Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Adult Learning

7 December 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Alan Carr	)	
Mr Michael McGoldrick	)	Forum for Adult Learning NI
Mr Colin Neilands	)	
Ms Ann Osborne	)	

The Deputy Chairperson:

I welcome Colin Neilands, director of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA); Alan Carr, development manager for the Open University (OU); Ann Osborne, chief executive designate of the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA); and Michael McGoldrick, the chief executive of the First Steps Women's Centre. We are glad to be with you, and we are glad that you are here to give us a presentation. After you give that presentation, the meeting will be open to questions from members. I ask you to keep your presentation pointed to give us the information that you think the Committee needs to hear.

Mr Colin Neilands (Forum for Adult Learning NI):

Thank you very much, everyone. We are delighted to be here. Thank you for the introduction, which saves me from doing it. I will lead off with some background on the formation of the Forum for Adult Learning NI (FALNI) and how it came about. Two members of FALNI, Ann and Alan, will give you some more information on FALNI's concerns. We will then turn to Michael, who welcomed you. He is the CEO of First Steps Women's Centre, and we think that his contribution will make you aware of some of the issues that are involved in the reality of running a women's centre that is very involved with adult learning in the community.

First, I will give some background on the formation of the forum. There had been a general lack of engagement between the different stakeholders, both within sectors and, especially, between sectors. Therefore, for some years, there had been no collective voice for adult learning, nor a regular focus for discussion of common issues. At the same time, there had been a growing recognition that that was to all our detriment, and, more importantly, it was to the detriment of adult learners in Northern Ireland. That coincided with the WEA making a decision to commit to taking a greater leadership role around advocating for adult learning. That evolved into a number of conversations last summer, culminating in the formation of the forum at the beginning of this year.

We are also very much stimulated by a major publication that came out in late 2009 as a result of the inquiry into the future of lifelong learning. That was a UK-wide piece of research, which was led by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE).

While acknowledging that there are numerous stakeholders that could be involved in adult learning, we decided pragmatically to initially just focus our membership on organisations that had a regional remit. However, we were very much concerned about making sure that there was a representative range of voices and interest groups across the sectors. You will see that our membership includes Age NI, the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Rural Community Network, the Open College Network, Colleges NI, the Open University, the University and College Union, NICVA, the Women's Resource and Development Agency and the WEA. We are a voluntary forum rather than a constituted organisation, so resources for any activities undertaken come from contributions from the members. The WEA acts as the forum's secretariat.

We have only been meeting since the beginning of this year. Hopefully, you know that we produced a manifesto for adult learning prior to the Assembly elections, and that was sent out to all candidates. We also formulated a number of joint responses to particular consultations that have been active this year. We made contributions towards the consultation on NEETs and widening participation, for example. We have also been involved in the production of some initial research, backing up many of our manifesto issues. I will return to the issue of research later.

The core principles that further unite the members are the belief that learning is a basic right and the concern that access to learning for those who experience multiple disadvantage needs greater attention and support. We also wish to promote the multiple benefits of learning, which go beyond simply skills and employment. We also highlight our acknowledgement that collaboration is vital to address those core issues.

FALNI is modelling collaboration and advocates greater collaboration between Departments and a move away from silo-based approaches, which obviously do not work. Adequately and fairly resourcing adult learning and its varied but complementary providers has the potential to make significant contributions to the programmes of many Departments and to contribute to the fulfilment of the draft Programme for Government.

I now hand over to my colleague Ann, who will talk about access and engagement.

Ms Ann Osborne (Forum for Adult Learning NI):

I will pick up on some of Colin's points. We see access to learning as a basic right. Our concern is that current government policy is very heavily focused on delivering on a very narrow skills agenda. We obviously have no argument with the delivery of skills, which are vital for the economy. Our concern is about the narrowness of what is on offer and that the wider benefits of learning are not being realised for the good of the individual and society. For the skills strategy to be most effective, there needs to be a broader nurturing of learning; it is about building a culture where learning is the norm for everyone and is a lifelong activity. The leap to engagement in learning and skills for those who are at a distance from learning is very often underestimated, particularly in government policy.

Although we see access to learning as a basic right, in our experience, the solution is not as simple as that. It is not as simple as saying, "Here is a course. Away you go and enrol." For some people, you may as well ask them to fly to the moon. For adults, there are many barriers to engaging in learning. For those with a poor school experience, the issue is the fear of failing again. There is also a fear of being too old to learn. Other obstacles include childcare or other caring responsibilities, transport, particularly rural isolation, costs and shift work. One of the most difficult barriers to overcome is apathy. People say, "Why should I bother? What has it go to do with me? I hated school. What is in it for me?" We have all come across people like that. In order to encourage the hardest to reach to engage, we need learning opportunities that are relevant and accessible. To illustrate that, I will give you a couple of examples of women who have come through community learning. Jeanette left school with few qualifications and lacked the confidence to improve her skills. She said:

"I really didn't want to go into a large classroom set-up with a lot of young people. I wanted something less intimidating."

She went to a local community education centre and enrolled on a GCSE maths course. She said:

"The centre's informal atmosphere made me feel at ease. It was a relief to discover I wasn't the only adult returning to education, and the tutor was great. I could relate to the way he taught maths. At school, I was really bad at maths, and I had just resigned myself that my brain was hot-wired to be a maths failure. The tutor proved me wrong. He made the classes informal and interesting. I got my qualification in maths and this gave me the confidence to go on to do more."

Jeanette progressed to Queen's, gained an honours degree and is now back teaching in the community at that centre.

Patricia, a single mum with health problems, was receiving kidney dialysis three times a week. A friend encouraged her to attend her local women's centre to learn how to use a computer. She was feeling very low at the time due to her health problems, and was finding life very difficult. She said:

"The women's centre has helped me overcome these personal difficulties but, also, the courses I have completed have given me confidence, helped me to become more assertive and generally built up my health, too. I was able to help my son, Christopher, with his homework through taking these courses."

Patricia went on to volunteer at the centre, which she feels gave her confidence and helped her to develop skills that she could transfer to the workplace. She is now in a work placement through the Steps to Work programme. She said:

"The family in the women's centre, the training and volunteering has made me into the person I have become — full of life."

So, such a change to how she started.

Those examples illustrate that learning is broader than acquiring a skill. It is about engaging

with other learners, gaining the confidence to try out new things and, most importantly, helping individuals to recognise that they have a second chance at learning, the potential to succeed and to improve themselves and their family through learning. They also demonstrate that the wider benefits include improvement in health and well-being, and being able to support their children's learning.

You will all be aware of the NEETs issue and the recent report led by Dawn Purvis and Mark Langhammer on educational disadvantage. Those issues are complex and need a range of approaches. Unless we can engage parents through relevant and accessible lifelong opportunities, other initiatives will struggle to solve the issue. It is only when parents value learning for themselves that they then value it for their children, and can provide the support needed to help to keep them engaged in education.

Those issues are intergenerational, and we need to break the cycle. Research has shown that it is support from parents for their children's learning that makes a difference, regardless of their own level of education. Those of us involved in adult learning are constantly amazed at the transformation learning brings to individuals through increased confidence and raised aspirations. It is more than the teaching that achieves that; it is the interaction with other group members, the sense of achievement and learning about themselves and discovering what is possible.

We have all seen that the benefits to learning can include things such as helping people to manage their health, manage their finances, engage in their community and become more active citizens. It also provides opportunities for them to understand the point of view of others and to broaden their horizons. In the Northern Ireland context, the contribution of learning to peace-building cannot be underestimated. We can provide evidence from earlier Peace programmes of how that worked.

Lifelong learning can impact on so many areas of life, and crosses the remits of all Departments. People need to have access to learning through a variety of venues, whether in the community sector, the statutory sector or the workplace. Independent educational guidance is vital to ensure that adults are provided with support and direction to help them to set achievable goals and progress from community-based learning opportunities into more formal provision in further education (FE), higher education (HE) or in the workplace.

Mr Alan Carr (Forum for Adult Learning NI):

Ann made the point that adult education can contribute to achieving government targets across the board, and it really can. It can help people to get out of poverty, assist people in adopting healthier living practices, enable people to progress into employment or within employment, generate enterprise, and promote better community relations and a more equal and cohesive society.

The question to ask about adult education is not whether we should be investing in it and spending money on it but whether we can afford not to invest in it and not to spend money on it. In Northern Ireland, 20% of school leavers leave school with no qualifications. In the current economic climate, many of them will end up with no jobs as well. Can we afford to write off people such as that, which is what we would be doing if we do not invest in adult education and offer people a second chance, and, if necessary, a third and fourth chance to develop themselves and their communities?

This is not the best time to ask government for resources and money. We are not actually doing that. I accept that governments have to work within finite budget limits, but there is scope, without increasing overall expenditure on further and higher education, to rebalance expenditure. There is a very strong justification for doing that. The demographics are changing: the proportion of the population in the under-25 age group is declining and will continue to decline, but the proportion of the population in the over-25 age group is increasing and will continue to increase for as far ahead as we can see.

I will not bore you with statistics because we have provided you with a research paper that contains the information, but the lion's share of expenditure on further and higher education — 85% or 90% — is spent on the under-25s. Only a very small amount is spent on meeting the needs of adult learners. There is scope for rebalancing that. There is a need to rebalance, and the demographics justify it.

I want to talk about the delivery of adult education. I heard the Committee's earlier discussion about the distribution of additional higher education places. The message that I heard coming from you was the need to bring learning to where people are. Well, that is what adult education does. Adult education providers work in partnership with organisations such as ours in order to bring education to where people are. The delivery is flexible and is frequently part-time. It meets

the needs of people who live in remote communities and those who have family responsibilities or those have jobs that do not allow them to attend courses during conventional hours.

I will mention just one of the partnerships that we have developed, which is a major one between the Open University, UNISON and the health trusts in Northern Ireland. That, by enabling unions, employers and an educational provider to work together, has offered opportunities to hundreds of health service ancillary staff to take the first step towards becoming professionally qualified nurses. That is the sort of thing that adult education can deliver. Given a bit more in the way of resources, we could deliver a hell of a lot more.

It is not just about economic development, however. It is also about personal development and creating a learning culture. The outcomes of adult education can be measured in all sorts of ways. The conventional way of measuring outcomes is by determining the numbers of people who progress to higher levels of education. That is a perfectly correct way of measuring them, because that is the route that some people will follow. Others will not follow that route, but that does not mean that they are failures.

We must stop branding people as failures in the education system. That is what we have been doing up to now. The conventional perception is that education is a one-way street where people enter at one end when they are five years old and emerge at the other end at the age of 16, 18, 23 or some other arbitrary age with their qualifications, and that is the end of it. We must stop looking at it like that, otherwise we are writing off those who have been failed by the conventional education system and who emerge from that one-way street with nothing.

We have to begin to look at education as more of a revolving door than a one-way street that people can enter, leave and re-enter whenever it suits them and pick up their studies at the level that is appropriate to their needs. That is what adult education can offer. There is a real need to do that.

Adult education can offer people hope. In the current economic crisis and in the face of rising unemployment and all the rest of it, offering people hope that better times may be coming in the future is a very real achievement and is something that we ought to invest in. All adult education providers — I do not just speak for the one that I happen to work for — can assist you in achieving that great objective.

Mr Neilands:

Thanks, Alan. Michael will now speak about the work of the centre. That will illustrate a number of the points that the forum wants to bring to your attention.

Mr Michael McGoldrick (Forum for Adult Learning NI):

Thank you, Colin. At First Steps Women's Centre, we change lives, give hope and provide choices for the future. We provide choices not only for women but for families. A lot of the courses and programmes that we run here start from very basic, non-accredited courses that attract people into the centre to dip their toes in to see what we do. We have a small entrance downstairs, which can be unassuming and does not portray how great and how big the centre is. When women come into the centre, the first thing that they are greeted with is a cup of coffee or a cup of tea. We try to take, and we do take, the formal education-type of learning out of learning. We make coming to learn here enjoyable and something that is cherished and valued. It is not about creating data for civil servants and bureaucrats on pass rates. We create an environment where we give hope to women so that they believe in themselves. We create a belief in women through what we do here, and our track record is second to none.

In the past five years, we have had a 100% pass rate in every IT course that we have run. Our IT tutors are second to none; they will go the extra mile and work on a one-to-one basis with women who come to the centre. We take the nervous energy out of women and give them the belief in themselves. Our staff are very highly trained to make it easy for women to come here and feel relaxed. It is like running a race or playing sport of any kind — if you are not relaxed, you will not fulfil your potential. All we do here is simply to encourage and create the environment for women to fulfil their potential. We do that by removing a number of barriers. We have an exciting childcare centre upstairs, and it is currently used by eight different nationalities. It is the United Nations. There are different colours of children from as far away as East Timor and Angola in Africa. There are Portuguese and Lithuanian children, and we have our own people here from the Province. They all get on well.

We also provide courses free of charge, and we provide a transport system with our own minibus. We remove as many barriers as we can, but, ultimately, we can only do so much. When women get that belief and do a course even as basic — I do not mean that to sound patronising — as flower arranging or yoga, they meet friends here. They create those relationships, and, when

they hear of someone else who wants to do another course, they think that they can also do it. That is what we do right across the Province. Many women's centres are doing exactly the same thing.

We carried out our own research. Two months ago, we sent out 400 questionnaires to past participants. We are called First Steps because women come here for a couple of years and move on. We asked them about how the centre has affected their lives, and I have some of the proof available for you. I will read some quotes of what women think of our centre. We asked them to rate our courses, and 85% rated any course that they did as excellent. Our retention rates are higher than 80%, and our pass rates are higher than 75%.

The centre might look informal, and that is deliberate, but our results are second to none, and the relationships that we emphasise between our staff, the women who come here to learn and the children create an environment that removes barriers and gives women belief. Our education system in the west is sometimes pushed towards getting a qualification and getting on the conveyor belt. By 11, you must do a test; by 16, you must do GCSEs; and by 18, you must do A levels. If you do not reach that, as happened to me, you can feel that there is a void and that you are no good. We are undoing all that negative feeling, and we are creating such a powerful force here that it is working. It is a great model, and sometimes, small is better. We have been asked to expand across the borough, but we feel that we want to protect what we offer here and retain our expertise.

I want to read a couple of quotes. One of the questions asked was whether people missed attending the centre, and we asked them to explain their answer.

"I embraced the opportunity to meet new people and enjoyed the journey throughout the courses with them. I have maintained several strong friendships as a result. The centre has been a warm, welcoming, non-judgemental environment for me. I miss the centre. It got me out of the house and I met new people, so I enjoyed the company of others. I also found the staff very nice and it was more of a homely feeling, a lot different from going to tech or school. I also like that it was for women, as, at times, I would feel embarrassed in front of men when speaking out. I am more relaxed in front of women."

That is just a small snippet of what we offer here.

We are very successful. We are very proud of what we do. Our staff have worked extremely hard, and we are rated as an Investors in People (IIP) silver category. Only 1% of organisations that have an IIP rating attain that mark. Everything we do here is planned with precision; we have a strategic document, a three-year plan, in place. We want to go places — we are going

places. We have won several awards for what our staff have attained here. The results speak for themselves.

Mr Neilands:

Thanks, Michael. To conclude, I have three points.

First, I will pick up something that was illustrated by Michael, and that is the need for research. Michael has statistics for his organisation, as many of us have, but there is a real lack of research into adult learning in Northern Ireland. Research and lobbying in Great Britain is carried out by NIACE, and in the Republic, it is led by AONTAS, the umbrella body for adult learning. Statistics in Northern Ireland are very scattered due to the multitude of providers, particularly in the community and voluntary sector, and the multitude of funders. At this moment, neither I nor probably anybody could tell you how many people were involved in adult learning in Northern Ireland last year. We could not tell you how much money was spent on adult learning last year, how much from government or how much from other funders. So, there is a real dearth of learning, and that is one of the things that we want to bring to the attention of the Committee. It is very difficult to make strategic decisions if there is a lack of primary data around this. We have started, and we have circulated the piece of research that we commissioned. However, as I said, we are not, in any way, funded, so we cannot take on board large-scale research at the present moment. That is an important thing that the Committee should consider.

My second point is about raising the profile of adult learning. Within Northern Ireland, there used to be the celebration of adult learners' week, which, again, happens in the Republic and in GB. There used to be some funding from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to ensure that that week got due attention in Northern Ireland, but that funding was withdrawn a number of years ago. FALNI would like to revive that, and is certainly going to try to make an effort when the GB week happens in mid-May next year. The AONTAS-promoted week is in February. We simply have not had the time to co-ordinate our efforts towards that, so we will focus on May. I would very much welcome the support of the Committee in raising awareness during that week of the importance of adult learning.

Finally, I would like to make an offer to the Committee. The forum is unique, in so far as it stretches across the different sectors that are involved in adult learning. We believe that we could provide the Committee with, shall we say, more complementary perspectives on adult-learning

issues in comparison with those you may receive from DEL officials. We encourage you to use us, whether in more formal settings, like today, or on a one-to-one basis around particular issues. We are very open to being approached in any way. We are concerned with building collaborative and creative solutions to the issues that are coming forward.

Thank you for your attention. We very much welcome the interaction with you all.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you very much for your presentation. It really did give us an insight into the tremendous work that is being done by your organisation. I will open up the meeting for questions, and the first question is from Michelle.

Ms Gildernew:

Thanks, Chair. Thanks a million to the panel; you are all very welcome. It is a bit cheeky of me to welcome Michael to his own centre, but this is my constituency, and I am delighted that you here and that the Committee is in Dungannon today.

The presentation was very insightful. It illustrated what I can visualise, because I have been here on a busy morning, and the centre is buzzing. There is a maths class taking place and there are women sitting at workstations doing computer courses. You can come in here knowing that it is a non-intimidating environment. Sometimes, that first step through the door is the most difficult one, because once you are there and get a cup of tea in your hand, the pain is taken out of it for a lot of women who come here.

I know what you are saying, Michael, about getting people on to that first rung of the ladder. Maybe they come in to do something for an interest, but decide that they could do an ECDL course or a maths GCSE. The focus has been on skills, but there is a group of people out there who cannot do skills training because they do not have the foundation and the building blocks in place to do so.

A lot of what you said was very interesting. You addressed the social elements well, but a lot of families are experiencing poverty. The ability to gain more qualifications and get employment will help families out of poverty. We should focus more on getting that point across, because it will resonate with people.

The point about the lack of research on adult learning was an important one. If we do not have an evidence base, it will be very hard for us to encourage the Minister to create a strategy. When you said that it was difficult to make strategic decisions, it sounded to me as if there is no strategy there. My first question, therefore, is, in an ideal world, what do you need? What would be on your wish list? That is what we need to hear so that we can help to encourage the Minister to take the matter seriously. The skills agenda can be too narrow; there are people who are not going to be encompassed in it. It is bad and all to be branded a failure, but then to be told that there is nothing for you is a double whammy.

Jeanette and Patricia's testimonies can be repeated thousands of times, and the fact that we cannot say how many people have experienced adult learning or show the results that they have achieved makes it more difficult for us to press the Department on what it needs to do. I ask again: what do you need to do and how do you see it moving forward?

Adult learning week is a great idea, but breastfeeding awareness week is in the middle of May, so try not to clash with that, because I will be very busy. *[Laughter.]* I absolutely agree that we need to raise the profile. I have not seen one yet, but I hope that the Committee will put out a press statement on the back of this visit, because that would be very appropriate today.

The Deputy Chairperson:
We can do that.

Mr Neilands:
There were a lot of things there; I am sure we have all got our responses to them. One of the things that we are concerned about is the need to build a learning culture in Northern Ireland. There are initiatives in GB, for example, known as learning cities, through which people come together to build a culture of learning in their city. There is an initiative in Bristol, I think, and I can get the information about that for you if you wish.

Ms Gildernew:
So, we are not the land of saints and scholars any more, are we not? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Neilands:

We are a small population; we could be a learning region if we started to adopt such a policy. You are right: there is no strategy at the moment. In our manifesto, we would be looking for a strategy for lifelong learning. The bits do not join up. I know that the Assembly is majorly concerned about greater investment in early years, for example, and we agree with that, but you need to start to join up all those pieces. We feel that adult learning in particular falls off the agenda for a lot of people, yet, as we have been illustrating, it is a key entry point. Initiatives that support skills need to be rooted in a more general culture, otherwise we will have to keep repeating the call for a new skills strategy because those issues will keep coming up. We need some long-term vision for and investment in such a strategy.

I suppose we always have to bring things down to money at some point. It is unfortunate that much of the work that Michael will illustrate, or which my organisation does across Northern Ireland, is in a difficult position. I do not want to be overly dramatic; it is not a funding crisis, but there is no government funding for our organisations. We are, therefore, dependent on short-term funding from the Lottery and Peace moneys, and we all know that that will be drying up. We have a Lottery grant at the moment for addressing men, and it is very difficult to get men back into learning. However, the benefits and initiatives as a result of that will come to an end with the Lottery funding, and we cannot mainstream it. That is a concern.

That really illustrates the lack of strategy and a joined-up approach. So much good practice gets lost. Worse than that, it is the people who get lost when there are not those long-term funding investments. Funding for the voluntary sector from DEL really disappeared a few years ago. We in WEA can account for about 4,000 learners disappearing, and I have no idea where they have gone. However, their opportunities have gone, and that is my concern.

Mr Carr:

Michelle asked what we are asking the Committee to do. One vital thing that the Committee can do is to challenge received wisdom and conventional ideas about further and higher education. Northern Ireland is a very conservative society in all sorts of ways, none more so than in its attitude to education.

Michelle also spoke about the role of adult education in alleviating poverty. That is very real and can help to improve things, and not just for the people in receipt of education and training. It

stretches through the generations; children in a family where the mother and father are involved in learning are much more likely to take an interest in learning. In addition, the parents will be much more able to assist them. So, it does stretch down through the generations.

The opposite also stretches down through the generations. If parents are not involved in education or are accepting their lot in society, the kids are likely to grow up following the same path. It can affect the lives of not just the individuals involved in adult education but their children, dependants and, indeed, their communities. People who are educated and participating in adult education are much more likely to be active participants in their own communities.

I also agree that the skills agenda is far too narrow. The sorts of measures of success that people have been describing as contributing to the development of their own families and communities are equally important measures of success.

The other piece of received wisdom that needs to be challenged is that education is for the young, and it stops there. It would be very useful if you could pursue the issue that we raised about rebalancing budgets. In Northern Ireland, even when people are talking about widening participation, what they seem to have in mind is helping kids in schools from disadvantaged areas and communities to progress further into education than they do now. Of course, that is vital and should be done. However, if we wait until that has an effect, we will wait an awful long time.

Year after year, people have been emerging from the conventional school system with absolutely nothing, and we need to tackle their needs. The figure is currently 20%. We hear people in Northern Ireland boast about the great success story of Northern Ireland schools. There is some truth in that: we do produce people with high-level qualifications in larger proportions. At the other end of the spectrum, however, we produce a much larger proportion of the school population leaving with absolutely nothing than anywhere else in these islands.

The education system here is not the success story it is portrayed as. It fails thousands of people year after year. The choice is whether we write those people off or we begin to do something for them, and the only way to do something for them is to expand adult education. In a situation where resources are constrained, that means a degree of rebalancing.
I think that you have a vital role to play in asking awkward questions about how existing resources are allocated.

Ms Osborne:

Back in 1999, a lifelong learning strategy document was issued by the Department of Education, I think, called 'Lifelong Learning: A New Learning Culture for All'. We were on the cusp of the new millennium; Labour was shouting "Education, education, education", and, if you look at that document, you will see hope in it. It talked about helping people realise their potential. However, the skills strategy that came along a couple of years later talked about people as "human capital". In comparing the two documents, the shift in focus is very marked.

I think that government policy is moving towards seeing FE as the only provider. We recognise that FE is a very good provider; Colleges NI is part of our forum. We are not knocking that; we are looking at that flexibility and that recognition that other providers are out there and could provide the learning. We are having to find that flexibility through other funding streams, which are short term.

For example, in EGSA, we run a lottery-funded project with Action on Hearing Loss, which used to be the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID). We have been able to offer discrete essential skills courses for people with hearing difficulties, but in order to help them make that shift, we have set up a book group. One of the women in the group said:

"It is the first time we have been at anything like this. We see words we do not understand, and we can ask questions. This really helps with our English course. It is fantastic."

That sort of thing would not be available through government funding. It is having that opportunity to innovate; to look at ideas and to collaborate with other organisations as well.

Mr McGoldrick:

Chair, if I can just add my tuppence-worth — I wanted to pick up on what Michelle said about poverty. The very interesting point about poverty, and I am glad Michelle brought it up, is that many of the women who come to our centre come because we offer childcare. Other educational establishments may offer childcare, but they do not offer it for free. Unless you have a child who is going to go to that particular childcare centre for four days a week, they will not even offer you a place, because they operate as a business.

There is a very real need for different strands of education; community education, third-sector education and third-level education. If you look at the analogy of the different styles of learning,

people learn in different ways. There are concrete experiences. I think it was Kolb who identified four styles of learning. It is the same in that we have one style of learning here that is very particular to a group of people who, at the start, may have lacked inner belief or confidence. They come out the other end and move on, but we also have a number of barriers that we remove to try and alleviate the cost.

Cost is another big factor in our research that alienates women from coming to try and gain an education. As Alan said, when people start to learn, it permeates down through to their children. If children see their mother or father learning, it has a positive influence on them. The bigger picture there is that if you do not get educated, it is difficult to get out of poverty. If you cannot get childcare that will allow you to go and be educated, it is a double negative.

Ms Gildernew:

I apologise, but I have to go. I have to be in Newry at noon for the Health Committee meeting. I did not want to let anyone think I was running out on them. I am glad that I got in first, now. Thank you everybody.

Mr McElduff:

My question is about the construction industry; the building trade. Adult learning should be relevant and current, and it should adapt to changing situations. Is the forum aware of any good initiatives that are helping people who have suddenly become unemployed in the building trade or construction industry so that they can get ready for future opportunities — perhaps something that involves diversification? It seems to me that the only other alternative is emigration.

Is there anything happening within the forum or that you are aware of that is specifically helping people from the building trade — plasterers and tradesmen, and so on — who are now suddenly unemployed? Is anybody coaxing them towards adult learning or making provision for them?

Mr Neilands:

The short answer is that I do not know. I look to my colleagues.

Mr Carr:

I could maybe respond to that. I am no great fan of new Labour but one of the very useful

initiatives that it introduced at a UK level was the union learning fund, which is now paralleled in Northern Ireland. The unions that represent building workers have access to that fund, and they work in partnership with adult education providers. There is scope for massively expanding that. I do not know the current value of the union learning fund in Northern Ireland off the top of my head, but it is very small, and an increase in investment in that could have quite dramatic effects, because the purpose of union learning is not just to enable unions to spend that money to provide opportunities to their members or to members who become unemployed; it is to try to develop learning partnerships with the employers so that employers are encouraged to invest in the training and upskilling of their workers, including providing training for people facing redundancy so that they can equip themselves to look for alternative employment.

That illustrates the inadequacy of a narrowly focused skills agenda, because there is a need to provide much more general opportunities than that, and there is no point in offering training to a plasterer who is facing redundancy to enable him to become an even better plasterer in a situation where the demand for that labour is falling. People need to be given the opportunity to look at other ways to equip themselves to do other things. However, the expansion of the union learning fund is one very immediate step that could be taken towards providing greater opportunities to workers facing redundancy not just in the building industry but in other industries as well.

Mr Neilands:

For many of us, there is a lack of flexibility around this. We are limited now by grants, contracts, etc. They are very contained pieces of works. So when something like this emerges, many of us who want to respond simply do not have the resources and know that, to get the resources, we will have to go through a process that will take a year or two years to find the money. That speed of response is not there unfortunately.

Mr P Ramsey:

I am glad we came here this morning. Michael and others said earlier that the centre dramatically improves the quality of life for women. That is marvellous.

Ann and Colin mentioned NEETs. As the Committee is trying to formalise a strategy in conjunction with the Department, it would be good to refresh us with your submissions to the NEETs strategy because it is hugely important, and, as Alan said, 40,000-plus young people in Northern Ireland are, unfortunately, NEETs. Sadly, that will increase because of the crisis that is

looming next year with the welfare reforms, when tens of thousands of people across Northern Ireland will be migrated to jobseeker's allowance. Those who find themselves culturally dependent on benefits will not have an inkling about the work regime out there, and any skills that they have, if they have any, will be gone or outdated. So I imagine that the pressures on all your organisations and on the Department will increase dramatically. We are questioning the Department on, for example, promoting the skills base through employment advisers. It is a suck-it-and-see situation, but there is a crisis looming.

Michael talked about the 350 women who come here. Is that formally audited? When they come here and get IT skills and literacy and numeracy skills, do they move on to education or does it help them to secure employment? It would be good to get those stats because, clearly, we want value for money, but we also want models of good practice for any organisation. Colin talked about research and the auditing side of things. That is always lacking; even with NEETs, tracking is very hard to achieve. It would be good to see if there is evidence out there on how we can do it. However, I am delighted that we came this morning. It was an excellent presentation, and we want to see more of those as we travel around the constituencies.

Mr McGoldrick:

I will give Pat and the rest of the Committee some statistics on the number of women who have come through the centre. It is probably safer to go through the figures from 2008 to 2011.

The majority of our funding comes from DEL under the European Social Fund, and it is match funded with DSD money. In that three-year period, 153 women moved on to employment. That is from our records and is lodged with DEL. That includes some women who came here, got some IT skills and went from low hours of work to more hours of work, perhaps from 25 hours to 35 hours. Not only has there been an increase in employment while we are in almost a global economic depression, but a significant number of women have moved on, and their hours have increased as they have gained more skills.

For two years, we ran GCSEs in English and maths. We ran those through the college, which came and provided the services for which we paid. The ladies who came through with maths and English GCSEs had started a year or two years before on numeracy and literacy courses. Some of them moved on to employment. The highest demand course here is beginners' IT, followed by the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL). There is a significant move to employment.

One member of staff here, Yvonne, carried out research on 400 women who have left the centre in the past three or four years. We are crunching the numbers from that. Less than one in five have moved on to FE, but some have moved on to university, graduated and become teachers and youth workers. There are very positive success stories there.

Mr Neilands:

That can probably be multiplied up. You asked about our response to the issue of NEETs, and we are happy to share those with Committee members and to share other initiatives that we are taking. We know that, some weeks ago, you discussed the learner access and engagement programme. We are taking the initiative on that because we think that it is very important for community-based adult learning. We are calling together the providers and the colleges at the beginning of February because the Minister said that the evaluation of that, which was carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers, would be available this month. We think that we need to respond to that in some way because that is one of the few initiatives to have come out of the Department to try to encourage access to education. We have criticisms of that particular initiative, but, again, it is important to pull together a collated response of all the stakeholders rather than bit-by-bit responses from different players. We are happy to share that collation of opinion with the Committee.

Mr D McIlveen:

I also add my thanks for your kind invitation to be here today. Michael, I will target my question at you, because it is related to the work that you are involved in. You mentioned that the centre has a retention rate of 80%, which is very impressive. In the maintained schools sector, one lament that we hear from a lot of head teachers in particular is that they provide a good standard of education within the four walls of their school but that, particularly in disadvantaged areas, when the children go home, they receive very little encouragement. In some cases, they receive active discouragement about their abilities, and so on. That is very sad.

The schools find themselves in a dilemma where they see themselves as not being able to interfere too much in what goes on in home and family life, and, to a certain extent, that is true. Reflecting that back to the work that you are involved in, there is often news about women in particular who go back into a home where they do not receive a lot of encouragement in their path of learning, and, as I said, they may even receive discouragement.

Do you have any mechanisms within the organisation — counselling, for example — so that you can perhaps address that issue? When you get into adult learning, I think the argument of not being able to interfere is perhaps not as strong as it would be at school level. It may be that some of those women are going back into what is effectively an abusive relationship and are being put off learning. Do you see that as an issue? If it is even a small issue, do you have mechanisms in place to deal with it?

Mr McGoldrick:

Thank you for the question, David. We do provide counselling here; it is paramount. It has become the accepted norm here. That counselling is obviously confidential, but normally the co-ordinators in IT, English, maths or health promotion courses build up a relationship with the women. They ensure awareness that counselling is available and how to access it. As we speak, several women are counselled here on a weekly basis. I cannot divulge, because I am not aware, whether that counselling is because of some kind of trauma from the past or about their education beforehand, but the service is really necessary, and it would be almost unprofessional not to offer that when we are offering other services, particularly when we are looking at health, healthy eating, why people eat too much, etc.

There is support here. It is obvious, but there is a difference between co-education and single-sex education. The women here feel very comfortable with the fact that they are among their peers and they can talk. That is why we have tea, coffee and tables here. They can talk in the rooms in private if there are any confidential issues. It is a valuable support and it helps us with our retention.

I will go back to your other point about schools and young people, and whether they can work within areas of high or multiple deprivation. The Department of Education had a programme under the extended schools scheme, which we linked into. The ethos of that was to try to do what you were implying: to work with the parents to help them become more educated so that they would pass the skills on or encourage their own children. We run English classes for local migrants who speak other languages in partnership with one of the local primary schools. That was sponsored by the school, and the idea was to try to help them improve their English so that they could help their kids. Obviously, children learn a different language quicker than adults. There was a definite need there, and the school came to us.

Mr D McIlveen:

As a quick supplementary question, of the 20% who do not see things through, is there any follow-up to try to find out the cause?

Mr McGoldrick:

Absolutely. The retention level is 80% plus. A lot of women leave for employment reasons, because they have moved or because of ill health. We do follow up. In fact, our process here is that if a woman misses more than two classes in a row, a phone call is made. If they have missed a class this morning and missed one last Wednesday, before 4.00 pm today there would be a phone call made as a follow-up. Our staff are trained to go and meet them if there is a problem, whether it is financial or related to childcare, etc. Generally, a lot of it is related to ill health, or, on a more positive note, because they have moved on to employment and the hours do not suit.

Mrs Overend:

The glory of asking the last question is that a lot of my questions have already been asked. Thank you very much for your presentation. It is good to hear of all the good work that you do. You spoke of 350 women moving on to employment. How many do you have enrolled, and do you find that the same people are coming back time and again for additional courses? How do you reach out to those women? Do they come to you, or are you actively seeking people to come in and get that education? Do you link up with Employers for Childcare, for example, to give those women advice on the support that they can get through childcare benefits, and so on, in order to get them back into work? They gave us a good presentation last week; maybe that is something that you could benefit from.

To pick up on Barry's point, it is not just women who need the skills. How are you reaching out to the men? Statistics show significant male underachievement. Also, do you work with job centres and unemployment centres? Do they feed into your work?

Mr McGoldrick:

I will start with Employers for Childcare. I know Marie Marin quite well. I have worked with her, and they have worked with our centre in looking at a couple of projects, so there is a partnership or an acquaintance with Employers for Childcare. One thing I am aware of about childcare is that our childcare is only for the time period that mothers come to the centre, so it is

really only two-hour slots; maybe one or two two-hour slots a week. That is where our childcare is aimed.

Mrs Overend:

However, it is getting them into work — it is giving them that advice so that they can move on.

Mr McGoldrick:

The other point was about how women come here. If you had asked me that question this time last year, I would have said that 75% or 80% of enrolment was through word of mouth. It is like knowing a good plumber or plasterer; it is usually word of mouth and recommendation. However, this summer, all our staff went out and hand-delivered 3,500 leaflets to areas where we knew there was an under-representation of women. From September, 63% of the women who started were totally new to the centre. Normally, before that, it would have been almost the opposite: 55% or 60% of the women would have been continuing, and 40% or 35% would have been new, but we developed a strategy through which we wanted to attract more women from under-represented areas.

We are called First Steps because we offer training only up to a certain level. We encourage women; we bring in EGSA; and we have made presentations to the local benefits centre up in Thomas Street who also refer women to us. We also pass women through to them if they have any queries, so there is a lot of to and fro with communication and advice, and passing on clients to find out whether they could be progressed to either a higher level of education, more employment, or more training at another venue. Some of our women — just under one in five, possibly one in six — have moved on to FE, and some to university. Others prefer to become more active in their community and to volunteer as well. A high level of women, who, because they have the skills and confidence, want to stay in their community. They reach a certain level of education, and can go off our radar for a while, and then they start signposting women to us, because they are more active in their own communities.

Mr Neilands:

The WEA recognised the situation with regard to men some years ago. Overall statistics on adult learning show that it is predominately women who enrol. Our statistics, say around 10 years ago, would have shown that we had about 85% women and 15% men. We started to make a concerted effort to achieve a better balance, and we are now up to around 35% men.

One helpful thing around that has been the Big Lottery Fund, which has sponsored us to address that issue, bring men back into learning, and to help address complementary areas as well, so it is also about men and health. Again, single-gender space can be hugely important, particularly when you are addressing subjects such as health for men. Men do not talk about health issues in mixed company, or they do not talk about it very readily. We have also produced our first accredited men's health course.

When recruiting, we target neighbourhood renewal areas, so we are putting this into the most deprived areas around Northern Ireland. As a regional provider, we always work in partnership with community groups, so the WEA has relationships with groups like First Steps all around the country. They do the recruitment, because they know the local issues best. They know the men best and have those relationships, but we can then come in and provide the associated learning, as well as the quality assurance and accreditation where appropriate.

However, we recognise that, frequently, the first steps for men in learning are not in accredited learning. It is about getting in there and having a renewed confidence to re-enter learning, wherever that may take them. We are only two years into the project, so we have not begun to measure where the men have progressed to as yet. However, the project does offer that opportunity to engage people and to give them aspiration — that is a common word we use. If they do not have a sense of hope then, as one of the men told me, they will not see the point in getting out of bed in the morning. That man was unemployed, he did not have any qualifications to get employment and nothing was happening in his local area. He was encouraged by his friends to attend a men's group, and in that group he started to build his confidence because he found that he could learn. That is the key factor. If we can get people to the point where they realise that they can learn, they start to begin their journey and the rest of us can co-ordinate and assist them in moving forward.

Mr Carr:

To add a wee bit to that, Sandra is absolutely correct to identify men as, in many ways, the problem area for recruiting into adult education. That is a particular problem in old industrial cities like Belfast, and particularly in Protestant working-class areas of Belfast, where the tradition through the generations was for sons to follow their fathers into fairly stable and reasonably well-paid secure employment in shipbuilding, engineering, and so on. That is not

unique to Belfast or to Northern Ireland — exactly the same pattern exists in the old textile towns in Lancashire and in steel cities like Sheffield. Now, the sons follow their fathers on to the dole queue, and breaking that pattern will be very difficult.

In response to Barry's question, I mentioned the existence of the union learning fund in Northern Ireland, and the trade unions are quite useful link mechanisms in recruiting men from working-class communities. Other potential sources of recruitment are community and sporting organisations. Therefore, in addition to expanding the union learning fund, another initiative that could be considered is the creation of a parallel community learning fund or perhaps even a sporting learning fund. There is huge interest in a whole range of sports by working-class men, and that is another potential route into learning.

All of those things could be looked at. They will require some pump-priming funding. However, huge amounts would not be required, and the resources could be achieved by doing a bit of rebalancing. There is a need to look at innovative ways of reaching males from working-class communities, because they really are the hard-to-reach target.

Mrs Overend:

I am from Mid-Ulster, which is a largely rural constituency. The agricultural and construction industries have declined, and the men who were employed in those industries are isolated and need to be reached out to. Thank you very much.

Mr McElduff:

There seems to be a deficit of understanding about rural construction sector implications in the here and now. A lot of good work is taking place, and this centre is a good example of that work. However, to be current and relevant, and to reach out to those who need to be urgently reached, we need to concentrate on unemployed people in the building trade. Another project that deserves to be mentioned and that is worth exploring in that context is the North Leitrim Men's Group. It is all about reaching vulnerable men in rural communities.

The Deputy Chairperson:

If everyone is satisfied that they have had an opportunity to speak, I want to thank the witnesses for their presentation. It has given the Committee much food for thought. Many issues have been raised. We have picked up on a number of those, and we will seek further information following

today's session.

We have talked about the barriers to lifelong learning. Do you see any difference between urban and rural areas? Have you found more difficulties in rural areas or urban areas, or is it the same across the board?

Mr Carr:

The key to adult education is that provision needs to be as flexible as we can make it. I talked of bringing learning to where the people are, and that is what adult education does. My institution, the OU, is very good at doing that, and it does cope with the needs of people in remote communities, people who are disabled, people who are in prison, and so on, who cannot take advantage of what is on offer from conventional providers. That sort of non-traditional, non-conventional provision is what requires expansion. Increasingly, further education colleges do that kind of work in their own communities. That is not easy to achieve in a society like Northern Ireland, where there is a tendency to keep on doing things the way they always have been done. So there is a need for people like you to keep asking awkward questions and put Ministers and civil servants under a bit of pressure.

My final point on that, to echo something Colin said earlier, is that we can help you do that. We can help you formulate the awkward questions, if you want us to, and not just in a forum like this. For example, if you wanted, we could set up one-to-one relationships between members of the Committee and members of FALNI. If you want to discuss an issue, ask for information or debate an idea, just lift the telephone and ring us. That offer is there if you want to take us up on it.

Ms Osborne:

In the past, we did a lot of work with organisations around, for example, farm diversification: helping people look at how they could use the skills of running a business on a farm and transfer them to other places. One issue really impacting rural areas is that so much provision now is being targeted at neighbourhood renewal areas, which are, in the main, urban. In the past, for example, in EGSA, any adult could come to us, or we could go to them, and be provided with advice and guidance to help them get back into learning or work. Through our DEL funding, we are now able to work only in neighbourhood renewal areas. That has had a massive impact on the work that we were previously able to do in rural areas.

Mr McGoldrick:

Can I just say something in relation to neighbourhood renewal areas? I am sure that most MLAs know that there may be neighbourhood renewal areas in which there are pockets of very little poverty, and other areas that are not designated neighbourhood renewal areas in which there are high levels of deprivation. It is a one-dimensional approach that we would just educate people from those areas. We have a mixture of women from every area. Under DEL, the only remit for our funding is that women cannot be in full-time employment. If they are working 16 hours a week or less, they are allowed to come here and train. We have a myriad of women: women from Armagh, Craigavon, Dungannon, Fivemiletown, Aughnacloy and Cookstown. They come here and they mix.

Do people really want the opportunity to learn with people from their own neighbourhoods? If someone has a literacy or numeracy problem, or if someone does not know what a mouse on a computer is, sometimes learning with only one or two people from the neighbourhood is OK. There is maybe an opportunity to redirect the emphasis on neighbourhood renewal areas. We do work with neighbourhood renewal areas, and we have quite successful projects under health promotion. However, I feel that sometimes we are constrained, in that we have to take almost 100% from those areas.

Mr Neilands:

As Michael was saying, that is an issue generally for a lot of people, in smaller rural communities in particular. If someone identifies themselves as having a literacy or numeracy need, they are flagging themselves up within the community in a way that could be quite an embarrassment for them and, potentially, their families. There have to be innovative ways of getting around that.

Targets stating that a class cannot run unless there are x number of people in the room also impact on any opportunities that we are trying to provide in rural areas. Therefore, a lot of investment goes elsewhere, to places where a class of, for example, 16 people can be guaranteed, which makes it economically viable. That is ignoring the fact that in some areas, if we are lucky, we could get five people, but five people with a real need. Those people are doubly isolated because the funding or the providers, particularly statutory providers, are not enabled to go out there and assist them.

Mr D McIlveen:

Have you responded to the consultation on the social investment fund?

Mr Neilands:

We are in the process of doing that; yes.

The Deputy Chairperson:

OK. Thank you, folks, for your presentation and I thank the members for the questions that they put to you. There has been much food for thought. I encourage one-to-one consultation with members. If there are hard or awkward questions that we need to ask and get right answers for, that would be commendable. Folk like you, who know exactly where the real problems are, the questions we should ask, and so on, need to come to us and make us aware of exactly what those are. I certainly encourage that. Thank you again very much for your presentation.