



Northern Ireland
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Committee for Employment and Learning

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Careers Services in Northern Ireland, Great
Britain and the Republic of Ireland:
Research Briefing

20 June 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Pat Ramsey (Acting Chairperson)

Mr Jim Allister

Mr Sammy Douglas

Mr Chris Lyttle

Mr Fra McCann

Mr Basil McCrea

Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Eóin Murphy

Research and Information Service

The Acting Chairperson: You are very welcome, Eóin. Proceed with your paper, please.

Mr Eóin Murphy (Research and Information Service): It is quite a big paper, so I am going to try to cover it as quickly as I can, and, of course, if there are any questions, I will answer them. The briefing provides a brief discussion of the careers services in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. I will discuss each one briefly, as there is a lot to cover. Again, if the Committee has any questions, I will be happy to answer them.

Careers services in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland are undergoing a period of change, with new strategies and approaches launched in each country seeking to reform and increase the effectiveness of the careers services. The motivations behind those changes are manifold. However, there is a need to use resources more efficiently, which is the clear reason why dedicated websites are becoming a significant part of the tools used by career services. All the careers services also agree on the use of labour market information (LMI), with up-to-date and accurate LMI playing an important role, with the careers services acting as a crossover point between an individual's aspirations and businesses' needs. The modernisation of careers services highlights the increasing value being placed on the services, with researchers finding that an effective careers service can have a significant impact on future employability and the subsequent economic well-being of individuals, businesses and nations. The focus of the careers services discussed in the paper is very much around reforms. However, all of those are at an early stage and, although positive steps have been taken, it remains to be seen whether they will be a success.

The Careers Service in Northern Ireland provides an all-age advice and guidance service. It is divided into two branches: careers policy and strategy, which focuses on the development of policy; and Careers Service operations, which delivers the service directly. The Northern Ireland Careers Service

employs 171 people, 114 of whom act as careers advisers. Therefore, the majority of resources are focused on delivery. Young people are usually introduced to the Careers Service in school from the age of 4 and up, with careers education mainly delivered by the schools. However, the Careers Service will provide additional support in schools, especially in post-primary schools. The Careers Service has partnership agreements with 99% of post-primary schools in Northern Ireland to help to deliver the services there.

The Careers Service offers a number of services outside of this to all clients, including labour market information, support on decision-making, job matching and career guidance interviews. In 2009, a new strategy was developed that provided for the future development of the Careers Service here. It was developed jointly by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education, and it highlighted the challenges facing Northern Ireland's labour market over the coming decades. The strategy has five key themes and 18 actions. It focuses on improving, amongst other areas, career education, access to information and quality of careers advice. It should be noted, however, that the strategy states:

"The provision of careers education, information, advice and guidance services for young people and adults is not as good as it could be. The approach ... has been inconsistent; careers information and facilities are variable; and there have been inconsistencies in the qualifications, training and competence of staff".

To meet these challenges, the strategy sets out an implementation plan, which is included in the paper. The vast majority of the actions have been completed, but some are still in progress and some will always be in progress because they are around professional development. That is around ensuring that careers advisers are always able to deliver the best services.

In a presentation to this Committee in November 2011, the Careers Service identified some areas of further work, including around careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) and improving linkages with the employment service. A large number of changes have been to the Careers Service in Northern Ireland in recent years, and, although there are still areas that are undergoing changes to improve service delivery, the system is largely effective, providing an all-age service with a number of access points for clients. The all-age service has been highlighted in different reports, including through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which has said that you need an all-age service so that the service is available almost from cradle to grave. The service is there for the very young to the very old.

As with Northern Ireland, each region of Great Britain delivers its own careers service and has recently undergone change programmes. In England, the adult careers service is called Next Step and focuses on encouraging people to make appropriate career decisions and on making skill development the norm. This is available to everyone who is age 19 and over, although, if you are 18 and on a Jobcentre Plus programme, you will be able to access it a bit earlier. It offers a number of similar services to the Careers Service here, including labour market information, and operates a dedicated website. The website, however, acts as a first contact site and provides a number of initial services such as skills assessments, course finders and labour market information. If clients want further support, they can arrange to meet a careers adviser, thereby targeting their resources and making best use of what they have.

As with Northern Ireland, Next Step is being redeveloped under the New Challenges, New Chances strategy, which was launched in December 2011. The revised strategy is intended to create a national careers service that will build on the work of Next Step and have a presence in a wide range of organisations, including further education (FE) colleges, community centres and shops. It will very much be based around and throughout, so it will be easier to access. This will provide information, advice and guidance on careers and include an online service and a network of organisations providing face-to-face careers guidance. As the strategy has been launched only recently, it is not possible to state how effective it has been in improving careers guidance provision in England.

Scotland has also published a CIAG strategy, and all the UK regional services have recently launched new strategies to redevelop their services. The main rationale behind the Scottish service is to modernise the way that careers services are delivered, with a focus on raising people's aspirations and improving their life chances. To do this, the strategy identified a number of key actions. These include improving data sharing, developing joint online solutions and streamlining employer access to skills advice and support. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) is one of the main delivery agents of this strategy. Initially created in 2008, SDS provides many of the services that are provided by Next Step and the NI Careers Service, although it does so with a focus on making career-management

skills a core part of the development of Scotland's workforce. SDS delivers a large number of services through the My World of Work website, which provides interactive ways for people to access careers information. Of the careers websites in the UK regions, it is probably one of the best in that it is very comprehensive and quite easy to use. It has a wide range of information and covers different age groups from schoolchildren up, so it is available for everybody to access.

Scotland only recently introduced that new strategy, and it is expected that its development and implementation will proceed rapidly in order to access the benefit of the investment in the system. Basically, the Scottish Government want to see a return on the money they have put in to redevelop the system and benefit the economy quite quickly.

Careers Wales is the main body that provides careers education in Wales. It is an amalgamation of six regional companies, and has been operating under a single name for the past 10 years. Those companies work in partnership with a wide range of other organisations at local and national level. It targets all groups in society, including young people, adults and employers, and provides a variety of services such as guidance interviews and CV preparation — the standard services that are provided by a careers service.

Services are available in schools from year 9, with services provided through a dedicated website as well as careers advisers working directly with the schools and colleges, as is done in Northern Ireland. However, as with other UK regions, Wales has undertaken a review of its career guidance and has instituted a large-scale change for the system. The review found that the service was in need of improvement; had a lack of leadership; had a fragmentation of services; had inconsistent links between Career Wales and the higher education careers services; and needed to improve training for careers advisers. Those and other reforms of the system have been instituted. The six regional companies having been pulled into one organisation is similar to what Northern Ireland has, which is one body responsible for careers guidance. The changes to the system have only recently been introduced and their full implications are not yet known.

The Republic of Ireland uses a very different system to that used in the UK. It is much more fragmented, and it has been criticised by the OECD. So, it is also undergoing reform. Guidance is delivered in post-primary schools, third-level institutions and as adult guidance by different organisations. In post-primary schools, it is carried out by schools with guidance counsellors funded by the Department of Education and Skills. Previously and in the past few years, guidance in post-primary schools was provided by careers guidance counsellors who had a dual role. They would provide counselling and careers guidance to pupils, and in some cases, they were also teachers, so they were potentially doing three different roles. Their funding was based on the number of pupils within the school. That has recently changed so that it is now based purely on the teaching grant that the school gets. They have to pay for that service from their own budget, so that could potentially have implications on what services are available for young people. As budgets are tight in the Republic, it will probably impact there.

Third-level institutions, such as higher education institutions and institutes of technology, provide their own services, which is similar to what is done here in Northern Ireland and throughout the UK. They have their own services and the provisions are largely concentrated on final year students and recent graduates. Guidance includes information on educational and employment opportunities available to students and graduates. For adults, guidance is provided through organisations such as FÁS. It is provided on two tiers, with the Local Employment Service focused on areas experiencing persistent unemployment, and it is thereby tailored to meet the needs of individual clients. The mainstream employment service staff are more generally involved in short-term jobs information and advice, so they would offer immediate guidance such as on CV preparation and that kind of thing.

A website called Careers Directions has been launched, and it provides up-to-date labour market information, opportunities to develop action plans and links to job opportunities. However, it should be noted that, prior to the institution of these changes, a review of careers guidance in the Republic of Ireland was carried out by the OECD in 2010. It found that careers guidance services were fragmented and weakly underpinned by information on labour market opportunities. It also found that awareness and use of labour market information is insufficient, and the sources of online careers information are fragmented and difficult to use. They are starting to build better website systems, but that is still in progress. This has all been taken into consideration in 'Pathways to Work', which outlines a strategy that has been designed to get employment back up and running in the Republic. However, consultations regarding career guidance are still ongoing, although the final structure has yet to be finalised. It is still very much in development.

If you have any questions, I will be happy to answer them.

The Acting Chairperson: Well done, Eóin. Given the comprehensive report you prepared for us, you did well to deliver it in the time frame.

Mr F McCann: As the Chair said, it is a very good and very extensive report, and it lays out well what happens in different regions across these islands. I noticed that a lot of the work has been fragmented in different organisations, although I picked up that the Scottish model seems to have got its act together. Its online provision, My World of Work, seems to offer a better opportunity for people to tap directly into.

Mr E Murphy: It is a very good and comprehensive website.

Mr F McCann: We deal with the question of NEETs here on a regular basis, and some schools may not have the opportunities and kids there may be bypassed by and large at certain levels of education. Is there anything in there that zeroes in on young people in schools that do not have high educational attainment to allow them to tap into careers? We dealt with it here a number of weeks ago, when one company said that people were going into third-level education.

The Acting Chairperson: It is a very relevant point because the NEETs strategy is to ensure that all people, particularly pre-NEETs and those at secondary schools for example, are prepared for the workforce or further education. The question might be more appropriate for our next briefing session and we might get more detail on that.

Mr F McCann: Was there anything in the research that allowed you to zero in or focus on it? Are reviews built in to all this? Six companies are operating different parts of a strategy, and it seems that it would be better if careers was under the one roof. If you have six competing companies, it might not have the desired effect.

Mr E Murphy: The situation with the six companies in Wales highlighted the issue of fragmentation of the system and the need to bring it all together under one roof. That is in an OECD report from 2004, and all the UK strategy redevelopment has come from that report, which benchmarked a number of best practice provisions across the world and said that, "These are the best ways to deliver this". Part of it was that a single body should deliver careers guidance.

In Northern Ireland, we have always had one system in place through the Careers Service, but the Preparing for Success strategy is much more about the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning working together to deliver careers guidance. In schools here, you have provision from the age of four, and the idea is that it starts off at a very basic level along the lines of, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and that, when you finish school, jobs are out there for you to access. Over time, it is gradually built up.

That is integrated here in the lessons, and post-primary schools have a system whereby you do careers guidance as a class and also, in your maths lesson, the real-world application is explained. So, instead of wondering why you are being taught algebra and having no idea, part of the lesson will explain how it will be used and what it is used for, and it gives an idea of what you do with it when you are done. It is not taught in pure academic isolation, such as learn a topic, do your exams and then worry about it. It is all part of one continuing all-age service. The changes were only recently implemented, in 2009, and there is continuous assessment every couple of years. The most recent report was published, I think, in 2009. I am not too sure, but I can check for you.

Mr Lyttle: In what country is that happening?

Mr E Murphy: Here.

The Acting Chairperson: Fra, it is a relevant point. In trying to prevent NEETs, we need to know what efforts are being made to ensure that there is no tsunami coming down the line. We have over 40,000, and Cathy and Fiona, in the next session, may be in a much stronger position to add some weight to that from the perspective of the schools.

Mr F McCann: You are right. My point is that the system in some regions seems to have shone and seems to be better than that in others. The paper referred to the Scottish system. If we were to

develop something like that, do we look at the other regions and pick out the best of them? There are schools that this may bypass where people just leave school.

The Acting Chairperson: That is a fair point. Where are examples of the best models out there that are delivering? However, we will leave that, Fra, until the next group.

Mr Lyttle: Is anything in Northern Ireland comparable with My World of Work? Given the centrality of careers advice, if dissolution was not looming for the Committee, careers guidance would be a justifiable topic for a Committee inquiry, but obviously we do not have the flexibility to proceed with something like that at this stage.

Mr E Murphy: NI Direct's career service website is specifically designed to provide information. I would not say that it is as comprehensive as My World of Work, but it seems to be designed more for just initial access, so it will give advice on CVs and general advice that can be given through online services. It also provides labour market information, which has been identified as a central component.

The idea behind accurate and effective labour market information is that you know that, if you are going to do a degree, what jobs will be available at the end of it in three, four or five years' time. So, you are making accurate and effective decisions about your learning. It is about creating a career path for yourself and knowing where the important points are, what jobs will be there at the end of it and where you can go further with it. It is not done in isolation where you are just saying, "I have an interest in doing engineering", but you come out and there are no jobs after three or four years. It is so that, if you go into a certain area within engineering, you know that posts are available at the end of it, so you will be coming out with the skills needed and will meet business needs. There has always been that criticism of a disconnect between business and education, so it is kind of melding them. The Careers Service is very much intended to act as that body that melds the two so that effective decisions are made on all sides.

Mr Lyttle: That sounds encouraging. My understanding is that DEL has a reasonable package of careers guidance tools available to it through the Careers Service. For me, the gap seems to be in joining the Department of Education and schools with that service at times. Are there greater compulsory requirements on schools in any of the other jurisdictions to deliver careers guidance in certain ways or is it similar to here where it seems to be optional but delivered, of course, within that optionality?

Mr E Murphy: Here, as I said, there are agreements between 99% of secondary schools and the Careers Service so that the Careers Service goes in and helps to deliver additional support. Schools have their own careers guidance teachers, and it would be partly up to them to deliver it with regard to what is in the curriculum. However, the Careers Service provides additional support. As far as I am aware, from speaking to the Careers Service, that 1% is two schools, and both decided not to take part because they felt it was not appropriate for their schools. One was a school that had young people with special needs. However, both do work with the Careers Service in other areas, so although they do not have the agreements in place, they have additional services and support and they know that the support is available when needed.

Scotland has a similar arrangement in place with agreements. As far as I know, in England, it is up to the schools themselves to source careers guidance. I am not definite about that, but I can certainly get the information for you. I think that Wales has something similar with agreements in place with its careers service, but I will get that confirmed.

Mr F McCann: If schools have a budget, do they have to pay for the Careers Service to come in?

Mr E Murphy: Here, not as far as I know. It is a service agreement. As far as I know, it is within the curriculum, but, again, I will get that confirmed.

The Acting Chairperson: OK, Eóin, well done. A very good paper and presentation. You were flowing there in your responses. You did your homework, so thanks very much.