



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Careers Education, Information,
Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland:
Skills for Justice Briefing

13 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan

Witnesses:

Mr Nick Skeet	Skills for Justice
Mrs Judith Thompson	Skills for Justice
Ms Colette Wymer	Skills for Justice

The Chairperson: Judith Thompson is the national relationship manager for Skills for Justice. Judith, you will introduce your team. I apologise for keeping you waiting. This session will be a little bit shorter than the previous session because I am under pressure for time. We have met in the past. Justice is such a big issue in our part of the world, yet nobody has any idea about how much there is in respect of skills and skills training, so you might just take us through that first and foremost.

Mrs Judith Thompson (Skills for Justice): Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here. We are delighted to take it up. I am the Northern Ireland relationship manager for Skills for Justice. My colleague Nick Skeet is the director for employer engagement across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and Colette Wymer is our research and policy officer.

I will elaborate on the point that you raised. We represent a very broad sector. As a sector skills council, we have in our footprint all the statutory justice organisations, which are what you would associate with justice. We also cover work with victims of crime and witnesses of crime, and we work with offenders to prevent offending behaviour and with young people, a lot of which is carried out in the voluntary and community sector. Those organisations are also part of our footprint. We cover community safety as well as justice; the two are very interlinked. Therefore, the Fire and Rescue Service is also part of our footprint, as are those voluntary and community organisations that promote community safety.

More recently, we assumed responsibility and are engaging with local government in Northern Ireland. Again, there is a lot of overlapping stuff, particularly around crime and district policing and community safety partnerships and around the wider remit of local government and the legal sector. Very much more hot off the press — my colleague Nick can say more about this than I can — we are in the

process of a merger with the Financial Skills Partnership, which brings an economic aspect. That is a very broad range of organisations.

The Chairperson: The point that I was not aware of, and other people may not be aware of, is that there are skills and qualifications on how to be an effective court usher.

Mrs Thompson: Absolutely. As a sector skills council —

The Chairperson: It is really important that people have skills in those very important areas. So tell us a bit about that.

Mrs Thompson: OK. All the areas that I have talked about are covered by our national occupational standards. People are familiar with national occupational standards as the basis of vocational qualifications. They define what good practice looks like, so employers use them for recruitment and progression, as well as qualifications. As Mr McCrea said, there are vocational qualifications in relation to court clerks. They exist in the area of policing; they exist for custodial care, covering work in our prisons; and they exist in relation to work with victims and witnesses of crime. So, they cover the work carried out by Women's Aid, Victim Support and a range of other organisations in Northern Ireland. Our role as a sector skills council is to work directly with employers, identify the skills that they need for their workforce and help them to attract people who have or will develop those skills.

The Chairperson: Do members want to ask any specific questions? While they are thinking about that, I will ask one question. I do not suppose that anybody is going through school saying that their aspiration is to be a court clerk. How do you think that we ought to explain to young people that there is a world of opportunity, there are very valuable jobs, and they can get qualifications that enhance their payment and employability? We are looking at how to tell people what you do.

Will members please indicate if they wish to ask a question?

Mrs Thompson: Part of our remit is to give that information to those who provide careers advice and guidance. As a sector skills council at this point in time, we are not heavily engaged in giving actual careers advice and guidance. That is the work of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) careers advisers. We provide fact sheets for the Department for Employment and Learning, which it passes on to all its careers advisers, around the jobs that exist in our sector, the nature of those jobs, where there may be things that people do not know or have not thought about, such as that the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service is an excellent place to work. We also address DEL careers advisers on a regular basis to update them on trends and issues around our sector. We have a web page specific to Northern Ireland, which outlines case studies, people's stories and how people have experienced —

The Chairperson: OK. We have got the general idea. I want to bring in a few members.

Mr F McCann: In my ignorance, I did not know that you exist. That may reflect the information sharing from DEL to the Committee, and to many people in partnership boards or community or voluntary organisations who do not know that you exist. I live in west Belfast, and I do not think that many people know that you exist. There is an issue about how you bridge the gap between using DEL as a middle person and getting to the people who might take up some of the careers opportunities that you promote.

Mr Nick Skeet (Skills for Justice): There are several recent developments, which it might be helpful to outline for the Committee, in how we are taking advantage of opportunities to look at other ways of connecting employers with young people, particularly around things like advice and guidance for careers.

Generally, the justice sector particularly and all the agencies that Judith mentioned have no issue whatsoever in attracting people to apply for their vacancies. Northern Ireland is the same as the rest of the UK, and they are inundated with applications for jobs. Most of those public sector agencies and those that work with them are generally seen as good career options by many people. Jobs in the voluntary and community sector are different, but jobs such as police officers, fire and rescue officers, probation officers and social workers are generally seen as good.

In the past, we have provided information to the careers advice services in Northern Ireland and the other countries in the UK, and we want to continue to do that and, in fact, to improve on it. However, the expansion of our footprint to include legal services, which includes commercial law, and now the merger with the Financial Skills Partnership, which offers huge synergies between those two sectors —

The Chairperson: Nick, on the issue that Fra was talking about — I said it to Judith — the reason you are here is that I discovered you as well. It is one of these things; there are so many people employed in our court service. But it is not just in the courts. People work with offenders. There are all these qualifications. We need to find a way of explaining to people that there are careers in this sector other than being a prison officer or a policeman, and that there are qualifications they can get to enhance their earning power and give them a viable career path. People do not understand that there is a career path. I only mentioned the court service because it happened to be the one that I talked to.

Mr F McCann: Chair, just one small point: given that there are thousands of jobs in this sector, it would be interesting to find out whether we can tap into the geographical spread of those who apply for the jobs that are available. In many ways, it is about the level of education that may be required to tap into these jobs. That is also important, and it is important that people know it.

Mr Skeet: I might be able to help the Committee with that. The justice sector has a higher level of educational requirement than the mean of other sectors in UK plc and the Northern Ireland economy. People generally come into it later in life, and it is often not a first career choice. There are proportionally fewer 16- to 24-year-olds, and the level of academic attainment and achievement is generally higher than other sectors of the UK economy.

We have found that the sectoral organisations have no shortage of advice and guidance through their own channels. However, as you said Chair, it is about informing those career choices. It is like the adverts for the army, the navy and the RAF. There are many careers other than being a sailor or whatever it might be within those organisations; they employ huge numbers of practitioners and professionals in a range of other careers. I agree that there is a job for sector skills councils to do in helping to improve that story for young people.

The Chairperson: Nick, I am going to be awfully rude and tell you that we are going to curtail this session. That is only because I have some other people coming in. The problem with this issue is that the more you look at it, the more you want to find out.

I have read your paper, but the information in it about what you do, and so on, is a little bit standard. It would be useful for the Committee if you could provide us with something specific about how your sector skills council might explain to young people that there are careers available in criminal justice or whatever. Will you also include a brief bit about the numbers available and what it would come through as, almost like a worked example? If you put that though, we will look at it. If there are any questions on the back of that, we will talk to you about them.

Mr Skeet: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: I apologise for —

Mr Lyttle: Chair, can I supplement that really quickly?

The Chairperson: Of course.

Mr Lyttle: A key provision that the sector skills councils seem to be able to make is website-based information. It has been raised a couple of times in our evidence sessions that availing yourself of improved online information for young people would be a step forward. Will you include that in any further submissions —

The Chairperson: OK —

Mr Lyttle: — and how well your system is equipping young people to interact with online information?

Mr Allister: I have a question.

The Chairperson: I have tried to stop this, Nick. I am useless as a Chair.

Mr Lyttle: Sorry; you tried well, Chair. It was my fault.

Mr Allister: Have you any criticism of our careers provision?

Mr Skeet: The criticism, if any, would be that there is so much more that we could do and intend to do to better inform the work of the Careers Service and to provide more channels of communication with young people and teachers.

Mr Allister: That is a self-criticism; it is not a criticism of —

Mr Skeet: I am being polite.

Mr Allister: You do not have to be polite.

The Chairperson: In fact, we welcome not being polite. You have seen how they treat me.

Mr Skeet: The information provided by any careers service is only as good as what it is provided with to impart to children, and Northern Ireland is no exception. We view ourselves as a key agency in supporting that provision. If we are not visible to you, perhaps that is criticism and evidence that there needs to be a more joined-up approach in who is applying —

The Chairperson: Do teachers provide placements in the Courts Service?

Mr Skeet: I have no idea.

Mrs Thompson: I do not know.

Mr Allister: You do not know that.

Mr Skeet: We do not have access to that very fine level of detail at this time.

Mr Lyttle: You could perhaps include that in your response.

Mrs Thompson: Yes. I am aware that there is involvement by schools in visits to courts.

Mr Allister: Is that on work experience?

Mrs Thompson: I would have to check. I know that there are visits and observations. I am not clear whether there are work experience placements, but I could check.

The Chairperson: If there is one thing that we have expertise in in Northern Ireland it is the justice system. You would have thought that we would have worked out that there are jobs there as well.

Ms McGahan: Like some members, I had never heard of your organisation —

Mr Lyttle: Just to balance that out, I had. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Teacher's pet; just keep quiet for once.

Mr Lyttle: I needed to defend them.

Ms McGahan: I am interested to know whether you work with unemployed law graduates.

Mrs Thompson: At the moment, we are working with the Law Society to look at ways of upskilling and benchmarking some of the non-lawyer roles; there are opportunities there. We are aware that there is

an oversupply of graduates. There is also work going on in relation to apprenticeships that might provide a route in for some people.

Mr Skeet: Judith is right. There is a huge oversupply of law graduates, many of whom take up jobs as what are loosely termed "paralegals" as a route into the legal services profession. Many of them are demotivated, or certainly under-motivated, because it is not the career that they signed up for, and they certainly do not earn the salary that they were hoping for. Until now, the paralegal profession has been 90% undefined; it has been lacking in definition in the roles and skills required; and there has been no supporting national occupational standards and no qualification route or career pathway, other than what employers created themselves. We have undertaken a major piece of architecture building with the legal services sector to develop standards and to develop — primarily in England, because that is where the appetite is — a level-4 higher apprenticeship and a level-3 apprenticeship to follow this spring. The next job will be to work with employers across the sector and the law societies of the various nations to look at how we can create career paths and information so that the sector and the education and skills systems can change behaviour on what a career in law could be or is.

The Chairperson: Folks, I am going to lose quorum, so I will draw this to a close. Thank you very much. If you could put in some information for me, that would be really good. Colette, I am sorry that you did not get to speak but we will get you the next time. Thank you very much. We will have a look at how we can pick things up, and I would like that information back. You can have a look at the Hansard report and see what you can do for us.

Mrs Thompson: Thank you. We are always delighted to talk to anybody who wants to talk to us.