



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Briefing from the Young Farmers' Clubs
of Ulster on Issues Facing Young People
in Rural Areas**

3 March 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**Briefing from Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster on Issues Facing
Young People in Rural Areas**

3 March 2010

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr David Hilditch (Acting Chairperson)

Mr Jonathan Bell

Rev Dr Robert Coulter

Mrs Claire McGill

Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Martyn Blair) Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster

Mr Joe Hawkins)

The Acting Chairperson (Mr Hilditch):

As part of the Committee's inquiry into young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), we will now receive a briefing from the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster (YFCU) on issues that face young people in rural areas. I welcome Martyn Blair, who is chairperson of the YFCU's rural affairs committee, and Joe Hawkins, who is its chief executive officer. I thank you both for coming before the Committee this morning. The briefing will be recorded by Hansard.

As members will recall, the Committee has already identified a number of barriers to access to training and employment opportunities for young people in rural areas. The Committee will look

at those issues as part of the inquiry into young people who are NEET.

Mr Martyn Blair (Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster):

I thank the Committee for inviting us to give a presentation. The YFCU welcomes the opportunity to meet the Committee to highlight some of the issues faced by people who are not in education, employment or training. In particular, we want to illustrate how those issues can be compounded by living in a rural area, as most of our members do.

The YFCU was founded in 1929, and we are in our eightieth anniversary year. It is an open and non-political body that operates through an association of individual clubs throughout Northern Ireland. We have 60 local self-governing young farmers' clubs across Northern Ireland, throughout all six counties. At the end of August 2009, our membership, which comprises mostly 12- to 25-year-olds, stood at 2,378, with 112 associate members. We have a further membership of an estimated 3,500 young people who take part in local young farmers' clubs' activities and events.

Internally and externally, accredited courses, competitions and events are delivered under one of three main categories: agriculture, culture and the arts, and sports and social events. The association is strategically managed by a peer-elected board of directors, which is known as our executive committee.

The YFCU vision is of a robust rural community that recognises and values young people as key stakeholders. Our mission is to encourage individual development, creativity, initiative and contribution for the benefit of members, the association, industry and the community as a whole. High among the values that underpin the work of our organisation is a commitment to fostering self-reliance and individual responsibility. The development and growth of young people in our rural communities is one of the key elements in which we believe.

Mr Joe Hawkins (Young Farmers' Club of Ulster):

Some of the common characteristics, experiences and barriers that young people who are not in education, employment or training talk about apply in urban and rural settings. For example, low educational attainment, additional educational needs, behavioural issues, family circumstances and poor personal and social skills. The Committee will have heard about all of those before, so we do not want to repeat them. However, many young people face a multiplicity of experiences

and barriers, and the impact on their future life choices of that combination of factors can be great.

The increase in the number of unemployed young people appears to be as prevalent in rural settings as it is in urban settings. Again, Committee members will know the cost to the future well-being of young people who are caught in youth unemployment, and to the economy, if that unemployment extends beyond six months.

Our members have identified the additional barriers that young people in rural areas face, the primary one being access to transport. That is compounded by a number of other related issues, including the affordability of transport, reliance on family members for transport and the additional travel time that is required to get anywhere. Ultimately, those barriers are a manifestation of rural isolation. Not only does rural isolation act as a barrier to young people accessing education, training or employment, it may also diminish their ability to participate in wider educational, social, recreational or community learning opportunities and volunteering, which, in turn, can hinder further their employability.

Providing wider community volunteering and developmental opportunities is a significant feature of the work of YFCU. We have about 300 volunteers who gain practical experience and transferrable skills in communication, management, organisation and leadership, from which they can draw increased confidence. That experience is gained from the office-bearer roles that they perform in their local clubs or at a county or central level. All of that is about enhancing the employability of our membership.

Opportunities for young people in rural areas to secure employment are already limited. Over the past two years, there has been a reduction in the number of opportunities for them to secure local part-time employment. That reduction has been particularly rapid over the past couple of months. Young people have reported that they have been let go or that they have not been able to get an interview for a post for which they would have easily been qualified only a few months ago.

The low-paid nature of some of the work can sometimes mean that up to a quarter of a young person's daily part-time earnings is spent on transport costs. That might be twice as much as the costs incurred by a young person in an urban setting who works only four hours a day; it may cost

only a couple of quid to get into Belfast City centre. In addition, it might take around two hours to get to and from work because of public transport timetables. If someone has to get a lift with a family member, they may have to leave the house very early and be in work very early. Coming home, they may have to wait around the town for a bus that leaves at a particular time or wait on a parent to come back from somewhere. All of that further reduces the time that a young person has available for recreational opportunities or study.

Increased unemployment, coupled with the already-limited job opportunities for rural young people, has a negative effect on those participating in apprenticeship schemes. One of our members is currently training as an apprentice joiner, and he told us that it has been wild hard to get a placement this year. Of the 12 rural young people on his course, only four currently have placements. As the Committee heard from the previous set of witnesses, courses will continue. However, apprentices from rural areas are unable to move to the next level as they have not gained the necessary on-site experience. Therefore, the length of a course could be extended from three to five years, which increases the chances of non-completion, and, of course, there is fallout from that.

Those who work on family farms are in a seemingly fortunate position, but they face the less obvious barrier of always being at work. For some, the pressure to work on the family farm means that education often ends after initial training at the lower end of NVQ level, and they miss out on further educational, economic and other benefits that may come from undertaking a HND or degree course.

Finally, our rural affairs committee met just last night, and its members asked me to emphasise that rural childcare, broadband access and mobile phone coverage are major impediments to rural young people taking advantage of training opportunities and finding work online.

The Acting Chairperson:

Thank you for your briefing. You have highlighted some of the severe difficulties and barriers that the rural community face when trying to establish links with further education.

Young farmers' clubs are best known for their social activities and for bringing the rural community together, but perhaps the Committee did not appreciate the barriers that the rural young face until it saw it in writing. How have you found working with the further education

sector in trying to overcome some of those barriers? Has it been enthusiastic or have those encounters been difficult?

Mr Hawkins:

I have been with the YFCU for 14 months, and its 16- and 17-year-old members generally speak positively about their experience with the FE sector. However, without wishing to repeat myself, what falls in behind that is the time issue. Rural young people must get up early to get connecting buses to local towns, and a trip that may take only 20 minutes by car can take up to an hour by bus.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

I thank the witnesses for coming before the Committee today. I live in a rural area and young farmers are in constant contact with me.

You hinted that the problems faced by the rural young are often compounded by other issues and that multiple government agencies have a role to play. Do you have any examples of good practice involving the Department for Employment and Learning as a key Department, working in partnership with others to address the needs? What are the benefits of a cross-departmental approach to addressing the problems that rural young people are experiencing?

Mr Hawkins:

I do not have a specific example of the impact that the Department for Employment and Learning has made, other than its work through the FE colleges and the opportunities that they provide. However, there are benefits to a cross-departmental approach. I have already mentioned transport, which is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development (DRD), and careers guidance and educational attainment are two other areas that could be improved through the development of a cross-departmental strategy. Currently, careers guidance is offered formally in schools and FE colleges, and, therefore, requires the input of both the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning. However, the sparsity and isolation of rural communities means that there may also be some benefit in taking that guidance on the road rather than providing it in particular settings.

The Department of Education also has a role to play in educational attainment. During the previous presentation, the Committee heard that it is necessary for young people to achieve

essential skills in English, maths and science by a certain age, and the Department has a job to do in making early interventions. There are obvious benefits for the rural community in having a cross-departmental approach and strategy to address its needs.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

What is the scale of the problem in Northern Ireland compared with elsewhere?

Mr Hawkins:

I have read only some of the information that will have been presented to the Committee, and it does not appear that Northern Ireland is any worse off than anywhere else. Indeed, we may even be a little better off than England, Scotland or Wales as regards the numbers of rural young people who fall into the NEETs category. Interestingly, the word “rural” did not appear in some of the information that we read in the Committee’s papers.

Northern Ireland does not appear to be any worse off. Some of our issues may have been compounded by our recent history, by the division in the delivery of education and the question of where young people may feel safe or comfortable. In that respect, it does not matter whether it is a rural or urban setting.

Mr P Ramsey:

Martyn and Joe, you are very welcome. It is good that you are participating even though we have not yet commenced the inquiry.

I am from an urban setting, but I understand the complexity of the barriers facing a young person in a rural environment. Are there any statistics available on that? Perhaps we could look into finding some research on that. You make a good point about broadband and internet access for young people. We cannot do without it these days, particularly for learning and researching. Those are barriers that we have not looked at. Again, perhaps we could examine that as we go through the inquiry. We have already set out the inquiry’s terms of reference, but it is something that we could examine. The additional transport difficulties that are faced and the cost of those must also be barriers. You are making valid points that we will have to take on board. There has to be a cross-departmental approach to everything that we are doing here, or it will simply fail.

Mr Blair:

To give an example, I was at a rural affairs meeting last night at which the discussion on broadband access and mobile phone coverage got very heated. Such issues are never a consideration in an urban setting. One member of the club has no mobile phone coverage at all on his farm. He is a farmer, and the only way that people can get hold of him during the day is to go to his farm.

Mr P Ramsey:

Perhaps he is lucky. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Blair:

That has an effect of increasing the rural isolation felt by that person.

We work very closely with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and Greenmount College in trying to move some of our members towards education. In my area, when a young farmer is coming to the end of their schooling at around 16 years of age, there is a tendency to panic and get excited about going straight onto the farm. They think that that is it: the books are closed, they will get onto a tractor and be happy. Through our work with CAFRE, we try to encourage young people to move into some sort of further education; perhaps just a basic one-year NVQ course on a part-time basis, studying one day a week at Greenmount.

There are members of my club who, having been bothered by their parents who have tried to get them to do their GCSEs, go straight onto the farm the minute that they hit 16 years of age. However, there are 22-year-old men who now regret that. They look back on their lives and wonder, "What have I done? I am scunnered already but I am stuck in this rut; my father depends on me too much."

We are now being encouraged to access the internet to do VAT returns and online applications for different types of funding and grants. Farmers who cannot access the Internet cannot do that. That is a problem in the rural setting.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

I was involved in setting up distance learning many years ago. Would there be any benefit in the lecturers from Greenmount going out to young farmers' clubs, say, once a week and providing a

couple of hours' worth of learning in the locations where farmers live? Is there anything like that going on, or would that be of benefit? I would like to hear your views.

Mr Blair:

That would be of major benefit. We offer courses through the young farmers' club. We offer first aid courses as well as hoof-trimming courses, although those would not be for everybody. We also have our Millennium Volunteers programme and our child protection courses, which are all fully subscribed. The minute that we offer those courses, they are full. They are well attended.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter:

Are those courses offered in the clubs?

Mr Blair:

They are offered through the clubs and facilitated through our headquarters and its staff. Therefore, an initiative like that would definitely be of benefit.

Mrs McGill:

You are both welcome. Did you make a submission to the rural White Paper that is due to come out?

Mr Hawkins:

We were part of the rural stakeholder group. I played a small part towards the end of that work, on the people and places subgroups, but Martyn was heavily involved in it.

Mrs McGill:

Are you hopeful that something will come out of it?

Mr Blair:

We were part of the stakeholder group from the start and we voiced our opinion on a lot of issues, including how we could become more involved with the administration of a rural White Paper. Therefore, we are hopeful, and the rural White Paper is now being launched.

Mrs McGill:

Have you spoken to any companies about mobile phone coverage?

Mr Blair:

The coverage is not too bad in my area, but, last night, I was taken aback by how bad it was in an area just outside Cookstown. It is a matter that needs to be looked into.

Mr Hawkins:

I have not spoken to any companies, but we could become an advocate on the issue. I have attended some county meetings in Fermanagh, and one of our executive committee members said that he does not have an e-mail address because he does not have broadband access. He could get it, but it would cost over £1,000. Alternatively, he could get plug-in access, but it would cost a massive amount of money and the speed is not always as the same as you would get in the Belfast area. We have not tackled that matter as a campaign, but it could feature in our next set of work plans.

The Chairperson:

OK, gentlemen. Thank you very much for your attendance this morning. Your briefing will be very useful as we move forward with the inquiry.