



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Hard to Reach Learners

8 February 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen

Witnesses:

Mr Christopher Andrews	Department for Employment and Learning
Ms Yvonne Croskery	Department for Employment and Learning
Dr Mary McIvor	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: Yvonne and Christopher are going to talk to us about hard to reach learners. I got the presentation reprinted for members because I could not read the earlier one. You may find it of interest. Fra, it is on the point that you were making in the previous session about engagement and work going back in. We have had representation, Mary, about the learner access and engagement (LAE) pilot — the £0.5 million that was detailed in the previous paper. Different people said that that was not drawn down. Some people said that it was, some people said that it was too bureaucratic, other colleges said that they did it but in a different way. We have this inflexibility where we cannot reach the really hard to reach people because we are too constrained. We need to bring the mountain to Mohammed, if that does not in any way upset anybody. I probably have.

Dr Mary McIvor (Department for Employment and Learning): I will skip though the first slide because —

The Chairperson: That is exactly what I wanted you to say.

Dr McIvor: I knew that was what you were asking. I just want to set the context. The main presentation will be about the learner access and engagement pilot. However, we need to tell you that there are other things happening in the community as well regarding further education (FE). I will give a little bit of background and then move on to learner access and engagement pilot. We will then have the conclusion and take any questions.

First of all, I will look at the overall numbers as regards FE engagement with adult learners. In the academic year 2010-11, there were 109,650 adults aged 19-plus enrolled in colleges. If we then look

at what we were talking about in the previous presentation, which is those specifically funded by the FE recurrent budget, you will see that there were 56,718.

The Chairperson: We are on slide 3.

Dr McIvor: The title of slide 3 is "FE Engagement with Adult Learners". We are looking at the overall numbers. The most relevant statistic to the topic today, which is reaching the hard to reach learners, is the table that looks at the percentage of adult enrolments from the most deprived wards. The most deprived wards are defined by the statisticians, and they are consistent across all Departments. FE has done extremely well in delivering to that cohort of people, and we have moved from 22% of our budget being allocated to adults coming from the most deprived areas to 24% in 2010-11. In the three years up to 2010-11, £32.5 million has gone into the most deprived areas as defined by the statisticians. You might want to ask a question or two about that later.

Slide 4 looks at adult enrolments in FE ranked by super output areas, which is how the statisticians have labelled it. However, that is really the most deprived areas. Without going into the detail of the table, because I know that you want me to move on, we see that, on the left-hand side of the table, the most deprived take more budget than any of the other groups in Northern Ireland. The share of the budget is sitting at just under 25% for adults in those areas that are defined as deprived.

I will move on to the next table, which looks at the cost of FE funded enrolments. Again, nearly one quarter of funding for accredited recurrent grant enrolments has been allocated to those engaged from the most deprived areas in the past three years. So what we are saying is that FE has improved the relevance and amount of teaching and learning going on in those areas, to the extent that 24% of the budget is now allocated there.

One aim behind setting up the FE colleges as regional colleges was to make sure that, wherever you are in Northern Ireland, you are within reach of a college or college outreach centre. Adult education remains a significant focus for colleges. There are 600 FE sector community outreach centres. All the colleges have a number of those. Those provide outreach from the colleges, where lecturers from the FE colleges will go to deliver training and adult education along with, or as specified by, community groups in those areas.

I will move on to the learner access and engagement pilot, which is a particular programme —

The Chairperson: Just before you get into that, although I accept that the statistical analysis you presented shows an increasing trend of resources towards those from the most deprived wards, that still does not indicate the proportion of people from the most deprived wards that you are getting to. In other words, I understand that the resources are moving in that direction, but how effective is your engagement, particularly with the most hard to reach people?

Ms Yvonne Croskery (Department for Employment and Learning): We will be moving on to that as we start to talk to you about learner access.

The Chairperson: OK. I just wanted to say, Yvonne, that is the question.

Ms Croskery: I hope that we will address that as we move forward.

Dr McIvor: We will move on to that now. Let me introduce Yvonne Croskery, who is in charge of FE policy and strategy, and Christopher, who has been looking after the evaluation of the learner access and engagement pilot. We have a lot of very rich detail for you today.

Ms Croskery: Taking your point, Chairman, we in the Department were very concerned about the hardest to reach people and getting them into education again, particularly second-chance adult learners. We developed the pilot programme, about which the Committee will know a little, having been briefed by FITNI. The programme was developed to encourage the hardest to reach adults back into the world of learning. It was primarily aimed at focusing on formal collaboration between colleges and non-statutory bodies. That includes voluntary and community bodies, and private for profit training organisations. It was developed to give employability skills to unemployed adults, particularly those

who hold no qualification. The pilot tested that concept, and a number of different approaches were built into it. The pilot was informed by the labour force survey 2010, which indicated that one in five people in Northern Ireland have no qualifications. That is 235,000 people. Now, we need to bear in mind that some of those 235,000 people are in work. Just because they have no qualifications, that does not mean that they are not working. There are also people in there who are not technically hard to reach and who may be from more affluent areas of Northern Ireland. The pilot programme was developed to test collaborative partnerships between the two sectors that would complement each other, play to their strengths and use the strengths of the community organisations that are working, day and daily, with the hard to reach, yet the teaching would stay in the FE colleges where we have professional, highly qualified teachers who are rigorously inspected through the Education and Training Inspectorate. It is very important that we continue to give those people the highest quality of learning experience. Already, some of them have had very bad experiences through the schools.

The learning support offered by the third-party provider is signposting the learner into an employment-related programme. The pilot focused on two areas: essential skills or what we deemed an accredited employment programme that would help that person to get a job. These were people with no GCSEs. Anybody who held a GCSE was not eligible for the programme. The reason we did that was that, once you let people with GCSEs in, suddenly the third-party finds that it is easier to get somebody with four or five GCSEs. We wanted to get to the very root cause and the hardest to reach.

The programme provided pre-entry guidance and advice on progression routes. Those are the things that the hard to reach learner needs if, for example, they are a single parent or somebody with caring responsibilities. It provided support and assistance to keep people on that course of study, and personal support and encouragement to say that they are doing the right thing and that this is the right way to go.

Each college was given the autonomy to run the tender process. Some colleges had to terminate contractual arrangements with third parties. That was because they were not able to engage hard to reach learners. It was a partnership based on outputs as well. It was not about both sides having a relationship other than to deliver. We were about getting the hard to reach in.

The tender specification was developed by the college based on local needs because it knew where the hard to reach learners lived and what types of courses were on offer. A number of contracts were re-awarded. I will give you few examples: the Workers' Educational Association; smaller groups like Greater Shantallow; the collaborative Upper Springfield Development Trust, which included a number of partners; the financial audit and support team (FAST); FITNI, members of which you have met already; and the Training for Women Network.

The Department's involvement in the pilot has involved the budget, the monitoring and the evaluation of its effectiveness and the guidelines. The partnership is between the two key parties — the statutory organisation, which is the sector that delivers the actual provision, and the third party. The actual teaching and learning continue to be paid through the block mainstream grant, which my colleague Andy talked about earlier. That is the funded learning unit (FLU) that he talked about. There was a separate earmarked fund for the third parties to give additional support to the hard to reach learners.

Each college determined the terms and conditions for the appointment, and each college was responsible for the selection. There were competitive tendering arrangements that went through the European Journal, and there were successful tenders. All matters relating to the delivery and administration were between the two parties, as is the case with any contract. However, at a strategic level, we had the responsibility for the budget.

I know that the Committee has been very exercised over the £3 million. I want to put on record that we made up to £3 million available for the pilot project. It was a demand-led pilot, and we could only pay money out based on the number of hard to reach learners who met the criteria, that is, people who did not have a GCSE. On that basis, we did not use the £3 million. However, that did not mean that it was lost. It was utilised through the normal mainstream block grant. We could have given the third-party providers more money had they been able to get to more hard to reach learners.

The Chairperson: What did we pay out of the £3 million?

Ms Croskery: The pilot is still running; it ends on 31 March. We have paid in the region of £1.9 million to date for the learner access. That excludes the provision, because it is paid for out of the normal block grant. The third parties have drawn down £1.9 million. A small percentage comes out of that for a management fee, but it is minimal.

To date, the pilot has engaged 6,670 learners. On reflection, perhaps our expectations were too high. There are 235,000 people in Northern Ireland who do not have a GCSE. They are not all hard to reach, and some were already involved in adult education, which Mary talked about earlier. Eighty-four per cent of the learners, who, our statisticians tell us, are the people from the highest quintile — the most deprived areas — completed their course. That was an excellent result, and 52% of them got a qualification, which was a first for them. Eighty-five per cent of them never had a qualification before, so it really was significant.

Fifteen per cent of those who enrolled were disabled. In the mainstream college courses for adult learners, that is around 12%. So the pilot is reaching out to people whom we did not get in before. Forty-six per cent of the learners come from the most deprived wards, and we stated that in earlier slides. To date, the results have been very impressive. This has been the most successful pilot programme that the Department has had for engaging the hard to reach learners.

The Committee will be interested in the enrolment age for adults: 53% of the enrolments were those aged 46 and over, which is a super result. Those are the people who never, ever volunteer to go into FE. Only 12% were 24 and under; those aged between 25 and 31 made up 10%; those aged between 32 and 38 made up 12%; those aged between 39 and 45 made up 13%, and, as I said, those aged 46 and over made up 53%. That absolutely blew us away.

I will move on to another slide, and Mary had a similar one. It is just to compare apples with apples. You can see from the pilot that we were reaching 45% of the most deprived areas through the learner access and engagement pilot. Normal adult education in FE is in and around 22%, just to go back to Mary's earlier slide.

The Chairperson: Just explain to me, 45% of what?

Ms Croskery: Of that most deprived area — that quintile of Northern Ireland that is ranked 1 to 178. Those are the people deemed to be the hardest to reach in —

The Chairperson: Yes. I know what a quartile is.

Ms Croskery: — in super output areas.

The Chairperson: So you are getting 45% of people in those areas?

Ms Croskery: We are getting 46%, and as Mary said earlier, it is in and around 22% in mainstream adult education.

Mr Allister: Sorry, is that what you mean? Do you not mean that, of those who come into the programme, 46% are coming from that quartile; rather than that 46% of those areas are in the programme?

Ms Croskery: Sorry, I beg your pardon. Yes, that is what I am saying.

The Chairperson: We are not trying to be difficult, but that is the issue. We understand that the programme is targeted at the most hard to reach people. However, if they were not getting double that, there would be something badly wrong. The question is: are you getting enough of them?

Ms Croskery: It is a pilot. I think that we have more work to do. We have been pleased by the results, but we cannot become complacent either. There is certainly more that can be done.

The Chairperson: I have a problem in that, when I talk to someone like you who is as enthusiastic as you are, which I applaud and support, there is a concern raised by other people that we are really not getting it. We keep talking about the people who are disengaged from our society and how we need to find a way of getting to them. Anyway, we have got the clarity about what you mean, but we will deal with it in a moment.

Ms Croskery: I will move on to the next slide. Of the percentage of funding allocated to learner access enrolment, 48% went to the most deprived areas. Again, that doubled the mainstream figure that Mary mentioned earlier, which was 23%. In the past three years, £700,000 of mainstream funding, that is the FLU money, was drawn down by learner access and engagement learners from the most deprived areas

I have a few quotes from people who participated, which I will tell you about. People said that they felt that the class size made them feel comfortable, that they had a sense of belonging, and that they were happy with the course in that it opened doors and was a great help. Some non-statutory organisations that participated in the pilot scheme expressed the view, through the evaluation, that:

"Access to local intelligence at a neighbourhood level proves most productive".

I do not need to tell the Committee that the third sector really has its strength there. They also said that the programme enabled them to deliver to local communities to meet local community needs. We did not just take forward this pilot in isolation. We decided that we would carry out a longitudinal evaluation to coincide, because there is no point in looking at something and looking backwards, so PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), through competitive tender, was awarded a contract to carry out a longitudinal evaluation of the impact of this pilot programme and its successes, with a view to informing us how we should go forward. Obviously, we will want to take the view to stakeholders as part of that —

The Chairperson: When will that report?

Ms Croskery: It was due at the end of January, and we anticipate that it will be in the next couple of weeks. We are hopeful that we will have it in our possession. We have published all the interim reports on the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) website to date, and I am hopeful that we sent copies of some of the reports to the Committee. If we have not, they should be on their way.

The Chairperson: We will check.

Ms Croskery: We will make sure that they are.

I will pass over to my colleague Christopher to talk to you a wee bit about the PwC evaluation, because he has been leading on that. He will tell you where we are at the minute and what our direction of travel is.

Mr Christopher Andrews (Department for Employment and Learning): As Yvonne said, PwC has produced a number of reports: an interim evaluation report and a number of progress reports. It has found to date, for example, that participants are being offered an additional layer of support that would not otherwise have been available in FE. As touched on before, participants over the age of —

The Chairperson: Is this in a paper? Where are you on this?

Ms Croskery: It is slide 14.

Mr Andrews: It is the slide entitled "Learner Access and Engagement: Evaluation findings". I will recap. PricewaterhouseCoopers has found that participants are being offered an additional layer of support that would not have been otherwise available in FE. As touched on earlier, participants over the age of 46 and the long-term unemployed may not have enrolled on FE courses in the absence of the programme. Value has been placed on soft outcomes — learners on learner access have noted things like improved confidence and self-esteem, positive attitudes, increasing knowledge and improved self-worth.

There has been a high level of satisfaction with the courses delivered under learner access. Some 93% of learners surveyed by PwC indicated that they were satisfied with their course. In the learner survey conducted by PwC, learners indicated that the most important thing for them was to achieve a formal qualification.

PwC found that, to date, in the operation of the pilot, grass roots organisations with local knowledge of the needs of certain sets of learners have had more success in targeting and mentoring those who are the hardest to reach. Most colleges and third parties also agree that the pilot has successfully raised the profile of the college and has enabled learners who would not otherwise have been reached. In particular, the PwC survey results found that just under two thirds of participants would not have engaged in any other form of learning had it not been for the LAE intervention.

Another positive outcome has been that new and effective partnerships have been created between third parties where none had previously existed. Existing partnerships between colleges and third parties have been strengthened. PwC has acknowledged that the pilot is at its most successful when there is a clear communication between the colleges and the third parties and a desire to embrace a full partnership approach.

The Chairperson: I tell you what, Christopher, it is all a bit bland, is it not? We will get to see the report when it comes out and get to look at the numbers. Everyone is saying that the pilot is great. Let me let Fra in to ask you a few questions.

Mr F McCann: I have to reiterate my point. I live in one of the most deprived areas in the North. I am involved in community groups that provide various forms of training and education for the most deprived wards in Belfast. The picture that you paint is not the one that I see. *[Interruption.]*

Let me finish, please. I started speaking —

Mr Lyttle: In fairness, you did not really let Mr Andrews finish, Chairperson.

The Chairperson: Hold on a tick. Excuse me.

Mr F McCann: I was asked to come in.

The Chairperson: He was.

Mr Lyttle: It was not a criticism of you, Fra. It was a criticism of the Chairperson.

The Chairperson: I do not think that that is strictly necessary, given that we have been here from the start. I asked Fra to come in because he has been indicating to me. Before you arrived in the meeting, we were dealing with this bit. Fra had raised matters that were specifically to do with this issue, and I wanted to hear what he had to say.

Mr Lyttle: I am happy to respond civilly, if you want me to, Chairperson.

The Chairperson: I do not, actually. I want Fra to come in.

Mr F McCann: I reiterate that, in the meetings that I have had with the local communities that I represent, I have been told that they have found the Department totally inflexible in dealing with a lot of stuff. Some of the training and education schemes provided by community groups deal with exactly the kind of people that you are talking about — people who would not go into FE colleges or normal education.

Many people who are looking for passes or chits to get into the construction or security industries are those who have come out of employment and found it difficult to get back in again. They were informed that, because that training could be provided in FE colleges, or possibly provided, the funding was being withdrawn. I went to a meeting with representatives of DEL and DSD, and I found the DEL representatives to be totally inflexible in their approach. All those people are eager to get back into

work. They wanted to be retrained to allow them to tap into another avenue of work, but, because of that inflexibility, they were told that, because the training could possibly be provided in an FE college, the funding was being withdrawn.

Ms Croskery: We are here today to talk about further education that is funded through the block grant. There are a number of other programmes for which the Department goes out to tender, such as Training for Success, but we exclusively fund only the statutory FE sector. The pilot sits in that context. Your point is very well made; there are a number of other avenues through which the Department delivers education and training for those who are hard to reach. However, we are here to talk about further education. We have a raft of other programmes —

Mr F McCann: We spoke about training being provided by FE colleges and provision in local communities. I am talking about provision in my local community that DEL —

The Chairperson: It is OK to take the point, Yvonne. It is in the mix, and we are a wee bit unsure about what is what sometimes. Believe me, Fra is not the first person to bring up that particular issue. Perhaps we should address the issues that he has raised.

Ms Croskery: From an FE perspective, the view is that, where programmes are funded through the block grant, they should be flexible enough to meet the needs of the local community. On a personal level, I would be very disappointed to hear that they are not doing that. As my colleague Andy said earlier, the funding is provided to deliver a range of training and employment programmes to help people to get back into work. The view is that, where FE is funded, it would be the first port of call. I am happy to take back some feedback from you on that particular issue, which is separate from this.

The Chairperson: Surely.

Mr Lyttle: I have had concerns conveyed to me about the programme, but I have also heard quite a few positive comments, similar to those made in the presentation, about the success of the programme in connecting hard to reach adult learners with FE. I am passionate about adult learning, so I welcome some of the positive findings from the project.

Some of the key concerns around the flexibility issues, which Fra raised, are about third sector groups being able to enrol eight people in classes instead of 12 people and the colleges allegedly being inflexible about the classes not being filled with the total number of people required. Things like that are obviously concerns. There is a need for flexibility. Hopefully, the PwC review has brought that out. I am interested to hear what sort of improvements are already coming through and what you think you can do to make the programme more effective.

Given that the pilot runs out in March, what sort of timescale are you talking about for the reintroduction of the programme in a more mainstream manner? In what way is the programme being used to link with other pathways of learning, for example, the local employment intermediary service (LEMIS)?

Ms Croskery: I will take the first question, which was on inflexibility. We are very aware of some of the issues raised by the third parties in the evaluation. In fairness, we need to make sure that the Committee is apprised of those reports. It is certainly not a perfect pilot. There are weaknesses. As we move forward, we as a Department will have to address, through our policy development, ways in which we can deal with issues like class size and colleges not being flexible enough. Certainly, that message has been abundantly clear.

Your next question was on the time frame for moving forward. I will answer some of that, if I may, and then pass over to Christopher, who can talk about the links and pathways. The pilot will end on 31 March, with the evaluation and final report from PwC being in the Department's receipt in and around this week or next week. Thereafter, we will have a series of consultations with key stakeholders, which will obviously be the parties that have been involved in the exercise, to take their views as well as the views expressed in the report's findings. We are looking at a time frame — subject, without prejudice, to the evaluation not coming forward with anything of such concern that it would not be suitable for the mainstream — of coming forward with proposals in and around September, when the academic year

2012-13 commences. So there will be a short gap. That short gap is necessary to allow us to have a look at our policy and make further reconfigurations to address the issues that the third parties and some of the colleges have raised. For example, we have been looking at focusing only on those who have no GCSEs. With a mainstream programme — taking up the Chair's point — we have to consider that some hard to reach people might be excluded from the pilot because they have a GCSE from 20 years ago in, for example, RE. There are lots of things that we will need to do. Obviously, we will be going forward with policy development. We need to talk to the stakeholders, and we need stakeholder engagement and feedback. We need to look at the evaluation report itself, and we need to take the views of participants.

The Chairperson: What you should take on board, Yvonne, is that members around the table are in the communities. They have people making representations to them and saying that this is not working or asking why they cannot do such and such. A valid amount of feedback comes back to the Committee. You need to be able to address those issues, because we face them day and daily. We will be interested to see the report when it comes back. It is about more, if you will forgive me, than everybody saying that they thought that it was better. The question is whether, in a longitudinal study, you are really getting to the people that you want to get to.

Ms Croskey: We believe that we are.

The Chairperson: I am quite sure that you do, but we need to ask the question, "Are you?" I am sure that Mr Allister will have points to make on that, because he is up next. I may be pre-empting him, but it seems strange that we have a budget of £3 million but can spend only £1.9 million of it. Surely there must have been some evaluation of how we deal with that. You do not have the letter in front of you, but we have a letter from the chairman of the Employment Services Board for West Belfast and Greater Shankill, who tells us that, despite doing great things, the Department will not even fund it £80,000 per annum. In an area such as the Shankill and west Belfast, I would have thought that we would try to find and support almost anything that would be effective on the ground. If £1 million has gone missing, why are we not able to address those issues? That may be unfair on you, because I know that you have not necessarily seen this information pack, but maybe you could think about that. I will bring Jim in, and I will come back to the issue of how we deal with specific matters. I just want to give you a heads-up on that. Is that all right, Jim?

Mr Allister: I thought —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Chris, I thought that you had finished.

Mr Lyttle: The second part of my question was for Christopher. What are the key findings of the PwC review at this stage? What has not gone well or what can be continued? The Chair referred to the underspend.

Mr Andrews: One thing that has been touched on is communication around what a college and third party can do and having a meeting of minds and getting everybody in tune. Some third parties have not been in tune with what the colleges expected, and vice versa. That has been a learning process. In the very early days, there would have been a mismatch. For example, some people thought that they would be able to have a class of four people. Unfortunately, on the grounds of cost, colleges could not deal with that. However, as we have worked through the programme, a lot of those issues have been smoothed out. Many maintain that there is a lot of work to do in areas such as communication.

There are concerns around administration processes and bureaucracy. We have had a three-year longitudinal survey, during which time many learners have been surveyed and a lot of information has been gathered. A lot of third parties have had to supply a lot of data to the college and to PwC. That has caused concern. Yvonne touched on the fact that issues around eligibility criteria have been a big bugbear. Third parties have said that the eligibility criteria stipulated by the Department have been too stringent. They were laid at one GCSE to keep the pilot cohort tight, but, again, that is something that is under consideration.

Dr McIvor: One piece of work that we need to do with LAE, if we get future funding, is to make sure that there is clarity about what this programme delivers compared with all the other programmes, because

there are many across DEL, not only in FE but under Training for Success and Steps to Work. We probably need to do a little more work so that people understand what is available to them.

Ms Croskery: And how it links as well. In fairness, LEMIS is about getting people into work and learner access is about getting people back into the world of education. We totally take the Committee's point that we need to look at mapping.

The Chairperson: We just think that there is frustration about this. Although it may be clear to the Department what is going on, it is not necessarily clear on the ground. There is a communication issue. There are issues about LEMIS as well, which we will not go into at this juncture. However, the real message that we need to get back is that all those around this table are determined to try to make better opportunities for people out there. So when looking at a longitudinal study that lasts three years, I would look for a harder-hitting report that includes numbers, what happened and whatever. I accept that, since the report is not finished, you gave us an interim update. However, what we really need to know is whether this works.

On the face of it, an underspend of a third is significant.

Ms Croskery: I want to deal with that. There was not an underspend, because we profiled at the start that we would provide up to £3 million to the colleges per annum based on the ability to engage hard to reach learners. It was demand-led, and our budget is profiled accordingly. There was not any underspend. Andy's £143 million includes what we did not use on the learner access and engagement programme because it went into normal adult mainstream education.

The Chairperson: We had people presenting to the Committee, such as those from FITNI, who were not able to access that information. I do not want to appear unduly harsh, but there does not seem to be the delivery on the ground that people were hoping for. We were not getting as many people in as we had perhaps hoped. Certainly, in answer to Chris's question, it has been outlined that there were difficulties with who would do the recruitment and how the thing would be delivered. There is a genuine problem with the hardest to reach people. Despite the quote in the paper, the fact remains that they do not want to go to college. I think, Yvonne, that you said that they had a pretty bad experience at school. That is what the project is about. In dealing with these issues, we must recognise that there will be no bigger problem for this country to deal with in the next few years than unemployment. People have to be given the chance to skill up, and they have to be given the chance to be flexible and to go where the skills are. They need communication and confidence-building measures. Apparently, the FE colleges are the places to go to for that, and we need to see that this works. The issue will require further scrutiny. We are not saying that you are not doing a great job; we are saying that we are not getting the transparency that we require to be able to make a proper assessment.

Ms Croskery: When we have the full report, we will be happy to share it with you, and we will be happy to share the policy development with key stakeholders, including yourselves.

With regard to unemployment, the programme was all about the two sectors collaborating and playing to each other's strengths. It was about our Department stopping replication, using the third sector to engage the hardest to reach to give them the support that they need in the community and ensuring that learning is delivered. We are all about widening access, increasing participation and, ultimately, getting people into the main campuses, and my colleague Tom talked in an earlier session about the £340 million that we have invested in newbuilds.

The Chairperson: OK. I want to bring Jim in.

Mr Lyttle: Could I just come in really quickly? I have been out with the Belfast consortium that is delivering the learner access and engagement programme. Of course we have to scrutinise, but we can qualify as well. The feedback that I am getting from it is that this is a good idea but there needs to be improvement. We need to recognise that. The feedback was around communication, class size and eligibility. That would suggest that the review is finding those issues and taking them on board. That is also encouraging, and I welcome that. However, my biggest concern is the timescale for the introduction of the main programme. A group of people is developing expertise in delivering those programmes, and the pilot is scheduled to end in March. The other spectre looming is the fact that the

Department may not be here. By all means, move on, but it would be good if a bit more attention could be paid in future responses to how exactly the gap between the end of March and the reintroduction of the programme will be addressed.

Ms Croskery: It will be a small gap. The FE key programme enrolment period is September, and we plan to have a mainstream programme, subject to being able to secure enough money from the budget.

The Chairperson: As I said to Chris at the start, the trouble is that we have had three briefings today, which is always difficult, and we have had to deal with the North West Regional College issue, which meant that, effectively, we had four briefings. We also have to deal with some economic stuff. This subject is important, and that is why I have been trying to push the business through; rather unsuccessfully, I have to say, and I am sorry about that. However, I have tried my best to push it through. These are important issues. We will want to see the report. You will look at the Hansard report and see the level of concern. We are not attacking the people, but we are attacking the problem. We need to find a way of getting better transparency so that we can deal with this, because the legitimate concerns raised by members need to be addressed.

Mr Allister: You have given us all sorts of interesting statistics about the number of learners who have completed their course of study and have got qualifications. That is all very interesting, but what I am really interested to hear is what percentage of people that has enabled to move into gainful employment. You represent the Department for Employment and Learning. It is all very good to learn, but the purpose of learning, in an economic setting, is to work. Where in all this is there any tracking of those who have been through the pilot programme? I have not heard any reference in the past hour to the PwC report even addressing that. Will it address it? Will we have an output that tells us not just the number of people who got qualifications but the number of people who, on foot of those qualifications, are now in gainful employment? Frankly, that is how I judge this programme; not on whether someone whiles away the winter evenings by going to a photography course but on whether they get themselves into work. Can you give us any insight into what the output has been from the pilot in those terms?

Ms Croskery: Before I answer that question in full, I will say that the programme's focus was on getting qualifications for people from Northern Ireland who are hard to reach and who are without a GCSE. The focus was not on getting them a job, but your point is well made. The longitudinal evaluation has been gathering data on that, and I think that we have some results on that.

Mr Andrews: The number of people who have progressed into employment remains low.

Mr Allister: Why were we not told that? We had a presentation this morning. We spent an hour talking it up, but on what seems to me to be the core issue, we now, at the last moment, get the information that the output into work has been low. Is the Department trying to conceal that? Surely that has to be the ultimate measure of whether the project is worth the money that we are spending on it. Can I hear how low the output is? I really do want to hear that.

Mr Andrews: PwC has found, to date, that 87% of learners indicated that they have not applied for a job. However, the vast majority of those people have indicated that they wish to go on to additional learning.

Mr Allister: So 87% have not applied for a job. Of the 13% who did apply, how many got jobs?

Mr Andrews: I do not have that figure.

Mr Allister: Why come before us to talk about the merits of a project and not come prepared to address what I would have thought was a patently obvious and key question?

Dr McIvor: Because the groups that the project addresses are the furthest away from work. A number of steps are, therefore, required to get them ready for work. The programme is the first step. The success is that they are now more willing to go on and get qualifications that will lead to work. It is not an overnight thing, because of the group that we are addressing.

Mr Allister: I appreciate that.

Dr McIvor: That is why we did not have an objective for getting people into work as we do for a lot of other programmes.

Ms Croskery: It is not an employment programme.

Mr Allister: It is not an objective to get those people into work?

Ms Croskery: It is to take them from where they are and enable them to gain a qualification and enter the world of learning.

Mr Allister: If you are telling us that it is not an objective of this programme to get those people into work, I am staggered by that. We are in an economic situation in which people, we are told, are crying out for work. They say that they do not have the skills, so we set up a programme to help them to get skills and qualifications, but it is not an objective of the programme to get anyone into work. What is the objective?

Dr McIvor: They have taken the first step to getting into work, but they do not have enough qualifications to get them into work, which is the next step. These people — I do not want to call them "these people" because there are all sorts of different people in that group — face multiple barriers, including unemployment and lack of confidence. Some do not want to go into colleges. We heard from the speech therapists that some people are not confident about doing interviews. All those issues need to be addressed, but they cannot be addressed overnight by going on one course.

Ms Croskery: I will give you an example. A former member of the security forces, who had an alcohol-related problem, joined the programme. I do not want to personalise that, but it came out from the evaluation. Certainly they are not ready for work yet, but they got a qualification, and the range of support that they have had on the other issues has paid great dividends. It is more about helping a person move from where they are. They are minute steps along the way, but ultimately —

Mr Allister: This is not a social programme. This is an employment programme, surely.

Ms Croskery: This is a learning programme.

Mr Allister: With a view to getting people into work, hopefully.

Ms Croskery: To progress.

The Chairperson: If I may come in on that, the Committee does understand the criteria that you put forward for getting qualifications. However, when you are doing a longitudinal study and taking a lot of information, the point that Mr Allister raises is quite appropriate. We need hard statistical evidence as to whether this is working and how it is changing. With respect, it is not enough to say that people had a warm fuzzy feeling when they went along to the programme. We need to know that you are spending the money appropriately. I am trying to find a middle road in this. The presentation, as it came across, did not quite set the scene as people here expected it to. Maybe you are answering a different question. The whole debate that we had as a result of the earlier presentation, which you will have heard, is that FE means business. That is the bit. Everything we see in everything from the Programme for Government to the Executive strategy is about skills and upskilling people. We need to know, from the Department, what you are trying to do and how successful you are. There is a frustration, expounded around this table, that we are doing lots of good policy work but not very much on output. That may be a misinterpretation or misunderstanding. It is our role to give you an opportunity to explain that. However, you need to take that opportunity. We will not do it today, because time has gone on.

I will pass back to Jim to see whether he has any other points.

Mr Allister: No.

The Chairperson: Let me make the point that the issue Jim raised about the PwC report is exactly the same issue that I, and others, raised. If you do a longitudinal study over three years, we expect some pretty rigorous analysis. We will be looking at that, and questions will be asked.

Mr F McCann: We spoke about the £3 million. Where did the £1 million go?

The Chairperson: To be honest, Fra, the answer coming back is that it was reallocated to other resources.

Ms Croskery: There was £143 million for mainstream funding; the money went into that.

Mr F McCann: Does that not defeat the purpose of the scheme itself?

The Chairperson: It does.

Dr McIvor: The scheme was fully funded. It was demand-led. If 100,000 people had come in, we would have had the money for that.

The Chairperson: If you listen to people like Fra, you see that the point is that we still have not really got to the crux of the problem. You cannot tell me that we have cracked the problem of dealing with disadvantaged people. More could have been done.

Fra, you have put your point, but I want to bring Sammy in, because we have one more bit of business that we have to attend to. I know that it has been a fairly robust engagement, but it was meant with positive intent. I want officials to reflect on that and come back. We will try to do this in a way that allows us to get ourselves structured and properly orientated towards the brief. Sammy, would you like to ask the final questions?

Mr Douglas: The first thing to say is that I am from a Protestant working-class background and I left school with no qualifications whatsoever. I embarked on community education and adult learning and now have a job up at Stormont. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: I am not sure whether there is a course for that. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Douglas: Looking back over those years at some of the people who were with me, I can see that some of them were, to use a term that you have heard, the furthest away from the labour market. Many of those people are now in community work or business. I am very committed to what you are doing. I understand some of the difficulties that you are facing. You are talking about hard to reach communities. I am talking about impossible to reach communities and some of those people that Fra and others have talked about. It can be an example of a local nuance if somebody does not want to go to a centre because it is aligned to that political party or this organisation or whatever. There are those sorts of issues.

I want to go back to the PwC numbers. You said that 46% of learners are from disadvantaged communities. Are those the actual numbers? I know people whom I would call serial attenders; people who go on every course. I am not saying that that involves a huge number of people, but I do know of people like that — good for them; they are interested.

Ms Croskery: To be eligible, people had to have no GCSEs. That would rule out the serial attenders.

The Chairperson: No, Sammy is talking about people who go on a course and do not get the qualification.

Mr F McCann: Sammy was one of them. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Croskery: The funding is output-related, and some of the tenders are geared towards getting the qualification. I do not have control of the tender — the college does. The figure that I have given you shows that quite a high number of people get a qualification, bearing in mind how far removed they are

from the world of learning and employment or anything at the minute. Many of the people on the programme are at the social margins.

Mr Douglas: I agree that there is inflexibility at times, and you have agreed with that yourself. We need new ideas and new experiences, and we want people coming up with new pilots. However, very often it is the same organisations — voluntary organisations and centres — that get them, probably because they are a safe pair of hands. We should be open to new thinking and new models.

Ms Croskery: I would not disagree with that. There have been very encouraging results from small, local grass-roots organisations. There is no doubt about that. There was re-tendering because there was poor performance from some people at the start. This was a pilot, and it was all about bedding down the experiences and learning and making changes. This is the first time that the third sector has had a unique earmarked funding stream to recognise its added value, and we are not paying it to do what we can do already through the statutory sector, which is teach.

Mr Douglas: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much.