 12. Pupils who achieve an attendance rate of over 90% during a particular six-week period enter a draw for vouchers worth £30. The scheme is intended to encourage people to come to school. It has had limited success; the children who attend look forward to the draw, but I admit that the potential of winning £30 does not really appeal to the hardened non-attenders. However, we will persevere.

A year ago, we introduced Groupcall, which is an automated telephone or text message alert facility. Since then, our attendance rates have improved significantly, last year by two percentage points to 92%. We also have a comprehensive and discrete programme of learning for life and work, which includes personal development, relationship and sex education, drug awareness training, citizenship and career advice from year 8.

Pupils can determine their need to speak to a professional counsellor. In the past couple of years, we have used two organisations, Contact Youth and Family Works. Those organisations have been tremendously effective. We have an exceptional young lady as a counsellor to whom our young people relate. She has a waiting list, not because there are extensive problems, but because the pupils feel that that lady listens and advises well. That is working extremely well.

During this term, we have worked in conjunction with the PSNI and the Forum for Action on Substance Abuse (FASA), of which our local office is based in Bangor. FASA has addressed the problems of alcohol and substance abuse and suicide. On alternate Thursdays, a lady comes in from FASA, and she is available to talk to any pupils who wish to talk to her. On the other Thursdays, a local police liaison officer comes in. That is all done to establish relationships with young people who, for example, might be drinking on the beach at Millisle on a Saturday night. That seems to be working well.

The reason that I am here today is talk to you about what I see as a drive in our school and our community to make education attractive post 16. We start at Key Stage 4. In Glaslary, we have not chosen to go down the route of the Prince's Trust or ASDAN. We are working within the GCSE curriculum. At the beginning of year 11, we divide the pupils into three academic streams. Our most gifted and talented pupils will follow a programme of nine GCSEs, and our middle stream will take eight GCSEs.

The pupils who are identified as those who will struggle with that type of academic diet will

take English, maths and science, and extra time on the curriculum will be given for those subjects. They will choose two further options from a list that is available to everyone, and, one day a week, they go to the Bangor campus of the South Eastern Regional College (SERC), where they follow occupational studies. That is done in conjunction with three other schools in the area, Strangford College, St Columbanus College and Priory College. Collectively, around 200 children go to SERC on a Wednesday, and they access 17 different subjects such as construction, hair and beauty, areas such as radio production, and so on.

Last year, our GCSE results were our best ever. Our year group comprised 112 children, two of whom dropped out. One child was part of a family that was intimidated out of the area by paramilitaries, and that child did not come back for year 12. The other was a foster child who moved away prior to the exams taking place.

Therefore, it was absolutely encouraging for us that 110 children completed their GCSEs in our school. A total of 65% achieved five or more subjects A* to C, and only one achieved one to four GCSEs. A total of 97% achieved five or more subjects at A* to G, which was a tremendous improvement. Our A* to C results have gone up from around 48% to 65% in the past year. That is the basis, therefore, for moving into post-16 education.

On Monday, Mr Finch's organisation talked to our occupational studies group about what may be available to them come September. We are targeting the middle and upper bands to offer them an enhanced curricular provision in our area. Traditionally, our brightest and most academic children went on to local grammar schools after GCSE. However, there was not a big uptake in what I would call tech and cert courses, and a lot of pupils went into employment or dropped out. It is that group that we have targeted.

We have had a sixth form at Glastry College for about 19 years. Three years ago, we had 40 pupils in sixth form — sixth upper and sixth lower. We then entered into collaboration with Strangford College, and we had eight courses running. The following year, with Strangford College, we offered 12 courses, last year we offered 16, and, come September, we hope to offer 22 courses. Our numbers have gone up from 40 pupils to 84 last September. You can see, therefore, that we are trying very hard to meet the entitlement framework (EF) requirement of 27 subjects at A level.

There is a mix of subjects, however, and not all purely academic. There are a lot of applied subjects, and a lot of new and exciting subjects. The value is that our students are coming together and collaborating. The old sectoral boundaries of integrated, maintained and schools such as ours are gone. Children are all mixing together, and that is exciting. We started with Strangford, and it is lovely to see Strangford pupils coming into our school in their uniforms. They integrate totally with our children, and ours go back to their school. That has been a breath of fresh air. From September 2010, we are offering and concentrating on the STEM subjects. Science, technology and mathematics at A level are being offered in our school, and engineering is delivered by SERC because of job market potential.

What elements and funding are required in a strategy for young people who are NEET and in whom we are particularly interested? Collaboration does not come cheap, and is not a means to reduce costs in education. However, it is vital to provide an extended curriculum post 16.

Transport costs, in particular, are crippling us, and cost Strangford College and ourselves almost £28,000 this year. It is vital that entitlement framework funding is maintained. However, may I make a suggestion about bus passes, on which I have already started to negotiate with the Department? Traditionally, children went to only one school. Increasingly, that will not be the case. We must negotiate with Translink a bus pass that will enable pupils to access education at two or three centres. For as long as that is not in place, Translink is reaping the benefits and we are paying additional travel costs. That really should not happen; those costs should be reduced. That is a big area, but if collaboration is to work, we must address transport costs.

From September, we are also looking having young people start the day in the school where their classes start. That will save time, and a bus pass that enabled a child who lives in Portavogie to get on the bus and go to Strangford College would save time and money. That is the way forward.

This is an appeal from the heart about our new school. Obviously, there are economic constraints and sustainability is a big issue. We do not have a sustainability issue. We were oversubscribed in year 8 by 49 pupils last year. We are well oversubscribed again this year. The proposal is to build a school for 600 pupils. I firmly believe that our school should have room for 650 — that is 110 per year group, with a potential sixth form of 100, which I believe we will have in place over the next couple of years, if we are given the opportunity.

The benefits of that to our community, because we are developing the whole Ards learning community, are exciting, viable and potentially the way to keep young people between the ages of 16 to 18, and beyond, in education.

Mr Weir:

Thank you, Mr McMaster. I represent an area that your school touches upon and I am aware of Glastry College's good reputation. I sometimes hear from parents who say that they have selected Glastry as one of their choices, but they realise that so many people want into it that their children will not get in.

I know that, at one level, neither of my questions are 100% within your remit. Nevertheless, I want to touch on two elements at almost opposite ends of the spectrum. First, you sensibly mentioned that you are doing a degree of catch-up work in trying to correct problem areas. To tackle such problems, early interventions are needed, particularly at primary schools. Will you expand on your thoughts or specific ideas about how that intervention would work?

Mr McMaster:

That is a very difficult question. The education welfare officer (EWO) service needs to be involved at an early stage to identify why children are not attending school. If that problem cannot be corrected before those children come to secondary school, it becomes particularly difficult. I believe that the problem is a generational one. I have seen third-generation families coming through — children tell me that I taught their granny — in which that problem has been perpetuated. The EWO service must get close to those families, find out why their children are not engaging with school, and encourage them to come.

Mr Weir:

Do you feel that, at present, education welfare officers are not being proactive enough?

Mr McMaster:

Absolutely. Coercion will not work and is no longer used much anyway in terms of taking people to court. However, it is important to get close to those families at an early stage to find out why their children are not attending school. The EWO must be persistent in pursuing such families. What else did you want me to touch upon, Mr Weir?

Mr Weir:

My other question is at the opposite end of the spectrum. You have had a lot of success in increasing the number of pupils staying at school until a later stage. You mentioned the expansion of the sixth form from 40 to 84 students and outlined the route taken to achieve that. Obviously, you also deal with many young people who are leaving and, for whatever reason, are not retained in formal school education. What are your views on provisions available outside schools for pupils who leave at the end of their GCSEs?

Mr McMaster:

Do you mean those who do not engage in any form of education?

Mr Weir:

Yes; those not directly engaged in education. In what areas could more be done for those young people?

Mr McMaster:

You have hit on the two areas to which I do not have answers. Has the Committee noticed that I have ignored one of the terms of reference? That term of reference concerns how we monitor the number of children who leave school. The exam results come through in August. In September, we try hard to identify where the pupils go — whether to secondary schools to study for A levels, to university, or whatever. However, a number of children just leave and we do not know where they go, and I am not terribly sure how much is available for them out there. SERC in Bangor has courses that will attract a number of them.

A number of young people will go into the trades. Locally, the building trade is flat at the moment, but there used to be a lot of opportunity there for part-time skills training with a view to learning a trade. I suspect that the employment rate is not as healthy as it should be.

Mr Weir:

SERC has good links and a good reputation in respect of further education. Do you think that the links between schools and some of the colleges are strong enough? Do you feel that they can be improved at all?

Mr McMaster:

Those links are really improving through our collaboration. There are 16 schools and colleges in the North Down area, including SERC, and the relationship among them has become a lot better over the past couple of years. We are more aware of what each place has to offer. Those links have been well improved through collaboration.

Mr Weir:

Thank you.

Mr Butler:

Thank you for your presentation. I have two questions, although you may not have the answer to the first. What sort of success rate does the occupational studies group have?

Mr McMaster:

There is a very good success rate.

Mr Butler:

What is the success rate after take-up? Do people get jobs out of it?

Mr McMaster:

We have targeted that group now for three years. The young people really enjoy it. Those young people could not cope with studying for seven GCSEs. They enjoy the experience of going out to the technical college on a Wednesday; it gives them the opportunity to sample four types of career.

The success rate in staying engaged with the course and what they get out of it — namely a double award at C-level or better, or a double D-grade — has been extremely good. Four of them have entered our sixth form having achieved five grades at A* to C. Two of them dropped out, but two of them have stayed on. Quite a number of them have gone on to SERC to study courses in year 12 because they got a taste for hairdressing and beauty, radio programming, music or something else that they have picked up at SERC. They have liked it and decided that that is what they want to do. There is an avenue of communication with SERC, which has improved their chances of continuing education or training there after the age of 16.

Mr Butler:

I know that STEM subjects at GCE level will only start in September 2010. How has the school fared with STEM subjects previously? That is part of an initiative that the Committee has drawn up.

Mr McMaster:

Technology has traditionally been strong in our school, as has science. Children feed into our school from other schools, such as Strangford, for example. We cannot deliver engineering, so SERC delivers that. Some children do not do additional maths at grammar school, but we have identified quite a number of young people who would be interested in pursuing A-level maths. However, they cannot jump in at that level. Some of them are very academic kids who have done traditional A-levels.

St Columba's College in Portaferry has a very successful sixth form, and is a small school. Its numbers are declining because it is being squeezed by so many areas, and, from September, Mr Breen will not be able to offer a sixth form class. We held an open night last Thursday when we had six families from St Columba's looking at our provision, particularly maths and science. That is exciting, because we are identifying areas of weakness among our collaboration of schools, as well as areas of potential that we are sharing. We were weak in drama and English; Strangford are strong, so we send our children to Strangford and utilise every strength within our group of schools.

Mr Butler:

Do you think that offering GCE level STEM subjects from 2010 will be a success as well?

Mr McMaster:

I hope so. Maths is obviously one of the most difficult GCEs, but we are identifying children in our secondary level who could potentially cope with that. Children who are perhaps not succeeding at grammar schools are also looking at picking up science and maths at A level.

At our open night last week, we met families whose children go to Nendrum College in Comber, Regent House, Glenlola Collegiate, Movilla High School, St Columbanus College, St Columba's College and Strangford College. The hall was full because of the excitement that this is generating. Collaboration is a new and exciting way forward.

Ms S Ramsey:

In general, and I am not talking specifically about your school, how long does a pupil need to be absent before alarm bells start going off and an EWO gets involved?

Mr McMaster:

In our school, when a pupil's attendance drops below 85%, we refer them to an EWO. Prior to that, it is the year head who initiates a phone call and invites the parents to come in. A lot of work is done in school before we even introduce the EWO to the problem.

Ms S Ramsey:

How is that percentage monitored? If a pupil takes two days off a month, when is it all added up and that percentage established?

Mr McMaster:

The person initially responsible for identifying trends in poor attendance is the group tutor who marks pupils in and who sees them and knows them. They are the first person that we expect to make an intervention with the family. The Groupcall message goes out every morning. If a parent has not informed us by 9.45 am that a child is going to be absent, they get a message to their landline or mobile phone asking why their child is off. That is immediate, and it continues until the parent answers the message.

Ms S Ramsey:

Therefore, it could be a number of months before the EWO is involved?

Mr McMaster:

Yes. We try to deal with it first, and we feel that that is most effective. If a group tutor identifies a persistent problem, they refer it to the year head who will then invite the family in to talk about it. The EWO is introduced only as a last resort when attendance drops below 85%.

Ms S Ramsey:

Do you think, in general, that there could be a difference in the EWO's involvement at a certain age, for example, between the ages of 11 and 14 and between the ages of 14 and 16?

Mr McMaster:

We tend to have most success at Key Stage 3, where pupils are between the ages of 11 and 14. At that stage, parents respond to a wee bit of pressure. However, once children reach year 10, at age 14 or 15, parents do not have the same ability to get some of the more reluctant children into school. That is when we use the EWO service more.

Ms S Ramsey:

The authorities do not seem to care once a child is closer to 16 years old.

Mr McMaster:

In year 12, the EWOs will not do anything.

Ms S Ramsey:

In your submission, you state that the Education Welfare Service needs to be more proactive. The Committee is carrying out an inquiry and hopes to come up with recommendations. It could be months before an EWO becomes aware of certain pupils, and, therefore, we need to look at EWOs being informed earlier.

Your submission is quite useful, because it makes us think outside the box. Not everyone who is NEET is an educational failure. There are a multitude of issues, one of which, as has been brought to our attention, is that of career guidance at an early age. You mentioned that in your presentation, but perhaps you could touch on it further. There has been vocal criticism of some schools trying to advise young people down a certain path, because it keeps the school's figures right, and trying to sweep the vocational aspect under the mat.

Mr McMaster:

Career guidance in our school is very strong. It starts in year 8 with employability. When pupils get to year 10 and upwards, we have quite a number of visiting speakers from different organisations and from third-level education to give children an idea of what is out there. Are you focusing on the lower achievers in particular?

Ms S Ramsey:

The lower educational achievers. Some of those people have gone on to be very successful.

Mr McMaster:

Absolutely. We have had pupils who, although they left school at 16 and did not go on to further education, went on to set up very successful businesses.

There were traditionally lots of employment opportunities in the Ards. The fishing industry in Portavogie was major, but is now in serious decline. Farming was a major employer 20 years ago, but it is not now. Most of the textile industry in Newtownards and Portaferry has gone too. Therefore, one has to look at small businesses, construction, public service, industries and retail as the main sources of employment now. Further education has tended to be about either continuing academically or looking for an avenue into employment.

The Chairperson:

I will touch on a couple of points that you raised. I presume that the bus passes will distinguish between young people in rural areas and those in urban areas. We hope to hear from rural young people when we visit the Balmoral Show later today. Are you negotiating directly with the Department of Education or Translink?

Mr McMaster:

The Department of Education. Ten days ago, the Department asked me to make a submission explaining the difficulties that we have with children travelling to three different centres. We operate a collaboration over quite a distance. It is seven miles from Glastry to Strangford and 20 miles to the South Eastern Regional College. We want to minimise the time spent travelling, as well as the cost.

The Chairperson:

If you want to share that submission with the Committee, we will be happy to pass it on to the Committee for Education so that the issue is flagged up with the Minister. It is unique to rural areas.

Ms S Ramsey:

I would also pass it to the Department for Regional Development, because sometimes officials do not look outside the box.

The Chairperson:

We will take that action.

Obviously, prevention is better than cure. You talked in your opening comments about generational family influences that create a situation in which education is not valued. Do early intervention and life skills form part of your curriculum? That would help to stop the cycle and ensure that young people leave your school with life skills such as the ability to manage budgets, communication skills, and the other skills that we all need.

Mr McMaster:

In our school, learning for life and work is developed right through from year 8. From years 11 and 12, every pupil is now given four hours a fortnight — we have a two-week timetable — to deal with exactly what you are talking about. Four hours a fortnight are set aside for the discrete delivery of subjects such as careers advice, personal money management and sex and relationship education.

The Chairperson:

Is there any collaborative or holistic approach that involves support for families? Some parents are illiterate themselves.

Mr McMaster:

We have not done that.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for your presentation, Mr McMaster. It will be included in the inquiry's report. Thanks for your time.

I now invite Mr Nigel Finch of North Down Training Ltd to come forward to brief the Committee on alternative education provision. Members' packs contain background information, and Mr Finch has tabled a paper. You are very welcome, Mr Finch. I suggest that you spend about 10 minutes on a presentation to allow members an opportunity to ask questions and make comments. Our conversational discussion is being reported by Hansard, and will be a matter of public record. Although this is a somewhat formal setting, I hope that you will feel at ease.

Mr Nigel Finch (North Down Training Ltd):

Thank you for the invitation. North Down Training Ltd is a small training organisation based in Newtownards, where we provide services for young people in the Ards, North Down and Castlereagh council areas. The company has been in existence since 1982 and has charitable status. Over the past 28 years, we have provided training through the old Youth Opportunities Programme, Youth Training Programme and Jobskills programmes and, currently, the Training for Success programme. Our main business area is in post-16 training and education, and apprenticeships.

We have traditionally worked with a range of learners, primarily those young people who have left school with little or no academic achievement. We have had some young people with five GCSEs and better, but the majority of our learners are non-achievers. There are many reasons for that, such as personal, educational, community or social barriers.

The direction in which our business takes our young people means that we try to focus on employability skills, personal development and maturing skills as our 16 to 18-year-olds grow into adulthood. We try to enable them to cope with the world of work. We are not just helping them with vocational skills. Our main business areas are business and administration, customer service, retailing, warehousing and storage, and hospitality and catering. We also provide employability skills programmes, essential skills programmes, literacy, numeracy and ICT training, and training in health and safety, food safety and catering in the workplace.

We have about 120 learners in our main training provision, both apprentices and trainees. The company's ethos is underpinned by very strong pastoral care and personal support for our learners to enable them to achieve something. They may well not have achieved while in education; we are anxious that they achieve something.

Over the past two or three years, we have begun to work more closely with schools in our catchment area at the pre-16 level, rather than post-16. I have outlined the three areas of provision that we offer. I will summarise them briefly and then talk about them in more detail.

The first area of work is a one day a week service for young people in schools during years 11 and 12. As Mr McMaster mentioned earlier, we use the local college for occupational studies. However, we recognised, as did the schools, that the college does not suit every learner. Some

learners need more discrete or personal provision. Two years ago, we began to offer the schools a work-based learning programme in which our staff are involved one day a week with a group of learners. We provide some initial employability and careers guidance and follow that up with health and safety in the workplace. We then place the learners with an employer for part of the school day. During the course of the two-year cycle, the learners have the opportunity to achieve what was an NVQ level 1 qualification. That service has gone extremely well in some schools, and will be increased in the coming year.

The second main area of provision that we have begun offering in recent months partly follows the alternative education provision guidelines. Although we are not part of the Department of Education's formal funding for that process, we see that there is a need for a discrete work-based learning programme for a number of schoolchildren who are not coping with the academic route. Through the Education Welfare Service, we have begun to offer schools a flexible, tailor-made programme for individual needs that ranges from two days to five days a week in our centre and with our employer partners.

Last year, a learner in year 11 had an attendance rate of something like 60%. He then attended the centre five days a week and achieved a 94% attendance rate. He also had full achievement in what was the equivalent of the GCSEs that he was taking. The style of learning that we offer clearly suited that young person. Some schools have picked up on that and have now begun to refer more and more young people to us on that basis. The challenge that we face in the coming year is to find out what is the best provision that we can offer through our alternative education process. I will talk on that part of our provision shortly.

The final part of the provision is for pupils in years 13 and 14. Once again, in collaboration with the area learning community in the north Down and Ards area, we are beginning to offer an additional vocational route for pupils in those years. We will do that in conjunction with Glastry College and Strangford College in the coming year.

I wish to talk about the provision for alternative education in a bit more detail, and I will take the Committee through a process that we have engaged in with a local school. North Down Training has put in place for 2010-11 a two-year provision of two days a week for an identified client group of 10 pupils from a local high school who are not engaging in education. The Education Welfare Service might have been involved in identifying those pupils, but I think that

it was primarily the school's senior leadership team who identified some learners in years 11 and 12 who are not attending school on a regular basis and who are seeking an alternative approach. We have put in place an agreement with the school to provide learning for those pupils from September.

At this stage of the process, we are meeting those young people, their parents and the school to discuss the range of needs that those pupils are presenting. In some cases, they face educational barriers, such as an educational statement or learning difficulties, and, in other cases, they face behavioural barriers because they behave poorly in class. Other pupils face community barriers that prevent them from coming to school. As Mr McMaster said earlier, the approach of not bothering to go to school may be a generational one. We have been given quite a challenge in trying to meet those needs. We have a strong sense of looking after the individual and looking after a tailor-made programme for individuals, and we are, therefore, confident that we can address some of those needs.

Those young people will be given a clear induction when they attend the organisation in September. That will include core values, the code of conduct, attendance, time-keeping procedures and behavioural expectations, as well as an induction to the various courses that they will do. The initial assessment process will include information from parents, the school and what we glean from the young person through our observations of their abilities and needs. Part of that process is working with parents. We are keen to get the parents to buy into the process by clearly communicating to them what we hope to do. We hope that that will encourage them to encourage their children to get out of bed in the morning and attend classes. Personal contact with parents, as well as school involvement, and perhaps the Education Welfare Service's involvement, will enable us to make some progress on that. That parental link is key to the success of the process.

Once we are involved in teaching and learning, we will then develop a personal training plan for each learner. We are keen to lay out exactly what an individual's needs and targets for achievement are and how we intend to go about addressing and achieving them. Some of that will be achieved through classroom teaching and learning, and some of it will be achieved through visits to the workplace. Some employers may come to speak to them, but, as time goes by, they will begin to sample real work in a real work environment across our core business areas. During the second year of that provision, the pupils will spend some time — perhaps half a day a

week — in the workplace in order to build on their workplace learning skills, which will be so valuable to them when they leave. We will set clear milestones that they need to achieve, and we will report back to the school, parents and young people on their success towards achieving those milestones.

As I said, communication is the key to the process, and we are keen to put in place clear and open channels of communication with the schools so that school staff can be become involved if we are struggling with a difficult or challenging issue.

Those pupils will be in school three days a week and they will be with us two days a week. That sense of collaboration is important; we just need to work together. We have clearly identified with the school the areas of the curriculum that we will deliver and that the school will deliver. Again, there will be some discussion around that to make sure that there is a sense of sharing of the educational provision.

One of the other strengths of our programme is the embedding of vocational skills and life skills within our essential skills provision. When teaching English, maths and ICT, we try to make it life-relevant and vocationally relevant, taking account of the curriculum that they have to follow, but trying to put that into a context for the young people that they can relate to much more easily than just a theoretical process of learning English or learning maths. That is a strength of our organisation.

That summarises the provision that we will have in September. The other provision that we have had in schools has been very successful — the one day per week programme. Schools recognise that the work-based learning route is a valuable route for some learners, though not for all by any means. The schools are identifying those who may not choose to go to school, and that route may be a viable and possible alternative that they can follow.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for that presentation. A number of members wish to pose some questions.

Mr P Ramsey:

You are very welcome. I commend you on your work; it is an all-round approach to working with young people. Are there measurable outcomes for what your group is doing? What is the

end result in relation to those young people who want to do the NVQ level 1 or level 2, for example? I suppose in these times of recession it is difficult to get employer buy-in. You need ultimate co-operation from them. Is that still there?

Mr Finch:

Certainly, in our core business areas, there are still opportunities for employment within business administration, retailing and catering in the areas that we are working in. We are confident that the employers that we currently work with will continue to buy into that provision.

Mr P Ramsey:

It may be difficult to provide outcomes. For example, you had 120 participants this year; how many did you have last year? Is there any way of monitoring what happens to them? Do any of the employers eventually take some of them on?

Mr Finch:

In relation to our main post-16 provision?

Mr P Ramsey:

Yes.

Mr Finch:

That is all monitored year-on-year through statistical analysis. We have retention rates, success rates, progression rates, and all of that sort of thing.

Mr P Ramsey:

Will you send that information to the Committee?

Mr Finch:

We can certainly pass that on to you.

Mr P Ramsey:

Finally, where does the funding for your organisation come from, and how many staff do you have?

Mr Finch:

For our main business of Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI, our funding streams come from DEL. It has a funding model that we use for that provision. The funding for the work in schools comes through the entitlement framework processes; that is a separate stream of income for us. We currently have 18 staff in the organisation providing services for 120 full-time students, plus around 45 currently on schools provision.

Mr P Ramsey:

It is good to see the work with the parents as well; that is fundamental.

Mr Butler:

Thank you for your presentation. How many students at NVQ level would go on to take NVQ level 2?

Mr Finch:

In the main provision or the school provision?

Mr Butler:

In the main provision.

Mr Finch:

The main provision covers NVQ levels 1, 2 and 3.

Mr Butler:

How many would take level 2 and level 3?

Mr Finch:

Around 60% of our enrolled learners in full-time provision begin at level 2 of the NVQ programmes. The other 40% begin at level 1 and will hopefully progress to level 2.

Mr Butler:

How many would take the NVQ level 3?

Mr Finch:

A small minority. Some 60% start on the level 2 programme and then progress from there. That is across the main provision. Within the schools, it is begun at NVQ level 1. Level 1 is an appropriate starting point for a 14 to 16-year-old. At the end of the first two-year cycle of one-day-per-week provision, some learners achieve level 1 easily within that time, and we have begun to progress them on to a level 2 framework.

Some pupils are achieving level 2 — or level 2 units of work — prior to leaving school, because they have that potential.

Mr Weir:

Thank you for your presentation. Your scheme in the greater north Down area is very much based around a high level of involvement, collaboration and, to use the buzzword of the past 24 hours — coalition — with schools. I do not know how long you intend your scheme to last.

At risk of showing my ignorance on the issue, can I ask whether you are aware of similar schemes that operate in other parts of Northern Ireland? One of my concerns is that we sometimes have a good idea that works in an area, but do not get the full benefit of it because of a degree of silo mentality within Departments. Consequently, best practice is not rolled out elsewhere. Are you aware of other similar schemes? If so, is there any co-operation or cross-fertilisation between schemes of a similar nature?

Mr Finch:

The main providers for the Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI frameworks are colleges and a range of training organisations across the Province. In the training organisations sector, there are some community-based organisations like my own, which, as I have said, has charitable status. However, there are other private-sector training organisations.

Some of the community-based organisations have a similar ethos and approach to ourselves, and some of them engage with schools to assist children post 14. I can think of examples of schemes in Derry, mid-Ulster and Belfast that do some work in schools with pupils post 14.

Mr Weir:

Is there any discussion between the schemes that operate in different areas? Maybe you are

closely guarding some of the details of your scheme.

Mr Finch:

I am not.

Mr Weir:

I am just wondering whether there is discussion, because different schemes may be able to learn from one another. There may be things that you are doing in the greater north Down area that could be applicable in, for example, Fermanagh.

Mr Finch:

There could be improvement in that area of the sector.

Ms S Ramsey:

Both areas had independent unionist candidates for the general election.

Mr Finch:

There is some sharing of information on active practice, but it is an area for improvement, and the sector recognises it.

Mr Weir:

Without pre-empting the content of the Committee's report, that may be one of the areas on which we make a recommendation.

Ms S Ramsey:

My points follow on from what Pat and Peter said. Have you ever been part of a discussion, facilitated by either Department, on sorting out the issue of NEETs?

Mr Finch:

The simple answer is no. I have discussed the issue with schools and with the Education Welfare Service at an operational level.

Ms S Ramsey:

Yes, but as a key stakeholder you have never had such a discussion with any of the Departments?

Mr Finch:

So far, there has not been an opportunity to have such a discussion.

Ms S Ramsey:

I do not want to put you on the spot, but you are dealing with an issue that becomes a problem later in life. Do you have any ideas, suggestions or proposals for what changes to make in schools to stop the kids reaching the stage where they are referred to you?

Mr Finch:

Our difficulty, which we have raised with DEL over the years, is that we are recruiting young people who have no GCSEs and have very poor educational attainment into post-16 provision. In many cases, those children have very poor literacy and numeracy levels.

Ms S Ramsey:

Do you not question how those children got through the school system?

Mr Finch:

We have been asking DEL how those children have spent 12 years in education and emerged with nothing. We recognise that many learners have genuine educational needs that prevent them from progressing in literacy and numeracy. However, many have chosen to disengage from school. We have asked DEL what it and the Department of Education are doing about that. The issue has been raised a number of times by myself and others.

Ms S Ramsey:

It would be useful to get answers.

Mr Finch:

Yes, it would. The schools that we work with recognise that there are young people in the NEET category. In partnership with the schools and with the Education Welfare Service, we have a possible way of improving that provision. Improving provision is our intention so that the children who choose to remain in training post 16 have a better start.

We are being challenged by DEL to fix something within a year or 18 months. DEL has set

targets for us for the achievement of literacy and numeracy that are unrealistic. DEL wants us to achieve level 1 or level 2 in essential skills, or a grade D or grade C GCSE within a year and a half for each of our young people, yet the schools have failed to produce that level in the previous 12 years. We have targets from DEL, which are unrealistic. We want DEL and the Education Department to address the issue at much lower level. It should be addressed at primary education.

Ms S Ramsey:

It strikes me that no discussion takes place outside the box in any of the Departments. I wish to comment on the point that Pat Ramsey touched on — the fact that we are always keen on looking at the money must be a family trait. You mentioned the entitlement framework. When pupils leave school to join your organisation, does the money that they get from DE go with them, or is that additional money?

Mr Finch:

That is different money. If pupils remain in school, they continue to get funding through the Department of Education.

Ms S Ramsey:

Kids can be out of school for anything between two days and five days, and your organisation gets additional money for that. The money remains in the school, instead of following the pupil?

Mr Finch:

We invoice the schools out of their existing budgets for our services for 14 to 16-year-olds in schools. A different budget exists for the post-16 age group. The money comes out of DEL's Training for Success budget or the ApprenticeshipsNI budget. That is separate to the Department of Education budget for post-16. Provision for pre-16 is covered within the existing entitlement framework budgetary constraints.

Ms S Ramsey:

So the school pays you.

Mr Finch:

The school or the Department of Education pays us.

Ms S Ramsey:

I want to hear more detail on that, because, over the years, an issue has been raised that the money does not follow the pupil.

Mr P Ramsey:

We need to have more detail on that.

The Chairperson:

We can follow up on that by writing to the Department of Education.

Mr Irwin:

I note that your organisation has been in operation for 26 years, so you must be doing something right. I also note that, this year, you provide places for 45 pupils, but that you hope to enrol 65 pupils in 2010-11. Is that because more pupils are coming to you, or is it because you have the capacity to cater for more pupils? Is there a limit to the number of pupils that you can deal with?

Mr Finch:

It is a bit of both. We think that we are providing a good service to the schools, so, increasingly, the schools are coming to us with suggestions or proposals for provision for them. The 45 learners that we have currently will continue into a second year, and we know of a further 20 that are definitely becoming involved next year. The increase in numbers is partly due to an increase in capacity on our part and partly due to an increase in our reputation among schools that we provide a good service.

There is a limit on that, as there must be. That is reviewed regularly by our management team to see what we can do. We are trying to formalise our educational welfare process, which, to date, has been much more of an informal process of a phone call being made, asking to see someone. We are trying to put a more clear structure in place, and, with that, we can predict more discrete provision in future and, perhaps, set a final number for what we can cope with.

Ms Lo:

As I am the last to ask my questions, they have, more or less, already been answered. It is quite a departure to move into almost a new area of alternative provision. Some criticism has been made

in the sector about duplication and fragmentation. What is your view on that? You said that, from September, you will have 10 pupils who are NEET. Those pupils are provided for only two days a week. What do they do for the rest of the week?

Mr Finch:

I do not see it as a departure from our main provision; I see it as an enhancement of our current provision. We provide a good service post 16, and we are bringing that service back to post 14, where we will offer an individual, tailor-made approach.

That group of 10 pupils will be with North Down Training to do English, maths and ICT. They will also do employability skills and look at a vocationally based qualification. Of the other three days, one of them will be spent in the workplace as work experience provision, and the other two days in school will be spent following the other year 11 and 12 curriculum activities. They will have the opportunity to sit additional qualifications in school. The school has delegated the responsibility, particularly for English, maths and ICT, to us; they will not deliver that part of the curriculum. We have agreed a refined provision with the school.

Ms Lo:

As you said, there needs to be a lot of communication between the school and the employer. Why do you think that you would do better in teaching English, maths, literature and numeracy than the school would? I do not mean any criticism; I just want to find out.

Mr Finch:

I do not want to criticise the schools for their teaching of English and maths generally speaking, but we use a contextualised approach. We use the experiences that we have with post-16 learners to help them to learn. For example, if they went down a retailing route, the English and maths that we deliver would centre on the experiences that they will face in a retail setting. The maths teaching will be based around dealing with cash and customers, payment systems and stock control. We put the maths lessons into that type of context, and we do the same with English. That makes it more relevant, and our experience is that the learners can identify with that.

We also cover general life experiences. We offer a money management programme to the learners so, as they become more financially independent, we talk to them about the experiences that they will come across in dealing with money and other life experiences.

The Chairperson:

What is your teacher to student ratio?

Mr Finch:

We have 18 staff, and our ratio is around 12:1 in a class setting.

The Chairperson:

Does that contribute to some of the success?

Mr Finch:

Yes; smaller class settings help. Also there are two staff in a particular class who are dedicated to that class to look after their needs.

The Chairperson:

It is very much person-centred, tailor-made learning.

Mr Finch:

We have tried to go to the young person with a holistic approach. It is not just addressing their employment or vocational needs, it is looking at all the other factors. We are dealing with issues of drug and substance abuse and sexual abuse; we are dealing with the wider issues as well.

The Chairperson:

So the pastoral care element is just as important?

Mr Finch:

It is really important.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for your presentation. Your briefing and contribution will be included in the Committee inquiry report, and there are a few actions that we are going to follow up on as a result of points that you have made.