



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Apprenticeships:
Department for Employment and Learning

28 May 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

Review of Apprenticeships: Briefing by Department 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
Ms Claire Sugden

Witnesses:

Mr Jeff Ard	Department for Employment and Learning
Ms Yvonne Croskery	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Jim Russell	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: Yvonne and Jim are staying, and we are now joined by Jeff Ard, head of the review of apprenticeships. Yvonne, over to you.

Ms Yvonne Croskery (Department for Employment and Learning): Thank you. I would just like to take your views, Chair: are you happy for us to walk you through this? We have provided you with the totality of our summary of the consultation.

The Chairperson: If the last one was a run, can we sprint through this presentation?

Ms Croskery: OK. That is all right. If that is the case, we are happy for you to ask questions on the report if you like, or I can set the scene a wee bit first.

The Chairperson: Set the scene for us first.

Ms Croskery: I think that I said earlier that the review was announced in January 2013; it was actually February, so apologies. For the record, the review of youth training apprenticeships was first announced in February 2013. You know that we have had an interim report, and that is in the public domain. It was published on 13 January, and the consultation document with it. We came forward with 32 proposals under four themes. Our consultation closed on 7 April, and we were absolutely blown away. We received 71 responses, and that is significant for a public consultation. Today, we are happy to give you a very quick overview.

The components of an apprenticeship, obviously, was the first theme; increasing participation the second. We subdivided the 32 proposals under these four themes. Partnerships and the role of key players, which goes back to David's earlier point about sectoral groupings — hopefully, they will all become clear as we go through this — and ensuring quality. Without further ado, I will feed back an element very quickly. Jim will then look at increasing participation, and Jeff will cover the themes on partnership and ensuring quality.

Chair, do you want me to go through every proposal?

The Chairperson: No.

Ms Croskery: All right. To start off, I will give you some key facts. There was very broad support for a system of learning, irrespective of branding. Nearly 90% agreed that apprenticeships should be defined as a system of learning. There was very strong support for a new job in a new role. Again, there was almost 60% support for level 3. I would like to add a caveat: those who had a doubt about moving to apprenticeships at level 3 were not privy to the fact that we will be moving to a traineeship in work at level 2. That is our thoughts for youth training. That said, it was really more about the inference of how important and vital it is that school leavers have an opportunity to work. For those who had a concern, we are addressing that.

Seventy per cent are really happy with one award and one qualification, which is a significant amount. The public at large out there, or the 71 respondents, felt very strongly that there needs to be root-and-branch reform of the award and the qualification, so that people know — I made this point earlier — what it is that you are giving them, what value that has and what doors it opens. So, we had universal support for that. There was very broad support for apprenticeships at all ages as well, which I think the Committee is very focused on, as well.

Without further ado, I will pass over to Jim to discuss increasing participation.

Mr Jim Russell (Department for Employment and Learning): Proposals 14 to 23 covered increasing participation. There were ideas around having a central service to market apprenticeships; having a UCAS-style portal where people can access information about them; improving the advice and guidance available to employers and apprentices; broadening the range of professional and technical occupations into the public sector and elsewhere; and incentivising employers, particularly small employers, to take on apprenticeships.

Again, the majority of respondents were supportive of that group of proposals. Sixty eight per cent were in favour of the central service to encourage participation. There was good support for opening up apprenticeships across occupational areas, supporting a wider range of apprenticeships, encouraging better gender balance and participation, and bringing the public sector into the mix. Incentives for small employers were seen as important, particularly financial assistance to help people to create these apprenticeships.

There was good support for the UCAS-style portal in bringing apprenticeships up in terms of their parity of esteem with other types of qualifications and so forth. We think that the UCAS portal might be used to help us with some of the other youth training things that we have talked about earlier and some of the stuff that we want to do on United Youth, where you can bring it all into one place and see it all, and map your journey through it.

Some people would like more clarification around how the central service would be funded and how it would work with employers. Obviously, people want a bit more detail on some of the other proposals as well. In terms of new ideas, people were suggesting that we might want to use some of the new tablet and telephone technology with apps to help people access information and to promote and market apprenticeships to them.

Jeff will talk about partnerships now.

Mr Jeff Ard (Department for Employment and Learning): There were two recommendations or two proposals — 24 and 25 — which resulted from recognition that most successful apprenticeship systems are based around a partnership approach, particularly with key stakeholders. There was general support through the consultation for an advisory group and a range of sectoral partnerships as outlined in those proposals. Respondents saw the remit of the advisory group as informing and advising government on industry demands and on how best to improve provision. Respondents also

saw that sectoral partnerships should be designed to help government in agreeing provision and informing demand annually and should also advise on the needs and requirements of the relevant sectors.

I will now move to ensuring quality. There were quite a number of proposals for ensuring quality — proposals 26 to 32. These focused on the view that a future model should focus on quality from the perspective of three areas: the employer, the apprentice and government. As regards the level of support, the vast majority of respondents agreed with proposals that quality, achievement and progression would be indicators of a successful programme delivery.

There was very strong support — an interesting statistic of just over 80% agreed that stringent conditions should be established for continuous professional development to ensure that those delivering training remain expert in their field. They felt that particular importance should be given to the fact that the programme would continue to be monitored in meeting the specific needs of employers, and that that should remain the main focus of any programme delivery.

Ms Croskery: I will move swiftly on to the way forward. The Minister is currently considering the responses to the consultation with officials. He is very appreciative of the comments that he has received to date from the Committee, and you know we have fed them through. Today is a conversation with you, as I said. We are here to take your views and feed them back into the process. We intend to come back to you on 11 June — we are scheduled to come back — to outline where we are and what the final position is. We will go back to our expert panel throughout that time to filter out where we are with the proposals and take its views.

At the moment, the view is that the Minister intends to make a policy statement, supported by an implementation plan for the new apprenticeships model, in the Assembly in the week commencing 23 June. As I said earlier about youth training, we are going to make a high-level statement about youth training to coincide with that because the two pieces of work are inextricably linked. We want to give comfort to the public about what we are going to do with level 2 around that diagram I shared with you earlier on the traineeships and the direction of travel. We want to take everybody on the journey with us at the same time so that the gaps are covered to the best of our ability.

Thank you very much for listening.

The Chairperson: In your earlier presentation, you said that employers were knocking down your doors about apprenticeships and all the rest of it. What are they asking you? Are they looking for apprentices now? Are they looking to see whether they can have an input?

Ms Croskery: They are indicating an interest in running apprenticeship programmes, particularly at the higher levels in areas where we do not currently have apprenticeships and in some new areas. We had a really encouraging response from the public sector, looking at professional and technical areas of the public sector. Financial services come to mind, Jeff —

Mr Ard: There is PriceWaterhouseCoopers, and there is one in relation to engineering and ICT.

The Chairperson: What specifically are they asking for? Are they asking you what the programme is going to be about or what sort of incentives are going to be available?

Ms Croskery: They are supporting apprenticeships that start at higher levels, and they are indicating an interest in offering apprenticeship vacancies. That is what they are looking at, and we are trying to keep up by seeing whether we can get curriculums and partnerships. In fairness, we cannot move as fast as we want, because we must follow the public consultation process. We must engage with you and make sure that we take your views.

I am saying that the appetite is there to move very quickly in some new areas in apprenticeships and offer young people and adult apprentices new opportunities. The door has been very much pressed and is wide open, and we have been very encouraged. For example, our Minister was talking to elements of the Law Society, and we have an awful lot of interest in areas that we have not been in. We have had correspondence from the health service, which has indicated an interest, and Skills for Justice. So we are very encouraged that we are not just coming forward with a concept but that employers and the wider public have an appetite for this.

The Chairperson: You have mentioned quality a number of times. Claire's line of questioning was about the quality of placements in apprenticeships. Your answer has been checks and balances. How do you put checks and balances into an apprenticeship? What does that look like?

Ms Croskery: In fairness, I am sharing with you the vision that we have. We need to work out and bottom out the process. That is the next stage of this once we sign off on the model, and we will be looking to work with our Department's quality improvement adviser to put in place monitoring arrangements to make sure that the young person or apprentice is getting quality off-the-job training, that it is happening when it should be and that learning is progressing at the required level. Obviously, we will be using the Education and Training Inspectorate as part of that process, and we will possibly use experts. We are looking at a new model to do all of this, so we might be looking at industry and employers built into this as well to make sure that it has that independence. We will look at assessment so that we do not find at the end that they are not doing very well or that the quality was rubbish. We will have to build in, right through from the beginning of the apprenticeship, how we are going to do that and map that out.

Mr Russell: On the point about the appetite from employers for it, I think that employers are showing interest in this route because they think that they can influence that quality and get what they need, rather than waiting until people come out of university or FE and try to find a job.

The Chairperson: From those indications, I think that the Minister's model was that the bigger companies would actually take more apprentices than they needed. Are you getting an indication that that is going to happen?

Ms Croskery: There is an appetite for that, but we need to bottom out what model would work best for Northern Ireland. In fairness, at the minute, we are consulting on the 32 proposals. Some work has taken place to look at models for engaging with SMEs, including over-training, but we are not at a definitive stage, in fairness. Public consultation was live until 7 April. There is a limit to what we can do here, but there is an appetite for some over-training. We have to balance the needs of SMEs and some of their fears and perceptions that their individual needs in the supply chain may not be met. So there are big challenges on policy development, and we are far from reaching a conclusion on those aspects. Really, the devil is in the detail. How will it work? How will you support SMEs? How will your incentives work? How will you deal with the supply chain? We are looking at a range of models, and we are possibly looking at a hybrid for Northern Ireland that looks at engagement of the SMEs and at opportunities for over-training for the supply chain. There is nothing definitive yet.

Mr Douglas: Thanks for the presentation. Fra mentioned welding earlier on, and certainly welder training and the subsequent skills shortage in the STEM area is very much at a critical juncture, not only in Northern Ireland but in the rest of the United Kingdom and, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland. The British Government, through their green deal, are talking about 156,000 jobs. I am meeting the Minister next Monday to talk about coded welding. Can you assure us that welding will be an integral part of this review?

Ms Croskery: The best way that I can answer that is to take you back to the interim report, which says that apprenticeships will be in all occupations. So, most definitely. The answer is the document already.

Mr Douglas: I am happy enough with that answer.

Ms McGahan: You mentioned engagements with the Law Society and with the health service. Recently, I have been contacted by a number of young people who have graduated in the fields of speech therapy and occupational therapy. They were finding it difficult to secure employment in these areas, so I sent an email to the private offices at DEL, the Health Department and DETI to ask the Departments what they were doing to alleviate these problems. DEL came back to me and said that this matter pertains to Health. Is that standard practice? I am just taking the opportunity to maybe get clarification of that.

Ms Croskery: In fairness, Bronwyn, I do not think that I am equipped to answer your question without having seen the correspondence. Our role is not to facilitate employment in the health sector but to facilitate apprenticeships, youth training vacancies or skill solutions, if there are vacancies for employers. We do not have responsibility for vacancies in another Department. For example, speech

therapy would fall firmly into the health sector. If the question related to an apprenticeship that was funded by our Department for a speech therapist, it would be for our Department to answer.

Ms McGahan: Yes, that was what I was trying to establish; perhaps I did not word it well enough. Could you follow up on that and give us feedback? It is in the general area of skills and employment.

Ms Croskery: OK.

Mr Ard: I met Skills for Health, which contacted the Department in light of the consultation. That whetted their appetite for exploring apprenticeships in the health sector. They said that not every occupation in the sector would be suitable for an apprenticeship. One area that they focused on was that of the paramedic; they said there may be opportunities there to recruit young people at an earlier stage and treat that as some form of apprenticeship. However, that was just early thinking.

Ms Croskery: That is not quite what Bronwyn was asking. She was asking about the specific issue of speech therapy, which she wrote to the Department about, and I am not —

Ms McGahan: And occupational therapy.

Ms Croskery: Yes, occupational therapy and speech therapy. We will follow that up with the private office. For clarification, if it is to do with a vacancy for which we provide a training support or initiative, it definitely would be our responsibility to answer. However, if it is to do more generally with vacancies in particular occupational areas, it would be for the sector and the other Department to answer.

Ms McGahan: Yes, but I am interested in the point that you just made on apprenticeships. Obviously, I am just trying to be helpful to my constituents and interested in providing other potential openings for them.

Ms Croskery: Yes. At the minute, the health sector is definitely pushing against an open door, but it is for each sector and organisation to decide where they want to take apprentices. All I am saying is that we are seeing people coming to us from areas where we did not have apprenticeships before. That is encouraging and to be applauded. We are going in the right direction of travel.

Mr P Ramsey: It is certainly a very good programme with immense potential. The Committee recently visited Seagate, which has bought into the programme. The Department is working well with a number of IT companies in the north-west.

Going back to the smaller companies, where, really and truly, we need to make an impact to get apprentices in, at times they might not have even the capacity to come to meetings that the Department may hold. They do not have that resource, so how do you stimulate or encourage interest from that sector?

Ms Croskery: It is not to bat away your question, but I am giving you comfort that we are already looking at models to engage with SMEs. Our proposals are looking at incentivising SMEs to take on apprentices to reduce risk. To take your point, in the first year, for example, there is little return on an investment in taking in an apprentice. We are looking at the potential to test models to incentivise an SME to take on an apprentice at that first part of that first year.

We are also looking at the shared apprenticeship model and whether there would be benefit in SMEs grouping together. We have been looking at group training as well and at oversupply. Our thinking is embryonic at the minute. We are testing and looking at evaluations in other countries and places. That work has been going on concurrently but it really cannot kick off to any degree until we get this past the post, signed off and everybody is happy with the direction of travel.

We know statistically that the number of SMEs in Northern Ireland is in the high 80s and that the number of microbusinesses is even higher. If we do not do things to incentivise, engage and get them to participate, this will not work. You are quite right.

Mr P Ramsey: Something that came up during the debate when the Minister led on this in the Chamber was the buy-in from other Departments on apprenticeships. We have a range of departmental estates, including healthcare and education. Are any people coming forward, because they need to be sharing that responsibility?

Ms Croskery: Yes, categorically. One Department is working through the possibility of running a civil engineering apprenticeship in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture. There are talks ongoing. We have been blown away by the positivity of the responses from DFP as the central employing Department. We have been engaging with the HR directors. Our Minister has received universal support from his ministerial colleagues, to whom he had written, and they are very keen. We are looking at the professional and technical areas such as DARD, the Rivers Agency and Health, as Jeff has just mentioned. There is universal support across government for what we are trying to do here, be assured.

Mr P Ramsey: It would be good to share that information, Yvonne, at some stage, even if it is to shame some of the other Departments.

The Chairperson: Yvonne, I have one more query. You mentioned the difference between an apprentice nurse and a student nurse —

Ms Croskery: That is for the health sector to decide. I am just saying that it is not beyond the realms of possibility. The challenge is this: what occupation cannot be an apprenticeship? When you look at it, you will find that most jobs need work-based skills. This is about looking at a new model and a new way of going into your chosen occupation area from a level 3 right through to a PhD. That is the truth. In answer to your question, I see that it could happen with nursing, but that is for the employer to decide, of course, not us.

The Chairperson: Thanks, Yvonne.

Mr P Ramsey: You got off light. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: You answered most of the tough questions in the first session.