



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust: Deloitte
Evaluation**

2 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Sammy Douglas
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Stephen Barr	Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust
Ms Sarah Bell	Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust
Mr James McCusker	Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust
Ms Amy McGarrity	Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust
Mrs Thérèse Rogan	Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust
Mr Tom Scott	Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust

The Chairperson: I welcome the witnesses from the Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust (GRIT). Tom and Thérèse, you are very welcome. We are looking forward to this immensely. Over to you.

Mrs Thérèse Rogan (Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust): Good morning, Chair and ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you this morning about what we consider and what I know you consider to be a very important subject: addressing the issue of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs). You will be very happy to hear that we are not here to ask for money or to complain. What we want to do this morning is to present the model that we have developed and that we believe will impact on young people's lives. We have with us today a number of young people who will testify to that. The proof of the pudding is in the eating: no matter what I say, they will tell the story a lot better than I can. Many of the young people with us have experienced failure in the education system or have come through the care system or the justice system, and many of them just cannot find work because they have not got the skills or qualifications. They have many personal challenges in their life, as we all did at that age, but some of them are more compounded than others.

Before I go on to tell you about the programme, I want to introduce team GRIT. Beside me is Tom Scott, one of 10 trustees of the Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust, of which I have the privilege of being chairman. In the audience, we have Anne-Marie McClure, who is also a trustee and is chief executive of Opportunity Youth, which is our delivery partner in the design of the programme. If I cannot answer a question at some stage, I hope to be able to pull them forward to the table, because I am not an expert in all this. The young people with us are James McCusker from north Belfast, Sarah Bell from the Shankill area, and Amy McGarrity, who travelled from Enniskillen this morning. The programme that we have developed targets all young people in Northern Ireland to become involved. It is not just a greater Belfast programme.

We have provided the Committee with copies of the Deloitte evaluation report, which is the second evaluation of the programme in its lifetime. The programme was initiated in 2008 and completed its second phase in March 2012. The programme was funded by the International Fund for Ireland. As members can see, the document carries quotes from the new chairman of the fund and from our second funder, the Department for Social Development (DSD). We would not have been able to deliver the programme without them. It is very important that, in his foreword, Adrian Johnston suggests that, now that the programme has been developed and delivered:

"The challenge is now for policy makers to assess the impacts of the GRIT Experience 2, and consider the potential for mainstreaming the very successful delivery mechanism which underpins the initiative."

Where did the programme come from? The Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust was set up six years ago, and our task was to fill the evident development gap for young people who were at risk of long-term unemployment, and to provide them with the means of achieving their potential. Those of us who came together to form the trust have all had experience in skills development, training and employment and long-term unemployment in community development. Many of our trustees have been senior civil servants who have been engaged in the design of past strategy and policy, and their experience has been invaluable to us. Opportunity Youth has a long history of working with excluded young people and disadvantaged young people. It has worked with us to develop this continuous improvement model.

The initiative started in 2008, and, as I said, targets young people who face major barriers to engaging in work and progressing in life positively. There are many young people in the programme who not only face barriers to employment but, as I said, have come through the justice system or the social care system and face great difficulty. They maybe do not have the advantages that all of us had in our young lives in moving forward. We have supplied members with the executive summary of the report. We hope that, by talking to you about the impact of the report and the employability of the programme, we will help you to understand what it is about.

What is the programme about? It is a five-day intensive personal development programme — some people would call it a boot camp — in which young people have the opportunity to review where they are at and look at their life choices. The programme is delivered through a series of outward-bound activities, but, more importantly, it is about looking at life, at where the individual is coming from, and at the barriers to growth.

The success of the programme is that our young people have engaged very vociferously with it; there has been 100% completion of the programme. Even though it is a very intensive programme, none of them left. Over 270 young people have engaged in the programme throughout Northern Ireland, and, as I said, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the young people's stories will say what it is about.

We work through a selection process, so that people who come on the programme are committed to creating a change in their life. They experience the investigation of their life path and look at their own challenging behaviour and mindset. An element of the programme, because of the International Fund for Ireland's experience and involvement, has been to look at community relations and how we can develop cross-community conversations and links in the programme itself.

The value for money of the programme is shown in the return on the investment that is indicated in the Deloitte report. My colleague Tom will talk about that now.

Mr Tom Scott (Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust): Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today. On a personal note, it is a particular pleasure to represent the trust today. The trust was set up to espouse the values of Gerry Rogan, a former colleague and friend, and a long-time civil servant. I would not miss the opportunity to say that about Gerry.

I have worked with young people in various employment, training and development practices in my professional and personal life over very many years — too many to tell you about. I continue to do that in retirement. I know from experience that the disengagement of some young people is not an easy problem to solve. Indeed, it is an almost impossible problem, given the current economic climate and the challenges that all young people face, not just those with multiple difficulties. However, through the development of the programme, we as a group believe that we have found a cost-effective model that works. It can be delivered in any community or communities and through mainstream training organisations, such as those in colleges or the community. It can also complement the work of our healthcare, social services and justice organisations, not least some of the restorative justice work that goes on across the Province, and help young people to avoid certain situations.

We believe that one of the most important factors in this success is that the programme addresses the core issues of personal development and self-respect by getting young people to accept the choice of challenging the obstacles they face in life. Once they make that choice to face up to those obstacles, they take that opportunity. The cost of the programme in relation to individual outcomes and the social return on investment is very illuminating. In the report, Deloitte tells us that the intervention works. Phase 2 costs about £1,800 per young person for the five-week programme. As it can so dramatically change young people's long-term attitudes and lives, we believe that it is worthwhile. Using econometric disciplines, Deloitte has calculated that the social return from this phase is four times the investment, which actually is very good. It is not a measure that we often use in policymaking in this part of the world. However, in North America, for example, it has been long-established as the type of return that drives programmes.

As Thérèse said, the programme has a 100% participation and completion rate, which is remarkable given that the young people concerned face multiple barriers, not least the legacy of the conflict, which has led to trauma in the education system from an early age, and the prospect of long-term unemployment. As you well know from your evidence from elsewhere, the rate of unemployment among young people is rising faster than in any other age group on the island of Ireland and right across Europe. All these young people face health problems, including addiction, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, self-harm and suicide. So, we are trying to address a whole range of things in the programme. Some have suffered abuse in the past. Some have come from socially disadvantaged homes, and others have been involved in the social care system or have rubbed up against the justice system. Given that history, the fact that the participation and completion rate is so high is remarkable.

We have not had the funding to track closely every aspect of every young person. However, we have had help, and we know that many of the young people who have done the programme would not otherwise have come through the problems they face, that many continue in education and training and that some find employment. The fact that we have actively sought to bring young people from both communities together in every cohort has also had a positive effect, not just on the individuals but in the communities they come from. We are looking at not just the programme's individual impact but its impact on communities. I am sure the stories that the young people will tell you will demonstrate those outcomes as we go along.

The programme has been made possible by a range of private and public funding from, for example, DSD.

The Chairperson: Tom, it is not that I wish to stop you, but certain questions will be coming up on the issue of funding. By all means, carry on, but I know that members will want to interact with you.

Mr Scott: Feel welcome to stop me and ask questions at any time.

The Chairperson: I am very keen to get the young people to come and talk to us as well. I did tell you that, with the support of my Committee, we work in a flexible and friendly manner here, so we can dip in and out of the discussion. Before we hear from the young people, would members like to ask any structural questions about what exactly it is that we are seeing here? Would that be OK?

Mrs Rogan: That would be great.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning, Thérèse and Tom. You are very welcome, and your visit is very timely, given our earlier discussion about David McIlveen's motion on NEETS, which will be the third time that the Committee has instigated a major debate on youth unemployment.

I am interested because you are clearly addressing all the elements that we had seen evidence of during our inquiry; vulnerable young people, suicide, mental health, and alcohol and drugs-related problems. However, there is one thing that I am not clear about. You mentioned that some referrals came from the Youth Justice Agency, and the report states that, since 2008, 270 young people have engaged in the programme through Opportunity Youth.

You are addressing the areas that I am interested in. Young people who have become estranged from their families and friends have been reconciled with them, and the programme has also helped young people come to terms with alcohol and drugs-related problems when others outside here are trying to treat people differently because of drugs-related issues and are targeting them and shooting them. It is good to see a structured report.

Where we have models of good practice, one thing we always look for is a tracking mechanism for the same young people, particularly those who have participated in residential. Is there any follow-up information on how many of those 270 young people went through training?

The Chairperson: I think that we have got the gist of the question.

Mrs Rogan: This is the second evaluation that we have done. In our first evaluation, we were able to indicate that 88% of the young people who did the GRIT Experience programme went into training. That is a very high percentage. They were there six months after the GRIT Experience programme, and 66% of them were there 12 months after it. In our first phase, we took most of our referrals from training organisations, and those referrals were for young people who were at risk of becoming NEET or who were at risk of falling off a training programme and not being able to pick it up again. This time round, we have not completed the tracking process, but we have identified that it is very difficult to track outcomes, and it requires investment to do that. One of our recommendations for the future — we have talked to departmental officials about it — is that the tracking process needs to be strengthened so that we can measure value for money and the longitudinal aspect of any intervention.

Mr P Ramsey: I agree with you. We felt that the Department should make the tracking mechanism a much greater priority. I also wanted to ask about the formal referrals of the young people. Where do those referrals come from?

Mrs Rogan: We have worked with the network of training providers to identify young people who have shown potential but who have fallen off a training programme. We also work very closely with Opportunity Youth. Recently, we have had some referrals from social services and the Youth Justice Agency. We initially developed the programme for people who were willing to change their lifestyle voluntarily, because it is very challenging; it is not for the faint-hearted, and the individual has to want to change. That aspect is crucial to its success.

In the main, the referrals have come from community groups, training organisations, social services and the Youth Justice Agency. We hope that, if the programme continues to be funded and if we can find a mechanism whereby it can be funded through the mainstream, those referrals will be strengthened and that the 2,500 to 3,000 young people who are recognised as being core NEETS will have the opportunity to take up the programme.

Mr F McCann: Thank you for your presentation; it was very interesting. I have been a member of the Committee for only a couple of months, but some of the discussions about NEETS have mentioned the Divis area of west Belfast, where I live. I was concerned that, although the NEETS issue was being pushed as a major project, it was missing many young people in many areas who had fallen off the edge of the education system. I sympathise, because the area that I live in suffers from some of the serious problems that you spoke about.

Many other community and youth organisations work, as people say, at the coal face of this problem. Is there any interaction between your organisation and the community and youth organisations working in many deprived working-class areas across the North?

Mrs Rogan: All the young people who come on the programme are recruited from the designated neighbourhood renewal areas (NRAs). I have absolute sympathy with you on your work in Divis. I spent many years working on employment and training issues in the Falls and Shankill areas, so I know what that challenge is about.

As DSD has targets, it was very keen that we should work in and take referrals from the areas that had suffered most and that we should work with community groups. We have also developed, and are in the process of strengthening, a more strategic link with other organisations involved in this area. We are very keen to share the experience. We recently developed a quality handbook, which means that, as regards sustainability, the programme can be delivered by other organisations that are capable of delivering it. It is not about us holding on to it; it is about the replication of the programme throughout Northern Ireland by organisations that are willing and able to develop it. We have also recently had the programme accredited by the QCA for the first time — it is at the primary level, but many of the young people do not have any qualifications, so it is a start for them. We have started the process, but there is still a lot to be done.

The tracking that Pat asked about earlier needs to be put in place, but there also needs to be a more co-ordinated strategy. A lot of money is being spent in this area, but we are not entirely sure where it is going or what the long-term value is. We are not saying that we have the only solution. We are saying that this is a solution that we know works, and we are prepared to share it with other community groups that are keen to develop it.

Mr Douglas: Thank you, Chair. I thank Thérèse and Tom for their presentation. I knew Gerry for many years, and the programme is his legacy; it is about what he was about and his work in reaching out to young people. I remember having discussions with him at the height of the Troubles about how to engage young people, particularly young people who are at risk. Obviously, over the years, young people have been at risk of becoming involved with paramilitaries. I notice that you are involved with young Protestant males. I certainly do not want to say that this is just about young Protestant males, because there are problems in both communities, but it seems that you have been fairly successful in targeting that group. That is a huge task, as I am sure you know from your own background, Thérèse. How did you go about targeting those young people?

The Chairperson: OK. We got that.

Mr Scott: We recognise that, in this programme, that continues to be a problem. The balance of the demographics is not quite right. Nevertheless, you will know from the Dunlop report on North Belfast and other reports that there is a vulnerability among young Protestant males in Northern Ireland, particularly in urban areas. We try to work with organisations in those areas that already work with young people and make contact with them. For example, Belfast Activity Centre runs a youth build programme in the greater Shankill and north Belfast area, and there are training organisations in the area, such as Impact Training on the Shankill, that we can work with. It continues to be difficult. Nevertheless, we are having some success. We cannot claim to have had huge success with that group, but we would like to have —

The Chairperson: Tom, I saw in the report that you have increased uptake in the unionist community from 29% to 39%. What is the nub of the issue? What is it that you are doing that is making the difference in the group that Sammy identified in his question?

Mr Scott: I think that, in those communities, the success is perhaps down to what I would call "contagion". Young people are going back to their communities and telling people that they have had success on our programme and that they should also go on it. We had a minibus full of kids from Ardoyne and the Shankill going off on one of the courses, and they compared notes about what happened the Friday night before during the rioting on the Crumlin Road and became friendly as a consequence.

Mrs Rogan: We have had to have a very aggressive face-to-face policy of engaging with the youth organisations that young Protestant males are particularly attracted to. It has not been an easy task trying to drive that statistic on participation up. We engage very strongly on a face-to-face level. As Gandhi said, young people are the best example of what you want other people to become. We use them in the recruitment process, and their stories are useful. It is a very aggressive recruitment campaign.

We initially set off not focusing on young women. We looked at young males aged from 16 to 24 because that group presented the biggest challenge socially and economically. We were then approached by training organisations that said that young women also need help in engaging, and we have two young women here today to talk about that process. So, while it was not a target initially, we found ourselves with a 70:30 ratio of males to females. Indeed, we could have run a number of programmes. We were approached by the Rathcoole community group to take young women as young as 14, but it was impossible to run a programme for ages 14 to 24 because the challenges from 14 to 24 are mega. However, with the handbook, the programme can be replicated for all sorts of community challenges.

Mr F McCann: In many communities, a sizeable number of young people believe that society has moved on without them and has left them behind. You would think that the work on NEETs would have been set up to reach that group of people, but, in many ways, it has not reached them. It takes personal contact and a direct approach to show young people that there are people who care and that there is a better way forward. That is where groups such as your group and others come into their own. That face-to-face connection can change lives.

Mr D McIlveen: Thank you for your presentation. I am trying to tap into the secret of your success. In a policing capacity, we sometimes engage with groups of young people, and — I say this somewhat facetiously — you would sometimes think that you are talking to a group of angels because they are in complete denial about having done anything wrong. When I had the privilege of visiting one of the residentials hosted by your organisation in my constituency, I was struck by the young people's very frank admission of their problems and by their real openness in sharing. That does not happen with young people in a normal environment. How do you win the confidence of those young people to get them to be so open and frank and to face up to their problems?

Mrs Rogan: The credit for that lies with Opportunity Youth and its experience. The staff in Opportunity Youth have the scars on their back from their own life experiences, and they present an open and honest environment. There is no gloss on that; it is as it is. When Tom and I move back from the table, I will invite some of our young people to talk. I will also ask Stephen Barr from Opportunity Youth, who is the director of the GRIT programme, to give you a better answer to that than I could. It is really about the whole Opportunity Youth team. Four of them — Stephen, Roisin, Sean and Marty — are with us today. They have had their own life experiences, and there is nothing better than that. It is about walking in my shoes in order to know what it is like. I will let Stephen answer that.

Mr Stephen Barr (Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust): It is great to be here. I am one of the service managers of Opportunity Youth. It is important to recognise that the organisation that I work for, which includes my operational team behind me, prides itself on providing a solid, evidence-based, quality and meaningful engagement programme for young people who are at risk. We have years of experience. GRIT works because, before you can firmly address an issue, you have to get buy-in and meets the needs of the young people who present. For me, it is about being upfront. David, you have had personal interaction with young people on one of our residentials.

Opportunity Youth prides itself on working with young people where they are at. We deliver programmes under a change process model. As part of that model, we accept that lapse and relapse are part of the process of change and that change is ongoing. For many of the young people we have worked with, the message that has been reinforced to them is that they are failures. They have no self-worth. It is about instilling self-worth in young people, and we do that through the intensive five-day personal development programme. We provide the young people with targeted activities that challenge them, and we hold them to account. All the young people who we work with are in bed at 12 o'clock. There is a policy of complete abstinence; there is zero tolerance of drugs and alcohol, which are part of the baggage that many of the young people we work with have. They are part of their lifestyle and their coping strategy. We replace them with legal highs. By legal highs, I mean activities that let them address their fears and that enable them to see that they can learn in a different way and that they can achieve.

Doing that is not easy. It involves skill and certain qualities. Opportunity Youth prides itself on being about professional people delivering professional services. The staff team behind me makes the programme work, and I am part of that as well. You will hear from the young people, and, David, you have seen the programme in action. Young people are given an environment that is safe for them to work in. There is no bullying. We have never had to send any young people home. We are flexible, but we hold young people to account. When you are straight up with young people and they know what the expectations are, they can sign up. There are challenges; it is not easy for the young people, but with a bit of support, the change process can be implemented and acknowledged. When young people slip up, just as we do many, many times in our life — we are no different; we are just a wee bit older — we help them to get back on track and apply the learning from that experience. That is what GRIT is about; it is about courage and endurance.

The activities that we offer young people provide an element of challenge and allow them to develop new skills. Post-residential, when the young people are engaging in the therapeutic and mentoring support that is part of the GRIT experience, too, we say to them, "Life is not going to be easy for you. If you want to achieve something, you have to acknowledge that you do not have all the answers. You have got to learn to reach out and ask for support."

The Chairperson: Stephen, I am keen to keep this moving a bit. We want to hear what the young people have to say for themselves, but I do not want to stop anybody saying what has to be said. We have just got to cut it up a wee bit.

Mr Barr: Just before we introduce the kids, Basil, I can say —

The Chairperson: You can talk as long as you like, I am just saying that I am trying —

Mr Barr: I will be two seconds. There is a big social problem with NEETs, and Opportunity Youth works very closely with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in tackling and addressing that. The GRIT model is a quality, evidenced-based model that works. The second report is a reaffirmation of that. The challenge for the Committee and others is that this is a possible pathway in reducing some of the social problems that present right across every constituency. The GRIT programme is regional, so there is nobody here from a constituency whose young people we have not worked with. We can say that without a shadow of a doubt. That is all I want to say. That is the challenge.

The Chairperson: I am not stopping you, by the way. There will be a few more questions.

Mr Barr: That is fair enough.

The Chairperson: David, anything else?

Mr D McIlveen: No. I think that answer is pretty conclusive.

Mrs Rogan: Can I add to that answer, Basil? Young people can smell a rat and disingenuousness at 50 paces. Opportunity Youth offers that degree of respect and honesty. They can go if they want; they are not in chains. However, they see that the people working with them are really interested in treating

them with respect and honouring their position and where they are at in life. They are not treated as a NEET or given a label. We get used to using those terms glibly, so it is very important that those young people know that. They will tell you themselves what it is like. I talked to Stephen yesterday, and he said to me, "Thérèse, it is not a car wash. You do not put them in one end and expect them to come out the other end nice and clean and ready to work." It is about understanding where they are at and what needs to happen.

The Chairperson: A key thing that you said was that we can replicate this. How do we do that? You have produced a brochure, and you have a costing of, I think, £250,000. However, how do you see it being taken forward? Apart from talking to this esteemed Committee, how do we get it mainstreamed?

Mrs Rogan: That is the big question. Our dream would be for the programme to be integrated into the suite of programmes that the Department offers, particularly for the core NEET group.

The Chairperson: You have an endorsement from the Department for Social Development, which, presumably, will be looking to mainstream it.

Mrs Rogan: We have had several conversations with DSD, and it is very keen to support the programme, as it is a not in employment, education or training issue. However, it is not willing to support it as the main Department, as it sees it as an employment and training issue. However, it is more than an employment and training issue; it is a justice issue and a health issue; it is an interdepartmental issue. We believe that all young people should have this opportunity — including 14-year-olds.

The Chairperson: It is a cross-departmental issue because you can get different cohorts of young people; you will get a different cohort from justice or the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO) than you will from those who have completely disengaged. I understand that. What is your connection with DEL?

Mrs Rogan: We have had several conversations with DEL about mainstreaming, and we are awaiting the NEETs strategy in the hope that the key performance indicators and the budgets attached to them will allow us to discuss further how the programme can be integrated as an alternative for young people.

Mr Scott: We do not want to be a delivery organisation. We, the trustees of the Gerry Rogan Trust, have no staff; we commission work when we get funding to do so. We have developed a handbook for a methodology or process that anyone can take on and deliver with the proper training and quality standards. We do not see ourselves becoming a big delivery organisation. We want young people to be given the opportunity, through a range of organisations, to participate in this challenge by choice. That approach helps them to change their lives.

The Chairperson: You will find the Committee very supportive of helping people who have had fewer chances than us or who are in a more difficult place. However, other organisations operate in a similar field — Bytes, Include Youth, VOYPIC and NIACRO, for example. How do we get a coherent strategy? David has been instrumental in getting a joint all-party motion before the Assembly to talk about this issue for the third time. What we need is a coherent strategy rather than merely saying that it is a problem.

Mr Scott: Government as a bureaucracy has to do the best for the greatest number of people with the budgets available to it; therefore, as I know from experience, you often get a one-size-fits-all approach from government. For example, there may be a programme for 5,000 young people to fund vocational training and make them employable within two years. However, such a programme may not address personal development issues or the challenges that young people face outside the vocational field; it just focuses on apprenticeships and vocational training. However, some young people in those cohorts need their personal needs to be addressed, and this methodology provides that opportunity.

The Chairperson: Does that need to be done almost before you can deal with apprenticeships and such?

Mr Scott: It has to be done both before and alongside.

The Chairperson: The Minister is bringing his NEETs strategy to the Executive soon. However, we might write to him asking him to ensure that the lessons on personal development as outlined in this programme are factored into his thinking. Would that meet with the Committee's approval?

Members indicated assent.

Mr McElduff: Although we do not want to reduce the issue to one of costs, page seven of the presentation provides strong evidence for the relatively low cost of the GRIT initiative and its outcomes, especially compared with the alternatives. It costs on average £1,835 per young to deliver the GRIT experience, so it is value for money.

The Chairperson: I agree, Barry. However, the issue for us on a cross-departmental government basis is that we need someone somewhere to take ownership of where the money comes from. Apparently, we have money set aside for a social fund; DEL needs certain things, as do other Departments. We need a co-ordinated attack.

Mr McElduff: In our letter to Minister Farry we should stress that we believe it to be excellent value for money.

The Chairperson: We will draw that to the Minister's attention. However, the key point — although I stand to be corrected by the folk here — is that this programme is slightly different from other strategic imperatives in that it looks at social and personal development as a foundation for other things. The evidence is that that is important; therefore we will stress both.

There is one other issue for which I would like the Committee's approval. Money has been set aside for tracking NEETs; however, I believe that it was set aside to set up a study rather than for tracking. I would like the Committee's approval to write to the Minister to ask him about that. My understanding is that when you look into the groups that Thérèse, Tom and Stephen mentioned, the more you find. I do not think that we are getting to the real figures involved. Therefore, with your permission, I will write on your behalf.

I did not want to stop anyone in their tracks, particularly Stephen, as he has done what nobody before has ever done in this Committee — or probably in any other Committee — that is appear from right flank to get a few questions in. That is a first. The young people should be proud of you.

Mr Barr: We pride ourselves on leading from the front, Basil.

The Chairperson: I am impressed. We will try to do that in the Assembly. I will say, "Move off that bouncy castle, Sammy; I want a go." [*Laughter.*] Unless anyone has any further questions, we will ask the young people to speak.

Mrs Rogan: We worked out the running order beforehand. I would like to introduce you to James, who is from north Belfast; to Sarah, who is from the Shankill area in north Belfast; and to Amy, who travelled this morning from Enniskillen to Dungannon, where she was met by one of the Opportunity Youth staff. The young people are very courageous for sharing their personal story with us.

The Chairperson: James, before you get stuck in, I want you to go easy on this lot, because they are a bit old. Before you say what you have to say, perhaps you will tell us what you have thought of it so far.

Mr James McCusker (Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust): It all sounds very good.

The Chairperson: Did those folk do a good job?

Mr McCusker: Yes.

The Chairperson: Were they telling the truth?

Mr McCusker: Oh aye.

The Chairperson: We need a little bit of help. We need to know what you think of it. Were the girls happy enough?

Ms Sarah Bell (Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust): Yes.

Mr P Ramsey: Some of us could do with some of your hair, James. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: You will have to have a personal consultation about that afterwards, Pat. Girls, did you think it was interesting or a bit boring?

Ms Amy McGarrity (Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust): Someone said earlier that the young people grow on the youth workers. The youth workers let us into their background so that we can grow on them. The tears at the end of the week were for a reason, not just because people were leaving; it was because people were leaving their best friend, not just their youth worker.

The Chairperson: Very good. I want to put you at ease to have a little chat. Do not feel that you have to give the script; just talk to us. We are interested and pleased that you are here. You have done a good job.

Mr McCusker: The best place to start is 2008, when I developed a bit of depression. As a method of coping with that, I turned to drink and drugs. It started off slow, from 2008 to 2010, and it gradually escalated. Last April, I overdosed and was put into hospital. For those three years, I had no aspirations, apart from getting drunk and partying 24/7. That is all I did. I was not talking to my parents; I was living on my own and basically destroying my life.

After my overdose, I realised that I needed to stop drinking and taking drugs. My doctor referred me to the drug and alcohol intervention service for youth (DAISY) project, which is run by Opportunity Youth. I started there at the end of April last year and gradually worked with a counsellor for a couple of months. He got me to meet Stephen Barr, and they put me on the Switch onto Employment programme, which is also run by Opportunity Youth. That programme put me onto the GRIT project. I started the GRIT project in October, and I think that that was when I met you, David.

Although I had tackled the drink and drug problems, I still had no aspirations; I did not know what I wanted to do, because I had spent so long doing nothing. I could not think of a future for myself. It was not until I took part in the GRIT project and faced challenges, specifically when we had to go up a mountain. Everyone in the group was struggling halfway up the mountain. They were saying that they were not going to do it, but people like Stephen, Marty and Seán put what I like to think of as positive pressure on us. They really pushed us to get up the mountain. Once we were at the top, they said, "You said that you were not going to be able to do it; you complained the whole way up, but, eventually, you did it. You finally got up there. That is the same with everything else in your life." That was a good comparison for me, with the drink and the drugs. I finally did get over it.

After that, I saw how Stephen and Marty worked with us. They helped me a lot, and it was from then that I wanted to do the same for other people. I wanted to help other people as they had helped me. I got motivation back. After I left GRIT I put some serious thought into what I wanted to do and decided that I wanted to become a youth worker. For the first time in a few years, I had motivation to do something and was aspiring to be something. I am now on the GAP scheme and working with Opportunity Youth as well; I am on work placement there for the next nine months. In October, I will get my level-3 diploma in youth work. I will go to university as well, come September of next year. I was living on the dole, drinking, doing drugs constantly and had no aspirations or motivation. If it had not been for GRIT, I would probably have stayed on the dole.

The Chairperson: Do you know that you are very well spoken?

Mr McCusker: Thank you.

The Chairperson: That is very good; it is great, and you should take that on board. In fact, I will perhaps get you to give a lesson for Stephen, because he was talking to me about equality stuff and I could not follow what he was going on about. You are great; what are you going to do at university?

Mr McCusker: I am going to study youth work.

The Chairperson: That is brilliant. Where are you thinking of going?

Mr McCusker: It will be either Jordanstown or George Williams College in England, because it is running the programme that I am doing at the moment to get my level-3 qualification. If I go there, I will pay a reduced fee, which will probably work out better.

The Chairperson: There is a cunning wheeze, but I will not tell you about it. *[Laughter.]* I did not want to interrupt you. Thank you very much. Who is next?

Ms S Bell: I am.

The Chairperson: I have remembered where I met you.

Ms S Bell: Where did you meet me?

The Chairperson: I met you at Opportunity Youth with Alex Attwood.

Ms S Bell: I remember speaking in front of Alex.

The Chairperson: I remember that, because you took the place by storm, and not just because you did not let Alex Attwood say anything. *[Laughter.]* You made a big impression on me as well. Were you at the VOYPIC event at Stormont as well?

Ms S Bell: Yes.

The Chairperson: There we go. I was just trying to get a line on you.

Ms S Bell: I am going to read from this paper. Is that OK?

The Chairperson: You just fire ahead.

Ms S Bell: GRIT gave me the opportunity to experience different thoughts, feelings and emotions, and to deal with them positively and powerfully; it also made me feel as if I was worth something on this earth and that I had a good reason to be here. It gave me hope for my future.

I went on GRIT with no confidence and no belief in myself and a big fear of not knowing how my future would turn out. I had never experienced a residential like it before, nor had I ever had the opportunity to be my complete self without anybody judging me. While I was on GRIT I did not really take in what it was all about until the end, and then I knew that I had achieved something. All I knew was that I was on a residential for five days to try to help myself.

Before I went on GRIT, I was always putting myself at risk. I was smoking cannabis every day, morning to night, and I was getting myself into trouble with the cops; I was self-harming, and I tried to take my own life. I thought that I had no control over my life. I thought that everything was controlling me because I had always felt disrespected, unlistened to and unloved by the people around me, especially my family. When people put me down and things went wrong, I turned to drugs and to harming myself and putting my health at risk. I felt that no one cared about me and that everyone was against me.

I left GRIT with a better knowledge of how I wanted my future to turn out and with more confidence in myself to try new things. I always know now that you can achieve anything you want to if you put your mind to it. That means that if you try anything you want, you can achieve it. I also left GRIT with more belief in myself. I learned that if you keep telling yourself that you cannot do something, you will start to believe that you cannot do it, or that if you keep telling yourself that if you try something it will always go wrong, you will start to believe it and it will go wrong.

Positive thinking leads to positive feelings, and negative thinking leads to negative feelings. I learned to trust myself more and to respect myself and the people around me. It also gave me a better way of looking at myself and at the people around me. Everyone is unique in their own way, and if everyone was the same it would be a very strange world, which made me feel better about myself. I started to believe that people like you better for who you are, not for what someone else wants you to be. The best experience that I got from GRIT was knowing that there are always people who know, care and understand what is going on for you and who can help you to think of better ways of getting on with your life and of thinking about your future.

Since I have been on GRIT, I have wanted to be a youth worker, because I know that everyone experiences different feelings and emotions. Even the best fall down sometimes, but it is how you cope with those emotions that matters. I also know that there are a lot of disadvantaged young people around the world like me who have experienced those feelings and thoughts and who need someone to talk to and to look up to. In youth work, you learn as you go along, and you learn from each other. Sometimes, youth workers learn from young people too; it is all about working together as a team to help people to become successful in what they want to do in later life and to recognise what does not work for them.

Young people are our next generation. They all have the ability and the power to achieve what they want; they just need a bit of guidance and encouragement to help them to make the right choices. All young people have a voice, and they have a right to let their voices be heard. If someone feels loved, appreciated, respected and listened to for who they are, it helps them to become more confident to make better choices in life, and they have a better chance of being successful and happy.

Many young people nowadays feel unloved, neglected and disrespected for who they are, and they are unhappy with their lives. That is a big problem, because then they start to fail in life and make the wrong choices. I have learned that you are the master of your own life, feelings, thoughts and future, and that you have the key to your future. You can only control your own life, thoughts or feelings, not someone else's. You should be the most important person in your life.

I know for sure that all young people around the world have the ability and the power to change their lives to be successful and happy. I am one of those young people. I believe in young people and always will. I wrote this presentation from my own experiences with my own words that I learned on the GRIT course.

The Chairperson: Did you write that yourself?

Ms S Bell: Yes.

The Chairperson: That is very good.

Mr Douglas: She could be a speech writer.

The Chairperson: Do you do consultancy? *[Laughter.]* Perhaps we should get you to teach us a few things. We will hear from Amy now and then have a wee chat with you all.

Ms McGarrity: Mine is not half as long as that.

The Chairperson: Will yours be with a big smile? We negotiated that at the start. What did you think about getting to Dungannon?

Ms McGarrity: Excuse me?

The Chairperson: Was it scary getting out of Enniskillen? *[Laughter.]* My better half is from Lisnaskea.

Ms McGarrity: I used to work there.

The Chairperson: Is that right? I once made a comment about the roads and she did not talk to me for four weeks.

Ms McGarrity: You would not be used to the country.

The Chairperson: Indeed. What are you going to tell us about? What did you find down there?

Ms McGarrity: I come from a rural community in Fermanagh where there is not much to do, so some young people misuse drugs and alcohol — actually, many of them do. I was hanging about with people who were using meth, and I was afraid that I might go down the wrong road and end up ruining my life like some of my friends. I was delighted that I had the opportunity to do the GRIT course or my life could have been much different now. Thankfully GRIT came into my life just at the right time. I was worried because it was such a huge commitment, but it was well worth it in the long run.

My highlights of the GRIT course were meeting new people, learning new things and gaining a qualification. I have become more independent and learned to put my trust in others and to develop new skills that have helped me to create a positive future.

GRIT was not just about the activities; it was much more than that. It is a life-changing experience. I believe that taking advantage of the project will change lives for the better and create positive futures. I am doing an NVQ level 3 in barbering in the South West College in Omagh. I have set goals for the future and I aim to achieve many things. I thank GRIT for giving me direction in my life.

The Chairperson: Very good. Do you want to ask the Committee any questions?

Ms S Bell: Are you not meant to ask us the questions? *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: We are all a wee bit overawed and scared to ask questions. We will let the Committee have a wee go at asking questions in a moment, but do you have any questions for us or want to say anything? What do you think about politicians?

Mr McCusker: We will not go down that road.

Ms S Bell: The politicians that I know are all dead on. One that I know who is really good was a social worker before moving up to politics.

Ms McGarrity: It would be such a waste if GRIT had to go because there was no money for it. It would be such a waste of the staff, as it is hard to get staff for the sort of work that GRIT does and who allow young people into their lives. That is the hard thing.

The Chairperson: Were you surprised by that?

Ms McGarrity: I was. I could not open up to my family; therefore I did not know what to do. I was going in the wrong direction all the time. However, I could open up to the staff in GRIT without knowing them, because they opened up to me. That is why it would be hard to get the staff if GRIT were to go. Not only that, young people would not have the lives that they have today were it not for GRIT.

The Chairperson: That was very eloquent. Do you realise that you are on television?

Mr P Ramsey: It is live.

The Chairperson: Yes, that is right. I will make sure that people get to listen to what you have to say. What do you think, James?

Mr McCusker: About which part specifically?

The Chairperson: Do you have any questions for us politicians? Are you worried? From what I can work out you are not normally shy. Do you think that we should be doing a bit more for GRIT?

Mr McCusker: Definitely; 100%.

Ms S Bell: Yes, definitely.

The Chairperson: Really?

Ms S Bell: Yes; get me the hammer. I think that you should.

The Chairperson: Is that the general thinking.

Ms S Bell: I wrote my presentation after being on the GRIT course —

The Chairperson: I cannot believe that you wrote that.

Ms S Bell: That is where it came from.

The Chairperson: That is tremendous. We will take a few questions from the Committee, and you can work out between yourselves who will answer them. I do not mind if you all want to have a go at answering them. However, I will try and guide you a wee bit. Who would like to go first?

Ms S Bell: No one was very enthusiastic. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Sarah, you are right. You may have to take over chairing the Committee. Pat, I want some enthusiasm from you, not your normal attitude.

Ms McGarrity: Youth clubs around the country are trying to help young people, but GRIT is 10 times better at helping them than a youth club.

Ms S Bell: It is because of how they deliver it.

Ms McGarrity: Yet youth clubs get much more than GRIT; GRIT should get twice as much as youth clubs.

The Chairperson: We will come back to that point. First, however, we will let Pat ask a question. If he is not enthusiastic enough, one of you will tell him.

Mr P Ramsey: We have three red buttons, and you can press one. *[Laughter.]* You should all be very proud of yourselves for giving such marvellous personal testimony before so many people you have never met; it says a great deal not just for you but for the people who have helped you along the way. A little bit of motivation and encouragement at the right time has changed your lives for the better. If it had not been for GRIT, God knows what circumstances you would be in.

Ms S Bell: If it had not been for GRIT, I would not be sitting in this chair; I would not even have had the confidence to come to Stormont. I would have been scundered.

Mr P Ramsey: I can say in all humility that there but for the grace of God go we all, our children and grandchildren. Well done. Thank you very much for coming along.

The Chairperson: I want enthusiasm and smiling from Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: You ask a lot. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: This is fame; this is a smiling Jim Allister.

Ms S Bell: If one person smiles, everyone smiles.

The Chairperson: Tell him that; he needs to hear it.

Mr Allister: I will deal with you later, Basil. *[Laughter.]* No one could fail to be impressed by your contribution, your enthusiasm and by what you have done for yourselves; that is a key part of it. In contrast to what you have achieved from this programme, share with us a little of your experience with the formal education system that you passed through at school. In what circumstances did you leave school? Did school help or fail you?

Ms S Bell: I failed at school. I left school in 2008 because my brother —

Mr Allister: How can you have failed when you can write as you do?

Ms S Bell: There were things going on in my life, so I dropped out of school. I used to get suspended all the time, and I left school in 2008 because my brother died; I was out of school for more than a year. I moved into a children's home in 2008, but I moved out of it last year and am now in semi-independent living. I hope to move on from semi-independent living to full independent living.

Mr Allister: What could school have done for you that it did not do?

Ms S Bell: It could have provided more support, and there should have been more youth workers in school; there were no youth workers in my school.

Mr Allister: I wonder whether what you mean is gaining self-esteem, believing in yourself, that you are worth something and that you can do something. Are you saying that the school system that you passed through did not offer any of that; that, in fact, it repressed it?

Ms S Bell: I agree.

Mr McCusker: In my school, you could see a counsellor who would come in once a week. However, I did not know that until I was in upper sixth, although I started to develop a drug problem when I was in fifth year. When students wanted to see the counsellor they had to leave their name in a box in the office and they would be called out of class. However, if someone was being called out of class once a week, everyone would realise that they were going to see a counsellor, and they would be tortured by the other students about why they were seeing a counsellor. People would get bullied because of it.

Ms S Bell: There should be more youth workers in schools. That would make a big difference.

Mr Allister: One of the things that I have picked up this morning is that you seem to put a lot of the success down to the personal mentoring that you get. The youth workers in charge of you really take an interest; they really get into your lives, and you get into their lives. It is a mutual process. There is none of that in our schools system.

Ms S Bell: I do not know about every school, but there was none of that in my school.

Ms McGarrity: The only way that that is going to work is when you can grow to somebody.

Ms S Bell: It is when you can personally grow. You should not be growing to them; you should be growing yourself.

Ms McGarrity: If they are treating you the way that you want to be treated, you will grow with them.

Ms S Bell: Exactly.

Ms McGarrity: You will gain confidence and go out and do those things. If they are not going to treat you the way that you want to be treated, you are not going to have the confidence to stand up and speak up for yourself. There is not a lot of that in schools.

The Chairperson: James, have you no control over this? *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCusker: I am waiting for my turn to speak.

Ms S Bell: I could talk all day.

The Chairperson: You are not in bad company. A lot of people around here can do that. This discussion is great because it is good for us to hear from people who have been on the course.

Mr McElduff: I am interested in sport, and it states in your written testimony, Amy, that you were very active in sport. Have you managed to keep up that involvement in sport? Do any of you see the value of sporting activities and being part of a team? Is sport a good thing?

Ms McGarrity: It is a good thing. You forget everything else that is behind you, and you let yourself go. You do not have your problems on your mind when you are out having fun, but, when that fun is over, it is back to reality. When you are out having fun, you are not thinking about the problems. That is why I play sport.

Ms S Bell: You learn about your problems, and then you learn to deal with them.

Ms McGarrity: I go out to forget my problems, and I have fun. I am very into sport.

The Chairperson: You make an interesting point about sport being a bit of a rest from your problems, but that is not dealing with the problems.

Ms McGarrity: It does not deal with the problems, but you are not going to be sitting in the house; you can go out and forget things for a while. You are not going to sit in the house and keep thinking over the one problem, for it to become worse, when you can come back to that situation later and think then about how to get over it.

Mr McElduff: I want to get another youth perspective, but it is not necessarily DEL-related. Are you all on Facebook? Are there any negatives or downsides to Facebook?

Ms McGarrity: There are and there are not.

Mr McElduff: Are there downsides to not being able to communicate with a person in the spoken way, which you are very good at? Is it a threat?

Ms S Bell: What do you mean?

Mr McElduff: I see a lot of young people constantly using it.

Ms S Bell: So, you are saying that people depend too much on Facebook.

The Chairperson: Do you agree or disagree with that?

Ms McGarrity: I agree.

Ms S Bell: It depends on the person.

Mr McCusker: I definitely agree. Back when I was partying all the time, I was constantly on Facebook trying to find out where the parties were. At 3 o'clock in the morning, the only people on Facebook are drunk people, so that was a good way of communicating at that stage.

Mr McElduff: You needed a party from three onwards. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCusker: I was doing that because I was not doing anything else. It was the only thing I could do at that time of the night. Now, I have a scheduled routine, and now that I stick to it, I do not need to sit updating Facebook constantly. I have something else to do. I see Facebook as a way of coping with boredom. It seems to be a big problem now. I have never put it on my phone because I know that I would probably end up sinking back to that and would even be on it at work. It does my head in most of the time.

Mr McElduff: Amy, do you have broadband where you are from? Like you, I am from the country. *[Laughter.]*

Ms McGarrity: We have broadband.

Mr McElduff: Congratulations; I salute you.

Mr Douglas: Thanks very much for your presentation; it has been very encouraging.

The Chairperson: Sammy, that is not you. Be yourself. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Douglas: OK. I have been very impressed. I work in east Belfast and come across quite a number of young people. I will direct the question to Sarah. When I see young people at football matches, even ones from the Shankill Road, where you are from, many of them — not all of them — are on the drink from 14, 15 or 16. They are the sorts of people who we were talking about this morning. Great work has been done with yourselves. How do you reach those young people in the way that you have been reached? What was the big thing from that environment that got you into GRIT? What made you say, "Right, I am going to go for this"?

Ms S Bell: I was in a children's home and was really into my drugs, and the social workers there put my name forward and said, "You are going on a residential". I said, "No problem", because they are trying to help you.

The Chairperson: We have asked some of the leaders this question: how do we get people interested? You went along basically because your social worker said —

Ms S Bell: The people who have been on it can tell their friends that, if they are having problems or feeling down, they can go on it. I went on a residential and told people about my experience. It is up to the young person. You cannot force a young person to do it.

The Chairperson: Is that the best way? If you tell other people, are they more likely to listen than if we told them?

Ms S Bell: You cannot force a young person to do anything; it is their choice.

Mrs Rogan: As well as talking to training organisations and community groups, we have had a lot of communication with statutory bodies to encourage them to use the programme. We have spoken to the health and social care sector and to people who influence young people's lives because, quite often, young people do not know.

Mr Allister: Do you engage with the schools?

Mrs Rogan: We do not engage with the schools. We work with ages 16 to 24. We would love to have the opportunity to engage with the schools. In fact, this programme would be very appropriate for young people around the age when they are making decisions about their life.

Mr Douglas: Sarah, I notice that you are trying to get into youth work. I am not quite sure where you are at this point in time. We were all inspired by your story this morning. It would be great for young people to hear it and for you to be role models, although I am sure that some have heard it already. Is there any way that we can help? I am sure that you get help from Thérèse and other people. Is there any way that we, as a Committee, can help with youth work and other initiatives?

Ms S Bell: With programmes like GRIT, you learn from going on residentials because you are learning from other people and the leaders. You learn and get experience.

The Chairperson: I think that Sammy is offering you a chance to come up and spend a day or two walking around with us to see what we do. You are all welcome; we will work it out.

Ms S Bell: How about you coming and spending a day with all us down in Ballintoy? *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: We can do that as well; there will be no problem. Sammy is saying that we are really pleased that you have come up and talked to us, but we maybe need to find a way of doing a wee bit more talking. You can have a think about the best way for us to explain what we do. You were saying that you talk to your friends; well, maybe you could talk to our friends and the other MLAs, and that could help with the GRIT programme.

Ms S Bell: So you are inviting us to come up and speak to other MLAs about our experience?

The Chairperson: Absolutely.

Ms S Bell: That sounds like a plan.

The Chairperson: It will not necessarily be as formal as today's meeting. I am quite sure that all the MLAs will be happy if you go where they go and meet the people they meet. We will sort something out if you are interested, and I am sure that Sammy would take the lead. You do not have to go in a wee herd; you can go individually. What we will do at the end is work out which Committee member is the most enthusiastic. For my money, Jim Allister is currently ahead. *[Laughter.]* However, all the members are very good.

Mr D McIlveen: I am glad to see that Jim is leading the way with his enthusiasm. The competition is heating up.

I want to say a couple of things. Thérèse, what you said about the schools is bang on. By the time these young people reach the age of 16 a lot of damage has been done, so there should be some engagement with the Department of Education if there are opportunities there.

I want to give James a chance to speak as he has been sort of overshadowed. James, you mentioned two words that literally keep me awake at night when I think about them: "motivation" and "aspiration". One of the greatest challenges that our young people face is a lack of motivation, inspiration and aspiration. James, I will let you lead off on this as you brought it up, but it is an open question. Can you think back to a single experience or event in your life that sapped your motivation? Where did we go wrong? I know that we may be getting into personal territory, and I do not want you to say anything that you do not feel comfortable saying. The key to getting this right is gauging where it all started to go wrong. Perhaps you can help us out with that.

Mr McCusker: It was in the middle of school, around third year. By that stage, you have done so many years in school and are starting to get bored with it. It is just test after test, day after day, and, apart from the period in the summer when you get that tiny bit of freedom, there is not much else to do. That is the time in school when people are living for the weekend. It has now got to the point where the younger age groups have realised that they can go out and get drunk and will have more fun doing

that. More things need to be done during school hours to keep people interested. The only reason that I stayed on in school after my GCSEs was that I was getting paid the education maintenance allowance (EMA). That was the one thing that kept me motivated to finish my A levels. I had had enough of school and exams and everything.

In third year and fourth year, you are constantly told that the exams that you are doing will decide your future. You are told that you need to do your exams and A levels or you will not get into university and that, if you do not get into university, you are not going to get a job. Well, look at half the country now: they are not going to get a job anyway, whether they did their exams or not. The pressure that is put on young students builds up, and that was one of the reasons why I became depressed. I was constantly thinking about what way my future would go, and the more I thought about it, the worse it got. I thought, "It is not going to go anywhere, so I may as well stop now." That was pretty much it. That happened around fifth year, when I was doing my GCSEs.

Mr D McIlveen: I will also open my next question up to everyone. Barry made an interesting point about social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Do you feel that there is too much pressure on young people and that, to some extent, their lives are always on display? When I was a young man — it was not that long ago — you went home from school and closed the door. That was it; you did not see or hear from anyone until the next day unless it was by phone. Now, contact is ongoing, and the lives of our young people in particular are always on display.

James, interestingly, you mentioned that, when you were in second year or third year, you were thinking that there were no jobs anyway. When I was in second year or third year, I was thinking that I should just get school out of the way and worry about jobs and things after that. Do you feel that there is an oversupply of information that is possibly having a negative impact on the lives of young people? They know too much and people know too much about them.

Mr McCusker: Yes; definitely.

Mr D McIlveen: I know that some of the young people who have been involved in the programme have had issues with self-harm and have attempted suicide. Do you think that that is partly as a result of the pressure to be on display all the time?

Mr McCusker: I am not really sure. One problem with Facebook is cyberbullying. If you are not the most popular person in school, you are going to have a very small friend group on Facebook, if you even bother going on it. There are people who talk about it constantly. You may not be on Facebook all the time, but the so-called popular people are constantly talking to one another on it and organising things. I have a lot of friends who are not on Facebook, but, nowadays, lots of people organise events, parties or days out through Facebook and do not even bother ringing people, so people end up being excluded just because they have not conformed to the social media.

Mr D McIlveen: Girls, do you find the same thing? How do you feel? Do you feel under pressure to be involved in social media?

Ms S Bell: To fit in with the crowd?

Mr D McIlveen: Yes.

Ms S Bell: It depends on what your community is like and what kind of friends you have.

Ms McGarrity: I would say least said, easiest mended, because then no one knows much about you.

Ms S Bell: You can just keep yourself to yourself.

Ms McGarrity: You might get it for one reason. You might have a sister or brother like mine; one lives in America and one lives in Australia, so how else am I going to contact them? It is free, easy to use and convenient.

The Chairperson: What about Skype?

Mr McCusker: I have been using Skype for years. I have a lot of friends in other countries, so it is probably my favourite. It is the easiest way to keep in touch, specifically because you can use it on your phone. You can just phone people, and the call is mostly free.

The Chairperson: Do you use the video on Skype?

Mr McCusker: Yes.

Mr Ross: Obviously, you have all spoken very highly of youth workers. The testament to their success is the fact that many of you want to get into youth work yourselves, which shows how important it is. Have any of the other young people who have gone through the scheme — perhaps your friends have gone through it — had the opportunity to go on and do other things? What do they want to do, and have they been successful?

Ms S Bell: The people who I know have. GRIT helped them to build their confidence up and they went on to do other things, or went to other training organisations. They were behind, but when they went on GRIT it built them up so that they felt more confident.

Mrs Rogan: Many of the young people have gone on to the Training for Success programme through the training organisations. These guys here are working in the Opportunity Youth environment. As Amy said, she is training in level 3 barbering, which is also very encouraging.

The Chairperson: Michelle, Amy is from Fermanagh.

Ms Gildernew: I know. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: This is our specialist in Fermanagh. She had quite a journey up here. Michelle, I just want to know why you are so late, because Amy was here bang on time, and she had to go to Dungannon to get a lift. *[Laughter.]* I know that you have come in at the end; do you want to —

Ms Gildernew: I want to apologise, Basil, for being late; to you as Chairperson but more to the young people. I had a bit of a family crisis this morning, so that is why I am so late. Unfortunately, I have another commitment, a health commitment, so I cannot stay for very much longer, and I am deeply sorry for that. However, it is brilliant that you are here, and what I have heard has been very well articulated and thought out. You are a great example of young people.

I want to say this without being patronising. I know how difficult it is at the moment. I am in my forties, but many a time I have said that it was so much easier when I was growing up than it is now. I know the kind of pressures that can be put on young people. I only joined Facebook, James, because I was missing out on a pile of things. My sisters were on it organising stuff, and I went on it because I was nosy and was missing out. I understand; I had to conform to the social media because I was missing out on information. Nevertheless, you can be bombarded.

You may already have been asked about the future. What do you all see as part of your future? I know that you are doing a training course, Amy. You might take a wee half an inch off James's Mohican when you are qualified. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: Are you responsible for that?

Ms Gildernew: It just needs a wee tidy-up. *[Laughter.]*

Ms McGarrity: I want to get as many qualifications as I can before I am 25. My main aim is either to be a youth worker or to work in a care home with different people, such as people with schizophrenia and mental health issues. Those people are working with people who work outside and who might not be as nice as the people who we have been working with in GRIT. We want to show people who have mental health issues that there are people like them out there.

Ms Gildernew: You can relate to them because of your own experiences.

Ms S Bell: I want to be a youth worker because I have had my own experience of life and I can relate to other young people. Obviously, I am not the only young person who has been through what I have been through, so I know that I am able to relate to young people who are going through the same thing as I did when I was that age. I could maybe encourage them.

The Chairperson: Do you not think that we have enough youth workers? We have the three of you.

Ms McGarrity: We do not have enough of the right type.

The Chairperson: That is very interesting.

Ms Gildernew: The perspective on youth work is interesting. I was involved in youth work when I was younger, and I can see why you want to be involved. Without putting words in your mouth, did you feel that nobody understood you until you got on the GRIT programme or that, if there were issues with self-harm, drugs or alcohol, people would judge you? Are you saying that the journey you have come through means that you are less likely to be judgemental of young people in the future?

Ms McGarrity: That is exactly the way it works.

Mr McCusker: The youth workers in the programme laid their lives out on the table. They told us exactly what they had done, how their lives had changed and the mistakes that they had made. Hearing that was inspiring because it showed us that we were not worthless and that we could do that ourselves. We heard about the mistakes that they had made and could see what they had now become.

Ms S Bell: Hearing other people's stories motivates young people, and they get the confidence to do it themselves.

Ms Gildernew: Everybody has a journey. I bet that there are things that people around this table are not proud of.

Ms S Bell: I am sure that youse have had a journey as well.

Ms Gildernew: Of course we have made mistakes and done things that we would not do again. You cannot presume that, because we are sitting around this table today, we are all perfect. We are not, and we should not purport to be.

Ms S Bell: It is about learning about your problems, dealing with them and not falling back. It is all about going up and up. Obviously, youse have problems and are not always happy.

The Chairperson: We certainly are not.

Ms S Bell: Youse are always enthusiastic by the looks of it.

The Chairperson: We are getting lessons in enthusiasm. *[Laughter.]* Some of us are responding better to treatment than others.

Mr Lyttle: I extend my sincere apologies; I was involved in a fundraising event this morning for mental health services in east Belfast. I could not avoid it. I have had the pleasure of meeting Sarah previously, and the strength of testimony from the young people shows how important the programme is. It is powerful. It is great to see you up here at Stormont today.

Mr F McCann: Members have asked some of my questions. I go back to some of the questions that the leaders were asked earlier. There is a section of society that the system goes by, and Jim touched

on the issue of education. There are quite a lot of statutory authorities, but, unfortunately, in many ways, when it comes to cutting back on resources, organisations such as Opportunity Youth are usually the first port of call. Although people in authority may support a scheme and say that it is good, when it comes to cutting resources, they will say that it has outlived its usefulness and that we should move on to something else. In the past, many schemes that could have had a big impact have fallen by the wayside because nobody bothered to see how they could be resourced. We have a big challenge in life, and while schemes for the likes of NEETs and others are supposed to get to the core of the difficulties and problems in many areas, even those bypass many in the community. We need to work on that.

The Chairperson: I agree with you. The softer options get cut, and the damage is left because the schemes have been taken away.

Does anyone else want to say anything or are you happy for me to give the young people the last word? Do you think you got a fair chance to say your piece?

Ms S Bell: Yes.

Ms McGarrity: Yes.

Mr McCusker: Yes.

The Chairperson: Did you learn anything about it?

Ms McGarrity: Too much. *[Laughter.]*

Ms S Bell: Are you asking if we learnt anything about GRIT?

The Chairperson: No; did you learn anything about us?

Ms S Bell: I learnt that you are very respectful and very nice people. You are very honest.

Mr Lyttle: Not everyone says that.

Mr Allister: Keep talking. *[Laughter.]*

Ms McGarrity: We will put a smile on your face yet.

Mr Lyttle: This is being reported by Hansard. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I have a really hard question. I want to know if Stephen Barr paid you money.

Ms S Bell: He did not; I paid him.

Ms McGarrity: He paid us with warmth.

The Chairperson: Thank you all very much for coming to the meeting. There are two debates coming up. One is on the future of our Department. We deal with the sort of things that you have brought to us. I am quite sure that you will feature in a number of the speeches. If you have the time, you are welcome to come up and see how much people have learnt from you, or you can watch it online. David also has a motion coming up. When do you think that will be debated, David?

Mr D McIlveen: I think it is with the Business Committee now.

The Chairperson: So it is imminent. If any of you or your friends would like to come up, we will organise it to make sure that you can do that and spend some time here. You can spread the message of joy and enthusiasm.

Ms S Bell: And happiness.

The Chairperson: And a little bit of reality. We understand; we are not trivialising the issues in any way. We know that you have had some traumatic and difficult issues to deal with, and we appreciate that. We are very grateful that you have come up here. You have done yourself proud; you are an inspiration to all of us. If you would like to get a wee bit more involved in this, you can get in touch with anybody you like, including me, and we will sort something out for you.

Mr McCusker: Thank you.

Ms S Bell: Thank you very much.

Ms McGarrity: Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thérèse, would you like to make some closing remarks?

Mrs Rogan: I just want to thank you all very much for your time and interest. I thank the young people for coming here, because it is not an easy thing to do. It is also very difficult to share that personal part of your life. The sad thing for us is that we will not be delivering GRIT because the funding ran out in March. We are depending on an application to the lottery to enable us to run another GRIT programme. If you believe that it is worth looking at how the programme can be offered to young people who are in a challenging situation and to young people in the education system, we would very much welcome you using any influence that you have. That would be very much welcomed.

The Chairperson: The main thing we will do — I have agreement from the Committee on this — is write to the Minister about his NEETs strategy and suggest that the documentation that you have provided to us is taken on board. We cannot prejudge what he is going to say; we have to wait until it comes back from the Executive. I assure you that the Committee has taken on board the messages that you have put forward. We will do our level best. There is a bit about engaging with the system, which, of course, is what you are doing, but if you could get your young people to engage as well, that would help. Everybody, as you know, is resource-constrained at the moment, but, as Fra said, this is not an area on which we should be cutting back. We do not want to lead people up the garden path, but the fact that you have had the chance to speak and that the young people have done their very best will, I think, be helpful.

Mr F McCann: I want to add to that. Mrs Rogan said that they had applied to the lottery. Perhaps the Committee could forward a letter to say what has happened here this morning and that it is concerned that, if the funding is taken away, 200, 300 or 400 other young people will be denied the opportunity to come through the programme.

Mrs Rogan: That would be very helpful; thank you.

The Chairperson: We will do that. We will draw attention to the funding issue when we write to the Department. Thank you all very much indeed. See you all soon.