



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

European Social Fund:
Training for Women Network

13 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
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen

Witnesses:

Ms Alison Blayney	Training for Women Network
Ms Danielle Downey	Training for Women Network
Ms Mary Hogg	Training for Women Network
Ms Helena Jeffers	Training for Women Network

The Acting Chairperson: I welcome Alison Blayney, the vice-chair of the Training for Women Network (TWN), Danielle Downey, from the Kilcooley Women's Education and Development Group, and Mary Hogg and Helena Jeffers from the Cookstown and District Women's Group. You are all very welcome. I note that you were not here for the full engagement with the Department. It was quite difficult and we tried to get across your opinions. I do not normally try to stifle debate, but there is a lot of pressure on a number of Committee members to move on to other business, and I have to leave at 12 noon myself, so perhaps you will try to do your best.

Ms Mary Hogg (Training for Women Network): Thank you. I am chairperson of the Training for Women Network. I suppose I am wearing a double hat today — I am also the development manager of the Cookstown and District Women's Group's Positive Steps community centre. I have brought one of our participants with me today, and she is going to lead off on how the past European social fund (ESF) has helped her. I have also distributed our organisational outputs. Those dealing with 2010-11 show how, when we did not receive ESF money, that impacted the centre and caused a reduction in numbers because we did not have the money to pay tutors and we were not able to deliver extra classes.

The Acting Chairperson: You are very welcome, Helena.

Ms Helena Jeffers (Training for Women Network): Thank you. I am so happy and nervous to have the opportunity to share how Positive Steps community centre has changed my life. When I first attended the centre, I was an emotional wreck and was suffering from severe postnatal depression.

Taking the first steps through the door of the centre were the most fearful, yet positive, steps of my life.

Three years ago, I began a personal development class, which dramatically raised my confidence and self-esteem. After a lot of tears and a second personal development class, I was well enough to stop taking my medication. I have also completed my Essential Skills maths and English and now have the confidence to pursue my career ambitions. I am in the final year of a health and social care degree with the Open University, and that is a stepping stone to a career as a social worker. Without the help from the Positive Steps community centre and the Training for Women Network, which secured European funding for the class I attended, I can safely say that I would never have had the confidence to pursue that ambition.

The environment in the centre is so warm and welcoming, and it is a little home away from home for me and for the friends I have made along the way. My little boy has made a lot of friends too and loves attending the on-site crèche. I would not have been able to attend the centre if it was not for that great crèche facility.

I am delighted to be a member of the board of directors of Cookstown and District Women's Group and to see other young women avail themselves of the opportunities that I have had and to see many more lives transformed just like mine has been.

The Acting Chairperson: Thank you very much, Helena. It is a good testament to your work, Mary and that of your colleagues, when you can have a young woman come in here articulating in a good way about moving on from a very difficult period to a period in which she is very close to getting a degree. Well done, on all our behalf. It is great to hear the testimony. It is a pity that the Department is not here to listen to it as well.

Ms Jeffers: There are lots of people out there.

Ms Alison Blayney (Training for Women Network): During our previous presentation to the Committee, we gave the financial details and did the number crunching. We wanted to put a more human element to it. That is what the Committee requested. Having listened to the previous briefing, I think I might organise a course on currency fluctuation. *[Laughter.]* We could all enrol in that one.

I have brought with me Danielle Downey, who, like Helena, has benefited greatly from the project. She is very nervous as well, but she wants to present to the Committee.

The Acting Chairperson: Danielle, you are very welcome. Just be relaxed.

Ms Danielle Downey (Training for Women Network): I thank the Committee for inviting me and for giving me the opportunity to tell you how community education has enabled me to turn my life around and helped me plan a brighter future for myself and my daughter.

I did not have a very happy experience at school. I was bullied, and, when my family moved, I was not accepted in my new school. As a result, I did not complete my formal education and left at the age of 15, with no qualifications. At 19, I had my daughter, Caitlyn. We were made homeless, and my relationship with Caitlyn's father broke down. I was in temporary hostel accommodation and living on income support. A friend told me about opportunities in Kilcooley Women's Centre, where I could get myself not only some qualifications in the hope that I could find a job and build a home for my daughter, but get support on a lot of other issues and, importantly, meet other young mothers in the same situation as myself.

I would not have had the confidence to walk into the local college and, in any event, it did not have childcare provision. My friend told me that the Kilcooley Women's Centre had a crèche, where Caitlyn could be looked after when I was studying in my classes. I started off with some computer qualifications: RSA word processing and typing qualifications, which I would need if I wanted to work in an office; and an IT user qualification (ITQ), which covered spreadsheets, using Microsoft Word, and computerised presentations. I also took part in cross-community programmes and completed level 2 and level 3 in peace and reconciliation studies.

I took part in other programmes, such as a health programme which helped me to plan healthy and affordable meals for me and my daughter. I met new friends and found support from the other women on the course. This, in itself, helped my confidence and made me feel that I was not on my own and

that I could see a brighter future for myself. I now know that the programme that I was on, which turned my life around, was funded via the European social fund.

Caitlyn also benefited greatly from socialising with other children in the crèche. Her confidence and development were improved through her routine in the centre. I also fully prepared her for nursery school and P1, which she will start in September.

Whilst attending the centre, I saw an advert for a six-month Step Ahead administration job through the Department for Employment and Learning. I wanted to apply for this, as it was not only a job placement for support for six months, but it paid a proper wage and I was not just on a bonus on top of my benefits. I applied through the job centre, and I was thrilled when I got the interview. I was very nervous before the interview, but I was so determined to get the job that I had to overcome my nerves. I wanted all my studying to pay off.

I got a phone call on the afternoon of the interview to tell me that I had got the job. It was for 30 hours a week, Monday to Friday. Whilst I was on the Step Ahead programme, I was encouraged to continue studying. Work called it CPD — continuous personal development. I just know that I am continuing to make myself really employable through training. I added to my qualifications by progressing my word processing to level 2 and had completed Essential Skills English, as I want to achieve my GCSEs next year. This gave me the skills and opportunities that I missed out on in school, because it prepared me for GCSE level.

When Step Ahead finished in December 2011, I was really disappointed. The centre assisted me in my job search, and I did not want to go back onto benefits because I had broken that circle. A position was advertised in the centre for a project administrator for its peace project. I felt that the skills that I had gained on the Step Ahead programme meant that I met the criteria to apply for the post. I was successful, and I am now in a funded position for two years, working across the whole of County Down. I passed my driving test, and bought myself a wee car.

Through my job, I help organise cross-community projects and work with other women's groups across Northern Ireland. I hope that, in my new role, I can help women who are in the same position as I was several years ago, and that, with personal determination and projects like the Kilcooley community education programme, which was funded by ESF, they can make a real difference.

The Acting Chairperson: OK, Danielle. Good for you; that is all that we can say. It is nice for members to get the testimony of people who were very low and were marginalised and, I suppose, demotivated, for a period. It is obvious that your confidence and competence levels are rising, and we wish you both well for the future. I am sure that there is a career path for you and we wish you well. In many ways, the testimonies epitomise what the training programmes are all about, in that they motivate and increase participation, particularly in training and then in further education, which means a lot. It is a passport for so many people into work as well.

We have another 10 minutes if you want to carry on and explain the participation rates to us.

Ms Blayney: Upwards of 9,000 places have been lost through this project not being successful. It is really disappointing to know that the funding is there, and that the reason why it was not progressed, or still cannot be progressed, is probably only a technicality.

Mr Jack referred to NEETS. There are two former NEETS sitting at the end of this table who would not have walked through the door of the college and who possibly would not be at the level to benefit from an apprenticeship programme.

The Acting Chairperson: That is a good point.

Ms Blayney: It looks like it will be internal easement that benefits from the currency fluctuation. It is disappointing.

Mr F McCann: I have been raising this issue since I joined the Committee. You can put a NEETS strategy down on paper, but it bypasses quite a lot of people. It is mostly people in very socially deprived areas who fall through the cracks.

The testimonies that we just heard cannot be put in a hard pack or on an application form. In many ways, that is one of your difficulties. If we can do anything to change that, maybe it should be that the

people assessing those applications should go to Cookstown or Kilcooley and look at the faces behind the applications and the success rate. I am on committees of quite a number of groups like that in Kilcooley, and I understand their difficulties. Maybe we could look at that. Obviously, we will ask the Department to go away and look at a number of things but I am sure that, if the whole assessment process involved going out into the areas and there was an allocation of points for effectiveness and the impact it has had on people and communities, we would be sitting here with a different answer.

The Acting Chairperson: That is reasonable. In reply to questions from Michelle, there was a concession from Colin that maybe next time round they will review the process and look at the outputs. They may not accept that there is imbalance and unfairness but they will accept that maybe they could have done it a wee bit better.

Ms Gildernew: I commend all of you for coming here today. I am sorry, Helena, that I missed your presentation. I was out talking to Colin to organise for him to come to my constituency and have meetings to ensure that groups know how to go about applying for the funding. It is one thing to have a go at them in here but we have to be proactive, too. That is why I was not here.

I have been to the First Steps Women's Centre and met a number of the women. I have been in and out of the place for years but I met women who participated in training and know what a huge step it is to say, "I want to do something else and I recognise that my skills are not what they need to be for the labour market. Where can I go to get help to do that?"

That is especially difficult given the difficulties around rural childcare. That is why I was so touched by the Training for Women Network and the work that is done in looking after children on site. You cannot overemphasise how important it is to know that your children are being cared for within reach of you so that, if there is a problem or anything happens, your child is there on the premises and you can go and sort them out, especially if you are breastfeeding and you need to be close by.

The lack of available affordable childcare in rural areas is an issue that I have been highlighting for years. However, organisations such as this are doing what they are doing and ensuring that women get the skills that they need but are also building their confidence. That is why I am so sickened that the difficulties that you faced are still there. We did not get a clear message today that they would be looking at your application again. We need to keep the pressure on to ensure that there is more recognition. Fra's point was very well made. A panel of consultants, the people who are judging these applications, need to see for themselves the difference that the money makes to groups and individuals like yourselves.

The Acting Chairperson: I suppose if the Chair was here and we were in the normal environment with this Committee, he may have suggested possible study visits to some of the groups but, as you know, we are entering into an exit strategy through which, possibly by the latter part of September, we may not be even here as a Committee, so that is not possible. Mary, are there any comments you want to make to finish?

Ms Hogg: It was lifelong learning for each participant, but the care within the community is really the most effective, as Helena shared, and she has probably not shared all her story. I do the personal development training, so I am not there just managing the centre. I am also listening to these women at the grass roots and I am very much hands-on. Helena, you probably cried through eight of the first 10 classes. That is the level of the participant who is coming in with such low self-esteem and lack of confidence.

Even when they miss a week, someone is there ringing up to see whether everything is OK. Even yesterday, we got a phone call from a young woman who had recently been raped. She was ringing yesterday to say that the offenders had been found and to see whether there was someone she could talk to immediately. Our service is available, but it is the other services that go alongside that are the ones that are not seen.

We work with young female offenders, too. We had 27 young offenders, and 20 of them went into employment. Two of them lost their lives, but the success rate, as the Probation Board for Northern Ireland will tell you, is down to the caring aspect of the service that we provide.

So, it is very much a home from home; it does not have the college environment. When further education (FE) became business, it was very sad to see that all of that was forgotten. For us, the ESF

contribution was £20,000 a year. The impact of that and the difference that it made to the people was huge.

Mr F McCann: The official who puts the stroke through £20,000 has no understanding of the impact that will have. To assess the value of your groups, has the Department ever gone out, sat with you and looked at the thing, or has anybody from the ESF gone out and said, "We want to see how effective you have been with the spend"?

Ms Blaney: When we have tried to engage with the Department, it has referred everything through to the local FE colleges. It does not have, outside the ESF, any community strand to work at a community level. It does have its learner access and engagement programme, and the jury is out on how successful that has been.

I thank the Committee for the scrutiny it has applied. We may not change what has gone on, but we can prevent the same mistake happening again.

The Acting Chairperson: Taking Fra's point, maybe we could send a note to the Department, encouraging it to have a conversation with groups like yours, which are making a meaningful difference in the communities. We should do that.

Ms Blaney: Ironically, before I left this morning, I got a phone call in Kilcooley from someone from the local FE college asking for our timetable for next year so that they could refer people from some of their programmes to us to train them.

Mr Douglas: Thank you for the presentation. Helena and Danielle are excellent role models. My fear, and Alison said this the last time she was here, is that some of the centres could close down. When I look through the list of the projects that have been funded, I see that there are not any from the Bangor/Kilcooley or Cookstown areas. That is a huge gap.

His party colleague, Chris, is here, but is there some way that we can make a direct appeal to the Minister? He is from the Bangor region. Not that he is going to intervene, but there seems to be an injustice here. Jim Allister did an excellent job of forensically testing, to put it mildly, the officials. They got a good going over. Is there any way we can appeal to the Minister?

The Acting Chairperson: The Department has conceded that there is surplus money there. If members agree, can we write to the Minister, given that a number of groups have reviewed or appealed the process for applying for funding, asking him to further look at the applications from those groups to see if it is possible to reallocate some of the surplus money to them? We are not talking about huge amounts of money. For example, Mary was talking the £20,000, but I am not sure what the cumulative funding total for the other groups is. If there is consensus, we should do that.

Ms Gildernew: Can we also say that, given that TWN is providing services across the Six Counties, the Committee recognises the disparity and that that is a group that we would like to see funded?

Mr Allister: The Minister gave a statement this week on the roll-out of the new NEETs programme. Looking to the future in regard to delivery, is there some interconnection that the Department should be thinking about?

The Acting Chairperson: Yes, a synchronisation of the work. We will include that in the letter.

Thank you very much. Honestly, we appreciate and acknowledge the contribution that you are making. Thank you again for coming along.

Ms Hogg: Thank you very much for taking time to listen. We appreciate it very much.

The Acting Chairperson: OK, all the best.