



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

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

6 October 2010

Mr Malcolm Roberts (Newry Sports Partnership):

Thank you very much, Chairman. Through my role as an Irish Football Association (IFA) and Newry and Mourne District Council development officer, Newry Sports Partnership has been engaged in sports development and community development in the Newry and Mourne, south Down and south Armagh areas for the past eight years.

I have started to establish a community-based learning model through Newry City Football Club, taking into account the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) strategy of community-based learning through Southern Regional College. The model can complement the existing strategy. We have the opportunity to engage elderly or older learners and potential learners, and we also have the distinct advantage of being able to engage young people who have dropped out of education or are looking for opportunities to re-enter education. The system that they fell out of may not have appealed to them, and, through sport, we hope to create an informal environment that leads to productivity by way of learning and vocational learning.

We have set up a programme-led apprenticeship scheme through the Department and in partnership with Southern Regional College. We currently have 14 young people on the scheme, three of whom were in our area beforehand and were not engaged in any type of programme of learning, training or education. We feel that the programme-led apprenticeship is a success in the 16-year-old to 17-year-old age group. We also have promising young footballers who are involved in full-time football and are pursuing their education towards achieving an NVQ level 2 qualification or, hopefully, NVQ level 3 qualification after two years.

The endgame of the programme-led apprenticeship is to go on to securing a full apprenticeship through Newry City Football Club. At this stage, the model is reliant on the football club moving from being a volunteer-based organisation to a professional one. If the Committee is aware of the current football set-up, very few clubs employ full-time workers. We believe that investment in the structures of Newry City Football Club, such as 3G playing facilities, a training room and hospitality facilities, provides an opportunity for the club to employ some of the programme-led apprentices.

We have also set up an Open College Network Northern Ireland-accredited centre. Therefore, we can offer courses for progression, on anything from community development to sports

development, which we believe is relevant to the voluntary and community sector. Through a sports club, because the engagement potential is especially high, we believe that we could attract potential learners of all ages and offer them credit- and unit-based courses for progression. That will enable us to upskill our community and, in addition, the volunteers who are based at the club. Therefore, people such as coaches, who may be over 40, can re-enter education and do a job that they are passionate about and can devote a lot of time to. We could start to harness that and put units together so that those people could obtain qualifications, such as diplomas and awards, in sport and community development.

Another new addition is the Sports Leaders UK approved assessment centre (AAC). Sports Leaders UK runs a range of accredited programmes and is endorsed by Sport England, SportsScotland and Sport Wales. We are speaking to Sport NI to get what almost amounts to an endorsement so that Newry City Football Club can start to deliver a wider range of those programmes to different partners.

The Sports Leaders UK programmes are all about building and raising self-esteem and promoting leadership in young people. There are also primary-school programmes, so, from an early age, we could use sport as a driver for learning outside of the traditional education environment.

We are working on a STEM-through-sport programme with Sentinus, which is a Lisburn-based organisation. As members may be aware, science, technology, engineering and maths are priority subjects, and Sentinus is very keen to work with Newry City Football Club to develop a pilot programme to introduce young primary-school children to STEM subjects in a sports environment, which will, where possible, lead to a more proficient use of sport in the promotion of STEM programmes. The pilot programme will hopefully begin in November.

We have direct access to more than 220 primary-school children and 110 post-primary students who are engaged with Newry City Football Club, as well as 78 adults who are aged between 19 and 65 and either play, coach or volunteer with the club. The indirect access is estimated at upwards of 400%. As the programme and learning centre becomes more established and yields more trust in the community, those figures will significantly rise.

I have a section on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats if the Committee wants to

hear it — I will be very brief. Strengths of the programme include work-placement opportunities that lead to apprenticeships. There is also a strong possibility that we will be able to create an environment and culture of learning among people, from the very young to the older generation.

There are also intervention opportunities, especially for those who are vulnerable. In my experience of working in south Down and south Armagh, most young people who become disenfranchised from traditional education establishments or programmes normally have strong connections with their local sports clubs. Therefore, there is an opportunity for the sports club to play a role and give young people something substantial that leads to pathways to re-entering education, rather than just being organisations that let young people in to have a kick-about.

There is also a very strong partnership-working ethos. As I mentioned, we work with Southern Regional College, the Open College Network Northern Ireland and Sports Leaders UK, to name but a few of the larger establishments. We also work with the local health trust and disability programmes in the area, so we have a full range of partnerships working.

There is a strong community ethos. By offering such programmes through the learning centre, we have better access to the community. We also have an opportunity to listen to what the community needs and then deliver on that.

Finally, the skills development opportunities for the voluntary sector are very strong. On Sunday, 14 men and women from a local sports club came into the club and engaged in the first workshop, which was about sport through personal development.

As usual, one weakness is the lack of fluid investment. Training workforces can be quite costly, especially for voluntary organisations. The quality and quantity of monitoring can be an issue. Therefore, we need to live and learn as we go along. We are also not very strong on support services for learners. At present, we rely on Southern Regional College, but, hopefully, we will live and learn and create more opportunities in the club for support.

Opportunities include the fact that a relatively small investment can achieve high impact, especially in the NEETs area. If we invest in training and possibly move some volunteers into paid roles, we can achieve more, again especially in the NEETs area. That model can be used for other organisations and clubs, especially in rural areas. Next week, I am meeting the heads of

development for the GAA and for Ulster Rugby. It is a fertile environment for micro-community and entrepreneurial business. If the infrastructure of a sports club is already in place, there are many opportunities to set up entrepreneurial businesses, such as cafes, coaching sessions, and so on. We can assess the need with strong data. With community engagement, we can start to record needs and the direction in which we can go. That will provide us with a strong basis so that we can move forward.

The programme complements the current strategy — the September agreement and the January agreement — as well as the community-based learning model through the further education colleges. The other opportunity is the training for work and training for skills programmes. At the moment, we are quite new, but, eventually, I would like to see Newry City Football Club or another sports club bidding for contracts to deliver training for work programmes.

The threats are the current strategy, because too many providers offer similar, or the same, pathways. Some schools in Newry and Mourne now offer BTEC levels 2 and 3. Some people might say that that takes away from the colleges' clients. Therefore, it is becoming quite a competitive area. It is a traditional education environment, but we believe that we can enter into it. Nonetheless, it is still a threat.

A lack of workplace investment means that the club will not be able to deliver high-quality workplace training. Although we are trying to move sports clubs from voluntary set-ups to professional set-ups, the lack of investment in that area could threaten it. It could be regarded as sports-specific, so there may not be an uptake of certain sports because of their popularity or their area. Furthermore, there is a lack of interdepartmental co-operation with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Department of Education. If there were more cohesion on that type of programme, it would succeed. However, as it stands, I seem to be talking to Departments in isolation.

The Acting Chairperson:

Thank you, Malcolm. It is refreshing to gain a new insight into our NEETs inquiry. The programme is unique and creative, particularly in involving apprentices and placements.

Mr Weir:

Thank you for your presentation. The briefing notes state that you have linkages with three areas in Belfast: Springfield; Ardoyne; and Knocknagoney. Will you tell us more about that? How did those links come about, and what do they involve?

Mr Roberts:

Through the work that I have been doing in the area and with Newry City Football Club, I have been approached, in the context of my sporting experience, by training providers and charities that are interested in looking at NEETs, and one of the main organisations is Youth Works. Many training providers, especially in Newry and especially ApprenticeshipsNI, have not delivered one sports programme. That may be borne out by the data, especially from A4e, which holds the contract. I have been approached to add my sporting knowledge to those models. The training providers know that sport is a good driver; however, setting up educational programmes or putting baskets filled with units on courses for progression or the qualifications and credit Framework (QCF) seem to be light on the ground. I have been engaged to try to develop that.

Mr Weir:

One of the Committee's concerns is that we quite often see good things being done in particular geographical areas that do not necessarily roll out of good practice. It is good that you and the partnership are being approached to have some input into models that can be applied elsewhere.

Ms S Ramsey:

I commend and congratulate you. I think that sport is the way forward for many young people. Another Committee that I sit on carried out an inquiry into obesity. We tried to highlight to officials that sport and activity is one of the ways forward, not only for physical fitness but for mental fitness. I am conscious of the fact that you mentioned the Ardoyne, Springfield and Knocknagoney groups, which are in and around areas where there are soccer teams. Is there any internal bickering about Newry leading the way?

Mr Roberts:

Not at the moment. I do not know whether it might be an issue as we move further down the line. When we are engaging young people, it is the activity that is important. Organisations such as the PSNI and the Youth Service would not necessarily be welcomed by certain young groups, especially those who are NEET and have come through the criminal justice system. It is the

activity that is important — using sport to engage young people.

Take the Sports Leaders UK model. Its qualifications are not sport-specific; rather, they are all about promoting leadership to try to enhance young people's self-esteem and create a bond in the group. Many young people whom I have worked with have been characterised within other groups with which I have been working. The important point to make concerns the attention that they are giving towards an activity as opposed to who is delivering it. What is exciting about the three groups in Belfast is that they are very strong groups. They are working in interface areas and want to use sport, because the feedback that they have received from young people indicates that that is what they want to do. They dip their toe into different sports, and the message has come back that sport is a strong driver.

Ms S Ramsey:

I represent a Belfast constituency. Midnight soccer was seen as an innovative way of getting young people off street corners, and of stopping them from going down the road of drink and drugs and other forms of anti-community activity. However, to address one of the concerns that we have about young people who are NEET and living in interface areas, there has to be a proper, joined-up approach from all Departments. Wee pockets of funding came from the council, the Department for Social Development (DSD) or DCAL, yet there did not seem to be a proactive approach to how that work would have a positive impact in communities.

Mr Roberts:

Sorry? *[Laughter.]*

Ms S Ramsey:

It is frustrating, the fact that —

Mr Roberts:

Yes, it is.

Mr Butler:

She is making a statement.

Mr Roberts:

Every time that I have approached somebody, it has been in isolation. That is the case, especially where NEETS are concerned. We know that we are about to be hit, but the damage that is done to our communities through the way in which NEETS are dealt with may not be overly apparent now.

Ms S Ramsey:

Let me be more blunt: if I go back to March or April of this year, all Executive Ministers were telling us that they were interested in our NEETS inquiry, that they were passionate about it and that they were all into it. However, we have an event this afternoon, and only one Department is weighing in. The rest are not. Therefore, you can see how frustrating it is when officials cannot see beyond their own noses, but Ministers, who are supposed to be leading the Department in question, can see the positive, on-the-ground work that you are doing.

Mr Roberts:

Yes, it is very frustrating. However, the partnerships that have been established in Newry may be the reason that we have been allowed to advance the model with Newry City Football Club. Newry and Mourne District Council has been fantastic, in that it has promoted us and, where possible, signposted me and others to funding streams. Therefore, it has been a great help. The expertise of council officials has also been fantastic. The community services unit of Newry and Mourne District Council is quite strong, and it has allowed us to have direct access to communities where a tremendous amount of work is being done. Those communities include the Newry city to Derrybeg area and the Mourneview and Carnagat areas. To that end, DSD has done very well to ensure that finances are available to address problems.

However, more sports programmes are on neighbourhood renewal agendas, and most are connected to soccer programmes. The local community safety partnership (CSP) is now looking at investing in different sports programmes, with soccer being the main one. Basketball and dance are coming up on the outside, so to speak. Although departmental involvement is frustrating, locally we have achieved this model with the help of many people in the Newry and Mourne area. However, the Department of Education could do a little.

Ms S Ramsey:

That is what I wanted to hear.

Mr Butler:

I will try to keep my questions simple. Your organisation is called Newry Sports Partnership, but it seems to be based very much around soccer and Newry City Football Club. I wanted to ask you about the number of jobs that could be created as a result of the programme. You talked about threats to the programme, one of which was that too many people are providing too many of the same courses and are, therefore, competing with one another. Could you not broaden the sports partnership to include a lot more sports, with the result that you would have a better spread?

Mr Roberts:

I absolutely agree. The GAA, Ulster Rugby, cricketing organisations and other sporting establishments have the necessary infrastructure. The work that I do means that I have quite a lot of engagement with Crossmaglen Rangers, for example. That club has a substantial plot of land, it has community backing, and it also has drivers in the club. Indeed, I will be talking next week to the head of development for Ulster GAA about the potential for using such a club for the programme. Our choosing Crossmaglen Rangers would be an issue to be considered down the line, but some rural clubs could take part in the programme. Similarly, Instonians Rugby Football Club, Ballynahinch Rugby Football Club and Downpatrick Cricket Club could be involved, for example. I am aware of numerous venues in the east and south where the model could be applied. However, the model is at the pilot stage, and I am hoping that within 18 months — that is, if I manage to work my way around the financial implications — we can come to the end of that stage and get some good evaluations.

Mr Butler:

That could be a problem in this climate.

Mr Roberts:

The chairman of Newry City Football Club, Paul McKenna, has been very supportive. If we pull together, and if there is greater community buy-in, it will allow us to lever substantial partners who have some money.

Mr Lyttle:

Welcome, and thank you for your presentation. I am a UEFA “B” licence soccer coach and am

increasingly in denial that I can still be an amateur player as well.

Mr Roberts:

So am I, and I am twice your age.

Mr Lyttle:

My constituency is East Belfast, so I am interested in hearing more about Knocknagoney. For all those reasons, I am enthusiastic to hear about what is happening.

My question is similar to the previous one. Can you tell us more about who exactly makes up Newry Sports Partnership? You are also the IFA grass-roots development officer in the area, yes? Can you tell us about the apprenticeship programme? What exactly is the type of work undertaken on the programme-led apprenticeship and what are the coaching programmes delivering?

Ms S Ramsey:

He is looking for some coaching tips.

Mr Roberts:

He is most welcome. We are looking for volunteer coaches.

My remit within the IFA is about participation and, to a degree, coach education. However, as we are all aware, the IFA is going through something of a rebuilding process in many ways.

The Acting Chairperson:

Is that a new word for it?

Ms S Ramsey:

It is like Liverpool FC.

Mr Roberts:

Exactly. However, my contract finishes in March. The community sports partnership is twofold. First, it allows me to engage in programmes that are outside my IFA remit. Secondly, if a new contract does not come in March, there will be so much more work left to be done. I have been

there for eight or nine years. I have been through this situation with the IFA before and have seen a great deal of work fall by the wayside, because of the break. I do not want that to happen this time. In my area, there is a great need to engage young people. We can do sport. From an infrastructure point of view, Newry City Football Club gives me the opportunity to do that, because of the potential of securing investment and because of the club's need to switch from a voluntary to a professional set-up. That is what the community sports partnership is. It is a community interest company, because it is a not-for-profit company. The idea behind the legal status is that it effectively will mean investment in training and development through sport.

Your second point, if I have them in the correct order, concerned the programme-led apprenticeship. I have wanted to establish an academy-type programme for many years. My experiences in England and France have shown me that, from a footballing point of view, to play full-time football is to improve the footballer. When I was a footballer, I had the opportunity to go into education or take an apprenticeship, which involved kicking around the stands, cleaning boots and doing a little training, with little or no education attached. Therefore, I had to choose between them, and I chose education. Although I did not go on to tertiary education, I went down the further education college route. Once I had acquired my coaching licences, all the relevant coaching qualifications and a driving licence, I decided that the world was too much to let it pass me by, and I went travelling, where I worked in the sports industry. I have gone from recreational sport to finding myself in employment. The educational aspect helped me to do that, not the playing aspect.

The programme-led apprenticeship allows us to offer both those opportunities. The NVQ level 2 in instructing, teaching and coaching is what the club needs. It needs more community coaches and people who have a —

The Acting Chairperson:

Excuse me a second, Malcolm. I am sorry, but somebody's mobile phone is ringing constantly on silent.

The Committee Clerk:

It is cutting out the Hansard recording. Hansard is not getting any feed. If anyone has a mobile phone that is on silent, please turn it off.

The Acting Chairperson:

Sorry about that, Malcolm.

Mr Roberts:

It is OK. Hopefully, the incriminating bits will be left out.

The programme allows us to do both. I will not name any names, but a couple of the young people who are part of the programme tried to go into education and take a BTEC level 2 or BTEC level 3. However, they fell out of education because they were just not familiar with the environment, whereas they have shown a great deal of —

Mr Lyttle:

Therefore, you are picking up people because of their interest in football?

Mr Roberts:

Yes.

Mr Lyttle:

Do you use football to connect them to learning opportunities?

Mr Roberts:

Yes. That is basically it. In a sense, we use the sport to offer people the opportunity to stay in education or to enter further education. I picked up a young lad from Bessbrook who came on to the programme four or five weeks ago. He had left school with no qualifications at all, yet his reports from the tutor are very positive. He has just signed for the under-18 football team. The programme-led apprenticeship is very good. However, we want to move it on to an employment-led apprenticeship, because we believe that the club will grow.

Mr Lyttle:

Is that employment as a soccer player or in other —

Mr Roberts:

The pathways are that people will get a contract to play but still have some working role in the club, which, obviously, will be full-time employment, or they can become a full-time coach.

There are also the marketing and hospitality aspects. The chairman indicated that he would like to take 40% of the current crop on to the employment-led apprenticeship. That is the intention. The idea is his business plan. The club is investing in a new stand, which is part-funded by Sport NI, a training room and a gym facility, where we can take private clients. Moreover, the learning centre will enable us to take health referrals, which gives us another opportunity to access the community.

Mr S Anderson:

Thank you for your presentation, Malcolm. You mentioned your relationship with Southern Regional College. It would be interesting if you could expand a wee bit on about what its thoughts are. Is the proposal an extension of sports development that clubs had some years ago, which, owing to funding issues, all went by the wayside? A number of Irish league players worked with clubs full-time to bring on young people and players. Is the proposal an extension of that, with the young people's education taken on board at the same time? On a lighter note, will it lead to Newry City Football Club having a better standard on the playing pitch?

Mr Roberts:

I wish that you would stop asking four questions at once. I have difficulty remembering them. *[Laughter.]* The potential for Newry City Football Club to become a business is greatly enhanced through the programme-led apprenticeship and the learning centre. Not all the full-time footballers will go to Newry City Football Club, but we hope that the majority will. However, we hope that we will raise the bar for those young players and that they will go to other clubs. There will be a fanning-out. For example, we have a young lad from Banbridge. If he does not make it with us, he will, presumably, go to either Banbridge Town or Glenavon.

Mr S Anderson:

Or Portadown.

Mr Roberts:

Yes. The idea is to try to have another intake in September. Effectively, we could have 30 young people in 18 months leaving the programme and going out to different clubs. They could raise the standards at some of those clubs. Obviously, there is potential for them to make first-team appearances, not to mention the grail of selling them over the water, the fee from which would be reinvested in the youth development programme.

Mr S Anderson:

If the project were to develop that young player and he were to go to another club, would your partnership be able to claim any transfer fees or moneys raised?

Mr Roberts:

No.

Mr S Anderson:

The club that develops a player may have a hold on that player.

Mr Roberts:

It is the club that develops the player. The partnership facilitates the programme and puts it together.

Mr S Anderson:

For the benefit of Newry City FC?

Mr Roberts:

Newry City Football Club will then be eligible for UEFA compensation payments, providing it signs all those players either prior to or during the time that they are on the programme. Currently, only three players are not signed. We have a game next week at which we are hoping that they will be assessed and signed up by the club. The club would then be eligible for UEFA compensation for the two-year development, and if the players go on to stay at the club until they are aged 21 and then move on, the club will gain the full five years of compensation.

I think that Newry City FC is looking at the prospect of developing players for the first team, but the chairman is also very keen that we get some workers out of it. There is a 3G facility, community sports coaching and a vibrant business arm at the club. Newry City FC has been blessed in many ways, in that people are still willing to sponsor the local club, because of where it is and because some local businesses have been doing reasonably well over the past 18 months to two years. The chairman is keen to ensure that we have somebody who can work in the office, do the catering and do the other things that are in his business plan.

Mr S Anderson:

Where does Southern Regional College fit in?

Mr Roberts:

You will all be aware that the colleges are reluctant to do programme-led apprenticeships. As was highlighted in the minutes of a meeting of this Committee in June 2010, almost 50% of students were not placed in work environments. I am also led to believe that the financial rewards or pull-down from the colleges from programme-led apprenticeships are not that great. There is a consensus among most regional colleges that the programme-led apprenticeship is difficult to manage financially. We found that to be the case at Newry City, because we have not had the opportunity to draw down any delivery funds, although I am paying for swimming lessons and pool time for one of the apprentices. A whole raft of equipment is needed to do water-based training. All of that is being invested by the club and is not part of the apprenticeship, because it is work-placed.

That relates to the point that clubs will still have to invest heavily to ensure that they reach a high standard of delivery at their own end. The leap from a voluntary to a professional set-up in the club comes at quite a price.

The role of Southern Regional College at the moment is to deliver the NVQ level 2, and it has also stated that it will deliver the technical certificate. Although the IFA could be delivering the technical certificate level 2 and technical certificate level 3 coaching qualifications, the college has decided that it will deliver everything, because it is the first time that it has done it. We are happy to go along with that, purely because the college has the experience, and it also has the contract.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for your presentation and briefing paper, Malcolm. On behalf of the Committee, I wish you well. I know that you are waiting to hear about various funding opportunities, so we wish you well.