Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

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Inquiry into Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland: Briefing from Mark Devenney, The Careers Man

17 April 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:
Mr Mark Devenney The Careers Man

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Mark Devenney. Thank you very much for your written submission to our inquiry. We assume that members have read it, so this really an opportunity for you to present any additional points of views and to answer questions. We usually give about 20 minutes for that. So, over to you, sir.

Mr Mark Devenney (The Careers Man): Good morning, and thank you very much for inviting me to give evidence to the inquiry. My written submission focuses primarily on the duplication and bureaucracy that I have encountered as a careers adviser with the Northern Ireland Careers Service and in my experience in schools careers education provision.

I was extremely frustrated by the demarcation lines in the delivery of services, particularly as I experienced a much more holistic approach to careers when working as a teacher in England, as a careers adviser with the University of Ulster and as a guidance counsellor in the Republic of Ireland. I am also the only private careers consultant in Northern Ireland.

In setting up my own consultancy, I have been able to provide young people with a fully integrated careers education, information, advice and guidance service. It is somewhat ironic that I named my consultancy 'The Careers Man'. That was what my colleagues and I were often called in school. Sometimes, the kids would refer to me as a "careers teacher" or "careers adviser". Mostly, however, they were pretty confused about my role, no matter how well I explained it at the outset of class talks and in individual interviews.

The Chairperson: I am sorry, Mark, but we appear to be having difficulties with the sound, so I will ask you to continue once that has been resolved.

Proceedings from 10.10 am until 10.12 am were not recorded due to technical difficulties.

The Chairperson: I apologise for that, Mark. Can you start again from scratch, please?

Mr Devenney: As I said, my submission focuses primarily on the duplication and bureaucracy that I encountered as a careers adviser with the Northern Ireland Careers Service and in my experience in schools careers education provision.

I was extremely frustrated by the demarcation lines in the delivery of service, particularly as I had experienced much more holistic approach to careers service delivery working as a teacher in England, a careers adviser in the University of Ulster and a guidance counsellor in the Republic of Ireland. I am also the only private careers consultant in Northern Ireland who is registered with the Institute of Careers Guidance.

In setting up my own consultancy, I have been able to provide young people with a more fully integrated careers education, information, advice and guidance service. It is somewhat ironic that I call my consultancy 'The Careers Man'. That name in fact came from my daughter, and her friends always refer to me as that. I was always called 'The Careers Man' regularly in school as well, and my colleagues were often also referred to in that way. Sometimes, we were referred to as the "careers teacher" or the "careers adviser", but young people in schools were mostly very confused about our role, no matter how well we explained it at the outset of class talks or individual interviews.

So, I fully understand how young people became confused. For example, pupils called into my office at the school, and, as I was the careers man, they could not understand why I could not give them information and advice about their Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) application, work experience or student finance issues. That is because those were deemed careers education issues and not career guidance issues, so there was a clear demarcation of duties.

That has led a positive that I have found in providing private practice. Another has been my work with parents. In the Careers Service, engagement with parents was very often about attending a parents' night with a notice board behind me. Very few parents ever stopped to speak to me at those events. It was mainly only those parents who came to me because their child would not choose what they wanted and who thought that somehow the careers adviser would tell them that they were right. I never did, but having discussed the options with me, many parents left with a totally different perspective.

Meetings with parents should be as important and compulsory for careers teachers and advisers as they are with teachers of other subjects. In any meetings that I have now with young people, I insist that parents are part of the process. I meet with parents, as I feel that they have a great influence on the decisions that young people make, particularly on their careers.

I am extremely heartened by the submissions of many of the stakeholders and interested parties to the inquiry, particularly that from the Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association (NICSCA) whose surveys, results and findings confirm much of my thinking about the delivery of careers education in schools. The submission by GEMS Northern Ireland was also interesting. It concerned the need for more focus on those not in education and employment or training (NEET) and for more specialist support for vulnerable groups such as those with special needs and the long-term unemployed. It is interesting that both those submissions contain evidence from people who are working at the coalface rather than from researchers, managers or policymakers. I beg you to listen to the people who carry out such careers work, not to the civil servants, the bureaucrats and the statisticians.

I am extremely passionate about careers education and guidance. I have a quotation from an earlier submission to your inquiry. It is from Dr Deirdre Hughes, who stated:

> *"teachers go into teaching because they want to teach a particular subject and have a passion about it. They do not go into teaching to become careers advisers."*

I did go into teaching to become a careers adviser, and I feel that it is as important as any other subject. I also feel that that is like saying that people do not go into teaching to become a principal or to take on other pastoral care duties in the school system. I became a teacher to go into careers advice and careers teaching.

I previously worked in adult guidance in the new deal, career guidance with Business in the Community and work placement and work experience programmes in schools. For my postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE), I studied business and education with a citizenship add-on. That was the most related subject that I could study that had elements of careers in it. I then supplemented my teaching qualification with postgraduate study in careers guidance, with a view to enhancing my prospects of getting a job in the careers field. That proved successful with the Careers Service. However, apart from a few subbing days each year, I found it virtually impossible to get a job in teaching careers. Since I returned from England in 2002, one teaching post has been advertised in Northern Ireland for someone to teach careers in its own right. A few other posts have been advertised with art, or others have been looking for experience of teaching history, geography or other subjects, with careers as an add-on. Only one post was advertised in that time for a pure careers teacher. That was for a secondary school in Larne, which gave it to a PGCE student whom they wanted to keep as a physical education (PE) teacher because the school had reached its quota in the PE department. The student had no careers experience.

As stated in the NICSCA submission, many teachers are given careers duties as an add-on to art, history or PE, but they have no interest in teaching it. I have come across that in schools. Only 32% of school teachers hold a careers qualification, and, as NICSCA states, many of those qualifications are outdated and are more than 10 years old. However, I have come across many teachers who have a passion for careers and do an excellent job in our schools. We now need to get them properly trained. Interestingly, the NICSCA survey revealed that 531 teachers carried out careers education and that 302 said that they delivered careers guidance. There were 102 careers advisers when I was in the Careers Service, and none of them was officially allowed to carry out any careers education. In fact, a warning was issued to me for doing so while I was a careers adviser. I delivered an interview skills talk that was deemed to be careers education and not careers guidance. So, you can see how young people can be confused when there is that sort of demarcation. Also interestingly, as a careers teacher, even with a careers teaching qualification and years of experience in delivering careers guidance, a teacher cannot join the Careers Service without the qualification in careers guidance (QCG).

In my submission, I highlighted many of the structural, policy and legislative barriers to providing a more effective careers education, information, advice and guidance programme in schools. I have read the Preparation for Success joint documents and submissions to the inquiry by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education (DE), which still talk the talk about co-operation, joint working and joint documents. In reality, that does not work effectively on the ground. I highlighted many instances of that in my submission. The result is increasing numbers of unemployed young people, young people dropping out of university and those who choose the wrong subjects and the wrong courses in further education (FE). They do not choose or consider employment options such as apprenticeships, training or higher education options. That highlights the need for a greater delivery of service.

Although the present structures and DEL and DE policies on careers provision have hindered the support that young people deserve, there is also a cultural problem to be overcome among professionals and parents. The pressure on young people to make decisions regarding their career is immense. In fact, the pressure is to make a decision as early as possible, and I have seen that year on year at school. It has reached the point that we are seeing it in year 8 and year 9 pupils at school. I believe that that is fundamentally flawed. I have seen teachers and careers advisers who feel that their job has not been achieved or completed if they do not get a young person to make a decision at the end of a 30-minute one-to-one interview. That is not what careers guidance is about, and it has been a relief not to have been involved in that statistical process. Instead, young people need to be empowered to take action and to be encouraged and supported through work-based learning and other experiences. Careers professionals should also examine personal issues such as peer relationships, particularly with parents, and other obstacles to career development. The ultimate goal of a careers practitioner should be to raise self-esteem and create satisfying lives. It is not just about making careers decisions. Open-mindedness should be celebrated and not discouraged.

The tests that we use to influence young people in making carers decisions should also be used to stimulate learning, not just to match them to particular careers. Benefits should be maximised from unplanned events, and lifelong learning is essential. Careers guidance should be continuous throughout the school calendar and should not just involve a one-off interview. Transitional guidance is often more important than careers guidance. I found that a lot of my interviews in school were about moving a young person on as they made their subject decisions at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. I tried to get them to keep a broad interest, rather than just concentrating on their career decision.

Training needs to be expanded to ensure that practitioners are properly supported in that extended role.

Initially, a distinction between careers education and careers guidance should disappear, and the distinction between careers counselling and personal counselling should also ultimately disappear. I would take that further step. I do not think that we are in a position to do that, but I feel that it should ultimately happen.

Some of the best careers decisions that I have seen young people make have come from broadening their experiences and not just from advice and guidance. For example, a young girl went on work experience to a solicitor's office and attended a court hearing on a planning appeal. She was so intrigued and stimulated by the hearing that she went on to do a degree in architecture and gave up any thoughts of law altogether. If she had not made the decision to go on work experience, or if the work experience had not turned out to involve a hearing on planning, she may never have become an architect. That is known as the happenstance theory, and it is espoused by a guy called John Krumboltz. It is my particular theory of guidance. I would ask you to consider how many of you made your careers decisions to do what you are doing now at the age of 14. How many of you at 14 wanted to be a politician? How many of you have a degree in politics? How many of you came here through experience and other things? That is the happenstance theory.

To summarise, I suggest that we change the structures and policy and educate parents and involve them in the guidance. We have the expertise and professionals on our doorsteps, and I sense a great willingness and desire to improve things. We can make this happen in our schools. The expertise and commitment are there, but we need proper legislation to make it happen.

The profile and importance of careers need to be enshrined in legislation so that schools and other agencies do not just pay lip service to the guidelines. The starting point should be the breaking up of the Careers Service, with careers advisers allocated to their particular specialism, whether in the schools sector, training, adult guidance or working with those with particular disabilities. They cannot be everything to all people. There is also a need to do away with the bureaucracy and management tiers and to create more careers professionals on the ground. Careers advisers also need to be utilised in schools in general and in careers resource centres in particular.

No one can teach a subject in a school without a teaching qualification in that subject, unless, perhaps, they studied it separately. So, why do we allow anyone to teach careers in education? To me, it is the most important subject on the curriculum. A joint qualification, including a teaching qualification, needs to be adopted so that careers advisers can deliver careers education and careers teachers can deliver guidance. That will create a seamless process for our young people. You could introduce a compulsory qualification for anyone who wishes to teach careers or include it in the training programmes in our teacher training colleges. That would give careers advisers the opportunity to upskill their qualifications to be able to teach, and it would give teachers the opportunity to upskill their delivery of career guidance and become careers professionals and not just history or art teachers who do a bit of careers. If you want to teach careers or deliver careers guidance in schools in the Republic of Ireland, you must have a careers qualification. Why are we not setting the same standards north of the border?

On the back of my business card I have a motto that I espouse to the kids in all my talks. It reads:

"Be what you want to be".

My daughter has abbreviated it for me into text language. So, that motto is at the cornerstone of careers guidance.

So, I ask that you please do not waste the opportunity to put in place measures that would allow us to support and guide young people to be what they want to be.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Mark. You talked a lot about demarcation in careers guidance and advice. Is that purely bureaucracy, or is it empire building?

Mr Devenney: I think that there is a bit of both. I have seen empire building where someone has come up with the idea that they will take year 10 classes and do year 10 one to ones. They then look at year 9 and year 8 classes, and the next move will be towards primary school. That creates empire

building, and the bureaucracy stems from that, because careers advisers are spending two or three hours a day doing a job that they could be doing for seven or eight hours a day.

The Chairperson: You talked about time and travel and having to go back to your base to store your units and all the rest of it. It has been pointed out that no formal qualification has been taught here for 10 years.

Mr Devenney: That has not happened in education for teachers, but there has been a formal qualification for careers guidance professionals.

The Chairperson: Right, but not for teachers.

Mr Devenney: Not for teachers.

The Chairperson: How crucial is it to get that back?

Mr Devenney: I think that it is vital. I have come across careers teachers in schools many times who were basically lumped with a careers portfolio a week before the term started at the end of August. They have had to come and ask me what they should do. It is scandalous that that is happening; it would not happen with any other subject. You would not hand an English teacher a biology portfolio and tell them to go and teach biology this year, but that is done repeatedly with careers. It is not fair on the teacher. It is deemed that, if they just go away and do a bit of research on careers, they will be able to teach it.

Mr P Ramsey: You are very passionate about your work, and you certainly have very strong opinions and views on the subject.

Mr Devenney: I certainly do.

Mr P Ramsey: I want to focus on some of the areas that the Chair spoke about. I am concerned that no standards or protocols are in place for the delivery of careers advice. I take your point that lip service is paid to it. For many of the teachers who are involved in it, I suppose that it is not their choice, and some of them do it on wing and a prayer. Is there any other area or region where certain standards or protocols are in place that mix the provision better?

Mr Devenney: Do you mean in other jurisdictions?

Mr P Ramsey: Yes, its delivery in other jurisdictions.

Mr Devenney: I studied the two jurisdictions north and south of the border. Ideally, I would love to have a system. My criticism with the system south of the border is that it encompasses careers education, careers guidance and personal counselling. That makes it a three-pronged qualification. In the short- to medium-term, it would be very difficult to introduce the counselling element. Some of the schools in the South are certainly moving away from the counselling element. However, my opinion is that, if people have issues in their personal life, that affects their career choice in their school life and their academic life. That sharing of information does not come across as well in the Northern schools, because you have a school counsellor, a school careers teacher and a careers adviser — three separate people who are reluctant to share information. In the Southern system, where I worked, you were all three.

Mr P Ramsey: I want to follow through on that, because I think that it is a reasonable argument about the personal approach. Through different presentations, we have heard about the need for individually tailored advice to individuals that is separate to a personal approach. I take it that you could have young people who are marginalised or vulnerable because they are estranged from their families.

I want to follow on from that to deal with something that I have a personal interest in. I was at an event yesterday with parents who have special needs children with learning difficulties. As those children grow older, they are four times less likely to secure employment than a normal child. However, the difficulty is that, as the parents get older, they are fearful because their child has no job

as such, and they feel that work would assist them to develop independence. You referred to special needs. Do you have any thoughts on how we can do that better?

Mr Devenney: I think that there are some great people in the Careers Service who, up until a few years ago, were very dedicated and specialised in working with children with special needs. A few years ago, the decision was taken that all careers advisers should become everything to all people. I found that some careers advisers found their niche in working with people with special needs, others with highly academic people, and others with people from working-class backgrounds who were underachieving. There was a range of specialist careers advisers, but that disappeared and careers advisers are now all things to all people, as well as trying to carry out adult guidance and work with the unemployed. That is well nigh impossible. I focus only on private practice and work within the education sector. It would be impossible to have the level of knowledge needed to help everybody.

Mr P Ramsey: That leads me to my final point, which you mentioned. The reskilling of adults has not been raised as part of our inquiry. We are basically looking at children and young people. However, it is a good point to engage with parents as well, who could be second-generation unemployed. I would be keen to know how you work that into the Careers Service, separate from any independent advice that you give.

Mr Devenney: We have a careers resource centre that is completely underutilised. However, if careers advisers were broken up and employed by different agencies, they could be back in the job centres and meeting the unemployed as they used to. The unemployed used to have access to careers advisers on the doorstep.

There are specialist careers advisers who probably have a niche. Perhaps they do not want to work with young people and would rather work with adults. People will have different attributes to be able to work with and help different people. However, they should be back in the job centres.

Mr F McCann: I gather from what you are saying, Mark, that the service is totally fragmented and has been for quite a while.

Mr Devenney: Completely fragmented.

Mr F McCann: I pick up that what you need is a team of people who specialise in special needs so that they can focus their attention entirely on how they bring people through. What amazes me about this inquiry is that quite a number of organisations say that they deliver careers advice to primary and secondary schools. However, when I asked them what they would do if they had a blank sheet, very few of them had an answer. There was quite a lot in your presentation about the direction that they should be going in.

Witnesses said during a presentation last week that there were some difficulties with boards of governors and head teachers and that good advice would not be available if they were not focused on careers. Have you had experience of that? Do you believe that the Department is totally out of touch with what is required to deliver a good careers agenda?

Mr Devenney: Yes. I think I made it clear that the Department is out of touch with that. Boards of governors in schools can have a big influence. It can be a bit of a lottery out there in the emphasis that head teachers and boards of governors put on careers and whether they feel that academic success is more important than having a more rounded individual.

Some schools do not think that employability is important. They feel that academic achievement is more important. There is also an issue in that neutrality is always thrown up as an argument with regards to careers advice and guidance being tailored to bringing kids back to do A levels, rather than looking at other options. As careers professionals, we have to rise above that so that our neutrality should not be questioned. We have to have that neutrality and guarantee in schools that we are not influenced by the ethos of the school in terms of everybody coming back to do A levels just for the sake of coming back to do A levels.

Mr Ross: We have identified that last point. The phrase that I used before is that people are being encouraged towards qualifications over careers. That was certainly my experience of careers guidance when I was at school, and being given university prospectuses, etc.

Your perspective is useful because you have been in the Department and can speak freely of your experience of it, which, perhaps, has not been what we have been able to get before. You spoke about engagement with parents. Engaging with parents, irrespective of the subject, is probably a huge challenge, and it is a challenge in other areas of education. You said that you insist that parents are present when you interview a young person to try to engage them. How else should we be looking to engage with parents at an early stage, and how do we do that through schools?

Mr Devenney: When parents are choosing a particular school and making the step to secondary or grammar, there should be an input from careers to tell them about the programme that they offer and to tell them that they focus on employability as well as academic achievement, and on making the child a more rounded individual to go out into the world of work. That is crucial. I would nearly make it compulsory for parents to be involved with the young people through the interview stage. Parents read so much in newspapers and listen to head teachers about what is right for their kids, and they get things into their heads that are not always the best for the young person. I have seen in some presentations, particularly from the further education sector, that they feel discriminated against in some ways in respect of the advice that they get about young people. That is one of the core problems that we have with parents. A young person may prefer to go into the further education sector and be more suited to a vocational route but, because they have five Cs, the parents want them to go back to school. They have the misconception that further education is full of drop-outs and is not right for their children. It is very difficult to get that message across to parents, unless you are doing it on a one-to-one basis. They hear so many other contrary stories about further education, vocational studies and apprenticeship training that they are working from a very low base.

I have had success even with 30-minute sessions with parents. I have said that this is what the young person wants, and this is what they are more suited to. I have asked whether they would prefer them to go back and do A levels for three months, and then drop out and be a year behind.

Mr Ross: It is a difficult one. Some parents do not take an interest in it all, and you may find it incredibly difficult to engage with them on anything relating to their children's schooling and everything else. I suggest that it might be difficult to engage with those parents no matter what you do, although Pat mentioned that, if you can get parents who have employment challenges themselves back into the school environment, where the main focus may be on their child, they can learn something too and can participate in learning and careers. That would be good for them as well.

Do you see that difficulty? That is one set of parents. There are other parents who will be incredibly pushy, and we have heard during our inquiry that there is a real challenge. Government generally have talked about the importance of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects, and we have to get young people to look at STEM subjects, because that is where the careers and, hopefully, the jobs are going to be in the future. Pushy parents are still in the mindset that they want their kids to be doctors and lawyers. Is there a danger that, if parents are too involved in the careers process, that pressure will be on the young person to follow the career path that their parents want them to follow, as opposed to the career that best suits them?

Mr Devenney: No; I think the opposite is the case. Parents need as much advice and guidance on their child's future as the young person. Picking up on one of your points about involving unemployed parents, some of the other submissions mentioned opening up schools to the community. I worked in a school in England that opened 365 days a year. It even opened on Christmas morning to show parents how to work their laptops and Nintendos and things like that. The gym was also open. That brought in those parents who felt excluded. At parents' night, you can predict 60% to 70% of the parents who will come along. It is the other 30% that probably need the most help who do not come along to parents' night, so it is getting them into the school ethos. Community work through the schools can certainly enhance that.

Mr Buchanan: Thank you for your presentation. It was very frank and forthright. I have to say that it is one of the best presentations that we have received because it highlights the shortcomings, the bureaucracy, the costs, and the failings in the current system, which is not delivering as it should be. From looking at this presentation, there is no doubt that the whole Careers Service needs a real root-and-branch change if we want to get something that is going to deliver effectively for our young people. I notice that one of your recommendations is to outsource careers guidance provision to private companies. To take that a little further, do you believe that that would provide value for money? Do you believe that it would be much more effective or efficient than the system we have? Do you feel that something like that would provide a much more effective delivery role for our Careers Service than we have today?

Mr Devenney: That is an option. To go down that route would be a significant and hands-up admission to the failings of our present system. The opportunity is there to get it right in the public sector, but we cannot go on in the present way. Ultimately, if the public sector cannot deliver on this — although I still believe that it can, with the right structures, culture and legislation in place — as it could not in England, the private sector could step in, as it did there.

The Chairperson: Mark, thank you very much for your presentation. As the Deputy Chair said, it was one of the most frank and thought-out presentations that we have had. The insight from inside the Department has also been helpful. Thank you very much for your time and for answering our questions.

Mr Devenney: Thanks.

The Chairperson: Does anything arise from that for members?

Mr Douglas: I have one quick question, Mark. In your recommendations, you refer to the system in the Republic of Ireland and go on to describe the various tiers and management and policy people. Will you elaborate briefly on that?

Mr Devenney: To become a guidance counsellor in the Republic of Ireland, which encompasses the whole programme of some counselling duties, careers guidance and careers teaching, you must do a specialist course. I think that there are three or four postgraduate opportunities to do that at different universities in the Republic. You cannot teach careers or deliver careers guidance or counselling without that qualification. It is not simply a matter of going to the art or history teacher: they must have that qualification. It is a legal requirement. They have looked at withdrawing the counselling element, and I know that some schools go for just guidance and teaching. That would be an initial step here. Including counselling would be my ideal scenario, but it takes a long time to build that in because you also have the issues around training people to achieve that counselling qualification.

Mr Douglas: Thanks.

The Chairperson: Thanks very much, Mark, for your time and input.