



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

European Social Fund 2014-2020:  
DEL Briefing

4 December 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Employment and Learning

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

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)  
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Sammy Douglas  
Mr Phil Flanagan  
Mr Fra McCann  
Ms Bronwyn McGahan  
Mr Pat Ramsey

**Witnesses:**

Mr Tom Evans	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr John Noble	Department for Employment and Learning
Mrs Briege Rainey	Department for Employment and Learning

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Briege Rainey, head of European social fund (ESF) future funding, John Noble, head of the ESF managing authority, and Tom Evans. Folks, we have received a briefing paper from you, so it is over to you.

**Mr Tom Evans (Department for Employment and Learning):** Chairman, thanks very much for the opportunity to present the outcomes of the consultation. I will give a brief overview of the recent consultation process, say something about the strategic context and then give a few thoughts on the timescales for the introduction of the new programme. Briege will then give a short synopsis of the key issues that have arisen from the consultation responses. At the end, we will pick up questions. John Noble is with us because he leads as the managing authority for the Department, so he manages the current programme. When we get past the consultation and the agreement of the new programme, he will have the role of introducing and implementing the programme. Therefore, he has a detailed understanding of the operation of ESF programmes. The current programme covers 2007 to 2013. It was planned to end this month, but the Department secured additional funding for programmes until March 2015. That means that it should broadly coincide with the commencement of the 2014-2020 programme.

The current programme has the interrelated priorities of helping people into employment and improving workforce skills. The strategic aim of the new programme is to combat poverty and enhance social inclusion. That is why the new programme has three priorities, taking the two earlier priorities into the current programme. The programme is projected to have increased funding of €16 million or €17 million on top of what is provided under the current programme.

The consultation document was informed by the current programme, and a mid-term review in 2010 indicated that the programme was delivering substantially on the two priorities. The consultation was

also informed by the emerging strategic context of the skills strategy and current review of apprenticeships and youth training. You just had a presentation on the development of the Steps 2 Success programme and how the NEETs issue is addressed through the Pathways to Success strategy. On social inclusion, the Executive are delivering on social change commitments. The programme is funded by Europe, so it needs to align with the objectives of EU 2020.

The consultation was also informed by the views of a consultation partnership group that has wide representation. The lead Department on European issues is the Department of Finance and Personnel. Other Departments involved included the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Also involved were local government and a wide range of stakeholders.

The consultation ran from July to October this year and was widely promoted through the media, various newspapers and through our networks. The team met local government officials and stakeholders from the voluntary and community sector at meetings chaired by the Department of Finance and Personnel. We received 52 responses, which were, in general, positively disposed to the issues raised in the consultation. We are analysing the responses and meeting stakeholders to clarify issues that they think are critical. This presentation is a further opportunity to take the views of the Committee and insights that it may have.

We have not gone to the Minister on this issue. We wanted to come to yourselves to give you a first cut on the issue.

**Mr P Ramsey:** You are very good, Tom.

**Mr Evans:** It is true.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I believe you. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Evans:** Our next step is to develop a draft operational programme, based on the three priorities and the comments and proposals offered through the consultation. We then need to submit the draft operational programme to the Commission. We are not in control of that timescale, as much as we would want to be. That needs to follow the submission of the UK Government as the member state. Their overarching partnership agreement sets out how the various strands of EU funding will be coordinated over the period of the new programme. That is provisionally planned for the end of February. Once that happens, our draft programme will go to the Commission and, hopefully, be agreed. We will then seek bids for the programmes under the three priorities. We will have to give that about three months, and the plan is that we would be in a position to start assessing bids in the autumn. With all best efforts and a fair wind, we want to line up the introduction of the new programme from April 2015, when the current ESF programme comes to an end. That is a general overview, Chair. I will hand over to Briega to take you through some of the key issues.

**Mrs Briega Rainey (Department for Employment and Learning):** I will go through the five questions that we posed in the consultation document and briefly go through the responses. Where there was agreement with what we were proposing, there is not an issue, but we will concentrate on the areas where people were in disagreement or had other suggestions.

Question 1 was about the three thematic objectives and the four investment priorities. We asked for people's views on whether they thought we had got it right. As you can see, people were almost unanimously in favour of what we had gone for. The one organisation that disagreed was concerned that we had gone for three priorities instead of two, but, as Tom has explained, originally, we considered having two priorities. The new one that was introduced, thematic objective 9, was about contributing to combating poverty and promoting social inclusion. We felt that, as a Department and through our ESF programme, we did those things through the other two thematic objectives, namely 8 and 10. However, because a ring-fenced amount of money has been allocated to that particular priority, our desk officer in the Commission, after discussion with other Commission officials, felt that we would need to demonstrate very clearly how and where that ring-fenced amount of money would be spent. The simplest and most transparent way to do that was by having a separate priority. Therefore, in the end, we decided to go for the three priorities. There was really no way around that. It is the best way to go because of the financial allocations.

In question 2, we asked whether people felt that the funding was sufficiently focused, given the constraints in funding. As you can see, 27 out of 40 responses were totally in favour. As you might expect, the people who disagreed tended to promote their own particular project. Lone parents said

that there should be more of a focus on lone parents, and other people had concerns that there was not enough detail in the document. However, it was intended to be a high-level document so that people could make their opinions known.

I turn to the type of people we would help through priorities 1, 2 and 3. Priority 1 would cover people who are unemployed, long-term unemployed and economically inactive. Within that group are lone parents, women, ex-offenders, and people who have suffered with substance misuse and alcohol abuse. They all would be included in priority 1. We intend to spell that out in the document. We plan to have what we call a data dictionary in which we will define the terms that we are using, even the term "disability", so that people are clear about exactly what we are trying to achieve.

There were other concerns about the priorities. Some people felt that, by ring-fencing money for priority 2, the NEET group in priority 1 would miss out. In fact, there is a NEET group being targeted in priority 2 as well. Those are people who have been referred to us by social services. They are from disadvantaged families. They are not standard NEETs, so to speak, who simply cannot find a job or get into employment or training, but people who, in addition, have difficult backgrounds or difficult family circumstances. They would come under the promoting social inclusion priority, so there is additional funding for them.

In question 3, we asked for views on the extent to which the proposed interventions address the priorities. Five people agreed completely, but most people — 31 — agreed to some extent. That was what we expected. People all had their own view on what the issues were. For example, one of the organisations said that we would need a reference to a childcare strategy. We do not promote that through ESF funding, but all the projects and all the participants under ESF are entitled to childcare allowances. Whether it is childcare through a crèche, a registered childminder or a relative, that provision is there. There is payment for that.

Another concern was that there should be a recognition of soft outcomes. Not everyone can achieve NVQ qualifications, and, in fact, in the current programme, there is a recognition of soft outcomes. There is not a standardised method for identifying soft outcomes, but I know that the managing authority is looking at a standardised method that would assist in that. It is an area that we are very keen on. We realise that, because of the type of people who are involved in ESF projects, the distance travelled is sometimes far more important than standard qualifications.

There were other concerns. The comment that there should be more engagement with local councils came up again. That is a separate issue for us. We are in discussion with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and some of the local councils. We will meet them next week to look at their proposals for how they can have more influence in the programme.

Question 4 asked whether a more strategic approach should be taken to the selection of projects. In the past, we have always commissioned by open call, and there has been some criticism in the consultation responses about duplication of activity. On the other hand, if we were to take a more strategic and thematic approach, others feel that that would constrain projects and would possibly shoehorn some activity to fit with those themes.

In the new programme, because we have three priorities, I can see three themes already. The first theme is access to employment, the second is promoting social inclusion and combating poverty, and the third is the skills priority. We are already on the way to having a bit more of a breakdown of the type of activity that we want to fund. In addition, we think that we should have a look at that open call system and at the issues people have with it to see whether we can address some of those. We are thinking, for example, of putting in place an independent expert panel so that, at the selection stage, we would like to think that we could pre-empt any issues that may arise to ensure that selection of projects is robust and we could cut down on duplication and those sorts of issues at that stage.

Question 5 asked how the programme might be simplified and streamlined. This is a big issue, even from the European point of view. Simplification is an important aspect of the new programme. We have a sample of very many suggestions, including the need for an earlier timetable for calls, and that clarity is needed around permissible sources of matched funding. I can say straight off that that issue is being addressed in that, currently, the intervention rate or the amount of funding from ESF is 40%. DEL then provides 25% of funding for priorities 1 and 2, and the other 35% is sourced from other public bodies. In the new programme, it will be permissible to go to private organisations as well, so that should help with the matched funds issue.

Simplification of the verification procedures was mentioned, and I think that John in particular would like to see all those things taken on board, because we are constrained by the Commission. A vast amount of work goes on, including the amount of auditing. It would be in everyone's interests to have a simplified process in place.

I will move on to question 6, which was about other related issues. There were a few concerns. One was about the inability of participants to claim benefits while on an ESF programme. That is under discussion in the Department. The people who work with NEETs and people in employment services are discussing and looking at that to see whether there is a way forward. It does not affect an awful lot of people but it is an issue.

Another issue that was pointed out is the financial incentives for employers to engage in ESF programmes. That is outside the remit of the ESF. There is not a lot that we can do about that. We cannot give employers additional money to encourage them to take people. Another suggestion is that there should be more support for people with disabilities in employment. I would say that the entire focus of ESF priority 2 is to help to enable people with disabilities to get the skills that they need to get into sustainable employment. Beyond that, I could not say very much.

Finally, we asked for general comments. In that section, someone again mentioned that commissioning themes would be a detrimental step and would limit diversity of service provision and lead to a loss of local knowledge. Information was asked for on the consultative partnership group. Everything that we are working on will be published, including the consultation responses and details of the consultative partnership group. That will all be available on our website; people can go to our consultation zone and get all of that information.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you. John, are you happy enough or do you want to make some comments before we move to questions?

**Mr John Noble (Department for Employment and Learning):** I would just like to clarify a couple of things. On the issue of simplification that Briege mentioned, we are currently piloting a simplification model to look at indirect cost paid as a basic lump sum to projects rather than actual receipts. The current process under the programme was that, if you spent one penny, you had to have a receipt for that penny. We have abolished that. We pay projects 20%, based on salary and participant costs as a simplified model. That is, obviously, within the rules of the European Commission.

The other issue is incentives for employers. The current programme does not have any incentives for employers for the simple reason that, if you enter those waters, you might breach state aid rules. Because the aim is, obviously, to train and upskill people and get them into employment, the focus is really on the training aspect of the programme.

**The Chairperson:** Tom, you said that the operational programme has to go to the UK Government before it goes to the Commission. Is there any concern about or threat to the programme that DEL is putting forward?

**Mr Evans:** It actually goes to the Commission after the UK Government have presented their overall partnership agreement. The reality is that it will, obviously, depend on the quality of the programme and how closely we meet the overarching objectives that the Commission has set.

**Mrs Rainey:** All the UK regions feed into the partnership agreement document. There is a Northern Ireland chapter in that document, which looks at all the funds, including the European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the ESF. The UK partnership agreement takes in the chapters for all of the managing authorities throughout the UK. The most recent news on that is that the UK partnership agreement will not be submitted to the Commission until the end of the February. Operating programmes cannot be submitted before then, so we are held back at the moment. We cannot submit before the end of February. Once it is submitted, we join a queue with all of the other member states. The document is passed round a number of sections in the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, and the Directorate-General for Regional Policy. It is criticised — we are told that they do not like this, and would prefer if we did that. There could be a three-month period of going backwards and forwards with the Commission until we actually get it into a format with which it agrees.

**The Chairperson:** Does that happen directly between you and the Commission, or does it have to go through the UK authorities?

**Mrs Rainey:** It is between us and the Commission.

**Mr Evans:** To clarify, Chairman, we are talking about simplification issues. There is nothing very simple when you deal with Europe, but the operational programme does not have to be approved by the UK Government. As Briege said, we fill in a more generic chapter on Northern Ireland — a sort of an overview. Once that partnership agreement is submitted, we can move our draft operational programme for consideration by the Commission, which is the determining body on that.

**Mrs Rainey:** We will send it to the Executive first and then submit it to the Commission.

**The Chairperson:** Briege, you went through the consultation responses to the questions. In the responses to question 2, you highlighted the fact that a number of organisations prioritise their key projects and reasons for being. For question 4, you talked about a more strategic approach, and you said that you could see three main aims falling out. Is there a concern or a risk that the three key aims that the Department might put into its operational programme will disenfranchise some of those smaller groups completely?

**Mrs Rainey:** I do not think so. Do you mean the three priorities?

**The Chairperson:** Yes.

**Mrs Rainey:** The priorities are based on three thematic objectives. The thematic objectives have come from Europe; they have come from the Commission, and we had no real control. They are the three that apply to ESF, so we have to go with those. We had some say in the investment priorities — in other words, the areas in which we choose to invest our money in order to achieve the objectives — but we are tied to those thematic objectives. So, through the operating programme and the activities, we are trying to ensure that we achieve the objectives in a way that builds on the work that is ongoing in the current programme, and which chimes with what our Programme for Government is aiming to achieve — the economic inactivity strategy, all of those things, as well as European strategies like EU 2020.

Every year, the Commission gives us country-specific recommendations. They are recommendations from the Commission on what we need to do to improve the economy or to ensure that we are helping to get people out of poverty. We have to be aligned with all of those things, from local level up to EU level. It is a matter of ensuring that we get it right in using the people that we have to deliver on those objectives, but in a way that is suitable for Northern Ireland.

**Mr Noble:** If you look at the range of project promoters that we have in the current programme, you will see that they all fit within those current proposed priorities. There should not be anybody that would be excluded from applying.

**Mr Evans:** Obviously, we draft the operational programme in such a way that we specify that it is crucial to the whole process that people could recognise that there is a potential to deliver programmes that they are expert in or have an experience in.

**Mrs Rainey:** On several occasions, the Commission has said that it is very happy with the current programme and how it runs, and that it does not envisage any great changes in the new programme. From the Commission's point of view, it runs very well.

**Mr P Ramsey:** That was a very interesting and comprehensive submission. It is one on which we look forward to more dialogue with the Commission going forward. I am very interested in the latter points on the independent panel. It is crucial that you are getting diverse opinions coming forward from those representing the marginalised groups and the most vulnerable groups that have been highlighted through the report. Those are disabled people, NEETs, people with learning difficulties and all the rest, and areas as well — subregional areas where there are higher levels of unemployment and lower levels of skill. There is Youth on the Move, the agenda for new skills and the platform against poverty. In your latter comments, Briege, you said that Europe is saying you are doing grand and that you should carry on the way you are. Surely, however, if you are trying to make a difference of inclusion, you have to resource it and target it in a much better way than you were doing previously, to make a much stronger impact. What are you going to do to increase the level of employment opportunities for disabled people, those with learning difficulties, those NEET and those — my constituents — who have the highest level of unemployment and economic inactivity? What are you going to tell me that is

going to give a heart to the young people — and to Tom Buchanan's, as well? Derry and Strabane consistently have the highest levels of unemployment. What are you going to do to improve their opportunities?

**Mrs Rainey:** The fact that we have that specific objective around poverty and social inclusion is going to put a focus on that area for people with disability and for NEETs from disadvantaged families. We are targeting those groups, rather than targeting geographical areas. However, in doing so —

**Mr P Ramsey:** Sorry, Briege, but if there is a regional disparity in employment opportunities then you are going to have to target geographical areas.

**Mrs Rainey:** Yes, the projects that we run cover the whole of Northern Ireland. There are projects in all of the areas. The community family support project, for example, has been built on the basis of the areas of multiple deprivation throughout Northern Ireland. That is the programme that the NEETs people are going to be identified from. That identification is there at the moment and will continue.

**Mr Evans:** We are having a discussion about links to NEETs and the pathway strategy, which Brian Smart leads on. Obviously, we will be drawing on information that our analytical services provide in terms of looking at populations and particular groups where there are particular needs. The reality is that, even when getting the bids from the various parts of Northern Ireland, the prospective providers will put together proposals that are about addressing the needs.

**Mr Noble:** One of the benefits of the open call system is that it puts it out to the voluntary and community sector in those geographical areas to say what the demands and needs are in their area. We can then put a proposal in. The whole basis of the ESF programme is a holistic approach for the individual. The open call system brings forward those project promoters who are best placed in those areas to bring forward those projects.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Can I tease out something else? The Chair asked the Minister a question when he was delivering an economic inactivity statement to the House about the high volume of strategies in DEL at present. Some of them are good, some of them are progressive and some of them are making a difference. My worry is this: will it be clearly additional to what is already there and not be sucked up into a NEET strategy or a welfare reform legacy to try to pick up the issues coming out of welfare? You said that there are going to be programmes and you are going to invite tenders to come in, but, unless you specifically detail programmes for people with disability, people with NEETs and people in regions with high levels of unemployment, you are not going to make a difference in geographical areas or in specific vulnerable groups, whether it is young people coming out of prison or young people in the NEET bracket who are coming out of care and who have mental health problems. Unless you are specific, you are not going to make that difference.

**Mr Evans:** I think you are looking at where the gaps in provision are. We are having discussion internally to show that there is no duplication in the programmes. I am looking at the population from 16 right through. What are the different types of treatments? Some people will be dealt with by mainstream support, but the kinds of groups you are talking about need enhanced support.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Yes, I agree.

**Mr Evans:** What you are looking at is a fairly sophisticated needs assessment at that stage.

**Mr Noble:** In the current programme, if you go out and talk to the projects on the ground and the participants they are helping, they tend to be people at the lower end of the skills ladder. So we believe that ESF starts them on the road to get on to that ladder. Once they get on to the ladder then they normally go on to other DEL programmes like Steps to Work or further education colleges. We believe that ESF is a stepping stone to get people who have no qualifications or experience at all up to a level with that holistic approach. Some of the activities that happen under ESF would not happen under any other DEL programme. It is about getting the hard-to-reach onto that ladder.

**Mr P Ramsey:** The Committee wants to work with you to ensure that you make that difference, so I look forward to your next briefing on how the operation is working.

**Mr Buchanan:** Pat is right: you have to be specific. One size — or, in this case, one programme — does not fit all. Has there been any consultation or any working with the health and social care trusts?

I see there is talk of more engagement with councils. What engagement has there been with health and social care trusts? I ask because in my constituency there is a growing concern that there is no provision for people who have an autistic disorder. I know that from the amount of correspondence coming through my office from people in their late teens, early twenties and further on.

I am not sure that they even come under the NEETs category, because it appears that there is no programme at all to help or facilitate those people. The Western Trust is deemed to be the worst trust for having any programme for people with an autistic disorder. It is a serious problem. I know families who are at their wits' end because there is no programme or anything at all for them. So, has there been engagement with the trust? There needs to be, so that maybe it can take it forward or do something for this type of people and the people within that category.

**Mr Noble:** A number of our projects in the programme have to secure match funding, which comes from most of the trusts, so an element of a number of projects would be match-funded by the trust. The trust has its aims and objectives and would match those with the ESF project. The one that comes to mind is the Cedar Foundation, which helps the types of clients that you just described across Northern Ireland. Its match funder is the trust, so the trust works closely with it. That will be key in the new programme.

**Mr Evans:** We have not had any particular contacts through the consultation, but this is why we came today. These are issues, and we will initiate contact because you can only respond to needs and strategies if they are communicated. We will take action to talk to the trusts. I have been talking to trusts in a different environment recently, so we will do that.

**Ms McGahan:** Thank you for your presentation. Were any of those consultations held in rural areas?

**Mrs Rainey:** No.

**Ms McGahan:** That is disappointing.

**Mrs Rainey:** All the meetings were in Belfast, at NICVA headquarters and in hotels. We did not go to other regions or areas.

**Ms McGahan:** Do you feel that there is a gap here in terms of rural areas and the priority of dealing with poverty and social inclusion?

**Mrs Rainey:** Yes, obviously I can see that. Not getting out to the areas was more logistical, really, and not having the staff to be able to go out there. We were very constrained in staff time. In fact, the groups came to Belfast.

**Mr Evans:** We had responses from and contact with local government through a range of councils that are communicating needs. As John said, a wide range of providers come from the local areas.

**Ms McGahan:** Can you provide me with a list of the councils that made submissions? I would be very concerned that rural areas were not represented. I have concerns that the current measures of poverty and disadvantage do not take in the needs of rural areas. They are disadvantaged when it comes to accessing funding. If the model that is used in the Twenty-six Counties was applied here, you would find very different patterns. I am concerned that the rural dimension was not addressed. I do not know how we can follow up on that, but I would not be happy.

**Mr Noble:** We have 97 projects across Northern Ireland, and they were all offered the opportunity to respond to the consultation. We have taken on board the issue of rural engagement. For example, on a regular basis we bring our projects together to consult with them on a number of issues. We have to admit that the majority of those meetings took place in Belfast, and it has been fed back to us that we should go out to the rural areas. So, we are planning to have some events over the coming months across Northern Ireland.

Recently, we had a fringe youth event, which led up to our ESF conference. That fringe event was organised by Youth Action Northern Ireland on our behalf. It held a number of sessions across Northern Ireland, and then obviously it had champions that were selected from those fringe events across Northern Ireland, which fed into our main conference in Belfast. So, we admit that we have not



engaged as fully as we should have, but we are starting to take that on board and engage more formally.

**Ms McGahan:** For all the information that you have outlined, can you provide additional information on where those specific groups come from? You talk about having more events. Have you thought about where those events will be?

**Mr Noble:** We are planning an event with our projects just before Christmas. A date has to be agreed, but it is potentially going to be in the north-west. In the new year, we will start to publicise the new programme. We plan to go out to as many of the regions as we can in the time frame that we have. We will obviously be taking that on board.

**The Chairperson:** Are you signed up to the draft rural White Paper in regard to consultation?

**Mr Noble:** We are aware of it. On the important point about outreach, as we draft the operational programme, we will have to communicate what we are requiring. So, we need to go back and see whether we can do something in areas outside of Belfast, do it physically and go out to the regions. I take the point about asking people to come to a Belfast event. We could run five or six events and present the operational programme before we call for bids or whatever. We will look at that, but we will provide the information as well.

**Mr Douglas:** Bronwyn raised one of the questions I was going to ask about the councils. Tom, you are going to come back to us with a list. Can you give us a rough indication of the response from the councils, very briefly?

As with my colleague Tom, I have an interest in Asperger's syndrome and autism. It strikes me that you have been involved with a group in east Belfast. There are growing numbers of children being affected by autism. Is that the case in Europe? Obviously, if we are putting together a European programme, there may be linkages to try to help and support. Some of the young adults can be very gifted, but obviously they have a range of other difficulties to cope with when it comes to training and employment.

**Mrs Rainey:** I do not have any information on that.

**Mr Noble:** I have some experience in that area. There is an element of our programme called "Transnationality". In other words, projects can actually develop partnerships across Europe. We have a number of projects that actually do have links across Europe. I visited a project last week in Spain. It was outside of my day job, and it was an organisation that I am familiar with. If you speak to the projects in the programme that we have that target people with disabilities, you will hear that Northern Ireland strikes above what is happening across the rest of Europe. That is the feedback that we get from projects that have links across Europe. They say that they are in a very strong position, and the good thing about ESF in Northern Ireland is that it is a very holistic approach and is focused on the participant and the participant's need. When you go across Europe, you tend to find programmes for people; they do not go down to the individual. Most of our projects — I mentioned Cedar earlier, but I could talk about Disability Action, Mencap and other groups like that — focus on the participants. So, whatever the needs of the participants are, they will actually meet that demand. That is the flexibility of ESF.

**Mr Douglas:** John, was an evaluation done of those projects?

**Mr Noble:** Do you mean individual ESF projects?

**Mr Douglas:** Yes, and I am thinking about Disability Action. I know that the likes of Ballybeen Women's Group will have been involved in a number of projects. If you have some information, I could maybe relay it back to some of those groups, to say that there is a programme that is coming and that there may be an opportunity for them to link in to try to get support from other parts of Europe.

**Mr Noble:** Most of our individual projects would complete an independent evaluation of it, which would feed into ourselves. So, we can certainly furnish you with some information on those that have been completed.

**Mr Evans:** On the general point, we will actively pursue the issue with the health trusts as well, because that is something that is within our gift.

**Mr F McCann:** I have a short point to make. Sammy always gets the constituency one in; brilliant. I can fully understand it. People right across the Assembly will say that many events that are organised are Belfast-centric. I can understand why people say that. When people are sitting down, they should look. People from Belfast can travel out as well as people can travel in. Look at the Dungannons, Strabanes or wherever and hold events in those areas, because it is particularly difficult for people in rural communities to travel, given the transport. The other thing is that when you hold it in Belfast, you are going to get the usual suspects who turn up at every consultation event. When you are dealing with NEETs, people say, "We've got a programme for NEETs, and we believe that we are getting at them". However, people who live in communities know that they are not getting at them. All of this escapes those who really need the help and consideration.

What you spoke about is good. It ticks all the boxes, but, as Pat said, it is only good if it makes a difference. The difficulty with many of the schemes is that many of them have been about for a long time, and many of them just tap into the usual suspects, but those who are particularly in need are the people whom this escapes. People talk about autism and Asperger's, and there are a number of other difficulties that are not getting touched at all.

**Mr Evans:** On the general point, the programme is for 14 to 20, so it is a big programme. When we get the operational programme in place, we should go out and communicate it. To give you some assurance, the priorities have been framed in such a way as to be flexible enough to cope with addressing. People can find a niche, whether it is in a very rural environment or in a highly populated environment, because there are different needs and infrastructure issues. Coming away from that, that is why we have come here today. You have raised a number of issues. It is better you raise them now that if we had drafted a programme and it was out the door. At least we can see if we can address them.

**Mr F McCann:** Sometimes, it is as easy as ringing Tom or Bronwyn and saying, "Look, we have this event here. Is there anywhere in your area that could facilitate this?".

**The Chairperson:** Or North Antrim.

**Mr Noble:** We may be knocking at your doors, then.

**Mr Buchanan:** You need to get out to West Tyrone.

**Mr Evans:** I have been in west Tyrone many times.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much for coming along. Points have been raised, especially by Bronwyn. It is handy that you have come to us before the Minister. You can take that message back to him from the Committee.