



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

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

13 March 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)  
Mr Jim Allister  
Mr David Hilditch  
Mr Chris Lyttle  
Mr Fra McCann  
Ms Bronwyn McGahan  
Mr Alastair Ross

**Witnesses:**

Mr Billy Clarke	Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
Mr Gareth Eannetta	Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
Mrs Heather Reid	Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders

**The Chairperson:** The next briefing is from the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO). I welcome Heather Reid, service manager; Gareth Eannetta, senior practitioner for Jobtrack; and Billy Clarke, senior practitioner for Choose 2 Change. You should give a brief introduction, and we will then move on to questions.

**Mrs Heather Reid (Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders):** I thank the Committee for the opportunity to amplify the points that NIACRO raised in its written submission in August 2012. You will be glad to know that we do not intend to reread the written response but rather to outline the key points that specifically relate to and impact on our service users. I will do that by giving a brief background of the work to outline for you the very welcome aspects that we have experienced in respect of careers and will highlight some of the issues that we consider need to be addressed.

NIACRO is a voluntary organisation that has been working for over 40 years to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities by working with and providing services to children and young people, adults in the community, and people in prison and their families. Over that time, we have gained significant experience working in the training and employment context with school excluders and adults who are furthest removed from the labour market. The work that we do and the employability services that we provide are based on the unequivocal link between employment and successful resettlement. The key objective is to support individuals to progress onto what we call mainstream services, so linkage and connections with a range of relevant providers and networks is, to us, essential.

Evidence presented for the consultation response is generated from our practice in three key service areas: the Choose 2 Change project, which works with young people aged 16 to 18 who have been involved in the criminal justice system to prepare them for training and increase their employability; the Jobtrack programme, which works with people over 18 and aims to assist those with convictions to return to employment; and the child and parent support programme, otherwise known as CAPS, which provides intensive support services to families whose children aged eight to 13 years are at risk of engaging in antisocial or offending behaviour. Those services span the school and community environments and do not simply focus on those who have come through the justice system but include children and families. I draw that to your attention to reinforce the point that we believe that good-quality, accurate careers information and advice has a crucial role to play in diverting people away from the justice system.

From the profile of our service users across those three projects, it is clear that those we work with experience multiple barriers in their lives, including chaotic lifestyles, misuse of drugs and/or alcohol and a risk of social exclusion. Most particularly, the key barriers that we see time and time again are poor educational experiences and discrimination. Typically, the young people or young adults who we work with have struggled in the formal education system and, as a result, consider mainstream education to be irrelevant to their future. More often than not, they become labelled as troublemakers, which causes them to become further alienated from the system, and, typically, they are among the cohort that is referred to as NEETs — not in education, employment or training. We also know from our work with employers, training providers and the further education sector that they are often reluctant to engage with people who have a conviction. NIACRO acknowledges that there are a number of reasons for that, including fear, preconceived ideas or perceptions of people with offences, lack of knowledge of the legislation, and simply being risk-averse. Challenging discrimination and providing training and support to employers and training agencies is core to our work.

In considering the consultation on careers, I am delighted to note that, over the past decade, NIACRO training and employability services has enjoyed very positive working relationships with the Careers Service. Most particularly, we have well-established connections in the community with careers advisers, who attend training facilities on our premises on designated days and participate in meet-the-employer events. Those are simply events that we hold to provide opportunities for employers and other key agencies to meet service users and to have informal chats on topics such as what an employer requires from an employee, the application process and what college courses would be suitable. Ultimately, we hold the events to break down attitudinal barriers or preconceived notions that may exist. In our view, that reflects the readiness of the Careers Service to engage with the voluntary and community sector. That is a very helpful model of service delivery, where careers staff are willing to work in community settings and support individual engagement in environments that are familiar and safe. That is particularly helpful to our work, given the numbers of our service users who will not, or simply cannot, access mainstream school or FE college provision.

In an attempt to break down or reduce some of the barriers that our service users face, NIACRO works proactively with a range of employers and training and education providers and offers support, training and advice on the safe and fair recruitment of individuals with convictions. It is worth noting that, over the past six to eight years, management in the Careers Service has prioritised that as an integral part of its overall staff training and development plan. The training outlines the requirements of disclosure under the rehabilitation legislation. It increases understanding of spent and unspent convictions, and it outlines good practice in recruitment processes. Ensuring that careers staff undertake that training and have access to our services for ongoing support has demonstrated a real commitment to understanding and addressing the issues for those with convictions. The result of that collaborative approach has been extremely positive for our service users. We have evidence that, on a number of occasions when individuals have faced discrimination and rejection from local FE colleges on the basis of their convictions, careers staff have intervened and challenged that practice and, consequently, opened up opportunities that would otherwise have been denied.

Other positive aspects that we note in respect of careers include the professional qualification framework requirement and the low staff turnover. That ensures consistency in the delivery of a quality service and contributes to the overall commitment of staff. That is particularly important for us in terms of a consistent and informed approach in dealing with people with convictions.

Despite those positive points, I would like to draw your attention to a few areas that need to be addressed. The first relates to individuals who are not attending or are excluded from school. We believe that the current arrangement of providing the individual interview with careers advisers in school is insufficient. It serves no useful purpose for young people who do not attend or are excluded from school. That profile reflects the vast majority of our young service users. NIACRO recommends

that formal procedures are put in place between careers, education and welfare, and education other than at school to address gaps in provision for those designated as NEET.

Secondly, we have experienced a culture of disjoint between Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) services. The key objective of NIACRO employability work is to support individuals to move to mainstream or community-based programmes as part of an overall resettlement process. In doing so, we have experience of working across a range of DEL services. Through that work, we have experienced particular and stark differences in the approach to, and delivery of, careers advice and guidance. We know that careers staff provide a professional service, using motivational skills that demonstrate a priority focus on our service users, and I have already noted the positive outcomes that that brings. However, in our experience, advisers in jobs and benefits offices and on the Steps to Work programmes do not demonstrate the same levels of professionalism or commitment. That limits their ability to support individuals, as they, unhelpfully, focus on the barriers, particularly convictions. In turn, that exacerbates the negative experiences that individuals already hold. We believe that the disparities in service delivery are caused by inconsistencies in the requirement for professional training in that area. Therefore, NIACRO recommends that all staff involved in, or required to deliver, careers advice should be trained to the same professional standards.

Thirdly, we are looking at young people in custody and at cross-departmental working. We know that careers staff work effectively in the juvenile justice centre, and we welcome that, but that model is not replicated at Hydebank Wood, where the young, male population is all under 25. NIACRO believes that that is unacceptable, given the Department's responsibility to offer information and advice to all young people up to the age of 25. In order to address that, NIACRO believes that careers must become integrated within the criminal justice system and that appropriate services must be provided in Hydebank Wood. The model already in place, in which health is delivered in prisons by the Health Department, could and should be replicated here. Given that this is a cross-departmental issue, we propose that it is championed by the Employment and Learning Minister but must be owned and led by the Executive.

Our final point relates to the impact of budgetary cuts. Over the past 12 months, as budgetary constraints have hit the public sector, we have noted with disappointment that the Careers Service has been unable to commit to NIACRO's employer training. That is of particular concern, because we believe that a lack of training and understanding of the rehabilitation legislation and management of conviction and disclosure issues will lead to practices that are potentially unsafe with regard to risk management or, indeed, will be open to judicial review, with implications for the Department. Our records show that, in the past 12 months, three individuals have successfully taken judicial reviews against one college and the PSNI. That is costly, and the financial and reputational risk to the Department must be taken seriously. In order to ensure that its own good practice is maintained, NIACRO recommends that the Department for Employment and Learning prioritises our employer training on the safe and fair recruitment of people with convictions as core to the staff development of all careers staff and personal advisers.

In conclusion, many of the people we work with face significant disadvantage and multiple barriers in accessing training and employment. Access to appropriate and informed careers education, information, advice and guidance is core to reducing offending and increasing public safety. NIACRO welcomes this opportunity to present its views on behalf of its service users, and we trust that the points raised can usefully contribute to this inquiry, which seeks to build on what works and address those aspects of the service that are less helpful.

**The Chairperson:** Heather, thank you very much. Those recommendations will be reported by Hansard, but, for clarity, could we have a copy of the paper that you are working from so that we have them in that detail?

**Mrs Reid:** Of course.

**The Chairperson:** You mentioned training a number of times and said that there should be the same professional standards across the board. You are asking DEL to take up your training on the safe and fair recruitment of people with convictions. Have you had any engagement with the Department of Education in that regard?

**Mrs Reid:** We have not. At the moment, most of our work focuses on those aged 16 and over, particularly the Training for Success and adult programmes. Due to resources, I suppose, we felt that it was best to target those advisers who are out in the community and more linked into our service

users. To go into schools and provide that service is another issue. Our focus and priority at the moment is on working in the community and with people coming into drop-in careers facilities such as the one in Ann Street.

**The Chairperson:** Hydebank has no careers provision at all.

**Mrs Reid:** No, it does not. We have brought in careers staff on the back of some of our programmes. They have found it very useful, as has Hydebank. However, unlike the juvenile justice centre, no agreement or protocol is in place for that to happen automatically and as a right. We feel that that is a huge gap.

**Mr Ross:** I will be as quick as I can. First, I think that you do very important work. It is very important that we rehabilitate and train offenders so that they have a genuine opportunity in life and can turn their life around.

When justice was first devolved to the Assembly, I served on the Committee for Justice and visited Maghaberry prison. The prison ran a number of training programmes for inmates. It struck me and stayed with me that the prison could not get inmates to engage with the training programmes. They did not see the programmes as important and did not want to train or get a new skill to give themselves an opportunity when they were released from prison.

We have heard an awful lot over the past number of months about the difficulties in engaging with people. You are, perhaps, dealing with some of the people who are the most difficult to engage with. What is the current level of engagement of young people who are in prison with your organisation to try to get some level of training?

**Mrs Reid:** I will hand over to Billy and Gareth to answer that, but my immediate response would be that part of the difficulty is the very formal structure of the prison setting. I made the point earlier that it was the formal education system that turned people off, and therein lies one of the key difficulties.

In our experience, we have found that programmes that are driven by the needs of the individual, and which are conducted in small groups or on a one-to-one basis, are the most engaging. I know that that is difficult for a system as large as the prison system to promote, but we have been in discussions with them to try to get them to adopt a more flexible approach.

Gareth works from Maghaberry prison and Billy has been in Hydebank. They may be able to give you an answer.

**Mr Billy Clarke (Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders):** Most of my work is with young people aged 16 to 18. I come into contact with young people in the juvenile justice centre. Most of the work there is done with young people who are about to be released.

They are turned off by going to college, but they are not turned off by going to the training organisations, such as the Training for Success programme, that are based in the local communities that they come from. One of the things that I do, and which the Careers Service is very good at, is to make a case for young people who are not able to sustain 35 hours a week in training. We make a case for a reduced timetable, starting off with 12 hours a week on the Skills for Your Life programme, so that they can go in and gradually work their way up to a 35-hours-a-week programme over a period of time. The young people will engage with that particular programme.

They then want to become involved in the vocational programmes, so the training organisations will work them towards that, perhaps one day a week in a joinery workshop or a painting and decorating workshop, or on a work placement. Over time, say, over six months, they will increase their hours to the point at which they are able to sustain a 25-hours-a-week programme and a work placement. In that case, the young person gets the opportunity to work their way up rather than go into, on day one, a 35-hours-a-week programme only to drop out of it.

**Mr Ross:** Can you give us an idea of the level of engagement? You are not going to be able to give us specific figures, but as a general percentage, how many young people are refusing to engage in any of that, even at the entry level where you are breaking them in gently? What percentage of young people are refusing to get involved in anything that you offer them?

**Mr B Clarke:** I work with a caseload of roughly 50 or 60 young people in a 12-month period. The last figures that I did were in January, and that was for the first six months of my current year. Eighty per cent of young people who I work with engage in training programmes, and 20% do not.

**Mr Ross:** How many of the 80% stay, do the full course and build themselves up? How many drop out?

**Mr B Clarke:** Approximately 50% or 60% stay in the programmes. Young people drop out for a number of reasons. Some young people go back into custody, and some drop out because they are leaving the area for a number of reasons. Some young people drop out — they become NEET — and come back in again. We will always try to look at why they drop out. It is sometimes because there is an issue in the family, and we look at what the reasons are and work with them to try to solve the problems and get them back into training again. We go back to the Careers Service and say that there is an issue with a young person and ask whether we can reduce the hours again. In some cases, we can reduce the hours even to one day a week; in other cases, it is not possible because of the circumstances. Some young people just do not want to engage in training.

**Mr Ross:** I suppose that one of the difficulties you face is that, if young people think that they will not get a job and employers will not want to engage with them afterwards, they will not see any point in getting involved in it. You said that you work with a number of employers. How many employers do you work with and is there a formal relationship between your organisation and employers whereby they help to take young people on? Or is it more that you approach various people and hope that some of them will take them on?

**Mrs Reid:** It is more the latter. We have not been able to establish any clear agreements with employers to take a young person or an adult on job sampling or work experience and offer opportunities. That is, quite frankly, primarily driven by the fair employment legislation. As the economy shrinks, there are challenges, and employers are not in a position to do that. However, we engage through our training, and we have an advice and support service. Through those processes, we engage over 500 employers every year, involving training organisations, training providers, DEL careers advisers, and so forth. Part of that is our influencing process to try to break down the kinds of attitudes and structural barriers that exist that mean people do not even get a fair chance in applying for jobs.

**Mr Ross:** Finally, are you aware of any incentives that could be offered to employers to take on young people who have been offenders? Do you know of any other jurisdictions in the world where there is an incentivised scheme to get employers to actively engage with organisations that are similar to yours?

**Mrs Reid:** We have looked at a number of jurisdictions, not by physically going, unfortunately, but by researching. Recently, in the Republic of Ireland, there was a very good tax incentive for employers. One of the biggest blocks is that employers are not prepared to cover the insurance, and that is a huge dilemma that organisations in the voluntary and community sector and those involved in DEL programmes face. Employers are not prepared to cover work experience, job sampling and the insurance requirements without monetary gain.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you for your presentation. The paper is one of the most well put together that I have seen in a very long time and has clear recommendations. I am very grateful for that. I will try not to stray too far outside careers, but the Justice Minister recently announced that he intends to reconfigure Hydebank Wood young offenders centre as a secure learning and skills training college, and DEL and the Department of Justice will work together to form a concept development paper. Do you have an update of progress on that issue? Can you give a reassurance that more robust careers education will form part of any new college that is set up there?

**Mrs Reid:** Last week or the week before, I attended a consultation meeting on prison reform, and the session that I attended was on purposeful activity. That considered what purposeful activity looks like and who should be involved. The principle of working more closely with DEL is certainly being taken forward. The rub is that, if the colleges were to be successful in getting the contracts to go in and deliver the services, which we call for, they would be looking to get some level of assurance that security would be reduced so that classes can take place. Currently, any inference of a security issue means that all classes are stopped, and that is a real difficulty and challenge to overcome in the prison

estate. The Department for Employment and Learning will want some level of assurance that, if it is putting resources in, it will be able to deliver.

**Mr Lyttle:** Have you made representations that any provision needs to enhance careers guidance as well?

**Mrs Reid:** Absolutely, and that is why we are so vexed about careers advisers not knowing their rehabilitation legislation. If they are giving advice in the prison setting, it should be accurate and relevant.

**Mr Lyttle:** It is interesting that, when we started out on the careers inquiry, we had a fair idea of some of the issues in mind, but I must admit that it has been useful for me to see that robust careers advice is also crucial to keeping people out of the justice system and from reoffending. That is another area that we perhaps had not completely understood to start with, so I am very grateful for your presentation.

**Mr Hilditch:** My question goes back to the potential barriers that young people see cannot be broken down. It is about the opportunity to get a fair chance. I know that there are some ongoing situations in relation to the things that we have been dealing with. For instance, someone can work in the voluntary sector and engage with young people in, say, midnight soccer. There are some great opportunities through leisure and sport for young people. However, when it comes to being employed at the local leisure centre in a permanent job, they cannot get that. I can understand the frustrations that are out there. Is there an attitude among young people that there is nothing at the end after coming through a period of training?

**Mrs Reid:** Absolutely. That is the challenge.

**Mr Gareth Eannetta (Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders):** I will comment on the back of what Heather said and in answer to some of your questions. Through my experience in Hydebank Wood, I know that the actual offering of training — or learning in skills, as it is called in there — does not relate fully or, some say, relate at all to the outside industry. We are still looking at the areas of bricklaying, joinery and plumbing, and the lads whom we are working with in there realise that there is perhaps no job at the end of that. They lose interest, and there is maybe not the want to continue in that type of training or education. We argue that any training that is offered in the prison should be related to job opportunities on the outside. You gave the example of sports and leisure. The prison has the facilities to deliver that type of training and to deliver it well, but the reality is that people will struggle to find employment in that area, especially in the likes of leisure centres. There may be other routes, if they become self-employed as personal trainers, but jobs such as that are perhaps few and far between.

A lot of thought needs to be put into managing expectations of prisoners and relating that to where jobs will be available. That is where employers come in. In a lot of work that we do, we are trying to bring employers into that process. This is the ideal moment. The Department of Justice is responsible for the training, and there needs to be a process where the Department for Employment and Learning becomes involved in that and perhaps takes responsibility for it, so that training that commences in the prison can be carried on through the gate. That is another issue at the moment. People start training in prison but do not get the opportunity to carry on beyond release. If DEL were to take that mantle, it would provide some level of continuity for prisoners. As I mentioned, employers should be included. It is good to get it from the horse's mouth by hearing employers say what skills they are looking for. This is an ideal ground to start people developing skills in the areas that are required.

**Mrs Reid:** One of the big things that we have tried to do through our meet the employer events is to bring employers into the prison setting so that they get a sense of what is happening for individuals; and also that the prison system itself starts to think creatively about how the world of work can come into the Learning and Skills agenda.

**Mr Hilditch:** On the employer side, has there been any engagement with the 26 local councils? They have opportunities for employment.

**Mrs Reid:** All the councils attend employer training, and several of them have changed their recruitment policies and procedures to reflect fair recruitment procedures. We had two

representatives from Belfast City Council at our meet the employer event yesterday, and they discussed the range of opportunities that council activities can offer.

**Mr F McCann:** Thank you for your interesting presentation. We had two presentations today in which we heard about the barriers that people face. Does DEL go into Hydebank or Maghaberry to start discussions about careers? In my constituency, I have run a number of training organisations in what were called traditional skills. Most of them have closed down, as people are not signing up for them. In fact, many people have dropped away from training in traditional skills.

Some weeks ago, we heard a presentation about encouraging education through sport, and I know that Chris was particularly interested in it. Part of the time is spent doing the sport that you love, but to participate, you have to become involved in education. I think that it is run by Belfast Met. There is buy-in from many young people who would not normally have gone back into education. Davy touched on the issue of sport, and that needs to be looked at.

There are barriers to young people, but are there barriers in DEL to providing a careers information service in places such as Hydebank and Maghaberry?

**Mr Eannetta:** Specifically looking at the Careers Service, we have had a number of employer events in the presence of all three prison establishments. The Careers Service has always been very willing to offer its services, and we commend it for its flexibility in going into areas where its services are required; people do not have to go to it.

We have had no issues. Any careers advice has been brokered by ourselves; the prisons have not really taken it on because they may not see it as their responsibility. Now is the time for DEL to become involved. In our experience, the Careers Service has been very willing to provide its services where they are needed.

**Mrs Reid:** The only barrier is that it is not integrated into the system. That is the key. The various bodies work very independently of one another. Any careers advice has been provided by prison staff. It is only in the past 10 years that we have gone in to try to provide the advice and guidance that relates to the conviction. Up until then, your conviction information was not even taken into account. Therefore, during their sentences, people were put through education and training that was not relevant to what they would encounter in the labour market. The frustration that an individual experiences can lead to more offending behaviour and convictions.

**Mr Lyttle:** The lack of industry relevance of education and careers advice has been revealed as a problem in the education system itself. Hopefully, this can make recommendations on it across the board. It is easy to forget that it can extend to the justice system as well.

**Mr F McCann:** The important thing about prisons or Hydebank is that you need a seamless process, where you deal with it inside and that process continues when people get out. That is crucial. On a daily basis, I see young people come out of institutions and just drop off the radar. That goes back to the NEETs issue. You talked about training schemes for people, but a huge number of people fall off the radar. There needs to be a community setting to allow you to deal with that.

**Mr Lyttle:** A cultural shift is needed across the board — in education, justice, everywhere — to recognise the importance of getting people into work. The education and rehabilitation systems have a clear focus on doing that. Hopefully, this inquiry will challenge people to make that shift. Although we assume that it is there at the moment, it is not.

**Mr F McCann:** It is all in the interpretation of rehabilitation. Departments can be fairly stuffy about how they deal with those things.

**Mr B Clarke:** Can I pick up on what Fra said? That is in our response to the consultation, at point 3.13, about young people running around the streets when they come out of custody. One reason for that is that people coming out of custody over the age of 18 do not have entitlement to training, because they are over 18 years of age. They have missed it because they have been in custody. I constantly harp on at DEL and the Careers Service about that. They tell me that because a person is over 18, they are not entitled to training. My argument is that they should be. Young people who have been in the care system or who are disabled are entitled to training up to the age of 24. However,



young people who have been in the justice system and come out of custody beyond the age of 18 are not entitled to their two years' training.

**Mr Lyttle:** Is there a societal attitude — I am not saying that I have that attitude, but we have to ask the difficult questions — that says that the person has removed themselves from having the option of training? Is that an issue? Fra raised the issue of attitudes towards rehabilitation. Do you think that there is a societal attitude against extending greater access to that type of rehabilitation and training?

**Mr B Clarke:** Yes.

**Mr Lyttle:** Right.

**The Chairperson:** That is the simple answer to that.

**Mr Lyttle:** We need to explore that.

**The Chairperson:** Nobody else has indicated that they have a question. Thank you very much, folks, for your time and input.