



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Careers Education, Information,
Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland:
Sector Skills Councils Briefing

13 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan

Witnesses:

Ms Shauna Dunlop	Sector Skills Councils Northern Ireland
Ms Siobhan Weir	Sector Skills Councils Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: Ladies, the members keep talking when I want to talk.

Mr Lyttle: You are the Chair.

The Chairperson: I know, but I have no control over the lot of you. I will sit and talk, and we will have a discussion. I will work out how best to get the information in your report into the matter. It may well be that I will read it in at the next report. I am sorry that you have had to sit there and wait for a little while. Will I have a quorum?

Mr Hilditch: I have to leave in five minutes' time.

The Chairperson: Let us get started. When do you need to go?

Mr Lyttle: I will stay for as long as you need me to.

The Chairperson: So long as we have enough members here to hear this bit. Davy, I understand that you have other things to do.

My apologies, folks, but what we are dealing with is very important, and we are very pleased that you have come to talk to us. You can give an introduction and tell us who you are and why you are here.

Ms Siobhan Weir (Sector Skills Councils Northern Ireland): In some ways, we can continue from what the Skills for Justice representatives were saying, because we are the network of sector skills councils. You heard from Judith and her team, who are one of the 21 sector skills councils across the UK, which represent 95% of all industries. That is what we are.

The key message is that we are employer-led organisations; we do what employers tell us to do, because we have that opportunity. We are not linked to government in that way; we are neutral and objective. At the same time, we do not have to be swayed by what the supply side says; we are demand-led. We respond to what employers say about what qualifications and workforce issues are needed. That is key.

As Judith said in her introduction, the importance of —

The Chairperson: Tell us a wee bit about yourself. Judith is the best kept secret in Northern Ireland, in this field. What about you? Where are you based?

Ms S Weir: I work from home. As a sector skills council, we do not have the capacity or funding for an office in Northern Ireland. My team is based in London; the researchers and marketing people are in London. I am the Northern Ireland person for my sector skills council. Shauna is something similar.

The Chairperson: What do you do, Shauna?

Ms Shauna Dunlop (Sector Skills Councils Northern Ireland): I represent the Learning and Skills Improvement Service. We look after the sector skills issues for the further education sector. We also operate in work-based learning and with some of the wider communities that you are interested in, such as the youth, community and library sectors. My role is UK-wide, but I live here. We want to make it clear that we are representative of a number of agencies, such as our organisation and Skills for Justice, which have direct links with employers. They collect labour market information and work with careers teams, as you heard from Judith, to try to bridge some of the gaps that we are all aware of.

The Chairperson: What do you think of the careers information that we give to young people, or anybody else, for that matter?

Ms Dunlop: We have a number of resources available, and we have undertaken initiatives in the past. There is one in particular that Siobhan wants to highlight.

Ms S Weir: Information is the key. Careers education, information, advice and guidance is a huge area, but sector skills councils are strong on information and what lies behind it. You might hear about a careers adviser who is not knowledgeable. It might seem that she is not knowledgeable because the information may not be at her fingertips or be as accessible, up to date or presented in a way that is convenient to providing enough information when interacting with a job seeker. Our role is to put information together for her so that she can give advice to the person in a way that makes sense. In my sector, SkillsActive, for example, we are sport, fitness, play/work, and outdoor providers.

The Chairperson: There is a feeling, Siobhan, that it does not happen. I know about sector skills councils; they tend to be more UK-orientated, but there are a couple here. I am not sure that young people are necessarily getting such advice as, "Here is your career progression in sports", or, "Here is your career progression in youth work". How do we get this communication to people?

Ms S Weir: It is getting better, because we have industry fact sheets. That sounds like a very dull description, but they are fantastic. They are A4 page-sized and written in the kind of language that young people, in particular, like. It tells them what they need to know about a sector, what they need to get into it and what the wages are. It is all on one sheet. That is what we do. That is how we help careers advisers, as they have a very challenging job. They cannot carry around thousands and thousands of job roles.

Mr Lyttle: That sounds like really helpful information. It sounds like the sector skills councils have access to a huge amount of labour market information that our young people do not necessarily have access to. Are there ways of making it more accessible? Do we have social media, such as Facebook and Twitter accounts, for the fact sheets?

Ms S Weir: Yes. Councils are on Twitter and Facebook and have fantastic sector-specific websites. Some of them are really interactive and draw out of young people in particular what their strengths are and what areas they should focus on. It is very efficient.

The Chairperson: Does anybody else find that this is interesting information although we were not aware of it? It is one of the tragedies of life that there is so much information around and that people do not get at it.

Ms S Weir: I know. We say that Northern Ireland is a small place.

Ms Dunlop: We want to get across today that there are opportunities for us to work with different organisations across Northern Ireland to get information out in the most accessible formats.

Mr Lyttle: Is there a website where a young person can go to get all the information that we have been hearing about in the inquiry?

Ms S Weir: Yes. The Northern Ireland careers website has web links for all the industries. You drill down —

Mr Lyttle: "Drill down" frightens me. How easy is it to access it?

The Chairperson: That is the problem.

Ms S Weir: If someone is keen on a job, they have to do a bit work for it; they cannot have it presented on a plate. We make sure that the information presented is accurate and up to date; that is the strength of the sector skills councils. We are all UK organisations, but most sector skills councils will have a manager or a presence in Northern Ireland. We can tailor it and get down to bringing in anecdotal information. For example, the Joey Dunlop leisure centre needs eight lifeguards, and five of them have to be female, because it cannot open the pool if it does not have its quota of lifeguards. However, it has trouble getting that information out. It is about how we make links to alert careers advisers that there is a job opportunity here and now, and the strength of sector skills councils is that we are tapped into that —

The Chairperson: David, do you want to ask a question?

Mr Hilditch: No.

The Chairperson: If people want to interject and ask questions, just do so.

Mr F McCann: It has been said that one of the difficulties is the lack of enthusiasm when people try to encourage a certain career path. One issue that came up was the interactive approach on the computer, and the indications are that websites here are of poor quality in comparison to those in other places, are difficult to get into, and that the quality of information is not good. If a person is enthusiastic about delivering a message, it will certainly help in what we are trying to do.

The Chairperson: Does anyone else want to say anything? I have a few questions to finish on. In inquiries, it is always the case that you ask a few questions and get answers, but you realise that you need a little bit more information. There are two questions. First, we need to see whether the quality of information that you give out, both in the fact sheets and online, is as good as you think it is. You might organise for us to have a look at that. The second question is: how effective is your interaction with careers guidance people? Do they know what you have? Can they take information that you have? There is a balance between needing eight lifeguards, which is not necessarily a careers strategy but there are jobs available there, to saying that this is a sector that you need to look at because it is vibrant and there are loads of opportunities. It is not just a lifeguard here, but it could be a lifeguard somewhere else or a sports therapist or whatever.

I would be interested in hearing about how effective your interaction is with careers advisers or schools directly. I do not just want a report. What we hear is, "Oh, we do loads and loads of things; I do not understand why there is a problem." We believe that there is a problem. I will state for you — because I have stated for others — that the problem is that loads of employers come to us and say, "We cannot get the quality or calibre of people that we want; if we did, we would employ them." Equally, loads of people who have an education, skills, qualifications or none say, "I cannot find anybody who will give me a chance to show what I can do." Therefore, there is a mismatch. We would like to hear from people not that everything is OK — although there are lots of things that are good — but about what can we do to fix that.

Ms S Weir: We can come up with solutions.

Ms McGahan: In your presentation, you talk about the need to do more to address the under-representation of females, especially in the engineering sector. Where I live, in Tyrone, the engineering and manufacturing sector is massive. Are there any good news stories that you can give us?

Ms Dunlop: We are aware of good examples, particularly in that industry. The sector skills council that looks after that work is Semta. We do not have the information to hand, because it is not our area. However, we will feed further information back to you if that would be useful.

Ms S Weir: Our sector overlaps with the childcare sector, most of whose workforce are female. Take a guy who is interested in working with young people and goes to a teacher and says, "I like working with young people. What are the career opportunities?" If he hears about babies and working in nurseries, that is probably as far as he will go, which is a pity. We want a careers adviser to say, "Have you thought of youth work? Have you thought of working with older children? You can be a play worker. It is exciting, and you can have a career in it. It is not all about nurseries and babies."

That is where a sector skills council can come in, as we have direct access to careers advisers. We work closely with the Careers Service in developing the fact sheets; it funds our work on that. We could not do it without that resource and funding. We have to say that —

The Chairperson: I know that not every sector skills council has a huge presence in Northern Ireland, because we do not have every industry. However, we heard earlier about the justice one and Semta for engineering work. It would be useful for us if you, as the co-ordinating body, could give us the reality of what areas are working very well, what are the resources and what you would like to do a bit better. Please take this the right way, but I do not need the normal PR flannel that you do everything.

There is good practice in getting the factsheet out. However, I would like to know from the Department whether it is enough to just fling out a factsheet for somebody to happen to look at it. Is this the best way that we can use the information that you have? We need to work it out on that basis. It would be really useful if you could do that and come back to us, and we will work out how to incorporate it.

Does any member need to say anything else on the matter? If not, is there anything that you want to say in conclusion? Have I missed anything that we cannot pick up at a later stage?

Ms Dunlop: We want to thank you all for the opportunity to come along and raise our profile. We also want to stress how the national occupational standards may be of use in any future work because they are specific to some of this work.

The Chairperson: I do not have the Committee's agreement on this, and I will think about how to put it forward to the Committee at the next meeting. We recently had open days for the universities. People have come along shown the research that they do at the universities. There is such an amount of information. Every time that I try to curtail this conversation, I cannot because we need to do more and more. We may organise a Long Gallery event at which a series of people will deal with all these issues; members can have a look and get a bit more information. People will be able to say, "This is what we do; here is our website." I will put it to the Committee next week, but that might be —

Mr Lyttle: A sector skills council open day sounds like a good idea.

The Chairperson: It could be done for careers too. Perhaps the National Association of Head Teachers could come. We should give people —

Mr Lyttle: I agree.

The Chairperson: We can look at that as a way forward and put it as a proposal to the Committee next week. That is the way to follow it up.

This session is being reported by Hansard. I invite you to read the report and come back to us with more information. The Committee Clerk is always looking for more information. *[Laughter.]* Thank

you very much for your time and patience. We look forward to engaging with you further on the important work that you do.