

From the Office of the Minister



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Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson MLA
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10 NOVEMBER 2016

Dear

Jo-Anne

I undertook to write to you, following your question in the Assembly on 11 October, about the help my Department provides to colleges to measure the impact of community courses and to better target provision for rural areas.

My Department and the further education (FE) colleges fully recognise the importance of community based education provision, and all colleges engage in a range of programmes and initiatives to bring learning opportunities into local communities and engage with 'hard to reach' learners. Whilst my Department sets the strategic direction for the FE sector, the colleges are responsible for determining their own curriculum provision and it is the responsibility of each college to assess the need for specific courses, taking into consideration all relevant factors, such as, potential demand, transport infrastructure, and viability.

College commitment to widening access and participation is evidenced by the number and range of courses delivered in community settings, and the numbers of students who participate on those courses. In developing and delivering community provision, colleges have developed links and partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders, and each of the colleges provides courses and programmes to meet the needs specific to their local areas/communities. I am sure you will appreciate that given the number of community courses being delivered across Northern Ireland, it is impractical to list them all in detail in this response. I have therefore focused on those community based courses within your constituency of Upper Bann, delivered through Southern Regional College (SRC), which I hope will be of interest to you.

SRC works with over 100 statutory, community and voluntary partners to ensure that the wider community has access to education and training opportunities. SRC's Community Development Officers work in partnership with local councils, schools, children centres, libraries and community and voluntary sector organisations to deliver education and skills training in local settings, and help to break down barriers and fears individuals may have of attending a main college campus. In 2015/16 the College delivered a total of 454 community training courses to 2,718 participants in 90 community venues.

The College provides the bulk of its community education in rural areas. Since 2012/13 there have been 12,863 enrolments in community based classes in venues including community centres, church halls, Orange halls and GAA clubs. To measure the impact of student learning in the community, SRC carries out a twice yearly survey of community students.

Over the last 5 years SRC has provided specific community based education which has targeted young people 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEETs), the long-term unemployed, rural farming communities, black and ethnic minorities, travellers, and residents living in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs). To ensure value for money and to measure the impact and benefits of these externally funded programmes courses, SRC has published 18 extensive evaluation reports. These reports show that in NRAs, 1433 residents enrolled onto programmes and 951 of the residents achieved accredited qualifications, with 128 securing employment.

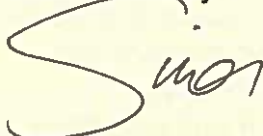
In order to better target community provision (particularly in rural areas), SRC engages with The Prince's Countryside Fund (PCF). In response to identified needs within the farming community, SRC developed a programme of study in 2012/13 to provide Business Skills for 60 Young Farmers with accredited training, workshops and study visits to enhance their management skills to support the sustainability of the agri-food industry.

In 2014/15 SRC worked with the PCF to address the need for health and safety whilst raising awareness of the many dangers of working in the rural community. In 2016 PCF approved a third application from SRC for an 'ASSET' Programme the aim of which is to provide accredited training to members of farming families, equipping them with the skills required to diversify and create a supplementary income to their current farming business, improving farm sustainability and encouraging farmers of the future to remain within the industry. To date under the PCF a total of 237 farmers have achieved qualifications in their local area without the need to travel to CAFRE and 437 family members have attended workshops.

The examples I have given here of community courses being delivered by SRC in your constituency are typical of the programmes provided by the other colleges right across Northern Ireland and I hope give you a flavour of the wide range of provision available.

My Department also continues to implement the FE Strategy, 'Further Education Means Success' which will ensure that colleges continue to fulfil the important dual role of helping to develop a strong and vibrant economy, and supporting social inclusion. Within the strategy, Project 3 – Social Inclusion will identify the barriers that inhibit different groups of learners from participating in further education provision and explore ways in which colleges can work in partnership with others, including voluntary and community organisations, to overcome these barriers, and strengthen pathways to further education at a higher level.

Yours sincerely



SIMON HAMILTON MLA