



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Pathways to Success

14 December 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Jim Allister

Ms Michelle Gildernew

Mr Chris Lyttle

Mrs Sandra Overend

Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Ms June Ingram)

Mr Pascal McCulla)

Mr Jim Walker)

Department for Employment and Learning

The Deputy Chairperson:

I welcome June Ingram, director of strategy, employment relations and European division; Jim Walker, head of the migrant workers branch; and Pascal McCulla, of the migrant workers branch. I ask you to keep your presentation to the point and brief because we have time constraints. I will then open the meeting for questions.

Ms June Ingram (Department for Employment and Learning):

Thank you very much for the opportunity to come to the Committee to present to you where we are at with our work on the creation of a strategy for young people who are NEET. I will take you through the briefing paper that we provided. We want to update you, outline the

draft strategy, set out the initial overall outcomes of the consultation process, talk about actions that we have been taking and indicate the next steps for finalisation.

As you know, this is very much a cross-departmental strategy. We want to try to get a final strategy in place by April 2012 and, in doing that, to get the balance right between creating a strategic framework with the right levers in place and populating or putting in place a more detailed action plan to take things forward. It is timely for us to provide to the Committee information on where we are at so that you will have the opportunity to provide any comments.

A considerable body of work, involving building blocks, has led up to this, including substantial work carried out by the Committee during the previous mandate. We believe that the draft strategy encompasses the thrust of the recommendations in the Committee's report of December 2010.

A scoping study that the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) developed was published in 2010 and provided information underpinning the development of a NEETs strategy, looking at what was happening in relevant policies and initiatives across the piece in a range of stakeholder bodies and organisations. In July 2010, the Executive agreed that a cross-departmental mechanism should be put in place to develop a strategic approach. We worked with the other principal service delivery Departments and the voluntary and community sector to do that and developed a useful, important and valuable working relationship with the voluntary and community sector through the NEETs strategy forum in developing the draft strategy. In parallel, the Employment and Learning Committee conducted its own inquiry into the issue, providing useful information and recommendations.

The current draft strategy was put to the Executive in March and issued for consultation towards the end of March. It sets out the broad suggested strategic direction, includes key actions that were put forward by Departments as their initial or immediate contributions, and recommends that delivery actions are further developed under themes, which are likely to be better information, intervention, prevention and good practice. It also outlines the shape of a steering and implementation mechanism.

We are suggesting that the strategic focus is in two interlinked parts that are designed to prevent young people falling into the NEET category. There is a major overlap with the work

of other Departments. The focus should also be on re-engaging young people aged 16 to 19 who are already in the NEET category and at risk of remaining there long-term, while focusing on longer-term preventative measures for other age groups and a mechanism to manage the integration of both sets of measures. As to the suggested strategic direction, we feel that the 16 to 19 age band is a key transition point, providing a locus where we can demonstrate where the strategy is being effective within a time frame of, for example, three years. However, of course, we need to settle the issue in the wider economic context of unemployment, which is a difficult situation.

It is also important to bear in mind the information situation in relation to NEETs. Our data on NEETs in Northern Ireland is limited, compared to that available in England and Wales. We have the labour force survey, which gives us an indicative overall NEET figure for the 16 to 19 and 16 to 24 age groups. However, that information is taken as a sample, so it is indicative.

Work in England and Wales suggests that, if you look at the 16 to 19 age group, you can break it down into three groups: young people who are out of scope, for example, on voluntary work or doing a gap year and are not formally counted as not in education, employment or training in that sense; young people with an identifiable barrier, such as the fact that they are parents or they have a serious illness, disability or other issues; and young people with no identifiable barrier, who are not in education, employment or training but do not fall into either of the other specific categories.

It is important to distinguish between those groups as they have different needs and the degree of help that they need will differ. We have provided some examples of the sorts of difficult and multiple barriers that those young people can face, including, for example, having been in care, literacy and numeracy issues, drug and alcohol problems, or having committed a crime. The range of barriers is complicated and can relate to those young people's life chances.

The consultation closed on 30 June, and 50 detailed submissions were received. We needed to consider those very carefully, bearing in mind the varied and intensive cross-departmental nature of the issues. We also had some consultation events, including one involving some 60 young people, and we are very grateful for the support of the voluntary and community sector in taking this forward.

We want the voice of young people to continue to be an important element in this as we take it forward, and there was a clear message from the event that young people want to see a more positive image of themselves being promoted and want us to build on that.

That background work has taken us to this important stage, where we feel that the draft strategy gives us a substantial platform from which to move forward. Since the consultation closed, we have been analysing the responses. We have been taking forward bilateral discussions with other Departments, looking at the issues that have come up for them and at the next steps. One of the really important areas of focus is the need to improve cross-agency and cross-departmental working. We have also been liaising with the NEETs forum and discussing with other delivery organisations, including —

The Deputy Chairperson:

Can I stop you for a moment? There is a problem with one of the microphones, which could affect the recording. These folk want to come in to replace the microphone.

That has now been done. Please continue.

Ms Ingram:

I was talking about what we have been doing since the consultation closed. We have been gathering more information about delivery on the ground. It is also important to mention that the second call for priority 1 of the European social fund (ESF) in September 2010 also highlighted the NEETs issue, and a tranche of ESF funding has been targeted at that area.

Other actions that we are taking forward are those that are highlighted in the draft strategy that we will be updating. Those include the existing wide-ranging programme of work initiatives, from the DEL perspective, that are relevant to provision for these young people. The Department of Education is also taking work forward.

As I think you know, we have moved forward with some research projects. We got additional funding for a research project to examine the potential for a tracking mechanism. We are also tendering for research projects into the views of parents and young people. We have also been working with the voluntary and community sector, for example, in looking at good practice and at what further action needs to be taken to improve signposting young

people towards potential opportunities and to the support on offer. The idea of the mentor approach will also be explored further. The Committee's report from the previous mandate flagged up the mentor approach as something that needed to be taken into full account.

The strategy forum has begun to come together to look at how best to work best-practice models involving the voluntary and community sector and feed into the outworkings of the strategy. There is a diverse range of funding sources available to those working to tackle the barriers faced by at-risk young people. Those are being applied in many different ways in different areas that are relevant to tackling the issue. However, we want to try to discover how to get the best value for money and added value with the best way to target any additional funds that we might be able to secure, bearing in mind the tight financial climate. We will explore any potential further sources of funding such as, for example, the Executive social investment fund. As I said, the best-practice strand will also influence our thinking on the best way to proceed in terms of additional funding.

The key question on the broad consultation outcomes was whether people agreed with the overall strategic direction. The clear majority of responses agreed with the suggested twin-strategic direction. A significant minority expressed some disagreement with our current suggested approach, and there were some caveats. However, overall, there is definitely enough of a consensus to proceed with the strategic direction and to take into account, as far as we can, any concerns that were expressed. Those were around actions under prevention or pointed towards actions for the older age group — up to 24. Respondents wanted to make sure that that age group was also taken into account as we proceed with the outworkings of the strategy.

The need to make this and other existing and developing cross-cutting strategies more effective by linking them more closely was another important theme that came out of the consultation. That strong message was also reflected in the Committee report.

We are now at the point where the broader strategic context is changing. We have got the draft Programme for Government. We have other strategies that are being developed by other Departments, for example, the review of youth justice, the public health strategy and the child poverty strategy. New structures have also been put in place such as the Health Department's children and young people strategic partnership. So, this strategy is timely as many differing strategies and initiatives are developing and evolving. We want to make sure that we link into

that because many of those issues overlap. It is about addressing the barriers that these young people face and addressing those life-chance issues.

Other overall key themes reflected in the strategy and the consultation include, as I said, preventative actions, early identification of risk, development of support services, information sharing and better provision, improved collaborative working and implementation, that is, how to join up collaborative working in a complex environment, both horizontally across strategies and vertically from strategy to delivery. Prevention, intervention and good practice also fall within those broad themes of information that underpin the strategy.

We would be grateful to receive any comments you have following the briefing. We will take on board any key points that might come from our meetings with Departments and from within DEL. We will be updating any actions that have been included in the draft strategy so far and looking at the overall consultation responses. We will look at how the draft strategy may need to be reviewed and will include those initial action steps for the first two years, which is important to demonstrate how the strategic vision is going to be implemented. Our ambition is to put in place an effective strategic framework, taking account of the cross-departmental nature of the issue, with the right levers and mechanisms so that we can improve coherence, understanding and support for those young people.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you for your presentation. Before we move on to members' questions, I have one question. You talked about the consultation document, and you said that young people fall into three categories, with 66% falling into group C, which is defined as young people with "No Identifiable Barrier". Can you provide some information on the type of young people who make up that group?

Ms Ingram:

In the strategy, we have taken information that is available in England and Wales, because we do not have the same level of information in Northern Ireland, and extrapolated it as best we can. We can look at the information there is in England and Wales about that group, but we do not have the same information for Northern Ireland. One reason why we commissioned the research was to look at better models of tracking and information for them. So, the information in England and Wales might give a better idea of what type of people that group consists of.

Mr Jim Walker (Department for Employment and Learning):

One of the things that has come from England is that that particular group consists of a lot of young people who may, for example, need just a little bit of careers guidance to get them redirected. Therefore, they are not facing barriers as serious as those faced by young people in group B.

The Deputy Chairperson:

What we are really saying is that we are falling behind England and Wales and other folk, in that we do not have the data. Could that be a possible reason for why we are failing our young people in this category?

Ms Ingram:

Information systems about young people are certainly a very important part of knowing who they are, where they are, what their issues are and how to deal with those issues.

Mr P Ramsey:

I am sorry in advance if I labour some of my points, but I was part of the previous Committee's inquiry into NEETS, so I have a number of concerns and questions. Briefly, I want to follow on from the Chair's point. Who are the 66% of young people in category C with no identifiable barrier?

Mr Pascal McCulla (Department for Employment and Learning):

That is a statistical category that, as June said, we borrowed from England. We do not have that information here. The simple answer, Pat, is that we do not know. That is why we are putting in place tracking and other mechanisms. We will know over the next couple of years, and we can redirect the strategy as we move forward. At this point, we do not know.

Mr P Ramsey:

I want to make a general point before I go on to some questions. Given the seriousness of the situation, and given the accelerating numbers of unemployment — 40,000 people across Northern Ireland — with new unemployment figures today showing that we have, to use the phraseology of somebody else, a tsunami of young people coming on, I wonder how seriously the Department is taking this. We have the head of the migration branch reporting to us; we have a senior officer from the migration branch reporting to us.

Surely, Chair, it is about time that a delegated and designated team was set up to take this issue seriously. As far as I am concerned, this is lip-service to the young people who we are failing. We discussed ad nauseam the tracking and tracing mechanisms in place. Our Committee was fortunate to go to Scotland, and saw at close hand models of best practice. Mind you, we did see models of good practice in Northern Ireland, which leads me on to a number of questions. This is something we need to take up with the Minister. Why, when these people have other serious jobs to do within the Department, can we not designate and delegate a team of people to lead on this?

I have some other areas of concern. June, you will recall that I raised the issue of the groups preparing pre-vocational training at the minute. Those young people are doing excellent work across Northern Ireland, but, because of pre-vocational training, are not able to access the education maintenance allowance (EMA). I was given a commitment that that would be looked at in the briefing and strategy, but I do not see it anywhere.

You referred to a three-year strategy. That needs to be extended. If we are going to make a difference, particularly during this mandate, it needs to be a three- to five-year strategy. What other Departments are doing this? Preventative action is clearly so important to the Health Department, the Department for Social Development and the young people who come under the portfolio of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). I know there is a small group looking at that.

You referred to working very closely with the voluntary and community sector, but, if you were, surely you would have reflected their opinions more greatly than you have in the strategy that you presented to us today. For example, one group in particular that made a series of presentations to the Committee in the previous mandate was Include Youth. That group makes a huge difference to young people, particularly those young people in our community who are the most vulnerable and marginalised.

There needs to be entitlement to that training and a high-level cross-departmental approach. Michelle, as a former Minister, would have some knowledge of any efforts that are being made there. This is something that we might be forced to take to the Chamber again, because I do not see any targets or set goals for reducing the number of young people who are NEET.

Welfare reforms alone will have a detrimental effect on young people, such as those with mental health issues, who are migrating from incapacity benefit. It is estimated by departmental officials that tens of thousands of people will be migrating and seeking work. So, is there going to be a tsunami of young people who are NEET? If so, what are you going to do about that? I genuinely do not see anything here that gives me any confidence in the Department. We spent months upon months collecting information and presenting it to the Department. We had a very detailed debate in the Chamber, and every party was united on the way forward to make a difference. I am so disappointed.

Ms Ingram:

You raised quite a few issues; I will answer as many as I can. On the issue of the branch that is involved, it is the migrant workers and NEETs branch, which has predominantly focused on NEETs over the past while. So, there is just an issue with naming there, but I take on board what you said about a dedicated resource, which we have predominantly got.

Mr P Ramsey:

Do you think that you have adequate resources in the Department to make a difference to NEETs?

Ms Ingram:

In terms of staff resources and the team taking forward the strategy, yes we do, and we have bolstered those resources in the past month or so.

Mr P Ramsey:

What do you mean by “bolstered”?

Ms Ingram:

We added two new members to the team and we about to move the migrant workers function to a different part of the division.

The wider context that you mentioned obviously is crucial. Youth unemployment and the recession are being considered within the Department. We are a team looking at the NEETs strategy, which is part of that bigger picture, but nobody can deny that there are very difficult issues.

On the point about targets, of course we want to see a reduction in the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training in whatever category. Part of the difficulty is the information, and we need to improve that information, which is why we are taking forward the research project. Careers Service is also working with the Department of Education to improve information sharing so that it can know more about where the young people are and how to address their issues. I am sorry my answer is a bit of a scattergun approach, but I am picking up issues as you raise them.

You mentioned the contribution of other Departments, such as the Department of Education and the Department for Social Development. There are actions in the draft strategy, and we have been discussing with them the outcomes of the consultation and looking at how those actions can be refreshed, updated and linked in better across the piece. I am trying to give the picture that we want to put the right levers in place in this strategy with actions that will be taken forward. That good-practice strand is also very important with the voluntary and community sector, and that goes back to what you said about the voices of that sector. We have been working with the strategy forum as a whole, but of course, individual organisations will have their own voices and opinions on what they want to see from it. We want to look at what individual organisations have said in the consultation and see how that can be reflected in something that should, as you said, perhaps be more clear about what will be delivered and what actions will be taken.

The issue about pre-vocational young people and EMA is under consideration in the Department. It is being considered by the policy branches, so I cannot give you any more information about that at the minute. We have looked at activity agreements in Scotland, and an evaluation of the activity agreements has just been released, which includes that concept of a trusted professional — that idea of a mentor. We may want to look at that area, if any additional resources became available, to see how that structure or concept might be bolstered.

I want to reassure the Committee that we have definitely got an appetite to do something here. We are dedicated to it, and we have tried to join up the cross-departmental aspect. The barriers that young people face are largely life-chance barriers, whether it is through being in contact with the criminal justice system or because of drugs and alcohol. Those personal, community and family issues is where we are trying to make a difference in joining things up

at a strategic level but using delivery mechanisms and different organisations to make a difference on the ground.

Mr P Ramsey:

I am sorry for taking up time, but, I think if it was not the day we were in, we would be spending a lot more time on this subject matter, and we might need to come back to it. A number of people responded, and the Committee listened very attentively and visited a lot of these groups across Northern Ireland. One group that impressed us considerably, and certainly impressed me, was Include Youth. What has the Department done with the response from Include Youth?

Ms Ingram:

That response has been analysed, as have all other responses, including the specific comments. As we mentioned in the briefing paper, 600 different points were made that have been identified and set out in a spreadsheet, basically, and all those comments will be looked at very carefully.

Mr P Ramsey:

Even taking the points that you are making to me now, June, I still do not believe that you have the capacity to seriously examine and thoroughly make a difference to NEETs.

Ms Ingram:

I think the issue is that our work on the NEETs strategy is part of the wider work on unemployment issues, youth unemployment, welfare reform and the recession. We need to be able to play our part in that within the wider resources of the Department.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I remind members that representatives of Include Youth are coming here on 25 January to speak about this issue. One point that Pat mentioned that you did not answer was the need to move from a three-year to a five-year strategy. What is your response to that?

Ms Ingram:

It is definitely something that we can look at. It is important in any strategy to have the short-term, medium-term and long-term goals. Research has been done on information gathering. If we are able to set up tracking mechanisms or better information mechanisms, it will enable

us to set longer-term targets and see where we can go in the future. I certainly take that point on board.

Ms Gildernew:

You are very welcome. I know that traffic conditions have been bad this morning, so it is good that you have made it here. I want to pick up on the point that Pat finished on. There is nothing personal in this; we are trying to identify just how high a priority this has been given within the Department. For my information, June, are you the children's champion in DEL?

Ms Ingram:

Yes, I am.

Ms Gildernew:

Right. In the Minister's weekly meeting with the senior team, roughly how often would the NEETs issue be on the agenda?

Ms Ingram:

I am not part of that stocktake meeting with the senior team, but the Minister has been visiting us to discuss the NEETs issue regularly and has been very interested in that.

Ms Gildernew:

So this issue has not come up? That is where I would have prioritised the things that I was keen to move on. People would have been invited into that process, and our children's champion would have been involved frequently.

Ms Ingram:

The Minister has talked directly to me, as children's champion, about the NEETs issue. The Minister has been closely involved in the development of the strategy and where we stand. He has been very keen to visit groups and delivery organisations and to familiarise himself with the issues. It is very much a priority for the Minister; it is mentioned in the Programme for Government and the draft Northern Ireland economic strategy. The Minister was very keen to make sure that it had its place in those documents.

Ms Gildernew:

But you are not included in the senior team?

Ms Ingram:

It is just a matter of the protocol: it is the Minister, the permanent secretary and the two deputy secretaries. The Minister has regular meetings with divisions as well.

Ms Gildernew:

Pat articulated quite a bit of the frustration about data. I was not on the Committee for Employment and Learning in the previous mandate, but, obviously, somebody who sees this as an issue that never seems to get resolved. You make a point about data in paragraph 1.12. Data does not fall out of the sky; we have to look for it. I understand that you will try to get data in the research that you will do after the scoping exercise. Is that not a good few years too late? I welcome the fact that it is happening now, but we knew about the problem five years ago. Data should have been collected then. That is not meant to be any personal criticism of the officials who have come to us today.

There is a huge crossover with health in identifiable barriers. I know that you are working with the Health Department on the children and young people's strategy. How often do you meet your counterparts in health? Children in care, children with mental health issues and children with a disability are all children about whom I am concerned. It is really a list of the most vulnerable children in our society.

I do not see the transport issue represented. Again, I am trying not to be facetious, but I looked at the list. The Rural Development Council was included in the list, but did you make any efforts to talk to young people from Fermanagh and Tyrone, where transport is a huge barrier? I cannot believe that it is not in the list. That leads me to think that perhaps you did not go beyond Belfast. We need to examine all of the barriers and the reasons behind them. If that is an issue that creates 30% of children and young people who are NEET, that needs to be a discussion between the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister for Regional Development. Unless that is identified, it cannot be resolved because the Minister will not know about it and will not be able to do anything about it.

It would be helpful if you could give us a wee bit more information on the funding tranche from ESF and what you are likely to do with that.

Ms Ingram:

Again, I will do my best to cover all of those issues. It may be a bit scattergun, but I will do my best. I will look first at your questions about liaison with other Departments, with health in particular, and the different groups of young people with different barriers. As regards the consultation responses, we have talked to three different parts of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety about the NEETs strategy and also in my role as children's champion. I have different routes of contact with different parts of the Health Department. I am the joint chair of the regional steering group for the employability of care leavers strategy. That meets regularly and has structures and a plan in place to improve the employability of those young people. Perhaps that is a useful model to look at in the future. We work closely with the Health Department regularly to look at disability issues and how we can improve our strategic focus in the Department on disability issues.

We will raise with the Department for Regional Development any issues on transport that have come out of the consultation. We had a consultation event at South West College in Omagh, which was very useful because it enabled people from the local area to attend. Young people from the area also attended the young people's consultation event.

Mr Walker:

We used the NEETs forum organisations to bring young people to the event. They brought a broad spectrum of young people to the NEETs consultation. There was a spectrum, and we asked to ensure that rural issues were included.

Ms Gildernew:

Was the availability of transport identified as an issue?

Mr Walker:

Yes; transport has come up as an issue. We are referring it to our colleagues in DRD as well.

Ms Gildernew:

I do not see it anywhere in the strategy or the paper.

Ms Ingram:

It may well have been highlighted through the consultation process.

Mr McCulla:

It is coming through very clearly in the consultation responses. The Committee inquiry also picked it up, so we picked it up from there. It just does not happen to be in this synopsis of the strategy at the moment.

Ms Gildernew:

You should put it in people's heads that they may like to mention it.

Ms Ingram:

We could write to the Committee with more information about the European Social Fund.

Ms Gildernew:

That would be great. June, you are director of strategy and employment relations in the European division. That is a lot of heavy work to be getting on with, particularly in this economic climate and the importance of engagement with Europe. However, "children's champion" is not in your title, and that could also be looked at. I do not know whether you had much discussion with the children's champion in DARD, for example, because she produces her own children and young people's strategy. She is an impressive woman who can get a lot of things done, but there needs to be more liaison between the children's champions from all Departments to ensure that the children are not missed out and so that, in all the rest of our roles, our most vulnerable children are given the priority that they deserve.

Ms Ingram:

It is important that the steering and implementation mechanism sits within the ministerial sub-group on children and young people and those structures so that other Departments are involved and we can look at different issues that maybe touch the same young people and we have a strategic focus even if we are coming at it from different directions.

Ms Gildernew:

I accept that the issue is cross-departmental and that other Departments will have a need to be involved but I emphasise strongly that there needs to be leadership and a Department that is putting up its hands and saying: "We are responsible for NEETs. We will engage with other Departments but we are the people who are driving that strategy." Without that, we are on a hiding to nothing.

Mr P Ramsey:

Hear, hear.

Mr Lyttle:

Thank you for your presentation and update. The very least that the Executive and Assembly can give our children and young people is a cross-departmental strategy to ensure that they get education, employment and training opportunities. I was part of the previous Committee inquiry, and some of the key issues that we drew out were effective use of EMA, tracking where those young people were, mentoring and careers.

I echo some of the concerns raised so far about pre-vocational training programmes and getting access to that assistance. I am a bit concerned that we seem not to know why 66% of our 16 to 24-year-olds are not in education, training or employment. There is clearly a significant and urgent piece of work to do there. It is encouraging that the research has started but I, like my colleagues, hope there is an extreme urgency around that.

The barriers for the identifiable barrier group are wide and varied. I fully agree that leadership is needed, but it is clear that, in addition to DEL taking this matter extremely seriously, there needs to be a full cross-departmental Executive approach. Is there a NEETs ministerial subcommittee?

Ms Ingram:

The intention is that there will be a NEETs subcommittee of the ministerial subgroup on children and young people.

Mr Lyttle:

That would be extremely helpful because Ministers need to take this issue extremely seriously. I understand from the paper that a draft action plan is being put before the Executive in the new year. Is that right?

Ms Ingram:

That will be part of the revised strategy. We hope to have a revised, updated, streamlined and clarified action plan.

Mr Lyttle:

Having heard the concerns of my colleagues, we should already be at that stage, given the work already undertaken by the Committee and the Department. Would it be possible for the Committee to be informed of the date of the next NEETs strategy forum and maybe for ourselves to have the option to attend?

Ms Ingram:

Yes; the forum sets its own agenda, and I am sure that it will be able to facilitate that.

Mr Lyttle:

I just think it would be useful to touch base with the many organisations and third-sector organisations that contributed to the strategy just to hear where they feel we are at.

I presume also that you are working with groups such as Include Youth, Training by Choice and GEMS NI. You mentioned the social investment fund. There was clear feedback from the inquiry about the need for alternative education and training provision and for mentoring programmes. We need to think outside the box to tackle those barriers. I hope to see some creative proposals.

Mr P Ramsey:

The Committee's report on the NEETS inquiry comprises these two weighty volumes. That indicates how seriously we took the collection and collating of the information.

Ms Ingram:

We take it very seriously too. I have in front of me the executive summary and the recommendations from the Committee's report, and I work with them hand-in-hand.

The Deputy Chairperson:

You mentioned the NEETS strategy forum. How was that made up? Who sits on that forum?

Mr Walker:

The NEETs strategy forum is a coming together of all the major voluntary and sector organisations that have an interest and directive in the area. It has approximately 40 members, including organisations such as Barnardo's, the Prince's Trust, GEMS NI, Include Youth and Opportunity Youth, and many others. It is a reasonably representative grouping.

We get invitations to attend meetings.

The Deputy Chairperson:

What is the purpose behind all that?

Mr Walker:

It is an opportunity for us to engage with the sector as a whole and for it to put forward its collective views and to come together when it is looking at best practice, for example, which it is now starting to do.

Mr Lyttle:

The NEETs strategy forum is made up of organisations that have been working on these issues for years in the absence of an Executive departmental framework to assist with statutory bodies and make the approach as coherent as possible. It does have a vital role to play.

Ms Ingram:

We very much appreciate its valuable input. In turn, I hope that the forum finds it valuable that it has a voice that we listen to and that we communicate with it to look at issues of coherence, progression and best practice.

Mr Buchanan:

One Chris's point, you said that it was your intention to set up a NEETs subcommittee. Why has that not already been done? When will that be put in place?

Ms Ingram:

That will be part of the ministerial subgroup on children and young people structures that are led by OFMDFM. When the strategy is finalised and we are clear about the agreed direction and the action plan, that will be the time to set up the structures for implementation.

Mr Lyttle:

That is where Michelle's point comes in, to a certain extent. Far be it from me to use this opportunity to criticise other Departments, but the ministerial subgroup on children and young people is not known for having regular meetings, shall we say. It would be helpful to have strong leadership on any ministerial subcommittee on NEETs to ensure that there is regular

interaction. It is clear that we are not going to make significant progress on this unless we deal in a cross-departmental manner with those barriers that cover a whole range of issues.

Ms Gildernew:

It is not renowned for ministerial involvement either. Perhaps that is something that you could recommend.

Mr Allister:

How many departmental staff are working with NEETs?

Ms Ingram:

There is a team of seven to take the strategy forward. But then, of course —

Mr Allister:

Are they working exclusively on NEETs?

Ms Ingram:

They have not been working exclusively on NEETs. We have been working on the migrant workers strategy, but that has required less involvement and input from us because it has been largely implemented. Part of that work was to service the migrant workers thematic subgroup, which now meets twice a year and is less demanding.

Mr Allister:

Is the bulk of their work committed to NEETs?

Ms Ingram:

Yes; it is about 80% or 90%.

Mr Walker:

The team will become totally dedicated to NEETs.

Mr Allister:

Is that an adequate complement?

Mr Walker:

In taking the strategy forward, we are working towards our target of having a draft strategy in place. We have sufficient resources to be able to pull that together.

Mr Allister:

When do you expect that?

Mr Walker:

Our target is to have a final draft strategy ready for the Executive in March or April.

Ms Ingram:

Sorry, we hope to have it agreed by the Executive by then.

Mr Allister:

Has anything gone to the Executive yet?

Ms Ingram:

The draft strategy was cleared by the Executive last March, so we are working through the outcomes of the consultation.

Mr Allister:

So, last March, a draft strategy was agreed, and now, one year later, you hope to have a final strategy agreed? There is not a great deal of urgency, is there?

Ms Ingram:

A lot of work has been undertaken since then. Actions have been put in place with the good-practice models, the research and the information strand, and also working —

Mr Allister:

It is other people's research. Take the three groups: that is not your research. You are borrowing GB research and applying it — whether or not it is applicable — to Northern Ireland.

Ms Ingram:

We have commissioned a new research project to look at possibilities —

Mr Allister:

When is that going to report?

Mr Walker:

The categories that have been borrowed from England were identified through the scoping study that the Department undertook. When that study was carried out, it was considered that the categories that applied in England could reasonably be applied here. On the tracking research that we have under way, we hope to have that report by the end of March.

Mr Allister:

Sorry, how are we going to have a final strategy approved by March if we are only getting the survey work that you are doing by the end of March? Why lead us on a merry dance? Tell us the real timescale.

Ms Ingram:

We are doing our best to give a answer on the timescale. If we go back to the original scoping study, you will find that it set out the evidence, the information for the need for a strategy, where it should be developed and the strands that should be within it.

The draft strategy that went out for consultation also included a reflection of the actions that are already taking place by a wide range of Departments that are relevant to the issue, so there is already work going on. It is not that everything has gone into limbo or suspension.

Mr Allister:

You are doing survey work that informs the final shape of the strategy. You are not going to have the results of the survey work until the end of March, so why tell us that you expect that, by March, the strategy will have been approved by the Executive.

Ms Ingram:

Sorry; I have not been clear enough. The survey work is research to look at models of how we might track those young people. That action will be in the strategy, but it does not stop the other actions and policies being implemented.

Mr Allister:

So it does not inform the final shape of the strategy?

Ms Ingram:

In terms of timescales, it coincides with the finalisation —

Mr Allister:

So it does not inform the shape of it?

Ms Ingram:

It is to give us options for how we might track young people in the future. It is that kind of information on the ground, necessary to inform future actions. The strategy —

Mr Allister:

It does not seem to me to be very co-ordinated, I have to say. However, let me ask about the three categories. Within the three categories that you have adopted, or borrowed, is there going to be a particular focus on one, over and above the others?

Ms Ingram:

The strategic direction that we have proposed is to look at the 16 to 19 age group, the group that has the most difficult barriers to employment. The 16 to 19 group is the key period of transition, for which we probably have most information on where they are and where they might be going. Their barriers to employment are barriers on which other agencies and DEL are working and —

Mr Allister:

Two thirds of young people are in group C. You cannot even tell us who and what they might be. Will they just be ignored and the focus placed on group B?

Ms Ingram:

They are most definitely not going to be ignored. We want to look at best practice for group B, and how that might be extrapolated. Group C encompasses potentially the large number of young people who have problems accessing education, employment or training, for example, the youth unemployment issue, which will be looked at as part of the wider issue.

Mr Allister:

When?

Ms Ingram:

It is obviously an urgent issue at the minute for —

Mr Allister:

It does not sound very urgent.

Ms Ingram:

What we want to present here is the NEETs strategy, but if you have comments that you want to make about the wider issues —

Mr Allister:

I am just unclear as to how, if the primary focus is on group B, when, if at all, you are ever going to get round to the bigger group, which is two thirds of young people who are in group C, all within a three-year strategy.

Mr Walker:

I think that it has to be looked at in the short, medium and longer term. Certainly, all of the actions currently being taken to assist all of the young people in group C are still going on. Actions are also being taken under the banner of youth unemployment.

Mr Allister:

It is all very fine to say that actions are going on, but when you drill down, you cannot even tell us who might be in group C. I have just no idea how you are striving to reach them.

Ms Ingram:

As Jim said earlier, I think that group C would be those young people who need, for example, a bit more direction and guidance. They may be in and out of different options, but they are there. It is just a matter of getting the information in place so that we can then work on the 16 to 19 group, on which there is largely a consensus on the strategic direction, and then look at how best to extend.

Mr Allister:

So the primary focus is on group B — and group C, which is the greater number, is some sort of afterthought?

Ms Ingram:

It is not an afterthought, because much work is already going on with young people to try to address their issues to make sure that they get into education and training.

Mr Allister:

Well, I hope that you are right. Thank you.

Mrs Overend:

Many of my questions have been covered. I just want to reiterate that the research seems to be important in finding the real needs, and that should be completed first. Are these Arad research people who are commissioned to carry that out looking at best practice in England, Scotland and Wales? How are they figuring out how to collate that data? Should they not have already started?

Mr Walker:

It has been recognised that there are deficiencies in the information system. This piece of research is to scope the possibility for a tuition tracking system in Northern Ireland. The organisation that won the tender has some experience of this in England. It will be looking at tracking systems that are available elsewhere, as well as conducting research in Northern Ireland before putting forward proposals to us.

Mrs Overend:

When were they appointed?

Mr Walker:

The contract was issued last month.

Mrs Overend:

The obvious thing to do first was to try to collate that data before you put a strategy in place.

Mr Walker:

It should be made clear that the scoping study is really to look at the possibilities for introducing a tracking system. It will not give us further, more detailed information about the specific groups and so on. However, from that scoping exercise, we will be able to gather further information. Therefore, it is not holding up the strategy; it is one of the ongoing pieces of work that will continue.

Mrs Overend:

I just think that it would feed more information into the strategy so that you would better know where to focus. Thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson:

OK, folks. We must draw this evidence session to a close. We are running well over time. I thank the witnesses for coming along. You will have sensed from the questioning that members are disappointed and concerned by the lack of leadership in the way that the NEETs strategy has been taken forward. There is certainly quite a lot of work to be done to bring it up to standard. The issues and concerns raised will be in the Hansard report, and the Committee will pass those to the Department.