



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Work Connect Programme: Department for
Employment and Learning, Action Mental
Health and Orchardville Society

26 February 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Peter Shields	Action Mental Health
Mr Terry Park	Department for Employment and Learning
Ms Margaret Haddock	Orchardville Society

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Mr Terry Park, the head of disability employment services in the Department for Employment and Learning; Mrs Margaret Haddock, the deputy chief executive of the Orchardville Society; and Mr Peter Shields, the operational manager for Action Mental Health.

It is my understanding that you want a photograph taken during this session. Are members agreed?

The Committee Clerk: We are not doing that any more.

The Deputy Chairperson: We are not doing that any more? Sorry, that was the earlier indication that I got. That is not happening now. Fra, the next day you will know to put a tie in your pocket.

Mr F McCann: I will run out and put on a tie.

The Deputy Chairperson: We will take the briefing now. It will be recorded by Hansard, and I again remind members to keep their electronic devices switched off. Over to you for five to 10 minutes to give us a brief overview. We will then open it up for questions.

Mr Terry Park (Department for Employment and Learning): OK. I want to explain how we intend to run this session. I will give a brief introduction of Work Connect and its background. I will then hand over to Peter to talk a little bit about the consortium organisation, and then Margaret Haddock from the Orchardville Society will give one or two case studies of the type of clients who we are helping.

As you can see from our paper, Work Connect was developed in and around the time of the full roll-out of the incapacity benefit (IB) reassessment project. It was designed specifically to address the employment needs of those who have health and other barriers to employment and included a recognition that those clients, particularly those on employment and support allowance, need a bit of additional specialist support.

We ran the procurement exercise, and a very strong consortium called Supported Employment Solutions (SES) was put together. That is made up of seven organisations that do a lot of work in their own right with people with disabilities, but they came together for the purpose of this programme. That resulted in the Department having access to a very strong group of people who are totally committed to providing employment services to those with a full range of disabilities. The Department was delighted to partner with Supported Employment Solutions. Suffice to say that we had existing strong work relationships with all the organisations, and the consortium has just cemented that.

Again, as you can see from the paper, the outcomes of those who are availing themselves of the service are very promising. Given the nature of the conditions and barriers that a lot of those people face in their journey towards work, it is a real credit to the consortium.

To sum up my bit, the disability employment service in the Department is delighted to be working with Supported Employment Solutions. We also work with them on a number of other programmes and projects. I will now hand over to Peter from Action Mental Health, which is one of the two lead organisations in the consortium.

Mr Peter Shields (Action Mental Health): Good morning, everyone. My name is Peter Shields, and I am the operations manager of Action Mental Health (AMH). I also have a dual hat on as the co-chair of the SES steering group. I have been asked to give you a bit of information on the formation of SES, who we are and what we do. As you can see from the briefing paper that has been provided to you by the Department, SES is made up of seven voluntary organisations from across Northern Ireland that provide a range of training and employment programmes for people with disabilities. Action Mental Health and the Cedar Foundation are the joint lead partners of SES, and the other partners are Mencap, the NOW project, the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), Action on Hearing Loss and Margaret's organisation, the Orchardville Society.

In terms of how this came about, initial discussions took place almost four years ago. In June 2010, AMH and the Cedar Foundation met to discuss possible partnership working for the future delivery of DEL disability employment programmes. From September 2010 to March 2011, exploratory discussions took place with other specialist disability organisations to gauge the level of interest in a partnership approach to tendering for and delivering DEL disability employment programmes.

In March 2011, agreement was reached to merge the Agencies in Consortium for Education and Training (ACET) consortium and the AMH/Mencap consortium. Both consortiums had previously delivered Workable and the New Deal for disabled people (NDDP), ACET in the Belfast area and AMH/Mencap across the other three regions in Northern Ireland. At that point, we agreed that AMH and the Cedar Foundation would be the joint lead partners for the new consortium and would take the lead in submitting any new tenders for DEL programme on behalf of the partnership — AMH in the northern and southern regions, and the Cedar Foundation in Belfast.

The main objective of the new partnership was to implement a supported employment approach in the delivery of programmes to assist people with disabilities and health conditions to enter into and stay in employment. We agreed that the partnership would consist of locally based voluntary organisations — not private sector organisations — and all partners had a previous commitment to delivering high-quality disability employment services. It was decided that the partnership would be pan-disability and would provide specialist rather than generic provision. For us, that was a unique selling point, in that clients who were referred to the programme would be supported by organisations that were specialists in that particular disability grouping.

We also wanted to ensure that we had the same ethos and values when we came together. That is why we met quite a number of organisations before narrowing it down to seven. For us, the values include a commitment to provide the best services to programme participants, employers and programme commissioners. We also wanted to provide person-centred services to people with disabilities and health conditions that respect the dignity, aspirations and choices of each individual. Thirdly, we wanted to share resources, knowledge and expertise to ensure the delivery of a high-quality standardised service. Lastly, we wanted to ensure that there was openness and accountability

to ensure that partnership working is carried out in a spirit of trust and mutual support. For us, profit is not the number-one priority; the person is.

At that point, we had no name and no meetings took place for eight months as there were no tendering processes. In December 2011, we came together, decided on the name Supported Employment Solutions and submitted our first tenders for the Workable programme in January 2012. In March 2012, we submitted tenders for all three regions of the Work Connect programme. During a busy few months we were awarded contracts to deliver Workable in all three regions of Northern Ireland, along with Ulster Supported Employment Ltd (USEL) and Disability Action in May, and the new Workable contract commenced in July. July was a busy month, and we were awarded exclusive contracts to deliver the Work Connect programme in all three regions of Northern Ireland and, over a very busy two or three months, by September the programme was up and running and we were delivering it. As the briefing paper explains, by November the Minister had launched the programme and we were delivering it in all 35 jobs and benefits offices across Northern Ireland.

Our management structure is very clear. We have a steering group that is made up of one senior management representative from each of the seven partner organisations, and we meet on a quarterly basis. The steering group has executive responsibility for the programme and the consortium. We are responsible for the strategic direction of the partnership and the performance management of the programmes. The steering group also links in at a strategic level with DEL, and we report to our individual boards of directors of our individual organisations.

We also have a five-member management team that is made up of management representatives from AMH and the Cedar Foundation as the lead partners. They have responsibility for quality assurance, contract compliance, financial management and operational engagement with DEL. At that level, we also have inputs from the participants and employers.

It then permeates down to the individual member organisations. When new referrals come from jobs and benefits offices, depending on the client's disability they are assigned to the organisation that can provide the best and most specialist support for them. Therefore, some with a visual impairment will go to RNIB, someone with a hearing impairment will go to Action on Hearing Loss, and so on. It is then down to the individual member organisation to manage its own front line staff, to ensure that the programme is delivered to the required standards, and to support the participants and employers in the programme.

Hopefully, that has given you a very brief overview of SES and how we have evolved. We will be happy to take questions on that as the morning progresses. I am now going to hand over to Margaret Haddock, who will provide a few case studies of clients who have progressed through the Work Connect programme over the last 12 to 15 months.

Ms Margaret Haddock (Orchardville Society): Good morning, everyone. I am Margaret Haddock, deputy chief executive from the Orchardville Society. What I have tried to do this morning is give three very short case studies to try to get a taste of the different types of people who have required the support of the Work Connect programme.

The first candidate was a young man who was referred through the Lisburn jobs and benefits office. He had Asperger's syndrome plus dyslexia and had struggled in the employment market for a very long time. He had held down jobs for maybe four or five weeks in places, and then they had broken down. Through the Work Connect programme, he was assigned to the Orchardville Society because of Orchardville's expertise in working with people with ASD. He began a programme with a one-to-one support worker, trying to find suitable employment. He was very keen to get started in paid employment quickly, and he actually pushed himself forward into a role that we initially advised against, which broke down. That said, after getting more structure and confidence and a lot of advice and guidance, he eventually gained a job in an area that is very applicable to him, as an IT technician in a local company. That has now been ongoing for nine months, which is the longest he has ever retained a job. We continue to give support to both him and the employer.

The second case study is of an older client who had a health condition — a gentleman who was 59 years of age and had been out of work for a very long time. He had very low self-esteem. He was assigned to the Cedar Foundation because of the nature of his disability. Michael had very low confidence and, through Work Connect, he worked on a voluntary work option for a few weeks, just to let him see that he could do work and could succeed again. From that, he had the confidence to tell us what he actually wanted to do. He received assistance to take forward a Security Industry

Authority qualification in door security, and he currently has a job pending if he passes that qualification. So Michael is well on the way to a paid job.

I have given you two men, so, being a woman, I would like to finish with an example of a lady. Diane was a young woman who had very bad mental health issues and previous substance abuse issues. She had no confidence to go into work at all. She could not hold it down and kept relapsing into her substance abuse, prior to going on to the Work Connect programme. Her story is actually on the SES website because it is very heartfelt. She stated herself that she could not have kicked her habit, as she put it, without the support of her worker from Action Mental Health, who gave her the encouragement and strength to keep going. She has now secured a job after getting support in areas such as CV preparation, interviews and job search skills, but, most importantly, one-to-one support when she needed it. She is now working 16 hours plus every week, and her joy is that she has a flat and can buy and upgrade her home, just like anybody else. That job has been ongoing for a considerable time now.

Those are three very brief case studies. I am willing to take questions on any other issues as well.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation. I commend you on the work that you do to get these people into employment. Looking across the public and private sector, do you find it in any way difficult to get the private sector to buy in to taking on people with disabilities?

Mr Shields: The private sector is actually easier than the public sector. We have been involved in initiatives with the Department to get work placements across Civil Service Departments, and that has now transpired with a programme that is taking 12 people on work experience during the next 12 months. That is a very small number of clients when you consider the whole of Northern Ireland. We also find that, in getting people into the public sector, there are more barriers with bureaucracy and with issues of insurance and indemnity. In the private sector, that varies with the size of the organisations. Large national organisations such as retailers are active on their corporate responsibility, and they try to work with you and have programmes to get jobs for people. There is more of a concern in small or medium-sized businesses because there is maybe uncertainty — "ignorance" is maybe too strong a word — about how they will cope and support a person with a disability. In the SES consortium, the programme is not just to support the client but to support the employers and to try to ensure that we have the support mechanisms in the workplace to try to ensure that the employment works for the employer and for the client. That is ongoing and, under the Work Connect programme, once the client goes into employment, a further six months of support is provided to the employer and to the client to try to ensure that the person can be sustained in that employment.

Mr P Ramsey: As the Chair said, this a unique piece of work. It works with people in the community who are more vulnerable, particularly and especially the people with complex needs. A lot of good work is ongoing, and a lot more work should be done.

Recently, we had the unfortunate debacle where a condition-management course in the Northern Ireland Office estate, which was attended by more than a dozen people who have learning disabilities, was closed down, and that ended the rewards that they were benefiting from. Has the Department done anything with the Secretary of State, for example, to try to retain that unique project, which has given so much hope to the families and to the young people who are involved in it?

Mr Park: I am sorry, Pat, but which project are you referring to?

Mr Shields: Is it the Praxis project at the Hillsborough estate?

Mr P Ramsey: Yes.

Mr Park: No, the Department is not directly involved with the Praxis project — it might well be that the Health Department is the lead — because it does not have a focus on employment per se.

Mr P Ramsey: It does, actually. More than 12 people are employed there.

Mr Park: Yes, those are employees of the Praxis organisation. I am not aware of the Department being involved directly in it.

An awful lot of work is ongoing. You will be aware of the Committee's investigation into the special educational needs post-19 group. The employment service is feeding directly into that, and we are also working with the FE sector on an ongoing pilot project, which involves a lot of young people, particularly those with learning disabilities, right across the regional college areas. We are providing dedicated one-to-one employment officer support, which, as Margaret mentioned, is required for this group. That can take them from where they are regarding vocational training, and it involves working with a local base of employers. We find that, quite often, it is about getting the job match right. We have had situations in which we have put people through a couple of work trials and it has just not been the right fit. Eventually, through perseverance, you get the right fit: you get the employer with the right attitude who is prepared to give the young person an opportunity and, before you know it, you can put that person into full employment. Sometimes, you will do that with a lot of support, and that is fine; that is what the likes of the Workable programme is there to do. Sometimes, it is unsupported. It is a very flexible approach.

Mr Shields: I will add to that. I do not want to sound as if I am overselling what we are doing in SES, but, over the years, we have had numerous examples here and in GB of what I describe as "general training organisations" trying to place people with disabilities and people without disabilities in employment. We have identified that there is a need for a client not only to be supported through the generic principles of filling in CVs and preparing them for work but by dealing with their disability issues and secondary disability issues. That is where our staff come in to deal with and support them. In previous programmes, there will have been clients who were maybe moved from one support officer to another. We have tried to assign a single officer to support the client right the way through that process and deal with all their aspects and needs to sustain them in employment.

Mr P Ramsey: I appreciate that. Maybe we could take up the Praxis project separately; it really is an important project. Praxis is making a huge investment.

I should declare that I chair the all-party group on learning disability and the all-party group on disability, so I am quite familiar with the range of projects. There are good ones, including yours, Margaret. Peter, we are aware of all the good work that the agencies and community-based organisations are doing. That is fine, and they have to be commended.

Correct me if I am wrong on this one, but I am led to believe that somebody with a physical or learning disability is four times less likely to secure work than somebody without. If that is the case, we are failing a lot of people. That is why the Committee felt that it was important to carry out this inquiry. Parents feel that their children are completely abandoned once they leave the formal education system. I have been at events in the Long Gallery and listened to parents who were in tears as they gave witness to the fact that they would rather their child, when he or she grows up, dies before them because of their fear about what will happen to them. Margaret, you were there and you saw that.

What more can we do? What greater target can we set to give greater hope, aspiration and confidence to the young person who has a learning or physical disability or complex needs? There is no doubt that people working at that level get a huge range of therapeutic conditioning that helps them to progress through life. Can you give us the figures? The figures that I have are that those people are four times less likely to get employment; is that the case? What are the Department's targets to reduce those figures?

Ms Haddock: I will respond first and then give Terry time to respond. The figure for how less likely a person with a disability is to be in employment than any other member of society varies between three times and four times. We cannot walk away from those hard facts. The Department also does on-the-scene work and gives match funding to projects through the European social fund (ESF).

Pat, you referred to the fact that a lot these people have a learning disability. I chose to respond because my area of expertise within Orchardville is to provide services for people with a learning disability. Parents have a constant fear about what will happen when their young adult leaves school at the age of 19. However, there have been very good pockets of practice — that is how I will put it to the Committee — on transition work across Northern Ireland.

I will highlight my own organisation, where transition services have been developed from as far back as 1997-98. In 2001-02, we presented to a much wider group of MLAs on what needed to happen for people with disabilities, from special education onwards. At that time, money was released to the Department of Education to assist with the process. The outcome was the appointment of transition officers employed by the Department, but their impact has been negligible.

We talk about different things. We talk about process and programmes to assist. What we need to do is work with young people with a disability, and their families, from an early age to create confidence and pathways and to give them knowledge of the pathways that are there. One of the things that is lacking is knowledge of pathways through FE and into programmes like Workable and Work Connect if they have already been through an ESF programme.

We have a piecemeal service of ESF projects across Northern Ireland. We cannot walk away from that fact. However, I have to say that DES in the Department has been very supportive in match funding the ESF transition programmes and also in taking advice and guidance from the voluntary sector on the issue, particularly over the last two years

Mr Park: Pat, I am due back here in a few weeks. We are in the process of developing the disability employment strategy, which I think is unique in partnership working. The strategic working group is made up of a minority of departmental staff and a majority of key stakeholders, of which Peter and Margaret are two. They are joined by other disability sector representatives. The whole thrust is that we have agreed a set of five common themes. The primary one is, in effect, about supporting more people with disabilities into work.

Working in conjunction with the sector, we have really good programmes to help people to stay in work once they make that really important shift into employment. We will set targets for this. The key objectives will be, first, a target for those with more profound, long-term, significant disabilities. Secondly, it will be about moving people from unemployment into employment. I will be able to give you an update on that. We have categorised those people. They are young people with learning disabilities, those with more long-term, chronic mental health conditions and people with sensory disabilities. We have a great opportunity to do an awful lot in the next couple of years.

Mr P Ramsey: I look forward to that, Terry. The economic inactivity strategy that we talked about earlier also links into that.

Deputy Chair, I will finish by saying that it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the Minister, Stephen Farry, who has attended openly and readily the all-party groups that I chair to have discussions with the people and parents themselves.

Mr F McCann: Thanks for the presentation. I had some concern at the start of the whole process of ESA and when the work-related activity groups were set up. I also sit on the Social Development Committee, where we get a lot of this stuff coming through. I still have a number of major concerns, but it is heartening when you see the Department and a number of groups that work at the coalface of disability coming together and taking the small steps that have been taken to provide services. It is good to see that there are some outcomes.

Do you track the people you have provided employment for to see whether they stay in employment? If they come out of employment, is there a mechanism whereby they are worked with again to ensure that they can go into other employment? How do you gauge that? Do you do it over six months, a year or 18 months?

Mr Shields: This programme was set up so that clients would have six months of initial support to try to get them into employment, and, once they go into employment, they will receive a further six months of support. That differs from the work programme in GB, which is over a longer period. What we try to do during that six-month period is develop support strategies in the workplace — either through peer colleagues, supervisors or managers — to try to ensure that that individual remains in work. If, coming towards the end of that period, the individual is still showing signs that they need ongoing support, referral can be made to the Workable programme. That is delivered by SES, USEL and Disability Action. The clients can link into the Workable programme and continue to receive up to two years of continued support to deal with all the issues that they have and the issues that the employer might have.

The emphasis is very much on retention. It is not just about getting people in, getting a stat and saying that we got someone into employment; it is about retention. In the past, we have seen people in many of the client groups, particularly those with mental health issues, fall out of employment very quickly, often in the first three months. It is imperative that that specialist support is there for those people. That is not to say that people will not fall out. People may regress because of their disability or health condition.

It will be three or four months before we are in a position to give stronger stats on sustained employment. Although we are showing stats for 2013-14 of 38% of clients registered on the programme going into paid employment, it will be six months before we can see whether they have been sustained there. Indicative figures show that in the region of 80% are being sustained, albeit that they are small numbers. We will be able to monitor that a bit better over time.

Mr Park: We are tracking the data on people who leave the programme early. Quite often, it is just down to deterioration in a health condition. They are people who decided that they wanted to give it a real go, who have worked in the pre-employment stage, made the transition into employment and, through the fault of no one — certainly not the SES consortium that is working alongside the employer and the employee — they digress or it is just too much for them, but there is always an open door. If they decide that they want to come back into the programme, they would be allowed to do so. There is a recognition that sometimes people will not be able to maintain employment. If that is the case, the support service is there. If it is a temporary blip, they can, hopefully with the approval of the employer, come straight back into work again.

Mr F McCann: I have just one further question. What about people recommended by the Department to the consortium? When you look at those moving from incapacity benefit across to ESA, you will see that thousands and thousands of people are taken off that. Some people are left devastated because of that. It seems to be a good step but a small step. Are you looking at ways that you can expand it and take more people in? Most people just go away; they go back to their house. If they are suffering from mental health problems or other disabilities, they just live with the terrible fact that their benefits have been cut in half.

Ms Haddock: From an SES point of view, we are aware that it is very important to reach people and let them know about the programme. Therefore, we had quite a comprehensive marketing strategy. I suppose that our marketing strategy was a bit different, because we were going to the places where we felt people who were unemployed and needing help would be, like doctors' surgeries, the local library and all those venues where people who are unemployed can put a day in. We have been targeting those areas quite carefully, region by region, and making people aware of the programme through leaflet drops and things like that. As Peter said, it is still relatively early in the programme to be quoting stats, but we have to encourage them to go to the jobs and benefits office and then the referral comes through to SES. It is about knowledge and making people aware. We have been working with the — Sorry; I just had a senior moment. The benefits offices; we have been working with the benefits offices to let them know to inform people about SES.

Mr Shields: I am not saying this as a criticism, but one of the weaker aspects of the programme is that it gives only six months to try to get people into work. When we receive referrals from the jobs and benefits agency, depending on what the disability or health condition is, we will allocate them to the various SES partner organisations that specialise in that disability. At that point, we are screening the person for suitability for the programme and gauging whether we think there is the potential for that client to go into employment within six months, which is quite tight. That is why, based on targets set by the Department for referrals coming in, 60% of those clients would be registered. So, 40% would be deemed not suitable for the programme. If the programme had maybe a 12-month lead-in, there may be more clients who could come on, which would reduce that 40% non-acceptance figure. To some degree, we are looking at individuals who are closer to the labour market. It is not a training programme, because we are not providing training per se, though short bursts of training may assist someone in looking for a particular job. It is an employment programme. From that point of view, it maybe does restrict those with more complex disability needs from engaging in the programme. However, as Margaret mentioned earlier, most of the organisations have ESF programmes, which are run over a longer period, and clients can subsequently access those.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. We are all very conscious that we are dealing with an extremely vulnerable group of people. You have seen the outworkings of that in Britain. In your presentation, you make reference to the fact that, while the programme is largely voluntary, you maximise numbers. How do you do that?

Mr Park: It is, effectively, done through active encouragement and influencing from front line employment advisers. The nature of the regulations at the moment is that, if a person is on employment support allowance and in the work-related activity group, their only obligation is to engage with front line employment advisers, who are members of staff who have been trained to deal with people with health issues and other conditions on their way to employment. Those interviews provide the opportunity for the front line staff to sell Work Connect. To try to supplement that, we have invited

Supported Employment Solutions staff into a number of our jobs and benefits offices just in case clients are apprehensive. A lot of them are. They might well want to go on to the Work Connect programme, but they may fear that, if they engage in the programme, it will impact on their benefits, which, of course, it will not.

That selling to the client group is really the key to it. That is why our success rate is above target but our referral rate is below target. Collectively, we are trying everything that we can to increase the referral rate. There is certainly the capacity to deal with more clients, but, ultimately, it is the choice of those in the ESA WRAG to engage in the programme in the first place.

Ms McGahan: Do you recognise that there are people who have been wrongly declared as fit for work? For example, if someone is taken off benefits and put on to jobseeker's allowance, they have to declare on the form whether they are fit, able and well to work, or something to that effect. If they do not sign that, what would happen? What safeguards do you have in place for that vulnerable person?

Mr Park: This programme and client group would not address that. I am not sure what our policy is regarding those who come through the work capability assessment (WCA) process and are moved on to jobseeker's allowance. I am just not aware of that. Obviously, what we are dealing with here — the client group of Work Connect — are those who move into the ESA work-related activity group. The JSA client base who do not feel that they are fit for work is a difficult area.

Mr Hilditch: Thanks for your presentation. I wish you all the best with the work. Terry touched on the referrals and the performance against targets. Were the targets too high? Were they unrealistic?

Mr Park: It is difficult to know, David. We set the targets based on the number of JBOs and tried to work out an average of those who were participating in other programmes that are available to that client group. We always recognised that the targets were challenging from a referral point of view and from the point of view of the success rate of those who were referred. It is not something that I would be minded to drop; it is something that we should aspire to.

As there often is, there was an immediate influx of clients when the programme began, and I think that that was because a lot of the advisers had clients who were keen on work and were desperately waiting for something to move to. We have found that the number of referrals from fresh ESA claims and maybe those who migrated across from IB have steadied. Based on the past couple of months though, we decided to take proactive actions with the SES consortium to particularly target the offices that have a high footfall of clients in the ESA WRAG but where, proportionally, the referral rate is not as high as we would expect it to be. It involves a bit of selling and gaining the hearts and minds, but I think that we are determined to try to increase those levels.

Referrals are one thing, and, even if we move gradually month on month towards that overall target figure, it is the conversion from referrals to starts that counts. We do not want people starting to inappropriately refer clients to the programme. We have a good understanding with the consortium, and if it finds that clients are being referred who are inappropriate for the programme, particularly because of the seriousness of their health conditions, it will notify us. It is an honest broker and the gatekeeper of the programme. We want appropriate referrals, and I think that there is a margin for improvement.

Mr Shields: Margaret referred to the marketing that we have done. It was not maybe formal marketing, but, when we were awarded the contract in July, we had the programme up and running by September, so two months. We really went all out to try to ensure that, by the end of November when the Minister launched the programme, we had gone to all 35 jobs and benefits offices to promote the programme. That continues, and our staff and our management team in particular are in all 35 jobs and benefits offices on an ongoing basis refreshing new staff about the programme.

Terry mentioned the pilot that we are doing in the Foyle jobs and benefits offices. We are there one day a week for a full afternoon, and jobs and benefits office staff identify potential clients who then meet with SES staff. We will monitor that over the next number of weeks and, if it proves to be successful, we will consider widening it out to other JBOs. As I said, we have seen an immediate increase in the number of referrals to the programme from the Foyle jobs and benefits office, albeit that we also want to monitor the suitability of some of the referrals that are coming through.

Mr Park: Newry has also just agreed to come on board. We were looking for one of the bigger offices in the southern region to come on board. Foyle and Newry will be targeting almost on a clinic-type basis.

Mr Hilditch: Peter, you indicated that getting opportunities in the public sector is not just as easy as people like us would think. Why is that? A range of work is available through the likes of parks, leisure and clerical positions, and some public bodies, particularly councils, have disability champions and various other things. There is a lot of stuff in place. What is the difficulty?

Mr Park: I will kick-off on that. The public sector is a massive organisation, and I think that it was mentioned that the Civil Service is one body that does not come out as favourably. I have been working with the Department of Finance and Personnel in conjunction with Action Mental Health to get the pilot work placement project up and running. That is a small first step. A number of councils are doing great work. Belfast City Council in particular has not only offered work placement opportunities but has ring-fenced jobs.

Mr Hilditch: That is why I asked the question. In some of the other schemes, it seems that local council involvement has been very successful.

Mr Park: They are taking it further than just offering ring-fenced opportunities. They also offer pre-employment programmes, which means that those with disabilities can go through a two-week programme that prepares them for the key stage in the recruitment process, which is the interview or assessment centre. We are finding that the feedback from employers is really positive in that it is the disabled applicants who are shining at the recruitment stage because of the little bit of preparation that they have been given and their absolute desire to get the job.

It certainly is not universal, and more can be done. However, for those public bodies that are engaged with us, the results have been very positive.

Mr Shields: It is important to clarify that, when I made that statement, I referenced the Civil Service Departments as opposed to public sector bodies. We are making inroads with health trusts, city councils and even colleges of further education. However, it is proving more difficult with the Civil Service Departments.

The Deputy Chairperson: Are you satisfied that your programme is covering all the constituencies throughout Northern Ireland and are getting referrals from all those areas?

Mr Shields: I have statistics here that take us up to the end of last week. They show a variance from office to office. The Belfast region, which goes down as far as Downpatrick and Ballynahinch, has had 293 referrals; the northern region has had 398 referrals; and the southern region has had 380 referrals. There is not too much of a difference between them. Within the regions, there are significant variances. In one office in the northern region, there have been 134 referrals. Another office has had eight, and one has had four. There are variances in the regions, but, in the main, the regions are adequately covered through referrals.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you. No other member has indicated that they want to speak or ask a question. Thank you very much for your presentation to the Committee. It was very good indeed. I commend you on the work that you do to get these people into employment. It is a very worthwhile exercise. Again, thank you very much.