



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Careers Education, Information,
Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland:
Young Enterprise Northern Ireland Briefing

6 February 2013

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 Sydney Anderson
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan

Witnesses:

Ms Carol Fitzsimons Young Enterprise Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: I remind members that this session is being recorded by Hansard. Carol Fitzsimons, the chief executive of Young Enterprise, has talked to the Committee in the past, so she will be familiar to us.

Carol, I do not want to cut you short in any way, but I would like to cut to the chase. I know that you are more than able to do that. Tell us what we should be doing with careers. You have listened patiently to some of the other things that have been said.

Ms Carol Fitzsimons (Young Enterprise Northern Ireland): I will just give a bit of context. I know that some members are familiar with Young Enterprise as an organisation. Others may not be. I will give a brief overview of what we do.

We are a charity that works with young people who are aged from five to 25 years. The majority of our work is with post-primary schools. We also deliver in the primary sector and, to a very small degree, in the further and higher education sector. We interact with over 100,000 students each year. We do that with the support of over 1,000 volunteers from the local business community, who come in and assist in the delivery of our hands-on active learning programmes. Our three key themes that we work towards are creating growth and interest in entrepreneurship; building the employability skills that we have been discussing; and empowering young people — giving them self-confidence in what they do.

We would like to recognise that we are in a fortunate position with the revised curriculum in Northern Ireland. It is important to acknowledge that. In the previous session, a member mentioned Learning for Life and Work, which is part of the revised curriculum in Northern Ireland. That is not the case in other areas. Therefore, although we would like to see much more work being done to build

employability and skills in schools, we are in the fortunate position that there is a genuine interest and desire to do that.

With regard to the careers piece specifically, Young Enterprise believes that, as we all recognise, the days of a linear career — a job for life — are very much over. We believe that the Careers Service now needs to provide a framework that allows young people to understand what their individual employability skills are; recognise that they are transferable skills; understand how they can map the employment landscape and what career opportunities are out there; and, then, reskill or change their career paths in order to, basically, have lifetime employability. So, it is really about moving away from a linear career path and recognising that young people need to have lifetime employability skills.

As regards the provision from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), as opposed to Department of Education (DE) specific careers teachers, DEL support really comes in at two key points in the post-primary sector. By the nature of the education system, that focus is primarily on qualifications and what someone's next choices are with regard to exams. Our view is that we need to shift that emphasis, so that lifelong learning and employability truly permeates on a cross-curricular basis throughout schools. Again, we are fortunate that that exists in the curriculum through statutory provision. However, we see that the application of it is inconsistent across the board. So, we work with some schools where there is very positive engagement and a large focus on students' employability. In other schools, there would not be the same level of uptake for the sort of work that we do.

Again, our work extends right back to age 5 because we very much believe that it needs to be something that goes through every year group and is approached by looking at a subject and seeing how it links to later life and employability. If we take mathematics, for example, we would look at that with regard to how you run a business, what that means with regard to finances and how it will relate to the real world.

Overall, I suppose that it is about preparing young people to become lifelong learners and creating the expectation that they will need to change careers and reskill, and that that is not because the career system has failed them; it is a clear expectation that that is, now, the world in which they live. We would like to see that the work that is done with careers in school prepares you with the skills to look at what skills are needed and to constantly reskill yourself, rather than trying to set people on one, straight pathway.

In essence, that is what our programmes aim to do. We link in with and bring business into schools. Young people set up and run their own businesses. So, it is about them developing their own employability skills. Again, as the people from the Gasworks Employment Matching Service (GEMS) mentioned, it is about having an early opportunity to develop those skills and understand how they can be applied in the workforce.

We are delighted that we have been very successful in our work with schools. However, there is increased demand that we cannot meet due to our limited financial resources. Last year, we had our highest ever figure, and there is genuine interest from and engagement with the schools. It is a very much a support service for schools that is complementary to their work. Last year, we were able to deliver to over 100,000 students, which is a fantastic figure in that it is one in three of the school population. However, I am also very conscious that that means that we have not delivered to two in three.

The Chairperson: You say that you engaged with 100,000 students, which is one in three. How much engagement did you have with them?

Ms Fitzsimons: The programmes range from a half day for some, and others will run a business over a six- or 10-week period or over a full academic year. It will depend on the year group that undertakes the programme. At primary level, it is typically about an hour a week over six weeks, and, at post-primary level, due to the academic pressures, we find that, in some year groups, schools can only afford to spend half a day on employability skills. We would like our education system to find some way of measuring the successful outputs of our young people — not just their academic achievement but also the employability skills that they achieve at school. The risk is that, if we say that we want to assess the skills of young people coming out, that very quickly converts into an examination system. We recommend that more focus is put on using the likes of Learning for Life and Work to build personal portfolios of skills that young people can take with them into education.

The Chairperson: Could you use the model of Young Enterprise, which some people might think is start-your-own-business-orientated rather than orientated towards general careers, in your organisation or in a complementary organisation that looks at employability skills and teaches people what skills employers want?

Ms Fitzsimons: Absolutely. The company model is the one that most people are familiar with, and we have been running that for 25 years in Northern Ireland. Through that, young people set up and run their own business over the academic year, and they trade and sell their products at local trade fairs. Some members may have visited those. That is primarily concerned with entrepreneurship, but it also very much builds employability skills. Some young people change their career choices as a result, because they may have been in charge of marketing at the trade fair, discovered that they have a thirst and an interest for that line of work and decide that marketing is a career that interests them. By being a member of a company, they get an understanding of the different careers that make up a company and the employability skills that are required.

The Chairperson: We understand that. We heard in earlier submissions that people do not have the confidence and are not able to present or articulate what they want to do. Is it possible to create a programme, and would your organisation do that? The outcome might not be how to run a business but how to make a presentation, prepare for an interview or something along those lines.

Ms Fitzsimons: Absolutely. We aim to incorporate the idea that entrepreneurship is one piece and that the employability of the young people is a key element of it. Many people will go through the programme and not want to start their own business, and that is perfectly acceptable. However, they will still have gained communication skills through interacting with members of the public and gained finance skills.

The Chairperson: I have one question, and I will then invite members to ask a question. If you have the resources and time in your organisation, I would invite you to suggest a methodology to expand from your idea of starting up a business, because not everybody will want to start up their own business. I am impressed by the reach of your organisation. You get to 100,000 people in our school population in an external format, and I want to see whether we can do that with jobs. You might need to make a proposal on how that might be done, which might feed into people's ideas of a part of a solution. I am not saying that it would necessarily be you who would deliver it.

I just want to get an idea of the numbers. How big a budget do you have?

Ms Fitzsimons: There are two aspects to the organisation. There are the mainstream schools programmes and an International Fund for Ireland project, which is cross-border with Junior Achievement Ireland. That specific project runs out in August of this year because of the fund coming to an end, and that specific project has quite a large budget of £1.8 million. Setting that project aside, because it is winding up, our mainstream schools programmes operate with a budget of just over £1 million, of which we receive £650,000 from the Department of Education. That £650,000 is to deliver the programmes to 60,000 students, and that is our target. Our mission is to maximise our delivery, so we also attract additional funding from private organisations and foundations where we can to increase the output of what we are able to deliver.

The Chairperson: Is your source of funding in your general accounts?

Ms Fitzsimons: Everything is in the accounts.

The Chairperson: If I were to ask you how you make up the shortfall of £350,000, you would tell me that it is made up of charitable donations, and that will be itemised?

Ms Fitzsimons: Yes.

The Chairperson: So, there is no problem in understanding what that is. You deliver programmes to 60,000 pupils at £1 million, and you do other things at £1.8 million — money which is under threat?

Ms Fitzsimons: Yes.

The Chairperson: Finally, how many people do you employ or organise?

Ms Fitzsimons: We employ just under 50 staff, although if that is taken at full-time equivalent, it probably comes down to around 39. Half of those are involved in the residential programme, which necessarily has a high level of staffing because they are out at residential, overnight camps. We are based throughout Northern Ireland, so we work across each of the six counties. We typically have two members of staff covering all of the schools in each geographical area.

Mr Lyttle: Young Enterprise is an absolutely fantastic organisation. I have had close contact with the organisation, in particular at a Young Enterprise project in Ashfield Girls' High School in east Belfast. The utility of it for me is career planning and exposure to the type of employability skills that were spoken about earlier. On a visit to see the Young Enterprise group in operation, one young pupil was taking a phone call from the 'Belfast Telegraph' regarding an on-telephone interview that she was doing. Another was doing the accounts and another was involved in making a product. It exposes young people to the skills involved in work in a way that a classroom is never going to. It is an absolutely fantastic organisation. Carol, do you think that it should be expanded further? In what way could it be integrated with career development to utilise the key contribution that it makes?

Ms Fitzsimons: Thank you for your kind remarks and interest in the organisation. We would be delighted to see it expanded further. It goes back to your point, Chair, about the level of engagement. In some of the year groups, we get a small period of time with the young people. With the Company Programme, we get a very extended period of time. We have recognised the success of that, and we have also introduced for year 10 a version of the programme for younger pupils. That is called QuickStart, and it runs over 10 weeks. This year, we have introduced a six-week version of the Company Programme, which runs in primary schools at primary 7 to give them more opportunities. Our mission as an organisation is that every young person at school will have had the opportunity to start up and engage in some sort of business.

The Chairperson: OK. I get the point. I am happy for you to point us in the right direction or send us the documentation regarding your current projects. I am particularly interested in what is done at the younger end.

Could you take your experience and do a similar thing in addition to, and separate from, the enterprise bit? It could be something that gives people life skills and prepares them for work, whether it is about making a presentation, doing a CV or learning what a job looks like. I just wonder if an option might be to draw up a programme on the basis of what you already do. You could probably quantify the cost. It would have to be publicly tendered and so on. However, if we even had a quantum, it would be useful to see if we could do that. If you would undertake to do that for us, we would be very pleased to receive that information.

Mr F McCann: Thank you for the interesting presentation. Do you contact schools, or do schools invite you to do a programme? On the point about geographical spread, this Committee has focused on NEETs and areas of high deprivation. Does the programme focus on that to encourage people?

Ms Fitzsimons: As I said, we are based throughout Northern Ireland. We operate with 86% of post-primary schools. Therefore we approach and work with the vast majority of post-primary schools. Where we do not work with post-primary schools, it is typically either because the school does something in-house that it feels is better or it feels that it does not have the time for us in the curriculum. However, the vast majority of schools work with us at some level. Disappointingly, we operate with only about 15% of primary schools. That is purely down to the financial resource that we do not have. If we were to deliver more at primary level, it would be at the expense of post-primary. That is the strategic choice that we make at the moment. We have significant additional demand from those schools that we cannot meet.

In relation to NEETs, we have worked with alternative education provision in the past. It responds particularly well because it is a very experiential act of learning. We have had very successful results in that. In the tender for the collaboration and innovation fund, we bid to apply the model to the NEETs setting. Unfortunately, that bid was unsuccessful. We have the ambition to apply it to, and to do more work with, the NEETs sector, but we were not successful in that bid unfortunately.

Mr F McCann: Did the Department advise where you went wrong with the unsuccessful bid?

Ms Fitzsimons: That will happen at 2.00 pm today; that is where I am going next.

Mr F McCann: I will ask you about that next time you are here.

The Chair posed this question earlier. You understand the remit of the inquiry and what we are trying to do. For you, what is the best thing that could come out of this inquiry?

Ms Fitzsimons: It would be a recognition that the work of Young Enterprise is the foundation of employability skills for young people. We talk about the Programme for Government and what we expect to achieve in 2030, and we expect young people who are at school to achieve all these great things. However, they will need the skills.

The Chairperson: What should the Committee recommend? What issue could we address to improve careers guidance?

Ms Fitzsimons: It is about recognising the value and importance of skills, in addition to academic education, at school. Ultimately, we still measure the success of our schools on their academic output and qualifications. We need to find a mechanism whereby the employability skills that our young people come out with are valued as highly without there being another exam.

The Chairperson: That is right.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. I have a 16-year-old daughter, and this issue is very significant for her. She is doing a controlled assessment with what the local enterprise centre does for young people in respect of self-employment. It forces them into research, which is very encouraging. The local enterprise centre encourages young people to sit on its board of directors, which is also a good initiative. Uptake is another issue, but that is happening out there. Do you have any outreach offices? I am not too sure about the details of your organisation. Are you based anywhere outside Belfast?

Ms Fitzsimons: We have an office in Banbridge, which works across the southern region and into Dungannon, where you are based. We have offices in Omagh, Derry and —

The Chairperson: Enniskillen?

Ms Fitzsimons: No. The Omagh office covers Enniskillen; it goes across the Sperrins and lakeland.

The Chairperson: How many offices do you have in total?

Ms Fitzsimons: We will have six offices across all the counties. It is representative of each education and library board; it is in proportion.

The Chairperson: It is fair to say that your problem is not making contact with schools but not having sufficient resources to meet the demand.

Ms Fitzsimons: We could extend our reach significantly. We could double what is delivered at primary-school level tomorrow, but it comes back to the point about approaching schools. We cannot approach the schools, because we cannot deliver to them.

Mr Anderson: Carol, thank you for your presentation. Your organisation is doing good work, as we all know. It has been running for quite a number of years. Have you any way of measuring the success of the young people who come through? Do you have figures that go back over the years? I know that we are in difficult times and that there are many factors to consider. However, is there any way of charting what you have achieved over the years?

Ms Fitzsimons: We are licensed to the Young Enterprise UK charity, so our research is typically carried out UK-wide. A student on our company programme is deemed twice as likely to start their own business as someone else and is typically 30% more financially successful in their career than somebody who has not done the programme. Therefore there is research, and I can send additional research to you. Our local research focuses on the value of having enterprise education versus not having it. There is significant research to show that it makes a difference to young people's employability. However, it is a challenge, as it takes time to assess it longitudinally.

Mr Anderson: Therefore you may have some figures on that.

Ms Fitzsimons: Yes.

Mr Hilditch: Carol, this morning's presentations have had an emphasis on delivery at primary level. Is there any area that we should be looking to for good practice?

Ms Fitzsimons: We were the first in the UK to introduce it at primary level, and that was because we are part of Junior Achievement Worldwide. We looked to our Junior Achievement counterparts in the States, transferred the Junior Achievement primary learning models, and adapted them for Northern Ireland.

At the other end of the scale, namely post-18, we would like to extend our provision significantly to further and higher education, as there is a demand from those sectors. One of the universities approached us recently to look at having an entrepreneurship module as part of its degree delivery. It is typical of all the business schools in the States to have a start-up; in Babson College students have to run a business over a semester. We would love to replicate that model. The reason that we have not done so is because the funding is linked to the Department of Education, which constrains us to stay in that sector. There is an opportunity to develop and grow at both ends of the scale.

The Chairperson: Carol, thank you very much. It would be useful if you would send us information on your programmes. You have expertise, or at least knowledge, of how to reach larger numbers of people, perhaps in a school environment but without the direct school leadership thing. We would be very grateful if you would do that for us. We will talk more to you. Thank you very much indeed.