



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Shaping an Employment Programme that
Works

4 July 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

Shaping an Employment Programme that Works

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Pat Boyle	Ashton Community Trust
Ms Susan Russam	GEMS NI
Mr Seamus McAleavey	Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

The Chairperson: We have Seamus McAleavey from the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA); Pat Boyle from the Ashton Community Trust; and Susan Russam from GEMS NI.

Mr Seamus McAleavey (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action): Thank you very much, Chairperson. Thank you for the invitation to come along and talk to the Committee about an employment programme. We have submitted a paper to the Committee and the Minister. The Minister for Employment and Learning is taking the lead on this issue, and we are keen to influence the development of an employment programme in Northern Ireland. We are seeking to talk to the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. From our point of view, these things are linked through the relationship with social security, economic development in Northern Ireland and the opportunities that may be offered by a developing economy. We have spoken to the Social Development Committee. Alastair was there, so he will have heard some of what we have to say on this.

The paper we put together is the work of a number of community and voluntary organisations that NICVA has drawn together. They have been heavily involved in these types of programmes, some for over 20 or 25 years. Our sector has a strong track record of working with unemployed people and helping them to gain employment. For many of our organisations, the focus has very much been in that field. So, we think that we have significant experience. Our motivation is trying to help people who find themselves particularly disadvantaged through unemployment. It is our view that a lifetime of unemployment is, for most people, a very bad thing. Giving those people opportunities, by getting employment and decent wages, is the cornerstone of dealing with a lot of the issues of poverty and disadvantage in Northern Ireland.

We have some concerns about the outworking of the work programme in England. One big issue we find is that, if the incentive for the providers is purely getting the unemployed person into a job, that often creates perverse outcomes, strange as that might seem, even though that is the number one priority for us all. There are all sorts of difficulties around that. We have views about how that should be dealt with.

We think that local is best. Over the past 20 or 25 years, during the time of direct rule, we in Northern Ireland simply took employment programmes that had been developed in England, maybe tweaked them for Northern Ireland, and then rolled them out. We are a very different place in size and scale. The shape of our economy is very different. The opportunity that is available is very different. From our point of view, this is a great opportunity to get a local solution for what are, as you will see when you look at the shape of our economy, fairly local problems.

I will pass you now to Pat and Susan for some comments. We will then be happy to take questions.

Mr Pat Boyle (Ashton Community Trust): Hello. Thank you for giving us the chance to put our point across to you. Hopefully, we will get some sort of resolution. Our main concerns are about the prime contracting model. It has been discussed and used in England for years. We have seen it here in only the past few years. One of our major concerns is that it is there to push out the third sector, as has happened in Scotland and Wales, where we have seen prime contractors coming in, with only 6% to 8% of the third sector taking up subcontracts. There are major concerns about the subcontracts alone. Things have been discussed, such as the creaming and parking of clients. Again, we are working with those furthest from the labour market. We have massive amounts of experience. We have over 25 years' experience, as have most of the voluntary and community sector. There have been programmes delivered here in Northern Ireland that we feel are up for the work programme. We feel that they are far better than what we see the work programme delivering. I think we need to look more at opportunities at home rather than look across the water at prime contractors coming in. One of the things that I am concerned about is the amount of money that can be driven out of this economy at a time when the economy is shrinking. I would be worried about that. I have other concerns about the prime contractors. I am sorry; what I was going to say has just gone out of my head.

The Chairperson: Do not worry. I am not stopping you, Pat. We are fairly relaxed, so, if you remember something later on, you can come back in; do not worry.

Ms Susan Russam (GEMS NI): Just to echo what Seamus and Pat have said; thank you very much for the opportunity to present to the Committee this morning. I have a long background in community development work in Belfast and across Northern Ireland in some of the most difficult and hard-to-reach and hard-to-help places.

Unemployment is a blight. It impacts on health and well-being, economic self-sufficiency and young people in particular. It impacts in urban environments across Northern Ireland, but also, critically, in rural environments, where young people who are brought up in poverty are more likely to remain in poverty as adults. We know the issues, challenges and concerns there.

We have seen our Employment and Learning Committee demonstrate leadership over the past number of years by scrutinising some of the programmes that have been in place and not merely taking it for granted that they are working OK. We have seen that with the issues and challenges around young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs); the Steps to Work programme; and the Training for Success programme. As my colleagues have said, there is an opportunity to ensure that we get the best and the most positive, well-formed outcome for the people who need us most so that we can try to get them into employment and onto a path to a career and career development.

One of my most serious concerns about a potential model or framework for the employment programme, as I believe it is to be called, is, as Patrick has said, the idea of three prime contractors working across Northern Ireland. I think members will know that, as regards the spatial labour market, the needs and aspirations of people in communities across the board, be they in Fermanagh, Tyrone, Belfast, Derry/Londonderry or anywhere else, are very different. I believe that "local" has to come into it and has to work best.

We were heartened to learn that the euphemistically titled "black box approach" — basically, an approach in which you incentivise your prime contractor or your subcontractor to come up with really

innovative solutions to working with an unemployed person — is perhaps not going to be within that type of methodology. We firmly believe that many constituents in Northern Ireland will go into a black hole and not a black box. That would be very concerning.

I think we have an opportunity to get what is best, but we also have an opportunity to drive what is best. Yes, people need to be incentivised. We all need to work to a very strong business programme, and we all need to ensure that we have quality in that programme. However, we also need to ensure that that quality is fit for purpose and fit for the customers who are hardest to reach and hardest to help. That takes not only the skills, knowledge and expertise of those of us who are doing the job; it takes the connections that we make across Northern Ireland. I have yet to be convinced that that can be achieved with three prime contractors working across that. My plea to the Committee this morning would be for it to look at that in the same way that it looked at Steps to Work and Training for Success.

If we are going to have a successful employment programme in Northern Ireland for the people of Northern Ireland under a devolved Administration, it is crucial that we make it fit for purpose. We need to have a comprehensive assessment of each and every customer who goes through that process. That is where the benchmark needs to be for the quality of that intervention. We need to find out what the money for each individual is spent on and who is doing what with it, and not put it into a black box or black hole where we will lose it.

We also need to make incentive work for those people. We should be challenged as providers of employment services as well as those who are sitting at the top, holding the reins of the prime contract model. We believe that we can make a different offer for Northern Ireland. In fact, there needs to be a very different offer.

We heard yesterday about the issues and challenges facing our young people. We know that the Committee has looked extensively at that. We know that there are high numbers of people who, when their benefits migrate, will have a multitude of complex, multifactorial problems and challenges and will be afraid. We already know that some of our young people are disappearing because they do not want to go into Training for Success or other models. We have to ensure that we can track where those young people are going and that we can make arrangements for older people, people of my age, to ensure that they are not lost, along with people who are being made redundant.

The Chairperson: Susan, I know that you are extremely passionate about this, but you are preaching to the converted here.

Ms Russam: I appreciate that.

The Chairperson: I do not want to stop you, but we want to get on and talk about the practical issues and about what you want to do. I want you to focus on that.

Ms Russam: OK. Moving swiftly on, the practical issues are these: if we are to have an employment programme that is fit for purpose, it needs to be driven by quality and by sound tracking, and on the basis that everyone shares responsibility for making it a success. The model of intervention needs to be at the pace, place and stage of each individual that comes into the programme.

The Chairperson: OK. So, if we could get to the bit about how you might do it —

Ms Russam: Maybe I should hand over to Seamus.

Mr McAleavey: We are happy to take questions now, Chairperson.

The Chairperson: Did you want to say something, Pat?

Mr P Boyle: I am OK. Susan covered what I wanted to say.

Mr McAleavey: The issue of the prime contractor is important. In England, very large organisations come in and mop up very large contracts. They associate a lot of voluntary and community organisations with them for the delivery, and work quite often appears or does not appear. Many organisations in England have simply walked away from the programme. In the same way that companies have produced zero-hours contracts for workers, it is as if there are zero-hours contracts for voluntary and community groups.

The Chairperson: What do you mean by zero hours?

Mr McAleavey: It means, "If we need you, we will call you and bring you in to work". It is impossible to run an organisation that can provide a quality service if it does not have some sense of how many people it will be dealing with, what programmes it will put them through and what resources are going to be required. It cannot just sit there and make resources magically turn up every time a prime contractor says, "We would like to send a person round to you."

The Chairperson: I have looked at your paper, and the synopsis is that you do not want remote framework-type people coming in, because you do not think that that works, and that there is an opportunity to do things locally in Northern Ireland because of our scale and fit. Is that the synopsis of the paper?

Mr McAleavey: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: So, we have got that. You may not have this with you now, but we need evidence of where things have or have not worked in the past. I do not want to stop anyone's enthusiasm coming through, but this is not about the aspirational stuff. The Committee will agree with you about the challenges facing our most marginalised people. When you described what happened in GB, I think you said that only a percentage of the voluntary sector took up subcontracts.

Mr P Boyle: It was 6 to 8%. That was in Scotland and Wales.

The Chairperson: OK. Where did that number come from?

Mr P Boyle: From transcripts and reports that I have been reading.

The Chairperson: The Committee would be pleased to receive that information, even in September—

Mr P Boyle: We would be happy to follow up with factual information.

The Chairperson: It would just be to say that these are the lessons learned or the problems observed. I can say to you on a personal basis — the Committee will, of course, voice its own opinion — that I am not in favour of framework arrangements. I think that they are a tool to make the life of the Civil Service easy and a complete and utter waste of space in just about every place that I have seen them.

Mr McElduff: Can you be more clear, Chairman?

The Chairperson: Well, just to reiterate the point, with Mr McElduff's encouragement, I do not agree with the framework directives at all. It is a bureaucratic nonsense. I know that we are being slightly facetious, but it is a serious point. They are for people who have a tick-box mentality. It is about trying to protect someone from a Public Accounts Committee (PAC) inquiry or whatever. I do not agree with that. If you have responsibility, you have responsibility. You need local people on the ground. It is not just in this area that I think there has been a failing; there are other areas. However, there is no point in me expressing an opinion any more than there is in you doing so. What we need is evidence of where things have failed in the past and of how we might do things better. You might look into how you can get us some information on that for the next session in September.

Mr McAleavey: We will do that. We can also point you to the history of some of those programmes over the years. There were particular difficulties in England, where there is a strong focus on getting the person a job. I made the point that that is what everyone is trying to do, but, quite often, you get perverse outcomes. Back in the days of LECs and TECs — local enterprise companies and training and enterprise councils — quite a number had to be suspended and closed down because of the shenanigans that went on, some of them fraudulent. Unemployed people were simply moved through those organisations and into jobs that they would have got anywhere, and employer organisations and providers collected the payments. People talk about creaming and cherry-picking. That is what the incentive gets people to do: they get paid for getting the result, so they go for that and cut corners. We would be happy to dig up some of the material from the past and let you have it. You have to look at this type of programme in the round and at the experience over the past 20 years.

The Chairperson: I will not take too long, because I want to hear what colleagues have to say, but I understand the point that you are making. If you set targets, people play to the targets rather than taking on the issues that we want them to take on. It would be interesting for us to find out about that. If I turn the issue around, I can see that the other challenge is that there is sometimes a huge amount of complexity. Within NICVA and other bodies, there are many, many organisations, and there are times when there is duplication. You are not sure who is doing what, and one project is finishing while another is starting. Another piece of work that would be useful is deciding what type of benchmarking you would like to see, so that we can control it. If we are not going to do it from a central framework, how would we do it? Government will rightly want to assess whether people are delivering against the desired result. So, that might be an additional bit of work.

Mr McAleavey: We are definitely not saying that people should not be held to account or that getting a job is not absolutely critical, but we need to be able to see that that is a sustainable job and to focus on the people who are furthest from the labour market. They are the most difficult cases. A lot more effort needs to go into helping them rather than helping someone who may get a job quite easily on their own.

Ms Russam: There is also an assumption that the third sector is third rate in delivering quality business outcomes for employers and other stakeholders. I do not think that that is the case. We are people-driven, not necessarily profit-driven, but we work very much on a business improvement model when providing our services.

The Chairperson: I hate to interrupt, because I think that we should give you a pedestal so that you can stand up and enthuse us all. You are amongst friends. Your colleagues here will be supportive. The question is this: how do we come up with alternatives that play to your strengths? We do have to be rigorous. No system is perfect, not even your system. We need to work out how to do it.

We will bring in members for questions. I remind you that you will all get a second go. Do not feel that you have to get it all out in one go — even you, Pat.

Mr P Ramsey: Seamus and Susan, you are very welcome this morning. It is important to acknowledge the significant contribution that the voluntary and community sector has played in Northern Ireland. I just do not know what sort of society we would have without the sector and the difference it has made to the quality of life of so many people.

I read your paper. There is nothing in it that members of the Committee have not said, here or in plenary session, about youth unemployment, the migration of workers, the complex needs involved and models of intervention. That has all been said in the prime context that we are clearly worried. We see it in constituencies. Contractors are coming in without the necessary resources and then trying to hobble on to some of the community groups to get assistance because they do not have the quality or capacity to manage.

It has to be acknowledged that, in the past 12 months, 11 of your organisations have worked with over 15,000 people with wide-ranging disabilities, health-related problems and complex needs. How many of those 15,000 people have secured employment through those projects? One concern we have always had about the Department is around tracking. Susan, you made reference to how we can get tracking. People talk a good game, but, as the Chair said, we do not see the evidence.

We have all talked about models of intervention and a quality, fit-for-purpose programme. At times, we have been very critical of the Department. It has to take risks with programmes. The previous Minister, Sir Reg Empey, did take risks when we had high unemployment and job losses in the Limavady and Derry area. That did not work because we went into a recession. Contractors were out of work; they could not get placements for adult apprenticeships. So, there are different needs at different times.

I am not taking away from the fact that Northern Ireland is a special case. The conflict, unfortunately, has left its legacy. We have all been preaching that.

During the NEETs inquiry, we heard about the excellent contributions from the community and voluntary sector in the provision of training and employment opportunities for young people. I see that Include Youth is named as one of your groups, along with mental health groups.

Have you met the Department formally? I would like to hear the departmental response to your paper. The Department may say to us, "Sorry, but we are doing all that."

The Chairperson: Let us just check whether the folks have met the Department or had a response to the paper.

Mr McAleavy: We met the Minister and some of his officials last week. We had a very good and useful meeting. The Minister was clear that he intended to avoid some of the problems that he saw in England. We were fairly heartened by what he said. He is going to have a consultation shortly on the proposals that the Department will bring forward. We will all play our part in commenting on those.

The Chairperson: Did he give you comfort about the framework, which is your key concern?

Mr McAleavy: It was pretty clear that there will be three providers, which are likely to be a consortium, and they will provide on a Northern Ireland-wide basis. There is a strong focus in the Department on value for money. The Minister was very conscious of that. The Department sees itself getting value for money by aggregating these things. Therefore, it will deal with three contractors rather than many contractors in different towns and areas. We said very strongly that value for money also has to be measured by the positive outcomes you get and what works. You can concentrate these things, but, if we do not get an improvement in a lot of people's employment situation, it will most likely fail.

Pat, with regard to whether we are focused on the Northern Ireland issues, I have to say that our economy is very different to England's economy. Opportunities are certainly not as easy here.

The Chairperson: Seamus, a range of people wants to speak. We agree with that point.

Mr P Ramsey: I have a final question. The Minister has announced the NEETs strategy, and, this week, he also announced further youth employment opportunities. How involved is the community sector in delivering those?

Ms Russam: We in the NGO sector have been actively involved in the NEETs strategy. In fact, I chaired the best practice group for that strategy. Over the past two and a half years, we have been actively working with the Department for Employment and Learning in driving that forward. Of course, I would say that the community and voluntary sector is critical to the delivery of that. It is an early announcement, and it is a very positive strategy, but we need to wait and see how it is going to be delivered and managed.

Mr McElduff: I want to know if there is a best practice example anywhere in Europe of an employment programme that works.

Ms Russam: We have one on our doorstep: the local employment intermediary service, which is known as the LEMIS programme. Patrick will speak about that.

Mr P Boyle: The LEMIS programme has been operating for a number of years, in different shapes and sizes. Over the past year, LEMIS has been rolled out and has been very successful in getting people into employment. It has hit all the targets that have been set for it. Weigh that up against the Steps to Work evaluation. There have been good and bad in both, but LEMIS strides ahead of any of the programmes that have been delivered. The unfortunate thing is that we do not yet have the data on the work programme. That is concerning in that we are going to run a work programme but we do not even have the data from the main work programme in England. That is a big concern for us.

Mr McElduff: What are the programme's distinguishing strengths and characteristics?

Ms Russam: First, local works best. It is hosted in such areas as Strabane, Derry/Londonderry, five neighbourhoods across Belfast, and Moyle. I have left one out.

The Chairperson: That does not matter. What is good about it?

Ms Russam: It is based on one-to-one individual mentoring and positive assessment with the individual. That is its real strength. Our staff who work in the programme know the constituency in

which they work. They have effective connections across many stakeholders in the community, in the neighbourhood renewal areas and in the health trust areas. They also know their spatial labour market very well. They know the jobs that are coming, and they have effective connections with employers. The programme is very measured with regard to the steps that are taken with each individual and is very much based on a voluntary commitment from the individual. The richness of the relationship with the person who is actively seeking work is based on what the mentor and the service provides. The programme is cost-effective and value for money. In its initial phase, it operated primarily in the city of Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Strabane. It has been rolled out further, and we hope to see it being recognised as an effective model of intervention. It works with people who are not on jobseeker's allowance. Traditionally, they are on what we call silo benefits, where they have been allowed to rest for many years.

Mr P Boyle: It has cost £1.6 million per annum to run the programme. That is very cost-effective when you look at the number of people who have gone into employment. The number is sitting at 489 in the first year. So, it has been effective in that way. I am trying to think of other things to add to that.

The Chairperson: The key point that Barry is getting at is that we are looking for best practice. We need to know what works, and why it works. The simple fact is that, if it is good, we will do more of it. Pat, you can think about it, or you can write to us and give us the details. The Committee would be interested in finding that out. However, I will just make the point that we started with, because it has got lost a wee bit. It depends on how you set your desired outcomes as to whether something is cost-effective. Although getting people into employment is the overarching aim, as Seamus said, there will be many people who need to reach that intermediate step, which is about giving them the confidence and skills to be considered for employment at some later stage.

Barry still has the floor if he wants to carry on, but we want to give you an opportunity to tell us what works and why. That may require you to submit another paper.

Mr McAleavey: We can add more details. The key point to make is that LEMIS is tailored to the individual. The effort is put into the one-to-one relationship between the provider and the individual. The key thing then is to get that individual a job. That relationship is also built with the employers. The focus is very much on that.

Mr P Boyle: Key to the programme is that it is targeted at those who are furthest from the labour market. That is the difference. The evaluations for Steps to Work or New Deal — because we do not have the data on the work programme — state very clearly that those programmes do not even touch people who are furthest from the labour market, because such programmes are not viable for them to run.

As I said, LEMIS targets the people who are furthest from the labour market. Some 21% of the people on the programme are incapacity benefit claimants, which is more than on any other programme. I cannot give you the data on the work programme, but of the percentage rates of leavers going into employment, the flexible New Deal was sitting at 16%, while Steps to Work was sitting at 31%. LEMIS is sitting at 33%.

Mr McElduff: Thanks. Finally, you make the point that finding a job is the ultimate goal, but not the only measure of success. Are there measures of success in the LEMIS programme other than ultimately finding a job?

Mr P Boyle: I suppose it is also about lifelong learning. People need to be able to move on and develop. We try to make sure that they are not going into low-level jobs and that there is room for them to develop as they go on. We want them to have a sustainable job that pays. The most important thing about all the programmes is that they make sure that work pays, because if work does not pay, people will not sustain jobs and will fall back into the benefit trap.

Ms Russam: The LEMIS programme also contains a citizenship and volunteering element. Part of the offer is to encourage people who are not labour market-ready to look at citizenship and volunteering in their own communities, Mr McElduff. That element has been very successful.

The Chairperson: By the way, I know that he deserves special honour, but we are on first-name terms on this Committee. Is that all right?

Mr McElduff: I would like to be addressed as Mr McElduff. *[Laughter.]* I am only joking.

Mr Douglas: Thank you for your presentation. I must say that your report was excellent and very helpful. In it, you say that there was a lack of consultation. Will you comment on that and on how we can improve consultation?

I know that we have been going over a number of issues, but it strikes me that it is important to keep us up to date with the whole process. These sorts of meetings are excellent, because we can raise these issues face to face. We are not going to be in existence for eternity, obviously. The situation will change in the next number of months, although I am not sure of the deadline for that. There will obviously be a new Minister, so it is important that, when he or she comes on board, we have left a legacy about the main issues. This is the main issue for all MLAs in the Assembly.

As the Chairperson said, you are speaking to the converted in many ways, but it is important to keep us up to date, rather than all this stuff being implemented before you do so.

Mr McAleavey: The organisations that we have drawn together are the ones that are focused on this issue. They are discrete; that is their activity. It is not across the whole voluntary and community sector. Their feeling was that they were not quite sure what the Department was doing. The experience has been that we take whatever is developed in England, tweak it or follow in late and roll it out. The danger is that when a consultation process is put in place — I do not have a big disagreement with this — everything is more or less ready, and things get tweaked at that point. We think it much better that the organisations that have experience get in much earlier and help shape the Department's ultimate proposals.

We are happy to have met the Minister. He says that a consultation is planned and that it will be open to these sorts of suggestions. If what the Minister and his officials say comes to pass, we will probably be a lot happier with where this is likely to go. The organisations have had fears, but the proof of the pudding is always in the eating.

Mr P Boyle: We put it to Colum Boyle who heads up the services in DEL that there should be a consultation. He said then that he did not know whether it could happen. However, we have now been told by the Minister that there is to be a 12-week consultation on this, which is excellent. I hope that this will not just go to the Steps to Work providers, but to all those interested so that we can scrutinise. We have the experience and skills as much as other sectors. We have the skills to be able to say that this will work, that we can tweak that or whatever. How much we are listened to is probably the big question in all that.

Mr Douglas: I note that Susan was very much involved in the Step Ahead programme. We raised in every meeting just how positive it was, because that was certainly the feedback that we were getting. We lobbied the First Minister and the Finance Minister for additional money for DEL. The scheme came out, which was great, but it was a reduced scheme in a time sense. Therefore, somewhere along the line from us pushing for the scheme to be implemented, it was, but it was different. I was disappointed that the same scheme was not continued with.

Mr F McCann: Thank you for the presentation. It was certainly informative. As I have said before, I get fairly cynical when I hear the word "consultation" coming up, because usually when a Department puts something out for consultation, it has already made up its mind, regardless of what comes out of it.

I agree with Seamus that that is the road that the Department may go down, and it may just be tweaked at the end.

Mr Douglas: Are you talking about all the Departments, Mr McCann?

Mr F McCann: I definitely am talking about all the Departments.

The Chairperson: You are all getting very cynical.

Mr Douglas: It is old age.

Mr F McCann: I was going to say that it is due to sitting beside Barry — or Mr McElduff — but I will not.

The Chairperson: As we like to call him now.

Mr F McCann: Most prime contractors are huge companies that come in for profit rather than to deliver figures. Pat said that some of those companies have poor records in England. The difficulty is that we do not know how long the contract will be for.

Mr P Boyle: Five years, probably.

Mr F McCann: Five years? Atos Healthcare was brought in for a seven- or nine-year period. No matter how bad they are, the most difficult thing is getting rid of contractors if they underperform.

Most of the companies certainly stand out in delivery. It may not be a bad idea, if you are writing a paper on what you have to deliver, to match it against what they deliver. One of the things that was being pushed in the Assembly yesterday was the whole issue of social contracts and trying to keep things local. Local people, especially in the community and voluntary sector, have more of an understanding and experience of how to deal with the legacy of the conflict and the associated difficulties. The unemployment rate is 6·8%, but that hides a multitude of sins in many areas where there are sizeable unemployment rates. There is a need to reach out.

I was critical of the NEET strategy when I came on to the Committee, but, in many ways, it has been difficult for it because there is a section of communities that people never get to, and that is why it is important that there is local understanding.

In the paper that is going to be provided, I ask that you match what some of the companies do. As happens with a lot of things, the top slice of money provided to try to get local organisations to do the work that they are doing is minimal. It has to have an impact on what is delivered on the ground. Perhaps you can provide that information.

Mr McAleavy: Any evidence that we can get that you might find useful, we will bring together in a paper and get that to the Committee as quickly as we can.

Your comments about the prime contractors are right. Our worry is that an organisation simply comes in — with no infrastructure, with everything packaged up nice and conveniently — and hoovers up the large contract. It then runs around to see what it can get from among organisations such as ours.

Mr F McCann: It gets you on the cheap.

Mr McAleavy: It treats the organisation badly, gets it on the cheap and creams off the money. We have seen it happen in England. Some of those contractors are under investigation. All sorts of problems have arisen.

The national Assembly for Wales has looked at procurement. It found that the more that you aggregate government contracts, the more that that type of provider is brought in. Wales is looking at how to disaggregate contracts to keep jobs in Wales.

The Chairperson: We agree with you, but it would be helpful if you provided that information.

Mr McAleavy: Yes, we will do.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for your presentations. I echo Pat's recognition of the work of the third sector — the community and voluntary sector — on this key issue. You have given us a lot of helpful information to take away and work on. It is encouraging to hear that the Minister has taken on board some of the concerns.

The social investment fund sets priorities for tackling unemployment, deprivation and dereliction. Have you seen how that will link with this type of initiative? Do you have any concerns about how community and voluntary sector organisations have been informed of and included in the opportunity to join that project?

Ms Russam: There was a consultation on the social investment fund before Christmas. There was then a five- or six-month waiting period, before a series of meetings, to which we were invited. I attended one meeting in Belfast City Hall, where there was a discussion around how that would look, how people could get involved and who would be involved. One area of concern for most of us in the room was the very short timescale between people from the community and voluntary sector putting themselves forward and the beauty contest for who they should be along with in the local community. That was quite concerning, not least because a lot of people had no electricity last week and were dealing with the flooding.

The nine zones and the introduction of the health and council areas are interesting. The buy-in of employers to get involved is also interesting. However, there is still a feeling that we do not really know what is going to happen, and that perhaps there should be much more emphasis on how we can link the opportunity in the social investment fund to the need that we know is out there. That is why we would welcome the opportunity to present to the Committee on that at some point.

Mr P Boyle: If you look at the European Social Fund, and the programmes that we already link to LEMIS and the like, you will see that it has proved very successful. The sift will be similar, if we are part of the contracts.

Mr McAleavey: From our point of view, we are always trying to look for those links. That is why, on this issue, we are talking not simply to the Department of Employment and Learning but to the Department for Social Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The sector is trying to find the links. The fear that we have when people talk about the social investment fund is that it is all things to all people. People think that it can solve all the problems. However, although significant, £20 million a year can go only so far. It is our understanding that this programme will be in the region of £36 million.

Mr D McIlveen: Thank you for the presentation. I think that the sentiment of the Committee is pretty clear on this. The Chair and others have indicated where we are with this, and I hope that that comes as an encouragement rather than a discouragement to you. With that in mind, it may allow us to get a little bit under the headlines as such. Pat raised the issue of the history of the conflict, and so on. You did not mention it in your oral presentation, but I noted that it was in the written presentation that we received.

I want to get to the bottom of working with community groups. We in the Committee hear a lot of presentations that use the conflict — with justification — as a means of presenting how we have been held back and how there is work to be done. However, we have to accept that, God willing, in less than two years from now, there will be young people coming into the jobs market who have enjoyed relative peace their whole life. They were not born into the conflict. Following on from that, I have two questions. The first is, from working in the communities sector, for how long do you think that we can honestly give as an excuse that the conflict has held us back? Secondly, do we run a risk that the new generation inherits the stories of the conflict from the previous generation and uses it as an excuse? If so, how do we then go about combating that?

Ms Russam: I was 13 in 1969, and I lived in a fairly quiet place about five miles from Belfast. My sister was seven years older and had the whole wealth of the 1960s to draw on and the opportunity to spread her wings culturally, socially and intellectually in the city of Belfast. To me, Belfast and other cities were places where we did not go unless we had to.

I then spent 40 years of my life working in Belfast and other cities, and it is important to remember that history is what we make it. Those of us who felt that we could make a difference to communities and lives and not make a noise have been able to do that. Other people in communities and neighbourhoods across Northern Ireland — or the North of Ireland, if you want to call it that — who have had a different experience: a very locked-down, closed-down, traumatic experience. The challenge now is that, yes, we certainly need to move on and cognitively reframe how we come out of a post-conflict society. However, my post-conflict society can be very different to that of my colleagues. The old ways are still being ingrained in some of our children and young people, but that is a choice for them. That is also a choice for those who are trying to influence. There is an issue and challenge around youth unemployment. Citizenship and responsibility sorely need to be tackled in communities.

The starting point for everyone is different. The frame of reference for some communities is limited. Sammy will know that, in areas of south and east Belfast, people do not go over the bridge or down

into town. Some people from Ballysillan have not been in the town for years. It is the same elsewhere: you come up from Fermanagh only if you have to go to the big hospital, or whatever. Therefore, we have to remove that ethnocentrism that exists and see ourselves as citizens of Europe, which, I believe, we are and should be. We are not just on the periphery of Europe. We must also recognise that those thoughts, fears, feelings and anxieties run very deep in a number of our communities and will continue to do so.

Mr McAleavey: David, we would not overlay the issue of the conflict, and we have to think about that with regard to this. However, it clearly has a big impact. The big impact that it has had is on the economy. With the best will in the world, we will not simply help everyone who is economically inactive or unemployed at the moment get a job unless the economy can pick up and we can supply many more jobs. There have been those impacts, and I think that we have a long way to go.

Before he came into office, the Prime Minister was saying that Northern Ireland is overdependent and needs to be changed, but he recognises that, economically, that will take 25 years. We have to mention the conflict but not overlay it. We have to think about what we could do differently that might help our people a bit more in making the connections. We have to recognise the mental health issues and such things that have been part of the fallout, and we have to try to deal with those.

Mr D McIlveen: I do not say this with any sort of cynicism whatsoever, but what impact would it have on the community group sector if we got to a stage at which we accepted that the conflict is something in the past, that it is over and done with and that we are a normalised society that is moving forward? Do you think that that would have a negative or a positive impact?

Mr McAleavey: I think it would have a hugely positive impact. If we can find a way in which to deal with the past, that will give us a platform to move forward into a positive future. That is important. We know that we have not dealt with it, and there are all the arguments around how to deal with it. I think that everyone in Northern Ireland wants to move on, but they are willing to move on only on their terms. That is our problem. Such acceptance would help catapult us into a much better, more positive future.

Mr P Boyle: The programmes that we deliver are in north Belfast, which is an area of high deprivation and high unemployment. I have seen the people moving on. I have been delivering programmes for the past 25 years, and I have seen the massive changes that people make within our communities. We work out of a totally nationalist area, and we have such groups as those from Mount Vernon that come to the New Lodge Road to take up courses and learn. I think that people have moved away from the Troubles. They just want to get on in life. Money is more important to them. I think that they have moved on a hell of a lot from the Troubles.

The Chairperson: We need to draw the session to a close, but there is a key point to make. I am interested in that exchange. The people may have moved on, but the community and society have not. We are fixated on the past, and we have to find a way of dealing with it to aggregate the positions of individuals into something more coherent. Perhaps that is a topic for a bigger discussion elsewhere.

You are the most unfortunate group of people to have come to this table, because you arrived here asking for help, and we have sent you away with more work to do than what you had when you got here. However, it is a sign of the Committee's interest. Bear in mind that, although all of us are interested, we are not necessarily knowledgeable about all of the terminology that you are using. We have to work it out. We understand the likes of "creaming" and "zero hours", for instance, when you explain them to us.

We will write to you with a number of points on which you have offered to provide us with information. We will be pleased to take a paper at your convenience. The Committee is a bit in limbo, but, when we get the paper, we will work out how best to take it forward and receive more evidence.

It might be useful to hear from the Department on LEMIS and a number of other points. We might write to the Department to ask it to do that, if Committee members agree. Furthermore, we received a letter from the Committee for Social Development. I propose that we send it a copy of the Hansard report, just to let it know that we are taking these issues on board.

Thank you for your time. I appreciate your enthusiasm, and we will see what we can do to assist in the coming days.

Mr McAleavey: Thank you.