



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE  
FOR EMPLOYMENT  
AND LEARNING**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Inquiry into Young People Not in  
Education, Employment or Training  
(NEET)**

30 June 2010

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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**Inquiry into Young People Not in Education, Employment or  
Training (NEET)**

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mrs Dolores Kelly (Chairperson)  
Mr Jonathan Bell (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Paul Butler  
Mr William Irwin  
Ms Anna Lo  
Mr David McClarty  
Mrs Claire McGill  
Mr Pat Ramsey  
Ms Sue Ramsey

**Witnesses:**

Ms Patricia Lewsley ) Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People  
Ms Jacqueline Melville )

**The Chairperson (Mrs D Kelly):**

On behalf of the Committee I formally welcome Patricia Lewsley, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), and Jacqueline Melville, NICCY's policy and research officer. I thank you for attending today's meeting on our inquiry into young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) and look forward to hearing what you have to say on the matter.

**Ms Patricia Lewsley (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):**

Thank you for affording me the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee. I begin by stating our support for the Committee's inquiry into young people not in education, employment or training; we welcome the attention that the Committee is giving to that issue. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about the areas that we believe are vital to safeguarding and promoting the rights and best interests of children and young people in the NEET category. Members received a written submission to the inquiry, and my presentation will simply be a summary of that.

As many of you will know, my job as commissioner is to promote and safeguard the rights and best interests of children and young people. It is also my job to monitor the extent to which government act or fail to act to protect children's and young people's rights and best interests.

When the needs of young people who are not in education, employment or training are considered, it is often 16- to 24-year-olds who are talked about. However, we want to highlight the fact that young people who are under the age of 18 should be subject to the special protections that are afforded to them as children. That should also be extended to those under 21 years of age who have either been in the care system or have a disability.

Our written submission sets out some of the obligations that are placed on the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government to uphold the rights and protections of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Government must do more to protect the rights of young people who are not in education, employment or training, some of whom are from the most vulnerable groups in our society. We welcome the issue being raised here today.

As the Committee will be aware, there are a range of challenges in identifying young people in Northern Ireland who are not in education, employment or training. It is important that accurate and detailed information about those young people is available, as that must form the basis of interventions and responses if they are to be effective. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has delayed in producing a scoping paper, but we hope that that paper will address the issue. It is important that as much data is collected as possible but also that we consider existing models of good practice and add value to those rather than duplicating or creating a whole new infrastructure.

Information from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment states that 41,000 16- to

24-year-olds were not in education, employment or training in the first quarter of 2010. Those young people, simply because they are in Northern Ireland, are the only group across the UK that does not have a dedicated government strategy in place to support them in moving into education, employment or training.

During the inquiry, the Committee heard about the consequences of not addressing the needs of those young people effectively. Youth unemployment alone is estimated to cost £250 million a year in Northern Ireland. We also want to highlight the social and emotional costs. Research has found that 16- to 25-year olds who are not in education, employment or training are more than twice as likely to feel depressed and less valued by others than their peers. At some point, an alarming 35% of those young people feel suicidal.

**Mr Bell:**

Thirty-five per cent?

**Ms Lewsley:**

Yes, 35%.

The 41,000 16- to 24-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training represent just under 20% of young people in that age group. We ask the Committee to remain mindful of those findings, namely that the situation may apply to almost one in five of our young people, in considering what actions government should take to support those young people.

Young people who are not in education, employment or training are often understood to belong to one of three groups: transitional, floating or core. Young people in the last group face multiple barriers to successful participation in education, employment or training. Across the three groups, young people's experiences are shaped by different circumstances, and they have different needs and requirements. For example, engagement in programmes such as graduate support works well for some young people. However, others, particularly those with complex needs, may need a different and more tailored approach.

Although we feel that young people across the three groups should benefit from interventions that are appropriate to their needs, our focus is on those who are most likely to be in the core group. That reflects our concern that not engaging in education, employment or training poses

the greatest risks to those young people's rights, best interests and well-being. We are also of the view that they are the least likely to benefit from increasing opportunities when economic growth is secured.

Research finds that young people who have low levels of, or no, qualifications, and those who experience family disadvantage and poverty, are at greater risk of not being in education, employment or training over a prolonged period of time. Studies also show that particular groups of young people, including those with disabilities or illness, those who are care experienced and those who are in contact with the Youth Justice system are among the most likely to be in that group of young people.

It is important that action to support young people who are not currently in education, employment or training and to prevent those who are at greater risk of disengaging in the future considers and addresses those factors. That leaves government with the challenge of not only considering reforms in education, employment and training but of addressing the inequalities and needs of vulnerable groups of children and young people, such as those with disabilities or those in care.

Commentators point to actions such as reducing the financial costs of education for young people and families and ensuring that they can access good alternative education and vocational training as being strategies to maintain the participation of young people. It is interesting to note that the Welsh Government's strategy for young people who are not in the NEETs category dedicates resources to supporting 11- to 14-year-olds at risk of not continuing in full-time education. For particular groups of young people who are more at risk of being in the NEETs category, the association between poverty and poor educational outcomes has been well established. In turn, research commissioned by my office noted that 16- and 17-year-olds not in education, training or employment were at particularly high risk of poverty, especially if they were in supported accommodation or independent living.

I want to tell the Committee about some of the people whom I met over the past few months. I met two young boys in the Flax Foyer, one of whom showed me two A4 sheets of paper that listed all the training courses that he had been on over the past two years. He had also been to numerous interviews, but he still could not find employment. I asked him why he thought that was and what was the biggest barrier that he faced, and he said that it was because he did not

have GCSEs in English or maths. He felt that he would have to rectify that situation. The last course that he had been on was a forklift truck driving course. He said that loads of young people were doing that course but that you will not see any jobs for forklift truck drivers in the newspaper on a Friday night. Therefore, the needs of a young person must be matched to the employment that is available.

The second young boy had done a catering course and decided that he liked catering. He was told that, if he did a course with a well-known chef in Northern Ireland, there was the possibility of an interview and a job. He got neither. He then decided that, because his interest was in catering, he would go on and do the next level of the course. However, if he went back to college to study for the next level, he would lose his housing benefit, so he thought, what is the point?

I also want to tell the Committee about a young girl of 17 years of age who was living independently in a two-bedroom house on £40 a week. She was doing a hairdressing course. When the bad weather came, she went to her social worker and asked where she could get extra money for heating. She received a £20 food voucher and another £20 for heating and electricity and to top up her phone, which was her only way of communicating with her social worker. The social worker told her to go to her local social security office for help. When she did that, she was told to come back when she was aged 18 or was pregnant. Those are the types of issues that young people face, never mind the issue of not being in education, employment or training.

Such concerns lead us all to make a specific call to the Government to ask them to tackle those particular disadvantages. We highlighted child poverty as part of our Make It Right campaign, which was launched earlier this year. November 2009 was the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and, this year, NICCY has embarked on a Make It Right campaign, in which we pick a different topic each month. In January, we selected child poverty, and, as part of that, we made three calls to government. The third call was about tackling the particular disadvantages experienced by 16- and 17-year-olds who are living independently and/or who are not in education, employment or training. That gave young people the opportunity to campaign on the issues and to make government aware of what it is like to be in their situation.

Earlier this year, NICCY held a poverty workshop on the needs of 16- and 17-year-olds. Participants from the voluntary and public sector agencies heard presentations from the Anti-

Poverty Network and the Prince's Trust, which highlighted the fact that, to achieve lasting change for those young people and for future generations, government responses must be holistic. The workshop discussed the importance of areas such as multidisciplinary family and early years support and of ensuring that the education curriculum is relevant to most young people. That approach will involve a fully interdepartmental response, which, over time, will draw on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Justice as well as the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning.

The Committee's inquiry provides an important opportunity for members to inform the work of the Northern Ireland Executive in that area and ensure that they are responding adequately to the needs of young people who are not in education, employment or training.

We are concerned that not enough action is being taken to safeguard the rights and best interests of those young people today and in the coming years, and we recommend the following action. An interdepartmental strategy must be developed to respond to the needs of those who are not in education, employment or training and seek to prevent those most at risk from becoming disengaged from education, employment and training. The strategy should be based on robust data that identifies those who are at greater risk of falling into the NEETS category. It should build on the identification of current provision and practice and be accompanied by a monitoring and evaluation framework. The strategy must be responsive to the often complex needs of the most vulnerable young people who are not in education, employment or training.

We are aware that the Committee is conducting its inquiry at a time when there is great concern about the implementation of budgetary cuts, and NICCY's view is that prioritising resources to support those young people will enable them to participate positively in families, communities and, ultimately, to help to grow the economy. That investment is essential to support Northern Ireland as it moves into economic growth and stability. Our young people watch television and read stories in the media, and, very often, they feel a sense of hopelessness. I hope that the inquiry will move forward and give some of those young people the hope that they are looking for.

We appreciate the fact that we have had an opportunity to present these issues to the Committee, and we are happy to respond by answering members' questions. I want to introduce

Jacqueline Melville. She is one of my head researchers and has worked on the subject, so she may intervene as well.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much. You painted a startling picture and portrayed what life is like. Unfortunately, there is not much in the current economic recession to shed much light on the darkness. Nonetheless, you have thrown out a challenge to the Committee, and it is up for the challenge. Let us see what we can deliver and encourage Departments to deliver.

**Mr Bell:**

I join the Chairperson in thanking the Children's Commissioner. It shows the value of the office. We did not want to hear what you had to say, but we needed to hear it, and I appreciate it.

For young people leaving care — the looked-after sector — are the statistics even harsher than the one in five young people who are not in education?

**Ms Lewsley:**

That area needs to be examined. We work with the Voice of Young People Care (VOYPIC), which is the lead organisation working with children in care. The young person on £40 a week to whom I referred earlier came through the care system. She could not understand why she was left to fend for herself once she was over 16 years of age. She was grappling to get help from wherever she could find it. We need to support those young people. Our research shows that 16- and 17-year-olds are invisible. When 16-year-olds leave school and do not go into training or employment, they receive no benefits, and their parents lose benefits such as child benefit and income support. Those young people end up living at home for nothing, which puts a huge strain on families, particularly single parents. Sometimes, the situation ends in an altercation, and those young people find themselves on the streets.

There is an issue around 16- and 17-year-olds. I sat on the child poverty subgroup, which is part of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) cross-sectoral advisory forum on the economic downturn. I raised the issue of 16- and 17-year-olds being on the lowest benefit and the minimum wage, yet they still have to pay the same as everyone else. Even though that young person was 17 years of age, she still had to pay the same amount for electricity and heating as someone who worked full-time or was on a higher benefit.



**Mr Bell:**

You flagged up Ursula Kilkelly's work on the financial burdens on young people. The Committee will have to consider that issue seriously. I welcome the fact that you included that research in your written submission.

**Mr P Ramsey:**

Patricia, you are very welcome. The Committee is very concerned about some of the points that you raise. The Prince's Trust made a good presentation on mental health issues, which included suicide statistics for young people. It would appear that there are better practice models in other places, particularly in Wales and Scotland. Do you know of any other good practice models? One can imagine how low attainment, low morale and poor motivation would lead to serious mental health conditions, so it is not a matter for DEL alone. A more integrated, cross-departmental approach to earlier intervention is required.

**Ms Lewsley:**

A number of good models in Northern Ireland already deal with some of the most marginalised young people, and we must tap into that work. As I said, the scoping exercise must pick up on those good models and determine how we can add value to them. Is it the case that, to get an add-on, an organisation receiving a certain sum of money for one project has to fight for funding from elsewhere?

I take the point about costs and the current budget, but it is not always about extra money; it is about spending money in a better way. Often, a programme is allowed to run for three or four years before its funding is cut. If something is not working, perhaps earlier intervention is required to allow the money to be put into something that does work. We need added value and joined-up government. To meet those children's individual needs and to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, a joined-up departmental strategy is required, and we need to ensure that the Department for Employment and Learning engages with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The worst thing that we could do would be to raise children's expectations by offering them training with the possibility of employment at the end of it when that possibility does not exist. Furthermore, are we matching training needs with the employment market?

**Ms S Ramsey:**

Thank you for your presentation and the written submission. Patricia, as you said, the position of Children's Commissioner was set up to promote the rights and best interests of children and young people. The Committee's inquiry has identified fundamental problems in several Departments. In addition, in the past number of years, there has not been a joined-up approach by government agencies. When you spoke about that young lad not having English or maths qualifications, it struck me again that the Department of Education needs to play a part. I am not saying that all children in the NEET category do not have essential or basic skills, but I am interested in knowing whether the Committee for Education will focus on the subject. We need a joined-up approach among Committees. Indeed, I am shocked that the Committee for Education is not focusing on this subject.

I was around when the campaign for the establishment of a Children's Commissioner started, and people were delighted when it was agreed to, because they thought that, for the first time, children's interests would be at the heart of government. I do not know whether it is true, but I heard that the scoping exercise may happen soon. It will give us a basis on which to start. I note the points that you made in your submission. Have you had any discussions with the Executive or individual Ministers on those points? You have as much influence on the Executive as any commissioner, so I am interested in their reaction to the strategy and the interdepartmental mapping exercise on funding. I agree that it is not about taking money away; it is about spending it properly.

**Ms Lewsley:**

I have not raised the strategy issue with anybody yet, but I raised many of those issues when I was before the ministerial subcommittee. As I said, I sat on the cross-sectoral advisory forum on the economic downturn, which OFMDFM set up, and I welcomed the opportunity to have a voice for young people at the table, because they are often forgotten about. I sat on the poverty subgroup and the employment and learning subgroup and fed many of the issues that I raised today into them. I would like to have seen that reflected in some decisions that were made. However, as has been said, 18 months down the line, there has been lots of talking but not much action.

**The Chairperson:**

That is an unsatisfactory response from people who have the authority to do something to

improve a situation.

**Ms Lewsley:**

On the education issue, all the research tells us that the earlier the intervention with children and young people, the better the long-term outcome. The strategy must focus on the long-term impact because change will not happen overnight. However, if we can start at the beginning and invest in a new generation, in 10 or 15 years' time, we may see some of those problems eradicated and costs saved. As we know, investing £2,000 to £4,000 in a child at the age of four or five saves the criminal justice system £750,000 by the time that child is 12 or 13 years of age.

**The Chairperson:**

It has increasingly — perhaps always — been the Committee's view that prevention is much better than cure.

**Ms Lo:**

I very much agree, and research shows that children at risk of becoming NEET can be identified as young as five or six years of age.

Thank you, Patricia, for your very good written submission. It calls for the promotion of a multi-departmental strategy. The Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and, perhaps, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment come to mind immediately. What other Departments should be involved? You are aware of the good work that is done by the voluntary sector, but there is also much fragmentation and duplication in small projects that, although good, have little long-term impact. What is your view?

**Ms Lewsley:**

First, all Departments have a responsibility, including the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), which scrutinises departmental budget submissions. If we are to make a real dent, DFP must ask Departments how much of their budget goes towards supporting the type of young people whom we are talking about. The Department for Regional Development could be involved, because transport is a problem for many such young people, who, as I said, may be on minimum wage and benefits but must still pay £1.50 for a bus journey. That is a huge issue, particularly for 16- and 17-year-olds, as is the cost of using their local facilities to help with

mental health and other challenges. Therefore, all Departments should consider, and then improve, what they do to help young people.

The Department for Social Development could consider the voluntary and community sector, in which short-term funding is the big issue. An excellent project may be only up and running when it loses funding because of a sudden budget cut elsewhere. There is no follow-through for that, so funding is a big issue for that sector. I am sure that the voluntary and community sector would agree that it is too big and needs to be rationalised. The question is: how will that be done? How do we ensure that much-needed services do not fall off the end?

For whatever reason, we know that the voluntary and community sector has filled in the gap when the statutory sector has decided not to provide a service, which is why the voluntary and community sector emerged. In that sector, we see the best models of good practice in how to engage and work with young people across the board. We must consider how to add value, merge or do whatever else that we want with such services so that they work in partnership with one another and share a common pot of money rather than compete for it, which means some organisations lose out. There needs to be an opportunity for them to come together to utilise that money better.

**Ms Lo:**

Absolutely. We need to work in partnership with the voluntary sector because, for years, it has worked with young people on a financial shoestring and in short-term projects.

**Mr Irwin:**

Thank you for that detailed and interesting presentation. All members of the Committee are concerned that so many young people are not in education, employment or training. However, I was surprised to note that, in 2008, there were 45,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who were not in education, employment or training, but, more recently, even in the current economic climate, that figure is now 41,000, which is 4,000 fewer young people. Is there any particular reason for that?

**Ms Jacqueline Melville (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):**

It is important to recognise the fact that the statistics and figures will fluctuate year to year and

quarterly within each year. Those latest figures are for the first quarter of 2010. NICCY wants to emphasise that, although the statistics and figures for children and young people may go up and down, a significant number of children and young people were outside education, employment and training before the current recession. Therefore, we are deeply concerned that the core group of young people with very complex needs and challenging and difficult circumstances may remain outside education, employment and training when the economic situation starts to improve.

**Mrs McGill:**

I was glad to hear you talk about transport and travel, which I did not see mentioned in your written submission. I welcome your comments on that. We raised that topic previously, which is a particular issue for young people in rural areas, where £1.50 would not get anyone to any place of education. How do we deal with that? We see the same thing over and over again, and those barriers need to be removed. We have said that to the Department, and we have asked for the problem to be addressed. You spoke about listening to the voices of young people. Last week, the Committee travelled to the Enniskillen campus of the South West College. We met a number of young people and listened to what they and their tutors had to say. If those young people did not have that financial burden, attendance for all courses would be much higher. You are right about the travel and transport issues. However, I repeat that, in rural areas, those difficulties are particularly exaggerated. Could the Department for Regional Development help with that issue?

**Ms Lewsley:**

It is important that this inquiry goes across all Departments, including the Department of Finance and Personnel, and that all Departments have an input into the strategy, because they have a responsibility. I hope that the scoping exercise will include the strong voice of young people who will raise many of those issues. However, it depends on how strong that voice is and how much it is listened to.

Access to transport, the availability of transport and the cost of transport are real issues, particularly for rural children. Many can access transport in the morning. However, if their courses finish late or are in the evening, they have no way to get back home because the buses stop running at 8.00pm. All that needs to be taken into consideration, particularly for young people in rural areas. However, as I outlined, it is also an issue for young people living in urban areas.

**The Chairperson:**

The written submission states that there are models of good practice in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries. Have you researched any of the models that could be adapted for the North?

**Ms Lewsley:**

No, we have not.

**Ms Melville:**

I do not think that that information is in our submission.

**The Chairperson:**

I am sorry. However, Sweden and other countries do not have many young people not in education, employment and training, so they must be doing something to avoid that. I simply wondered what models of good practice and strategies they employ. If there is research or if you have any thoughts on that issue, you could submit them at a later stage. The Committee is keen to hear about models of good practice.

**Ms Lewsley:**

Yes; we could do that. I am part of a European network of ombudsmen and commissioners, and I could easily have a conversation with my counterparts in those countries and ask them for information.

**The Chairperson:**

The Committee hopes to publish its report in October or November, so it would be useful to have that information before then.

**Ms Lewsley:**

I will organise that over the next couple of weeks.

**Ms Melville:**

The statistics for young people who are not in education, employment or training demonstrate that the figures are higher in the UK and Ireland than in other EU countries.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you both very much indeed. That was a useful session.