



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

The Bytes Project

16 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 Barry McElduff
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Ms Sinéad Blair	The Bytes Project
Ms Laura Couser	The Bytes Project
Mr Harry Dunn	The Bytes Project
Mr Ronan McCaffrey	The Bytes Project
Ms Carly Richardson	The Bytes Project
Ms Amanda Stewart	The Bytes Project

The Chairperson: We have a long list of witnesses that I do not want to read out, so I am going to let Laura or whoever introduce you. There are seven witnesses. Is everyone joining us at the table?

Ms Laura Couser (The Bytes Project): They can if they wish.

The Chairperson: I have just been told by the boss that only four people are allowed at the table at any one time. Is that another one of those immutable laws?

The Committee Clerk: It is because of the number of microphones.

The Chairperson: I am distressed that I cannot have a bit of flexibility in the Committee. We will hear from four of you first of all. However, I would not mind hearing from the young people as well. We will see whether we can bring people in and out of the discussion.

Ms Couser: The format of today's presentation is that the staff panel will speak first. I introduce Ronan McCaffrey, development officer; Amanda Stewart, development officer; and Sinéad Blair, learning and development officer. I am Laura Couser, director of the Bytes Project. These staff work at the coalface with young people. The presentation will be interspersed with some audio links from young people who could not be here. Fortunately, they have progressed to employment. We will have our youth panel at the end, so you will have plenty of opportunity to speak to the young people.

The Chairperson: So are the youth panel going to talk to us?

Ms Couser: Yes.

The Chairperson: Excellent. Our lead spokesman on that, Mr Allister, looks forward to engaging with them.

Mr Allister: News to me. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Couser: We are here today to discuss the important issue of reducing the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), or who are at risk of becoming so, particularly those who are further away from the labour market and those with complex personal issues who, for whatever reason, may find themselves homeless, in care or known to the law. We want to share with you some of the methods of engagement and delivery that we have developed over 18 years of working in this field and to discuss how the service can be delivered to all young people across the Province. I know that we are not a regional organisation, but I feel that we have enough experience and history of working with that target group — originally called "status zero", for anybody who has been around long enough to know that — to have some good delivery methods for turning young people's lives around.

First, the original motivation for Bytes came from an international model called Bytes for Bullets. It targeted young people at risk and offered them opportunities for personal and social development and economic improvement through creative information and communication technology (ICT). That remains the ethos of Bytes to this day. It was established here in 1993 by a steering committee led by the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) and other statutory agencies, including the then Training and Employment Agency (T&EA), the University of Ulster and Queen's University. Fortunately, they had the foresight to change the name from Bytes for Bullets to Bytes for Belfast. The original name probably was not that appropriate back in 1993.

Funding initially came from DENI, with the T&EA coming on board as a 50:50 partner in recognition of the skills development in which young people participated and the progression into formal training and employment. We received start-up equipment from Apple and set up our two original centres in 1993.

Our work is cross-community, and we recognise that labour mobility is a barrier for young people and that it prevents them from accessing opportunities. During 2010-11, approximately 3,000 young people engaged in a range of activities and services through the Bytes Project. That unfortunately reduced to 2,000 in 2011-12 due to funding cuts. We originally had 10 community outreach centres, but that number was reduced to seven in this financial year.

I suppose that it is fair to say that the young people concerned are not yet committed to personal change. In fact, the opposite is probably true: they are not quite aware that they need to change their lifestyle or attitude or that it is important to have some motivational aspiration in their life. Why would they? They have no role models, and there has been generational unemployment. They can often be in a downward spiral, totally lacking any motivation and aspiration in their life. Many have not had a lot of positive experiences in the education system or, indeed, in formal training programmes.

Bytes provides a flexible programme, and that is key to what we do. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It is very much geared towards personal and social development issues, with the underlying remit or theme of motivating young people to move into education in order to increase their opportunities in life and to find employment. I would like to invite Sinéad to speak about the range of personal development activities and programmes available for young people and how they can map that across into employment and learning.

Ms Sinéad Blair (The Bytes Project): Given that I am a learning and development officer, I am going to come at this from that pitch. The curriculum in the organisation has evolved and changed quite extensively over the past few years. I think that that has happened as a response to the evaluations and consultations that we have engaged in with the young people themselves. As well as the young people's input, we have put made an effort with managers, youth workers and examination boards — a good spectrum of people who we feel have provided input to shape the curriculum framework that we deliver to the young people.

I will give you a flavour of that framework. It is constructed around four core areas of work and basically takes the form of IT and digital media, personal and social development, good relations, and

employability and skills support. During 2011, we had over 2,000 young people engaged in those four core areas of work. Resulting from that contact with young people, approximately 456 qualifications were achieved. That number was slightly down compared with that of the previous year, but obviously the organisation has had to downsize, given funding cuts during last year. Moving forward into the next year, we would like to see those numbers increase again.

To give you an idea of some of the comments coming forward from external organisations, I will give you a quote from some of the moderators and examiners who work with the young people and review their work. This quote comes from an employment skills moderator. Her name is Rosemary Cunningham, and works for the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). She looked at the work that the young people are putting together with our staff and said:

"The evidence in the portfolio booklet was of a very high standard and showed good cross-referencing. Internal standardisation is excellent in this centre and includes in each portfolio a good range of activities. Work has been shown to satisfy the evidence requirements for this particular qualification."

We like a young person who goes through the curriculum to have something tangible at the end of it. So, the staff work closely with the young people to produce a portfolio. We hear that term quite a lot when we are talking about education and work, but the portfolios that they produce are credible to their work. Young people have told us that they can take them to interviews and, if they are considering moving into further education or other training, they can take the portfolio with them and showcase what they have achieved. The portfolios show the learning outcomes, the projects that they have been involved with and how much they have developed in a range of areas.

I introduce Ryan Murray, who is on the slide on the screen. Ryan is one of our young people who went to our Shankill centre, and was with us for a number of years. Ryan has now progressed into employment. He undertook a range of qualifications and opportunities in the organisation. He is about to take up a post with some digital media people in the Shankill area, which involves putting together logos, digital artwork for banners and producing stuff for the parades that are coming up in the summer. Ryan gained our digital media qualification and he excelled. Prior to his engagement with the staff, he did not know he had talent in that area. You will hear for yourself how much Ryan has developed and come along. We will play the recording:

"My name is Ryan Murray, and this is my story. I attended Shankill Bytes for six years. When I first started attending Bytes, I was mainly interested in using computers for Bebo and seen it as a place to hang out with other kids. As I started to go to the centre on a more regular basis, with the help of Bytes staff, I started to get involved in projects ranging from suicide and drug awareness as well as relationship and sexuality problems. I was also involved in a lot of cross-community and single identity work, and this gave me a better understanding of people from different cultures and different backgrounds. I've also successfully completed a number of qualifications within Bytes, such as job search, personal development and ICT. As a young person in Bytes, I was the first person to complete a CCEA digital media, and I gained an A. My folder is actually being used as a folder of excellence. With the help of staff, I had a lot to put into a CV, which gave me confidence to apply for jobs. I got a part-time job in Gordon's Chemist on the Shankill Road, and then, with my improved confidence, I got a full-time job in a call centre, where I worked for two years. I am now working in Iceland on the Shankill Road, but I still call in to see the Bytes staff and Phil and that, and let them know how I am getting on. Just an overview of everything really. Working with Bytes has really opened my eyes to working with people from different backgrounds and people from across the barrier, and it has taken them barriers down for me. It has given me a lot of confidence in myself and in my work. I am really happy and fortunate for that."*

Ms Couser: Amanda will speak next. You can have all the text on the screen and all the rhetoric and buzzwords that go around, but our work is about the young people, their needs and how we can help them overcome barriers in their lives. Hopefully, they will get employment at the end, but it is about overcoming barriers in their lives. Amanda and Ronan are working at grass roots, and they can give you a real example of the impact of some of the work.

Ms Amanda Stewart (The Bytes Project): Good morning. I am one of the development officers with The Bytes Project. I will talk briefly today about some of the strengths of the Bytes approach and why it works for people who, arguably, are among the most marginalised young people in our society. The Bytes Project works with young people from a range of backgrounds, including those who are considered core NEET, homeless, care experienced, ethnic minorities, young people from the

Travelling community and those with disabilities. I do not use those terms to label the young people; I am using them to highlight their circumstances. We engage young people, primarily, in three different ways. First, we engage them through our drop-in centres, which are strategically placed in communities. We have seven of those centres. Secondly, we take direct referrals from the Youth Justice Agency and social services. Thirdly, we have a bespoke outreach service that is delivered in areas of need.

Typically, many of the young people we work with are dealing with a complex range of multiple issues, including drug and alcohol misuse, mental and physical health problems, family conflict and low educational attainment and self-esteem or confidence, to name but a few. I guess you are saying, "So what? What is it that The Bytes Project actually does to help young people address those issues and tackle barriers to education, training and employment?" One of the most important parts of the process is relationship-building with the young people. By its ethos, it has a young person-centred approach. That means that it is non-judgemental. It is about being respectful of the young person, regardless of their background, behaviour or any of their experiences. It is about taking the young person as they are. That approach develops trust, and it gives the young person space to explore the issues and to make sense of them and to prioritise them.

Once that is established, we begin to goal-set with the young person. We facilitate that process, but it is very different for each young person, because the goals are determined by the young person, depending on their issues and barriers. It involves asking the young person where they want to go, what they want to do, and what their future would look like, if things were better. When that is established, we work with them on a realistic action plan, so that they can begin to be enabled to put those steps in place. If somebody said that they wanted to do hairdressing or be a youth worker, we would ask them what they have to do, what they need to do, what information they need to source and what skills they need.

I suppose that, due to the way in which I am describing this, it seems that it is a linear process, but it is not. My experience is in working with young homeless people. They usually lead chaotic lives. It may well be the case that I have worked with a young person who has determined their goals. That young person, who has been taking part in a Bytes programme, might stop turning up. It might be about going back to that young person, asking them what is going on in their life, reminding them that they were really keen and asking them if there is anything they want to talk about. It might seem that we are back to the start of the process, but that is OK. It is about building resilience and hearing the young people; it is about our belief in their ability to self-actualise. I could talk all day about how much I believe in the process and what it means.

The Chairperson: You are in good company, Amanda.

Ms Stewart: I feel it is the young people who can speak about this. I am going to introduce you to Gary Cusack who attends our Poleglass centre. We have a recording of him speaking. He will probably say it better than I can:

"My cousin actually told me about Bytes. I started going to Bytes and it just changed everything. I settled down with a girl, and then I broke up with her, but it made me look at things differently. Then, I got involved with youth work. I'm doing my level 1 and 2..."

Don't get me wrong, they are all my mates. They still are my mates and if any of them needed me, I would be there for them. I still talk to them; I just don't do the things that they do.

I finished school three years ago. I got five GCSEs but I didn't get maths or English. School is a boring background. There is no perspective in it. You just sit in a classroom; you're bored, you're melted. In Bytes, you are in a different environment — you are not melted. You are in your own clothes. You are just there to do it, you enjoy it more. It's enjoyable.

It has changed everything. It showed me the direction where I want to go. Before, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't know where I was going to be in a few years' time. Now, I've got my path all cleared out. I want to do youth work. I want to be a youth leader.

Cross-community projects we did. We did a lot recently with Tullycarnet. Catholics and Protestants, obviously. It's really good. I really enjoyed every single moment of it — getting to know different cultures, different people and different backgrounds.

I'm studying bricklaying now. I passed my level 1 and I'm near finished my level 2. Then, that's me after I do that. But, I don't really want to be a bricklayer; I want to be a youth leader. I did my level 1 and I'm doing my level 2 now. Then, I'm going to do my level 3 and hopefully go to Jordanstown to do a diploma in it.

I was inspired by Bytes and by Martin. He showed me along the way, and I've volunteered in a youth club for four years. I enjoyed it.

It's changed a lot, especially for me and my best mate. He was going through a rough patch, and he tried to hang himself. I was there for him whenever he needed me. Then, I went through a rough patch in life about a year ago. Only for him and Bytes, to be honest, I wouldn't be here."

Ms Stewart: It is a pretty powerful message.

Ms Couser: The next witness is Ronan, who will talk about some of the outreach work linked to interface intervention programmes that we deliver.

Mr Ronan McCaffrey (The Bytes Project): Thank you very much. I am a development officer with The Bytes Project. I will talk briefly about the benefits of outreach work and how it impacts directly on the lives of the young people we work with. The Bytes Project has, over the years, gained a reputation for working in some of the most socially and economically deprived areas of Northern Ireland. We continue to carry out that work to this day. I want to talk briefly about six particular areas. As I look around the room today, I recognise a couple of faces here. Mr Ramsey, I am currently working in Strathfoyle. However, the one I want to start with is Short Strand.

Two summers ago, and leading in to last year, Phil and I engaged in a cross-community law and order project. In total, 25 young people successfully completed the qualification, but the qualification only tells a small part of the story. Involved in the qualification were visits to the courts, police stations and talks with the PSNI. There was not one incident; it was a 100% successful engagement. Perceptions of the police, if only slight at times, changed. Only recently, we heard that Short Strand community centre and Short Strand Bytes, because of the contentious parades in the summer and the trouble that comes from them, have successfully gained money to take young people from Short Strand out of the area during parades to lessen the impact on the police and on the young people especially.

The second project that I want to talk about is the 50/50 Project in Glengormley, which is supported by Paula Bradley MLA. In fact, we used her offices on Portland Avenue for the first few weeks of the project, but we have now moved across the street. We are working there with Sharon and Ina McTaggart, who head up the 50/50 Project. We started there in October/November and, to date, there have been 22 law and order qualifications successfully completed as well as 12 Oxford Cambridge and RSA (OCR) employability qualifications.

Again, that only tells a small part of the story. Inspector Martin Ruddy of Glengormley PSNI station noted that the incidence of antisocial behaviour in the town is at an all-time low. We are not taking all the credit for that, but we will certainly take a small piece of it.

In Strathfoyle, I am working with Eamonn O'Donnell at the Enagh Youth Forum and have been there for a couple of months. At the moment, in Strathfoyle, Eamonn tells me that there are Travellers and ethnic minorities moving in, and that has created tensions in the area. To date, we have completed 13 law and order level 1 qualifications with Eamonn's group, and we have embarked on the assertiveness and decision-making course. In Ardoyne, like Short Strand, in the summer period, unfortunately, there are issues with parades, and a lot of young people in the area get into trouble. We have started working with the Flax Foyer on law and order and assertiveness and decision-making courses. I am not telling any lies, it is hard work. Working in that area with the Flax Foyer, a lot of young people come to the table with a lot of issues, and it complicates the work, but, at the end of the day, it makes it more enjoyable when the young people gain qualifications.

You listened to Amanda earlier, Mr McCrea. Amanda works on Friday evenings at the Lisburn Simon Community with the young people there doing projects. One of the other ones is the Hubb on the Shore Road. We have done law and order and assertiveness and decision-making courses there.

I want to stress that the outreach work that we do is all carried out with limited and stretched resources, as well as strict timescales. We are going into areas like Strathfoyle for two or three hours a week. We are going into Flax Foyer for two or three hours a week. We are going into the Simon

Community in Lisburn for two or three hours a week. You are not going in to start qualifications, you are going in to start to build relationships before the qualifications take place, because the young people do not know you and you do not know them. That is all I have to say on the outreach work.

I want to introduce, on the following recording, Joe Ferris from our Short Strand Bytes centre. Thank you very much.

"I am 20 years old. Before starting Bytes, I was attending Corpus Christi and living in west Belfast. I would regularly visit my granny in the Short Strand, and spent a lot of time in the area. I stumbled upon Bytes in 2008 while being around the community centre with some friends. The development worker at the time, Ronan, encouraged me to use Bytes to socialise and to further my education. I then moved to the Short Strand area in 2009 and finished school. I started taking part in various projects and getting involved in programmes offered by Bytes. I really enjoyed the informal aspect of Bytes, the fun activities and the relaxed atmosphere. I felt comfortable. I felt I could try new things, and believed that Bytes was a place where I could be myself.

I have since completed the following: law and order level 1 and 2 in understanding young people and exploring relationships between young people and the police. It was a real eye-opener for me. OCR in ICT, including word processing, giving me invaluable knowledge and skills to complete job applications and also funding applications. I have also completed first aid training, which I have continuously used in my voluntary capacity in my local youth project. Recently I applied, through the O2 Think Big programme, for £300 to design a project for Bytes around healthy eating. I designed the project based on the 'Come Dine With Me' TV programme, which had 10 young people taking part. I feel this was a great success, and I have been approached by O2 to apply for the Think Bigger programme, which could be worth up to £2,500.

I realise what Bytes has done for me in order to get to this point in my life. I have successfully found work with the support of Bytes. In fact, I have three jobs at present, all of which I know that Bytes has helped me to get. Bytes has provided me with the following: self-confidence, with the ability to believe in my own worth and ability; interview skills that have helped me during my job hunting; qualifications that have furthered my job prospects.

The impact of Bytes in the local community is huge. If Bytes has done this for me, it has the ability to do this for other kids and young people in Short Strand who really need direction, who need a purpose, and they deserve the right chances. I understand that the recent decision to make cuts will impact heavily on the Bytes service. However, I pray that Short Strand may not be affected, as the young people in the Short Strand need Bytes, just as I did. The closure of Short Strand Bytes would be an absolute travesty."

Ms Couser: Listening to that, it would be very easy to think that we are just a training organisation that delivers lots of qualifications. However, as Amanda and Ronan alluded to, it is not easy work and it is not about qualifications; it is about the issue that the young person presents with. Much of the outreach work that Ronan talked about was done because there was interface violence.

We have been a victim of our own success, because people contact us to say that they have a problem with a group of young people hanging around and ask us to come in and do something to support them. It is not a case of going in and delivering training. As Ronan said, you need to take the time and space to listen to the young people, find out their issues and sometimes even facilitate conversations. I remember the early law and order programme that Ronan talked about that was done on the Shankill, and it was not just about the PSNI. We also had to get ex-combatants in the room because of some of the lifestyle issues that young people were facing at the time.

It is about challenging everybody. It is about challenging the young people and telling them they have to get out of bed in the morning and commit and telling them that they cannot expect people to commit to them if they do not commit to other things.

The whole process is about challenging attitudes and behaviours. If there are issues that we can help and support with, or bring other specialist organisations in to help and support, that is also a role and function that the staff have to undertake. We look at the person as a person; we are not looking at rolling them in, doing a programme and rolling them out again. It is about changing their lifestyle, and that includes all the issues and baggage that they bring with them in that lifestyle.

I do not know whether any other panel members want to add that.

The Chairperson: I will take a few questions from the Committee to tease things out a bit. We will do that quite informally, so people can chip in. When we have done that, we will have another little chat with the young people to find out how well they have done. We will have a little chat first about some of the more formal stuff.

Sammy has to go early, so he will go first.

Mr Douglas: I apologise; I have to go early as there is a ministerial visit to east Belfast at 11.30 am.

I have been very aware of Bytes over the years. Paul Miller is a former worker in Bytes who went on to great glory and became the manager of Glentoran for about six months.

I was delighted with the presentation. Ronan mentioned Short Strand. I have been in the centres in Short Strand and Tullycarnet. Obviously, we had a lot of violence there last year. That did not just involve young people, but young people were caught up in it. That was some of the worst violence that we had seen for many years. What is your experience now? There were a lot of relationships built up between young people there, and the whole thing was fractured overnight. Have things improved since last year?

Mr McCaffrey: Yes, they most definitely have. We have talked about the issue in work over a number of years, myself and Phil especially. It is recreational rioting to a large extent, because the young people on the Catholic side and the Protestant side know each other, play football together and socialise together. When they are bored, they go and riot. It is as simple as that. Last summer's violence had more sinister elements, but young people, especially young males when they get bored, have this energy and they go and riot. When you talk to them about it, you say there are pensioners living on the front of the roads on both sides and you try to get the young people back into their communities, but it is the pensioners who are left with the broken windows and the smashed windows of their cars. The issue is getting through to them. They actually do not see a danger in rioting. If the police come, things can happen, but they do not see that. They just see it as going up for a riot, releasing energy, throwing stones at each other and then going back in.

Mr Allister: This year you are going to take some of them away.

Mr McCaffrey: Yes, there is funding there.

Mr Allister: Is there a sense of reward in that?

Ms Couser: No, because they have not committed any offence at this point in time, and what we want to do is take them away from —

Mr Allister: You described what they did last year.

Ms Couser: It might not be the same young people. The first instance is probably around the jubilee parades this weekend. We know that it can create a group of people, and young people will migrate to a group of young people. It is about making them aware that one wrong step can ruin their whole lives. We do not want them to make that one wrong step. It is not about them making a wrong step and then being rewarded with being taken away; it is about taking them away from that situation in which they could become involved. That is maybe the nature of young people.

Mr Allister: The young people who did not go out and riot do not get taken away.

Ms Couser: These are young people who have not committed an offence yet. It is really about them avoiding committing an offence. As Ronan said, they do not do it always because of sectarianism; it is just because they are absolutely and totally bored and there is nothing else to do. We have all been there. I grew up during the Troubles, so I know what it is like to live in an interface area. Sometimes, you just want to find out what is happening, and then you get caught up. It is not about going with an intent to fire a brick; it is about going just because there are other people there and, unfortunately, sometimes, you get involved. Ronan talked a lot about the law and order programme. We designed it specifically to get young people to look at the impact of what they do, to think about what they are going to do, and, before they go to an interface, to think, "Well, if I go there, I'm going to get caught up in that." This is the result of that.

The Chairperson: So, things will develop. Sammy, do you want to say anything else?

Mr Douglas: You made a good point about taking young people out. My experience is that young people get caught up in some of that rioting, they are arrested and they are marked for life. If they want to get on to programmes that take them to America, for example, they cannot go because they cannot get a passport. I am very aware of the excellent work that you have been doing for a number of years. At some stage, maybe you can tell us what we can do as a Committee to help you to pursue your further aims. I wish you all the best.

Ms Gildernew: I find myself thinking along the same lines as Jim about the recreational rioting stuff. However, it would be remiss of the Committee to think that you were involved only with young people who are involved in rioting. I want to bring it back to the case studies. I was on the Committee for Social Development 10 years ago, and we did a report on homelessness. The Simon Community was very strategic in giving us information to help us to come up with that report. I was very pleased to see Carol's letter in the pack today. At times, it was very hard to get some members of that Committee to understand the reasons why young people would make themselves homeless. I found it shocking that people did not understand that there were a number of reasons why a family unit would break down and why a young person would voluntarily leave what was seen to be a comfortable family home. The case studies were very compelling.

It must be hard to evaluate, although you have done your best to do that in respect of qualifications and jobs and all of that. It is impossible to evaluate how many young people you have saved from self-harm or suicide, for example. To that end, it can be very difficult to make the case for funding. I appreciate that.

I make no apology for pointing out that it is very much an urban-based project. There are young people who would be in a similar situation in rural areas, but the same provision is not available for them. What are your thoughts on that?

Ms Couser: We would love to expand. We have demands that we cannot cope with. A lot of our outreach work is regional and takes place in Lurgan, Lisburn and Coleraine. We have done a small amount in Ballymena and Larne. It is normally a call for help, or there is a direct link through the Simon Community, in which there would be young people, because it is quite transitional in the foyer situation, although we provide that transitional support as well. Part of my opening statement was, first, about how we secure what we have. There is a need where we are working. Secondly, it was about how we can roll it out and make it available across the board. We do not want to be only urban. We want all young people to have access to our programmes. Amanda and Ronan do outreach work in regional areas.

Ms Stewart: I work at Lurgan Foyer and in the Lisburn Simon Community. That is not without its difficulties, because you are there by yourself. You have a couple of laptops, and you are faced with the young people who come in. I remember going out to Lisburn for the first time. I was so nervous. I went into the room, and a couple of young men were there. They said, "Why don't we tie her up and put her in the corner and take the laptops?" I said, "Please don't". *[Laughter.]* You do not have that relationship, and it is tough. Needless to say, the laptops were not even opened that day. I said, "What's the craic here? Where are you coming from? How do you find Lisburn Simon Community?" Again, it goes back to building relationships. With limited resources and really limited staff, there is only so much that you can do. If I do a bit of work in Lurgan, people ask whether I could come and work in Edward Street in Portadown or in their hostel in Armagh. I cannot, because I am only one person. There is loads of potential for expansion, but it is a question of resources.

Mr P Ramsey: I want to follow on from an earlier point. Michelle Gildernew is right; where government policy is concerned, we are always looking at measurable outcomes, particularly if young people are involved and if they might be NEET. That is very hard in your circumstances, and I must say that I was very impressed by the presentation. I admire your passion for the work that you do and your clear compassion for the young people who are involved.

It is very hard to have measurable outcomes that will help somebody who is estranged from their family or has alcohol or substance abuse problems to go down a better a path. It is hard to have data on that, for example. You heard about the proverbial youth and community worker out there doing a multitude of different types of work, particularly in the outreach sense.

When you were speaking, you did not refer to those young people who have been totally failed by the education system. It is a fairly strong point that you are making. We know that statistics show that young male Protestants are not getting the same academic qualifications as their counterparts, for instance. What steps are you taking to track that back to a school and to talk to the governors or to whomever? I am very interested in that and in where the problem lies.

Brian Heading, the Mayor of Lisburn, talked to me about the Bytes Project only last week. He was highly complimentary about it, so I place that on record, in case I forget to say it. I am also very impressed, because it is not easy to do outreach work on the streets. You need to have a special skill to do that and to encourage and motivate young people into believing that there is a better path to go on. Again, I can only admire you for that.

It is hard to qualify the outcomes that you get, particularly at times of high tension, such as the parade season. Do you have any data that you could share with the Committee? I know that you referred to some areas. I am not sure whether you mentioned 3,000 or 2,000 young people and that so many of them going into training, so many going into education and so many going into work. I am keen, as, I am sure, is the Committee, to get more information, because it is possible that there will be an all-party motion on NEETs in the Chamber. All the information is relevant. Can you share with us your funding streams? That is also relevant. We would like to be in a position to advocate on your behalf, but who are we advocating to?

Ms Couser: That is two questions. So far as the progress of the young person or the process that they take are concerned, you normally count only what happens at the end. For instance, they might have a qualification, have found work or have moved into employment. Yes, it is very difficult to track what happens in between, because you have to allow for a young person to move forward and regress, and then you pick them up, dust them down and move them forward again. That could happen multiple times during their process in Bytes.

Over the years, we have looked at a number of things. We have looked at neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and at how we could model it to a peer group in which one individual has good behaviour and one has not so good behaviour. We have tried to look at alternative ways of doing that. At the minute, we would like to explore looking at Social Impact Tracker, which looks more at the softer outcomes. However, as most organisations would say, I think that you need investment to collect those statistical data.

I have forgotten the second part of the question.

Mr Allister: It was about funding streams.

Ms Couser: Just recently, the Department of Education (DE) passed the funding of the Bytes Project to the Youth Council NI, through the youth sector. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) matches the funds that come from the Youth Council. For me at the minute, there is a pressure and a gap, and, I suppose if I am perfectly honest, it is a bit of a scary space. Everything is waiting for something to be established under the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). We know that new funding streams will be set up. The Youth Council does not know what will happen to it, and one of our core concerns is that we do not fit in the normal funding formulas.

Mr P Ramsey: You are in limbo land at the minute.

Ms Couser: We are in limbo land.

On the other side, we have the issue with DEL, which means that we are not quite sure where our training programmes will go and how that will affect the match funding. At the minute, all staff have letters of offer until the end of June. So, effectively, our funding finishes on 30 June. We know that the Youth Council is doing an external review to figure out how it will allocate funding to us. At the same time, all of us — the Youth Council, the Department of Education and ourselves — know that we do not fit in the current funding streams. That is why we have always sat outside the normal process. That is a very worrying situation for us at the moment.

Mr P Ramsey: I have one final question. What was the thinking behind the Strathfoyle work? Strathfoyle is in a rural area; it is not in the city. How did you become involved in working with the young people in Strathfoyle? Who referred you there?

Mr McCaffrey: Eamonn and I more or less bumped into each other. When we were receiving child protection training at our Shankill centre, the girl who was taking the training mentioned the Strathfoyle group and Eamonn, and, because we had been talking about the age group that we work with, she said that she might have a group for us. That is how it happened. Two phone calls later, I went up to meet Eamonn, and it started from there. He has a fantastic set-up there. He is like us in that he has limited resources and grabs at anything. If you walk into the centre on a Thursday, and you will find 12 to 15 young people waiting.

The Chairperson: I want to move on to some other issues that we want to tease out. Jim, do you want to come in at this point?

Mr Allister: I have just one question. You told us the source of your funding, but you have not told us what your budget is.

Ms Couser: The two Departments give us £220,000 each. Bytes was set up as an independent charity, and in the past financial year, we have raised an additional £225,000 on top of the joint £440,000.

Mr Allister: So, your total spend is £665,000 or thereabouts.

Ms Couser: Our baseline is £440,000. Anything over and above that is a bonus for additional staff, additional resources and additional programmes. For example, part of that money was used for an essential skills tutor. Again, that allowed us to look at how we could engage our young people with essential skills needs through essential skills training. Moving them to formal training providers was not working, because they had difficulty turning up every day. For example, Belfast Met had difficulty with them because of their limited attention span and commitment. So, we wanted to bring in an essential skills tutor to work alongside us and to look at how we could tackle the issue in a non-formal environment. So, sometimes the funding is used to help us investigate how we can do things better. The core budget is £440,000.

Mr Allister: Since your formation, what has been your spend profile and your staffing profile?

Ms Couser: I am not quite sure what you mean by "spend profile".

Mr Allister: What were you managing on 10 years ago?

Ms Couser: Probably around the same, to be perfectly honest.

Mr Allister: So, has there not been much increase?

Ms Couser: No. We went through a period of probably about five years where we did not get a rise in our cost of living at all. Obviously, because costs have gone up and the budget has stayed the same, we are constantly looking at cost-saving exercises. We are constantly reviewing how we can do things cheaper and more efficiently and effectively.

Mr Allister: So, DEL, for example, has been putting in the same £220,000 or thereabouts for 10 years?

Ms Couser: It has fluctuated, but it is thereabouts. At the minute, we have 21 core staff. They operate the infrastructure, head office and seven outreach centres.

Mr Allister: What has been DEL's response when you have said that you could do with some more money?

Ms Couser: It said that we should talk to the Department of Education and see what it is going to give us first.

Mr Allister: Does the Department of Education then say that you should talk to DEL?

Ms Couser: It says that, because it has nothing to do with us, we should talk to the Youth Council.

Mr Allister: Do you think that you are valued by either Department?

Ms Couser: I think that we are absolutely valued. There is a difficulty, because we sit outside the normal funding structures. We have always been a bit of a square peg in a round hole. Since being set up in 1993, we have gone through five economic appraisals and one Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) inspection.

Mr Allister: You come pretty cheap to the Department, do you not think?

Ms Couser: That is my point exactly. We come very cheap, so I ask whether we can please just have security of funding. An important point is that we went through the process in March last year and were not sure whether we were going to get an extension. In April, we were told that we would have a transitional year to sort out where funding was going to go. From an operations and staff perspective, we lost three centres, and staff were made redundant. Staff took a pay freeze and a reduction in salary. Do you know why that was? It was because staff believe in this work; they believe 100% in this work and they care about the young people they work with. I am going to get very emotional about it; it is an extreme passion of mine. We do not want this service to disappear. I do not care whether I am doing it or whether somebody else is doing it, it is a valuable service. We meet people where they are. We take them, personally, from where they are in their lives. We do not care how long the string is; we want to get them from one end to the other.

The Chairperson: Laura, following on from what Jim said, it says in my notes that there was a cut of about 25%.

Ms Couser: Yes, that was in the last financial year.

The Chairperson: From what to what? What does that mean exactly?

Ms Couser: You will have to add 25% to £440,000.

The Chairperson: So, you were at about £550,000 and you are down to £440,000. So, £100,000 has been taken out.

I want to make a point along the same lines as Jim's, but you still have the Floor, Jim, if you wish to continue.

Mr Allister: I am happy enough; I have got the picture.

Ms Couser: I would like to see DEL taking a lead. Rather than doing what the Department of Education or the Youth Council do, DEL should —

The Chairperson: That was my question.

Ms Couser: — step up to the mark.

The Chairperson: Who do you think is your champion? Who fights for Bytes?

Ms Couser: Me. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Good, but what about a Department or a Minister?

Ms Couser: We have always had very close relationships with Department reps. Jeff Ard, who was in here for business prior to this session, was one of our Department reps. Last year, when the budget cut hit, there was a feeling that we were going to do things differently, but both Departments stepped away from that. Doing things differently is something that I would encourage. We need to be transparent in what we are doing. We also need to be feeding information to the people who can actually make the decisions.

The Chairperson: I want to move on. It is not that I do not want to talk more about this, but I want to get the young people up to tell us what —

Mr Allister: Can I just ask whether you need any help in kind from the Department, such as premises?

Ms Couser: No. We were in Rathcoole youth club, and there is no rent cost there. However, for our age range, the youth club situation does not always work. It depends very much on the club.

The Chairperson: Are you finished, Jim?

Mr Allister: Yes, thanks.

The Chairperson: We will pick that up. I will ask that the Committee write to the Department to ascertain the priorities. If we can find a way of doing that with DE as well, we will write to the appropriate Committee for onward transmission.

I think that you fall between a number of stools. I got involved only by chance. I spoke to some of your young people, whose heads were melted when I spoke to them. *[Laughter.]* Ronan made some really quite dramatic comments when we were talking about interface areas. People do not realise how damaged and vulnerable some of our young people are. There is no point bemoaning that, because it is the reality. As a society, we are not tackling the problem properly.

There seems to be a diversity of delivery with groups such as Include Youth and Opportunity Youth, and we cannot get our heads around what we are all doing. Yet there is clearly a problem with young people from very difficult backgrounds, shall we say. We have to find a way to deal with that.

Ms Couser: Absolutely. We deliver what comes before those programmes, because we signpost young people into, for example, the Prince's Trust. That is a good leader, but the young people are not ready to go into those programmes when they come to us.

The Chairperson: I will reflect on this, and I will stop in a minute. Your presentation was pretty comprehensive and covered a lot of issues. However, you need to get out certain key messages. That is not criticism; I am just saying that we are struggling. It is not clear to us that you are dealing with people who are at the pre-entry stage for other courses. Whenever we talk here we tend sometimes even to sanitise the reality of their lives and what you try to deal with. That has come across.

It is good that you say that it is hard. A throwaway comment is sometimes more powerful than a big presentation. So, the idea of asking, "Why not tie Amanda up and steal her laptops?" gives the subject a certain earthiness.

Ms Couser: We are doing interface work with Tennent Street police station, and a group of 32 younger people, who we would not normally work with, are going to see the Lord Mayor tomorrow night about interface violence. They went through a process with us and achieved a qualification. They asked their school principal to attend the presentation, because that principal made them feel as though they would never achieve anything in their lives. I think that Phil Hughes was one of the delivery people at that programme. You are right, Basil: it is hard to get across the message that we work at the pre-entry stage for everything and that we do not care about the range or issue of work.

The Chairperson: We have got the message about a number of issues, but we have not quite got the answers yet. However, I assure you that this Committee is particularly interested in the areas that you deal with.

This is my opinion, and I will probably get leapt on because these people do not show me any respect at all, but you are probably at a lower, more grass roots level of engagement than just about any other grouping that we have dealt with, and we have dealt with good organisations that work in difficult situations. That has given us cause to think about matters.

Thank you very much. We will think about how we can help you. We will certainly write the letters, and the Committee will deliberate. I am quite sure that you will also feature in the debate on NEETs.

Ms Couser: Can I invite the young people now?

The Chairperson: You can indeed, if they are not bored to tears.

Ms Couser: We had a couple of no-shows. So, Joe, who is with us today, would like to step in. Again, that is typical of lifestyles: they are passionate about something, but something happens in their lives, and they could not get out of bed this morning.

The Chairperson: Sure, I understand. So, who have we got? Is it just Joe?

Ms Couser: No, we have Carly, Joe and Harry.

The Chairperson: Right, come on up.

Ms Couser: Harry is from Belfast Foyer, and Carly is from Tullycarnet. You heard from Joe from the Short Strand earlier, but he wants to say his piece.

The Chairperson: Brilliant. I have a few questions to start you off before we have a wee chat. So, what do you think of it so far? Are you bored to tears?

Mr Harry Dunn (The Bytes Project): They put their point across properly about the budget needing to be there for the youth. I live in the Belfast Foyer as well as volunteer there, so I live with a lot of homeless people. So, I am technically homeless myself. The money needs to be there for those people so that they can be given the opportunity. I am 25, so I am one of the oldest people in the place, but a lot of the kids that I live with have been kicked out of school. Some of them have gone through the prison system. Some of them are only 17 or 18, and they are struggling. As soon as they get out of jail, they do not get any funding at all. The only place that helps them is Bytes. That is why they need that centre to be there.

The Chairperson: Do you think that the presentation got across the reality?

Mr Dunn: A lot of it did, yes, but there are other issues that can be brought across in a short time. Ronan was talking about the project in Glengormley. I am originally from Glengormley, and I have noticed that the interface in Glengormley has actually calmed down. I used to work in the centre of Glengormley for many years, and, walking through it, I saw that there was a riot every Friday and Saturday night, because there was nothing to do. They used to have each others' mobile numbers, and they would text each other when they got enough drink in them to go and fight with each other. So, this actually is working. It is working with the other centres as well, given all the employability stuff that comes across. Even if people do only their level 2, it gives them an idea that they are not worthless and that they have something to work towards.

The Chairperson: I have let the time run on a wee bit, so I want everybody to have a chance to say their piece. We need to be short and sharp, because you have got to explain to some of the other folk around here. We will go to Carly next. Tell me what you think we should know.

Ms Carly Richardson (The Bytes Project): I am not one of the typical young people from Bytes. I left school with A levels and had the opportunity to go to university, but I did not get a place. Growing up, I always knew that Bytes was there, but just thought —

The Chairperson: Where are you from?

Ms Richardson: I am from Tullycarnet. I always knew that it was there, but I just thought that it was the place that people went to use the computers when they did not have one. It was only when one day I was in doing some work experience in the community centre that Bytes is in that one of the development officers asked me to come in and have a chat with her. After that, when I left school I got involved with some of the different projects, and it really helped boost my self-esteem and confidence, because I was very quiet in school. I went to a grammar school and grew up in a housing estate. I was bullied in school because of where I lived, so getting involved in the cross-community projects, including making a few films on drug abuse and bullying, has really helped to give me the confidence to apply for jobs. I would have applied for jobs and just not heard back from them, or I would have gone for an interview and been so nervous that I could not speak to the employers. In the past year, I have secured a job and have actually been promoted in fewer than six months of being in the job. I

have been offered the position of assistant manager, and I would not have been able to do it without the help from Bytes staff. Even those staff who do not work in my centre will ask me how I am getting on with my job. They need the funding to keep helping other young people.

The Chairperson: OK. We will come back and have a wee chat. So, do you want to add to your Oscar-winning —

Mr Joe Ferris (The Bytes Project): I just want to touch on what Ronan said about the issues surrounding interface violence in the Short Strand. I know that the group now present, which attends the Short Strand Bytes centre, would tend to be the ones who get involved and who end up getting themselves tied up in the interface violence when it comes around with the parades and stuff. I know that the two workers in Bytes in Short Strand — Paul and Natalie — are doing their utmost to keep them away from the interface violence. It is not only those two who do that; the rest of the staff do the same. Ronan worked there before, and he does outreach work, and Phil is also involved. They all do it. It is good that funding has been made available for Saturday when a parade will be going past. Certain young people are getting taken away so that they do not get caught up and end up with a criminal record and then not have the opportunities in life that most people do. If they have a criminal record, they are not going to be able to go anywhere. Sammy spoke earlier about going to America. If you have a criminal record, you are not going to get in to some places. Those are the kinds of things that I wanted to touch on.

The Chairperson: We will have a few more questions. We understand the issue; we get the point about visas and passports. However, the question is this: do the people you are working with and know get it? There are issues there. I want to get a few questions in.

Mr Allister: Carly, are you now in full-time employment?

Ms Richardson: Yes.

Mr Allister: Are you now a volunteer with Bytes?

Ms Richardson: I have recently been involved in helping out as a peer volunteer. My brother was recently kicked out of school and referred to Bytes. So, I help him and his friends by trying to encourage them to get involved in different programmes.

Mr Allister: Is it common for people who have passed through Bytes and are now employed to be loyal to it and to continue to have a connection with it?

Ms Richardson: Yes. A lot of the ones who I know put the fact that they have a job down to Bytes, so they will always have a connection with it. They are thankful that it helped them, and they want to help others, especially because they know a lot of the young people who are still involved in Bytes centres in the community. Those young people are slightly younger than them, and they do not want them to be taken by the different things going on in the community, such as drugs and violence.

Mr Ferris: I go in and help out. I have three jobs at the minute, and I know that that is down to what Bytes has given me. My qualifications in ICT, first aid and all the rest, and my self-confidence are down to Bytes. As I said in my presentation, Bytes needed a young person to apply for funding, so I applied for the 02 Think Big funding. We got £300 and organised a programme based on the 'Come Dine with Me' format. Ten young people took part, and it was very successful. We now have the chance to get £2,500 from thinkBigger! for the same programme, only it is a bigger step up.

The Chairperson: Harry, do you want to say anything about that?

Mr Dunn: No, it is OK.

The Chairperson: I did not want to cut you off, because you were in full flow. We will come back to you.

Mr McElduff: My question is probably for Harry, because it is about the homeless dimension. I am particularly interested in the impact of the Bytes Project on homeless young people. You said that you were technically homeless and that others are homeless. What is the difference?

Mr Dunn: Some people become homeless because their families have kicked them out. However, I became homeless because of a relationship breakdown and arguments with my family. When I was kicked out of my house, I had a job, but I lost it because I became homeless. When the Housing Executive views a case, it will say that you are intentionally homeless, so you will not get any points. That is the difference. If you are living on the street and you ask the Housing Executive what you should do, you find that the support is not there. Unless you go and resource it yourself, you have nothing. Where I am now, the Foyer, is in my opinion one of the best hostels in Belfast, and part of the reason for that is that the Bytes Project is there and runs essential skills programmes. I have done a few employability courses. For example, I have just finished level 2 in my youth work training. I was able to do all that because the Bytes Project is at the centre. I would not have known about Bytes had it not been there. Even some of the people I live with have moved out and still come back to do different programmes, because they know that the help is there.

The Chairperson: What do you think about politicians?

Mr Dunn: I am saying nothing about that. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: You are strangely reticent just because you are sat beside Jim Allister.

Mr Allister: We are obviously all beneath comment. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Just to wrap it up, you are up here in Parliament Buildings, but have you ever been here before?

Mr Dunn: I was here last year.

The Chairperson: What were you up here for last year?

Mr Dunn: We were up looking for funding last year as well. There was an event upstairs on the fear of the oppressed.

The Chairperson: Did it work?

Mr Dunn: I do not know. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Gildernew: Do you feel oppressed with Jim sitting eyeballing you?

Mr Dunn: Pretty much; he is a bit shifty on it. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: What do you think about your experience here? Is this a good thing for you to do? Do you think that you are getting your point of view across?

Mr Dunn: I think that a youth's voice has to put the point across; that is it. No matter what director it is, anybody who talks to anybody knows that it is the youth who are impacted the most.

Mr Ferris: It is a good idea for young people to come here and talk to you and get their point across.

The Chairperson: Do you think that it would be a good idea for some of us to go and look at some of the centres?

Mr Ferris: That would be a brilliant idea.

Mr Dunn: Definitely.

The Chairperson: Would we get the sanitised version or the real stuff?

Ms Couser: There is no sanitised version. Sometimes you need to wear your crash helmet when you go in, but that is par for the course.

The Chairperson: What did I present the Bytes Project with a prize for? I gave some people certificates.

Ms Couser: That was for the ESF programme.

The Chairperson: Yes. As far as Amanda is concerned —

Ms Gildernew: SF? The Sinn Féin programme? Very good. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I was intimidated, but it was very good. We will finish here; we have run on.

Ms Couser: I do appreciate the time.

The Chairperson: We have run on, and the departmental officials will kill me when I bring them to the table. I am using the royal "we" or the collective "we" — whatever "we" it is, I am talking on behalf of the Committee. There is a genuine desire from people on all sides of the table to really understand the reality. The Committee is particularly connected on this issue. We really do want to understand and see what we can do to help. We know that resources are tight everywhere. Everybody has a good story — that is just the nature of the world — but it seems that we need to do something to raise the really difficult issues that you are trying to deal with. I do not know whether you know this, but we as a Committee are sort of on life support; we do not know whether we exist or not.

Ms Couser: A bit like the rest of us.

The Chairperson: That is why we have a certain amount of empathy. If time permits, some of us, or perhaps the whole Committee, would like to see what you are doing in reality. We would like to see whether we can up the level of interest in the issue. We will certainly be writing letters about this, and we will let you know how we get on. We will send a copy of the Hansard report to the Minister for his attention. Thank you all very much. We are more than happy to hear from you again; do not think that this is the end of the conversation. If you think of anything that we should know about, just let us know.

Ms Couser: Thank you very much for your time.

The Chairperson: All the best.