



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Youth Training: DEL Briefing

12 February 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mrs Deirdre McGill	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Daryl Young	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: I welcome Daryl Young, the deputy director of further education, and Deirdre McGill, the head of youth training, from the Department for Employment and Learning. We would be grateful for a 10-minute briefing.

Mr Daryl Young (Department for Employment and Learning): Thank you very much, Chairman. I am accompanied by Deirdre, who heads up the team that is looking at the review of youth training. We submitted quite a detailed briefing paper, so I will try to pull out some of the salient points, after which Deirdre will look at the way forward on some issues.

At the outset, I want to say that the review of youth training is specifically focused on a cohort of young people who are at or around level 2, which is around GCSE level. I will come back to that later and give a bit more detail.

This is the first of two sessions that we want to give to the Committee, so this initial session is to give you an early opportunity to hear what we are about and to ask some questions. We plan to come back later, probably in March, when we will have done more thinking and research and come forward with emerging findings and a potential way forward for further discussion. We hope to have a proposition in place by the early summer — perhaps the Minister will give a presentation to the Assembly at that stage — and then go into a formal consultation exercise, with a view to the review finishing some time in the autumn of this year. It is quite an intensive programme over the next nine or 10 months or so. It very broadly follows the approach taken to the apprenticeship review; they are very much brother and sister.

As you know, the Minister announced a review of youth training and apprenticeships in February 2013. They are both seen in the context of the Department's skills strategy and making a more effective economy by ensuring that we can meet the skills needs of employers and also making sure

that, in this case, young people have the skills and other attributes that employers need to give young people the best opportunity to get into employment. It is very much seen in the context of having an effective, high-quality and relevant apprenticeship and youth training system.

I want to say a little about timing. Although the two reviews were announced at the same time, this review is following slightly behind the apprenticeship one for a very good reason. As I will explain shortly, this is a main feeder programme into the apprenticeships. One of the main recommendations in the apprenticeship review is that they should move to level 3. This is very much a feeder for young people into that area. We need to make sure that we fully understand the requirements of the level 3 apprenticeship so that we can in turn make sure that level 2 training meets those needs and fits young people. There is a bit of a lag.

It is also interesting that, with the movement of apprenticeships up to level 3, it is likely that they will all require good literacy and numeracy skills and possibly, in some areas, GCSEs at grade C and above in English and maths. Most of the apprenticeships will require that. At apprenticeship level, we are talking about a qualification that is equivalent to A levels. Our level 2 programme, therefore, needs to be broad and have sufficient depth to prepare young people for that transition.

What is the cohort? The cohort is typically young people leaving school. They would have done their GCSEs, of course, but they would not be coming out with five GCSEs at grade C and above. They are possibly coming out with two or three GCSEs at grades A to C, and maybe two or three at grades D to G. They may or may not have English and maths at grade A to C. It is a well-motivated and reasonably well-qualified group of young people. They probably do not have many barriers to progress, but they are not quite at full level 2.

The review is not for young people who are already leaving school with a level 2 qualification, which is defined as five or more GCSEs at grades A to C. Those young people would be able to go straight into an apprenticeship or a level 3 further education (FE) programme. It is not for them. Neither is it for younger people who perhaps have barriers and do not quite have the qualification level that I outlined. Their natural home, at least to begin with, would be the lower level Training for Success programmes such as Skills for Your Life and Skills for Work. They could, of course, progress onto the programme that we are designing. It is very much a landscape of provision.

Some young people coming onto the programme may have a very clear idea of what they want to do. Others may not be so mature or so sure about what they want to do. There are probably three subgroups in the cohort: those who know that they want to go forward for an apprenticeship on a skills-based route; those who want to go down more of an educational route and so would go into a level 3 provision in FE; and there may be some who simply want to get into employment as quickly as they can. The programme needs to be pretty flexible and fleet of foot to enable all those different aspirations to be met. We want it to be an aspirational, high-quality programme that young people will aspire to enter if they decide to leave school at the age of 16. That is very much one of the fundamentals.

Deirdre will cover the possible content a wee bit more. The research to date shows that it could be made up of four main areas: employability skills, which employers say they really need; a good work placement, which is possibly one of the most challenging bits of the programme; literacy and numeracy, which may increasingly involve resitting GCSEs in English and maths; and a good relevant vocational qualification, such as a City and Guilds or BTEC qualification. That is the sort of mix that we are looking at in the programme.

There are different programmes at the moment, which this will replace. We want to try to make the programme more cohesive and be a single programme that is less confusing for young people. At present, a lot of people are following an apprenticeship at level 2, which will, of course, disappear. There is currently a Skills for Work level 2 Training for Success programme, which is a successor to programme-led apprenticeships. There are also mainstream FE programmes at level 2. We want to try to get those programmes into a more cohesive whole as we move forward.

Careers guidance will be an important element of the programme. It will not only be good, independent careers guidance as young people enter the programme but ongoing guidance as they go through the programme, because they may change their minds as they go through. They may want to move from one focus to another, so we think that it is important that good careers guidance is available as young people move through and progress out of the programme.

So far, we have had a fairly inclusive process of consultation. We have had a number of stakeholder events and a call for submissions on the website, so we are already beginning to capture a lot of the views of key stakeholders. I will now pass over to Deirdre to paint for you what our programme is going to be from here forward.

Mrs Deirdre McGill (Department for Employment and Learning): Good morning. We are trying to make sure that we have an evidence-based policy. We have already carried out a number of study visits across the UK and the Republic of Ireland to check what is happening on this piece. We have also been in touch with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and have asked it to research, in particular, what best practice is available for young people in connecting those who perhaps do not always do well in a classroom-based environment and how we could link vocational education with the world of work. As part of that process, we have been given advice to target three countries: the Netherlands, Denmark and Scotland. The Minister is carrying out a study visit to the Netherlands next week, and we hope to follow that up.

As Daryl said, we have had extensive stakeholder engagement. It has been very interesting, because the feedback confirms what our desk research has already shown us. It is interesting that young people themselves feel that they want to be stretched. They want the opportunity to get a quality offering that employers will value. In particular, they want very clear advice on the potential progression pathways for getting into an apprenticeship, the world of work or, if that does not operate, progressing into further education. Their aspirations are very high. We targeted a number of focus groups and will continue to do that through a leaver survey next month.

Employers' feedback to date — that continuous engagement will happen over the next couple of months — verified what Daryl said about what the programme is likely to look like. Employers were very clear — I am sure that it is well documented — that they want young people with good literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. They want the right attributes. They felt that, if there were to be work placements, young people needed to be sufficiently mature at the point at which they entered that work placement to take responsibility and show interest, which should be matched with the vocational area. There is no point in a young person who is perhaps interested in an area of construction being given a work placement in retail. There was a whole alignment issue about how we would take it forward.

As you will be aware from the review of apprenticeships, we have established a joint expert panel for both apprenticeships and youth training. The Minister has made a decision to reorganise or change that to have an expert panel that is specifically focused on youth training, because the issues are different. We have included a number of new sectors on that expert panel, such as retail and childcare, which are growth sectors. Those sectors will provide opportunities for employment because a lot of people are required in the childcare sector, and there is a lot of replacement demand in retail. We have also added in some training organisations and the Prince's Trust, and we will be engaging more widely with the voluntary and community sector.

The first meeting of the new refreshed panel is due to take place at the end of February, and, at that stage, we will be able to present some preliminary findings from our research and from the call for submissions. The call for submissions is now due, and we have started to get some significant reports. We will be collating and analysing all of that, and, as Daryl said, we will present again to the Committee at the end of March when the picture should be a little clearer.

In the spirit of all that, I suggest that we now take your questions.

The Chairperson: Dead on. Thank you, Deirdre and Daryl.

Daryl, you clarified our understanding of youth training and apprenticeships. You referred to them as "brother and sister", and they will be interlinked and intertwined. Why is youth training coming after apprenticeships and not before? I would have thought that you would have wanted to get the level 2 programme sorted out before level 3 was tied down.

Mr Young: I guess that it is a bit of a chicken-and-egg issue. However, the fundamental reason is that, because the level 2 programme will be one of the main feeder programmes into apprenticeships, we need to be sure that we understand the requirements of the apprenticeship programme so that we can tailor what is happening at level 2 so that it prepares young people better for entry into a level 3 programme. It is a matter of making sure that we fully understand what will be required of the new apprenticeship programme at level 3, which will be much more comprehensive and will move beyond

level 3 to higher levels. We need to understand that before we finalise the design of the level 2 programme, as it is a main feeder. You could have started it either way, but we thought that that was probably the most sensible way to do it.

The Chairperson: What collaboration has there been with the Department of Education (DE) or even the Department for Social Development (DSD) in the establishment of that?

Mr Young: We have been dealing with the Department of Education for quite some time now on the broader 14–19 area. In fact, we had a meeting with the Department of Education yesterday. We talk about having clear progression pathways for young people in our own programmes. Similarly, DE will look at progression in the school system for young people who decide not to leave at 16, and they have all sorts of progression issues. Yesterday, we talked about the need for the Department to align its two progression pathways and make sure that the transition is as smooth as possible for young people when they leave school, whether that is at 16, 17 or 18 years of age, and that the progression pathways between the two organisations' programmes are clear. That work is under way.

The Chairperson: So the work is under way. It is not just being talked about.

Mrs McGill: We also want to ensure that we capture in our programme sufficient skills development and opportunities for young people to avoid their entering the benefits system. We are trying to capture them, signpost them and make sure that that progression pathway, if it is needed — we hope that it will be needed only in a small number of cases — will be joined up so that we will give them a diet that was not being duplicated.

Mr Young: It is probably fair to say that the cohort on which this review is focused is young people who make the decision to leave school at the age of 16. They probably would not have the GCSE profile to enable them to stay on into sixth form. They are young people who will be leaving, and there is a very clear progression point from the school system into the education and training system on our side of the fence. We need to work closely with DE on that.

The Chairperson: You will have to work with DE because careers teachers must also buy into it. You will have to convince them that this is an alternative.

Mr Young: Absolutely. As you know from your other work, the two Departments are jointly reviewing the careers strategy. That needs to consider what happens lower down in a school — say, at third form, when people are moving into the 14–18 space. As young people move into fourth form, many more choices are now available to them than would have been previously. It is important for them to take careers advice. Also, as people come into and move through our programme, that initial and ongoing careers advice will be very important, so I think that all of that will have an impact on the review that the two Departments are doing of the careers strategy.

The Chairperson: Daryl, you were very clear about who was not going to be involved in this strategy. One group which I suppose has been missed out, but which you referred to, is the young people who do not have entry level or even level 1. You said that there are other programmes, such as Skills for Life, for instance. Is a review being done there? One of the concerns that the Committee had with apprenticeships was that we were going to miss out level 2. Now we are being reassured that level 2 will be there because we have a review for youth training. What about that other cohort that is not included?

Mr Young: At the minute, that other cohort is picked up as part of the wider work that the Department, with others, is doing on NEETs. It is not fair to say that NEETs will pick all of those up, but I think that the programmes for that sort of young person are probably quite well defined at the moment, but will be refreshed and looked at again in the light of the NEETs strategy. We are very clear that there needs to be a progression route for those young people out of those programmes and into the programme that we are currently reviewing.

The Chairperson: Daryl, I will let other members follow up on that point, because I know that they will want to.

Mr Douglas: Thank you very much for your presentation. We are here in the Titanic Quarter in the science park, where we had some of the greatest welders in the world, and we still have some of the greatest welders in the world. By the way, it is in my constituency.

Coded welding is very much part of training. Have you identified any gaps there? I ask that because Copius came to us and told us that there was a huge number of jobs. There are jobs, particularly for coded welding, not only in Northern Ireland but offshore. The European standard is 9606. In Northern Ireland, however, you can get to a level 2 City and Guilds, but you cannot get to level 3. I think you have to go to Cork or Aberdeen for that. Surely, there is a big gap there. Welding affects all sectors of industry. There are great opportunities. How do we fill that gap?

Mr Young: The first part of filling the gap is identifying, specifically, what the nature of that gap is. We would have to do that through the involvement of the sector skills council.

Mr Douglas: Daryl, I am saying that you cannot get trained to level 3 here in Northern Ireland. If people want you to have the European standard 9606 coded welding certificate, you cannot reach it here. Think of the expense for trainees, or even employers, of sending people to Aberdeen or Cork to get trained. Cork is the closest place to us to be trained on the island. I am working with Chris Lyttle on this, and we are looking to see how we can bridge that gap. Have you any answers for us?

Mr Young: I think we will have to log that as an issue that we will have to look at. That may well be an area that the apprenticeships programme could pick up on. One of the things that we need to make sure we do is identify the needs of employers and, if there are gaps, try to fill those gaps. That is possibly an area that could be looked at in the apprenticeship review.

Mr Douglas: Will you come back to us on that?

Mr Young: Certainly.

Mr Douglas: Thank you very much.

Mr F McCann: I know that Sammy is fairly passionate about the whole question of the welding, and I totally agree with him. Recently, I had occasion to talk to a couple of people who applied for a job behind us. They are fully qualified, but never got an opportunity to take part in it. In the past, big sections of this city never got the opportunity to get into welding, and it is something that needs to be dealt with.

I want to pick up on something that the Chair said about those who have been bypassed. If my memory serves me right, we were told a couple of years ago that 40,000 young people left school without any GCSEs. We were constantly asking questions about how they were being catered for. I know we can say that NEETs can pick them up, or that some may not be picked up. We have to ensure that everybody is picked up and offered an opportunity. As part of the inquiry that we have carried out into careers, and some of the other presentations that we got, there is also a section amongst them — people with special needs, people with disabilities and people who are blind and partially sighted — who have come here and said that, when you take all the ones that are neglected, they feel it worse than anything. What can be said to them? What will this youth training programme offer them that is not being offered now?

Mr Young: I think it is that progression. A lot of the young people you have described will be starting off in programmes and availing themselves of opportunities that will eventually feed into this particular programme. We want to make sure that, if we get the level 2 programme right, it gives something that young people can aspire to get into. However, we also have to make sure that the programmes that will be feeding into that level 2 programme are appropriate and right. In mainstream FE, we have a lot of young people following level 1 provision, as well as level 2 provision, to bring them up to the stage where they could operate at this level, and in our training programmes. There are other programmes that address those needs.

Mrs McGill: All of those programmes have essential skills included within them. So, if you are operating an entry level programme or a level 1 programme, it will be an absolutely integral part of those programmes to address those literacy and numeracy issues and to encourage that young person to go up the levels and get to level 2. All of the programmes that exist at the moment at entry level and level 1 will continue to exist. All of the pathways to programmes and the Training for Success programmes will still be in place.

The issue with that particular cohort is that, if we badge them — we are trying to make sure that we give those who are very close to the labour market sustained support to get them up the skills ladder

very fast, because if we do not maintain the momentum and do that, there is the danger that they will become less motivated and move into the benefits system, which you referred to earlier.

Mr F McCann: To take it a bit further, if I was listening to that, and I fitted into the category, I would feel bad, because there is nothing there — or even in the report, which I have gone through — that particularly says how you move people who are disadvantaged — doubly disadvantaged in many ways — into the mainstream and allow them the equal opportunity that they have not had up until now. We can talk about all of the schemes that may be available, but if you talk to the groups that come in front of the Committee, you will hear many of them say that it has failed them. This is supposed to be a new way forward, but the same categories of people are being left behind.

Mr Young: Those issues, as they exist, need to be addressed within the context of those existing programmes or maybe new, different programmes that need to be designed to meet the needs that you have addressed. The programme that we are identifying is not necessarily the programme to meet those needs at that point in time, but, hopefully, it will provide progression for people whose issues have been solved through other programmes.

Mr F McCann: Chair, I do not mean to hog the meeting, but you said that you were looking at different schemes in other jurisdictions. You spoke about the panel that the Minister had set up, and you talked about speaking to different groups of people. When you were looking at developing the programme that we have in front of us and taking it forward, did people sit down with groups that represent those most disadvantaged and those with disabilities and say, "We have this scheme here. How do you see it? How do you see it proceeding? How do you see the people whom you represent fitting in with this, because this is all about equality and equality of opportunity?"

Mr Young: We will certainly be doing it, and we have been doing it. Deirdre, you can say something about the groups we have had so far.

Mrs McGill: Certainly, in the voluntary and community sector, we are meeting the group that represents the NEETs forum next week. We have met United Youth. We are going to try to get a broader group together through the voluntary and community sector to have a more detailed engagement with. We have met a lot of the providers and have significant contact with them. They are the people on the ground. That includes representatives of Mencap and a lot of the providers that you are talking about. They were reassured, because there is nothing in this new way forward that is going to not enable those people to develop into the programme. There will be no barriers or blockages. There will be a seamless pathway to enable that to happen. The issue is that it has to be joined up and that we make sure that that happens when the programme is put together.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning. We welcome any review looking at youth training to try to make a difference. However, I am quite shocked that the review is just focusing on level 2 upwards. I am very concerned that it is passing the buck. On many occasions, in the Chamber and outside the Chamber, the Chair has made the point about the number of new initiatives coming from the Department, how they are linked up and how they can be synchronised. When you are doing a review of youth training, what is the justification for excluding entry level and level 1?

Mrs McGill: Level 1 people will be included. The whole purpose of the programme is to get people from level 1 to level 2, so —

Mr P Ramsey: This is the summary:

"The review of youth training is examining vocational training provision at level 2 for 16-18 year olds."

That is your evidence today.

Mrs McGill: To get to level 2, we are saying that you have to have a minimum of a level 1 qualification. A level 1 qualification is four GCSEs at D to G. Within this group, we are targeting a significant number of 16- to 18-year-olds in Northern Ireland. The vast majority will fall into that category. We are not suggesting that, if someone is operating at entry level, those programmes are entirely important and fit for purpose. They need to be there and need to be encouraged into this programme. We are simply saying that, in the context of the programme, there is somewhere in the region of 8,000 or 9,000 young people who are near the labour market and who we feel we could add

value to. We want to make sure that we target them and get them into employment or an apprenticeship.

Mr P Ramsey: The language you used earlier was that you are going to prioritise and focus on those closer to the labour market. I am concerned that those most vulnerable and marginalised in our community are not the people you are talking about today. In July 2013, there were 320 participants in skills at level 1. They are the most vulnerable and marginalised, who possibly are not succeeding onto level 2. On the one hand, Deirdre, you are saying that level 1 is not part of the review, and then you are intimating that maybe it should be part of the review. How are we going to cater for those young people? We have taken a very intense interest in those in our community who are NEET. What is coming up is that those who are most vulnerable — those coming out of care, for example — who are possibly not achieving the academic qualifications that you say are necessary. What are you going to do for them in youth training?

Mrs McGill: There is a programme in the Department that caters for that group of young people, which will continue to operate and be supported.

Mr P Ramsey: What is the programme?

Mrs McGill: It is within the context of the Pathways to Success strategy. There is a breadth of programmes in the Department that cater for that cohort of young people. That will continue to happen. We will work very closely with other parts of the Department. In fact, we will provide a progression pathway that will make very clear to young people what the various starting points are and how that progression pathway can enable them to progress through the levels, from entry level right through.

Mr P Ramsey: Are you presently collating and monitoring the progression of young people coming out of care, who have greater barriers, and where they are going in youth training?

Mr Young: Our programmes currently cater for those young people. The eligibility criteria for Training for Success programmes, for example, have higher age barriers for young people leaving care. Normally, TFS programmes finish at 18. For young people leaving care, I think that the eligibility goes up to 24 or 25.

Mr P Ramsey: I am not sure, Daryl, that you are answering my question. One of the main recommendations of the NEETs inquiry was to put in tracking mechanisms to ensure that we monitor the progression of young people. Are there tracking mechanisms in place for people coming out of care?

Mr Young: That is happening. That is one of the strands of the NEET strategy. It is happening, as I understand it, through the use of the unique learning number. That is a number uniquely given to a young person to enable tracking to take place.

Mr P Ramsey: Enabling is one thing, but is it being done?

Mr Young: Yes, it is being done through the work of the NEET strategy.

Mr P Ramsey: Will you share that with us? It is something that we might have to come back to. I am deeply worried about those we examined and identified as being the most vulnerable and marginalised. Somebody else is looking after them now. I do not know who that group is or what part of the Department is involved. We are trying to have joined-up thinking so that we do not leave young people being further marginalised from the centre.

The Chairperson: Daryl, I know it is not your department, but if you could follow that up for us, it would be —

Mr Young: We will, of course.

Mr Hilditch: My question is along the same lines as what Fra and Pat touched on; it is about where we are with those who are not at level 2. Is there potentially another review coming down the line to deal with that area?

Mr Young: We do not have specific plans to do a review of that type. That has been —

Mr Hilditch: It probably leads in to Pat's —

Mr Young: It is, but the work on NEETs has been comprehensive. It has focused specifically on the types of young people that you spoke about. The Committee knows about the work the Department has been doing with others on the NEET strategy. It is specifically designed to address the issues that you raised.

Mr Hilditch: Will disability form part of the review?

Mr Young: Absolutely.

Mr Hilditch: I know that the Minister indicated a separate piece of work on disability, but will it also be incorporated into this?

Mr Young: Absolutely. Young people with disabilities will be able to find their way into this programme if they operate at that level and meet the requirements of that programme. Without a doubt, they will be able to progress.

Mr Hilditch: As I said, my comments are the same as the others.

Mr Lyttle: I was going to ask the same thing: how the youth training review fits in with the NEET strategy, but a lot of that has been touched on. Maybe it is something that we can come back to.

Ms McGahan: Again, the same thing, but there is a particular point that I want to zoom in on. The terms of reference talk about meeting the future needs of businesses, and you made a comment about retail growth. In my constituency — in Tyrone and Fermanagh — retail growth has been extremely slow. However, in areas such as Belfast and Lisburn, it is massive, despite the fact that we have the fastest-growing population in the North. Who do you engage with in areas such as Tyrone and Fermanagh to define what the business needs are, thereby creating apprenticeships for young people?

Mr Young: Our colleges and training providers, particularly our colleges, are very active in working with employers in their area to identify needs and to address them. That is the bread and butter of what we expect colleges to do as part of their wider economic engagement. The colleges in your area are very active in doing that.

The Chairperson: Daryl and Deirdre, I appreciate that this was an update on the review of youth training. I think that you have heard the concerns of members. This session has been recorded by Hansard, so we can forward the report to you for review. Thank you very much for coming along.