



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Learner Access and Engagement Pilot
Programme: DEL Briefing

10 October 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

Learner Access and Engagement Pilot Programme: DEL Briefing

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Christopher Andrews	Department for Employment and Learning
Ms Yvonne Croskery	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: We have Yvonne and Chris to talk to us. Over to you; the floor is yours.

Ms Yvonne Croskery (Department for Employment and Learning): Good afternoon. Thank you very much for inviting us to discuss the learner access and engagement pilot (LAEP) programme evaluation. For anybody who does not know me, I am the head of further education (FE) policy, and I am accompanied by my colleague Christopher Andrews from further education policy and strategic planning branch.

We sent through a short slide show to the Committee. We are happy to walk you through that or move straight to questions.

The Chairperson: Do it briefly. We can read the slides. Just tell us what you are trying to structure, and then there will be a few questions.

Ms Croskery: OK. The learner access and engagement pilot programme commenced in November 2008. It was informed by the outworkings of the Department's further education strategy Further Education Means Business. The programme aimed to encourage the hardest-to-reach adults back into the world of learning through providing an extra rung of mentoring and support; to develop partnerships between non-statutory organisations, mainly voluntary and community groups, and further education statutory colleges; and, ultimately, to widen access.

The pilot was to encourage adults aged 19 and over who were not in work and did not hold a qualification at level 2 to gain a qualification by providing additional learning support not previously available. The whole purpose of the pilot was to test those arrangements. The evaluation was commissioned by the Department and taken forward by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the pilot programme, which ran in all six

colleges in Northern Ireland, and to give advice to the Department on its appropriateness for mainstreaming.

It specifically looked at gathering the necessary evidence to support the need for a pilot approach with additional mentoring; to look at the statistical base to inform policymaking; to identify the constraints involved in such a pilot; and to inform —

The Chairperson: Yvonne, I am happy enough in that I have got why they were doing it. Issues identified: tell me what those are.

Ms Croskery: When the pilot launched, there were difficulties with recruiting learners. That was at the very beginning of the pilot. As it started to bed down, third parties were finding it challenging to get people who did not hold a level 2 qualification and get them enrolled. As the programme bedded down, that was no longer an issue. As you will see from the results in the evaluation, enrolments improved significantly.

There were also issues with the ability of the programme to resource provision. Specifically, I mean securing appropriately qualified tutors and course viability. Again, that was at the very start of the pilot, and as the partnership between the voluntary groups and the colleges bedded down, they developed relationships and held management meetings to overcome those issues. Indeed, one college came forward with a suite of provision that it could offer from the prospectus and the community setting to help the third-party provider to recruit. They did build up their relationship.

There were also communication issues at the start around understanding the nature of the contract, its focus and its eligibility. Again, however, they developed good relationships through management meetings that made sure that each understood the other and how they could complement and add value to each other in getting learners on to programmes.

There were issues around understanding eligibility at the start. We were working on the pilot with a finite budget. Therefore, to make sure that we were measuring accurately the impact of the pilot and its interventions meant that those who had one or more GCSEs or a level 2 qualification were precluded. That was not so much of an issue once that understanding became more apparent.

The Chairperson: Do you mean that you changed the criteria?

Ms Croskery: No, we did not change the criteria; rather, we clarified the criteria. There were issues around age, for example, and, under EU law, we cannot distinguish between age. It was an adult programme.

The Chairperson: Yvonne, I do not want to interrupt you, but that is wonderful Civil Servicespeak: "we did not change the criteria; we clarified the criteria." That is tremendous and much better. I shall do that in the Assembly tomorrow.

Ms Croskery: We did not change them because the advice that we were given from our statistician was —

The Chairperson: Yvonne, I am sorry that I interrupted. Just carry on, please.

Ms Croskery: Good. There were also issues around age and gender balance. There is no doubt about it that the evaluation shows that it was clearly easier to engage female adults without a level 2 qualification than it was males, and that is something that we have dealt with as we move forward with the policy proposals.

As I said, age raised some issues as well. There were greater challenges in engaging those who would be in the not in education, employment or training (NEET) category. We do not take away from that at all: it is very clear that they were harder to engage and to keep on the programme. There were also some issues with people recruited who were quite elderly. We revised our criteria to state that all that we needed for our learners was for them to be willing to be economically active. That allowed the programme to be as wide as it could be. All these issues are being dealt with and will be dealt with in the mainstream programme as we move forward. We are very mindful of that. Indeed, we have developed pilot proposals for NEETs exclusively because of that. We really want to find out what the issues are.

On that note, I will pass over to my colleague, Christopher. He will run you through a whistle-stop tour of the key findings.

Mr Christopher Andrews (Department for Employment and Learning): The first key finding is a very statistic-heavy slide on enrolments. I will go through it as quickly as possible and point out the most significant aspects of it. Over the course of the evaluation, we got over 6,600 enrolments, 46% of which came from the 20% most deprived wards of Northern Ireland. As a comparator, mainstream FE attracts 24% of people from those wards. The other particularly startling statistic is that 85% of our participants had never achieved a qualification before. That suggests that we reached the hardest to reach and the most disengaged from learning — the people who had switched off from previous education. A further interesting statistic is that 15% of our enrolments on the pilot programme declared a disability. That compares with 12% in mainstream FE.

The next slide is about the learner survey. PricewaterhouseCoopers, throughout the course of the pilot —

The Chairperson: Just before you move on to that, Chris, I am getting my head around the statistics. You say that it is a success because you got half the people from deprived wards and most of them had no qualifications, which is the target. How do we know what percentage of people in those wards we have actually reached? If I were looking at a ward that has perhaps 5,000 people who meet the criteria, how deep into those wards are we going?

Mr Andrews: That was not picked up during the scope of the evaluation, but I am sure that we can take that back and look at it.

Ms Croskery: We can take that back and look at it at constituency level.

The Chairperson: I just want to know whether the scale is big enough to make an impact. Say that you have 100 people who have issues and you get to deal with five of them. You might say that those five are doing really well, but we are not doing enough for the other 95. How big is the programme and its impact?

Ms Croskery: We do not have that level of detail with us. We have the overarching figure, which PwC provided.

The Chairperson: The overarching figure of what?

Ms Croskery: It is that 46% of participants were from the 20% most deprived areas in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: I understand that your budget is constrained and you are doing a pilot, so you get only 6,500 people who can do it, and you say that those seem to be the good 6,500. I want to know how much bigger it has to be so that we get all the people in those areas who have no qualifications engaged in some form of further education.

Ms Croskery: The labour force survey of April 2012 gives us an indication. Out of the population survey, it shows that in and around 18% hold no qualification in Northern Ireland from a population of over 1.1 million. I will check the figure.

The Chairperson: I am happy. Perhaps you can work it out and come back to me. I do not want to interrupt the flow.

Mr Andrews: No problem. If I may, I will move on to the findings of the learner survey. Almost 50% indicated during the course of the learner survey that they wished to gain a qualification, and 35% suggested that they enrolled in the courses to improve their chances of getting a job. Just over 70% — this is a very interesting statistic — said that they would not have engaged if the course had not been delivered in a community setting; that is, they would not have gone to an FE college. That places the importance on the community aspect of the course.

Another particularly interesting finding of the learner survey was that the majority indicated that they would have done nothing in the absence of the programme; they would not have engaged or re-engaged in education otherwise.

The Chairperson: Before you move on to the role of the mentor, some of the FE colleges tell us that they prefer their own scheme for engagement to this scheme.

Ms Croskery: That is not the view that they have shared with the Department, Chair. We have had broad support from the six college directors about the impact of this programme and the need to continue it.

The Chairperson: The Committee has taken evidence from colleges concerned about the LAEP programme, and the feeling was that it was overly bureaucratic and that there were difficulties in getting things sorted out. I could be wrong; I am only pointing to that.

Ms Croskery: That may have been before the evaluation was published.

The Chairperson: Yes, it would have been.

Ms Croskery: Since it has been published, we have had great support from the six directors. In answer to your question, though, the colleges are not impacting on these people. The evidence of the evaluation clearly shows that they are penetrating on average only 22% of general FE from the 20% most deprived areas. This programme was able to delve into 46%, and I have to report that, outwith the scope of the evaluation, when the programme ended, it moved to 53%, and that is quite a significant difference.

The Chairperson: I agree, but that is the point that we challenged in the past. I think that there is an issue around getting those most estranged from the education establishment into a college in the first place. You need to get them to do something else first.

Ms Croskery: The evidence base here is very clear about the added value of the third party, the mentoring role and the community setting — all three together.

Mr Andrews: If I may, I will move on to the role of the mentor. The mentor was supposed to provide a seamless service from engagement to college; that is, the mentor was supposed to take over all those aspects of enrolling into college that may have put a learner off. Those include enrolling, finding out where the class is, any particular aspects regarding filling in forms, and so on. No other FE programme offered a mentor in that particular way. Mentoring was identified as a key feature of best practice during the course of the pilot.

The role of mentors was wide-ranging, but they played a key role in recruiting, supporting and retaining the learners. Typical tasks included setting up classes, liaising between learners and the college, addressing barriers to learning, maintaining contact with learners and signposting to progression routes. Again, the report noted that mentoring was most effective when provided by appropriately qualified individuals, and where that individual had no other role in the programme. The report suggests that learners from hard-to-reach groups such as single parents and the long-term unemployed, those experiencing intergenerational unemployment, were offered an additional layer of support from the mentor that would not have been available in any other programme.

The next slide is on partnerships. There is significant evidence to suggest that that partnership-working would not have taken place without the interaction of this programme. Most third parties and colleges agreed that the learner access and engagement pilot had successfully raised the profile of colleges at a local level and that colleges had access to a range of learners that they would not normally have reached. The report also identifies three critical underpinning factors to a successful partnership arrangement: access to local networks or local people on the ground through your third party; a clear understanding between the two parties of the programme criteria; and an effective communication strategy, whereby each party knows what to expect from the other party.

I will hand back to Yvonne for the slide on barriers to participation.

Ms Croskery: The report also identified key barriers for participants' involvement in the programme. Those were divided into practical, attitudinal and programme barriers. On a practical level, barriers

could include geographical location, caring responsibilities of the participants, or disability, which are all issues that I am pleased to report that the mentor was able to do something about. By signposting appropriate help and providing a seamless service to help with caring responsibilities, they were able to utilise the college's service to pay for childcare — simple things such as those. Colleges have a budget to help with childcare, and they were able to signpost participants. Practical barriers were overcome by, for example, offering provision in rural areas, offering support for those with caring responsibilities and making it more accessible for people with disabilities.

Attitudinal barriers tended to be very specific circumstances among the long-term unemployed or those with a poor attitude to learning or who had bad experiences first time around. One example of that was a male in a learner access and engagement group who was going through his numeracy course in the local primary school where his child was being educated. He was so proud to be associated with the primary school and to have his learning delivered in the place to which his child was coming during the day.

Other programme barriers included entry criteria, which I have raised before. There is no doubt that those criteria are very tight. They had to be in order to measure the impact, because if we allowed people in with four GCSEs, the view was that they are not classed as hard to reach and should be using mainstream FE instead.

Participants liked small, bespoke class sizes in which they did not feel intimidated. A lot of people who participated were around the age of 46, so these are predominantly adults, and it can be intimidating going back to learning. I am pleased to see that the local setting and having small groups dealt with that very effectively.

The Chairperson: OK. Going very quickly through the rest of the thing, the programme cost £1.7 million, which you say is cost-effective. Is that about the size of it? I am keen to move on to some questions, Yvonne, unless you want to say anything else on that.

Ms Croskery: The figure of £1.7 million only takes you up until June 2011, and the programme ran until March 2012. Altogether, the Department has spent just over £2.2 million. When you look at the success rate of those whom we engaged, 56% gained a qualification, with 85% of the participants never having had any formal qualification. We perceive that to have been good value for money. We concur with PwC.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much.

Mr Allister: Something that you did not mention, which is on page 21 of the PwC report, is the fact that there is a disparity in the reach of the programme to people from a Protestant background and a Catholic background. According to the report, some of the evidence is based on quite disparaging commentary. Why have you not highlighted that as an issue, and what do you propose to do about it? I notice that PwC itself did not make any recommendations.

Ms Croskery: It identified some issues, and the specific example that it used just above figure 3.5 is the Derry/Londonderry situation. In that area, PwC said that there was less of a dynamic in one community than in the other. We will look to develop targets to ensure that the colleges, the contracts and the third parties are penetrating the areas that we need them to. We are encouraging collaboration so that a bidding organisation coming to a college can demonstrate its ability to move in to these areas and have the engagement with the communities.

Mr Allister: In order that we can understand how big a problem it is, what is the community background of the 6,600 who engaged with the programme?

Ms Croskery: I do not have that figure with me today, but I will be happy to provide it to you.

Mr Allister: If you would, please. It is concerning that there should be this disparity. Are you saying that you would ask future providers how they will address it?

Ms Croskery: In moving the programme forward, we would expect and we will ask colleagues to ensure that part of their tender specification is that they clearly seek organisations to demonstrate how they will penetrate specific wards and areas. That will be monitored through the contract and by the Department.

Mr Allister: Was it a disappointment to you that PwC did not really seem to have any recommendations to deal with that?

Ms Croskery: The report recognised the situation but did not highlight it. I do not have the figures of the religious breakdown of participants to hand, but, based on the robustness of the report, I feel that it was not an issue of concern.

Mr Allister: Well, something has given rise to the top half of page 21 of the report, has it not?

Ms Croskery: Yes, it refers specifically to one particular area where two learning support providers were stronger in their penetration of their areas as one was in another. Those areas did not appear to have the same dynamic, but that could be an organisational thing, too. Perhaps that organisation —

Mr Allister: Could it be a question of location?

Mr Andrews: This specific example refers to Londonderry, as Yvonne said, and the organisations in the city side of the area and Shantallow are particularly strong, and the —

Mr Allister: Was that the location of the provision?

Mr Andrews: No, there was provision in the Waterside as well. I think that the organisation in the Waterside in this particular instance was not as effective in recruiting Protestants.

Ms Croskery: It may have been that the organisation was not as effective in engaging people.

Mr Allister: Will the figures that you are going to produce to us demonstrate that it was only a Londonderry problem?

Ms Croskery: I will produce the figures — I have to liaise with the statisticians to provide them for you — broken down by community background as far as I am able to.

Mr McElduff: What does the study tell us about the construction industry re-engaging people who may have lost out in that sector?

Ms Croskery: The programme was designed for economically inactive people. Essential skills courses made up the bulk of enrolments: there were just over 1,200. Colleges met the needs of the learner, and learners had choice. They chose whether they wanted to enrol in a construction-related course. Could you be more clear in your question?

Mr McElduff: Do the colleges provide the solution? I am thinking very practically of groups and individuals who were plasterers, lost their jobs and are at a bit of a loss as to where to go next in life.

Ms Croskery: The college and the third party would be engaging such people and offering a number of routes to see where they would like to be reskilled or re-engaged.

Mr Lyttle: Thanks for your presentation. From my experience in Belfast, there is a lot of positive feedback about the programme. The Belfast consortia were involved with it, particularly organisations such as Oasis in my constituency of East Belfast. One piece of feedback from the PwC report and from community and voluntary sector groups that deliver on the ground was the importance of building really strong partnership arrangements between the community groups and the colleges. What work is going to be done to ensure that those partnership arrangements are in place?

Ms Croskery: As a starting position, before the tendering even commences, there will be information seminars to engage with interested parties and really communicate about the programme — local MLAs, including the Committee, will be invited to that, and the Department will be represented — so that we can start at the very beginning, before the contractual position commences, to ensure that there is a clear understanding. The contracts will be designed so that the parties are clear about what their respective roles are. We, as a Department, expect to see close liaison and communication among the partners. There will be a number of improvements to the programme. We are looking at extending the eligibility criteria to help providers to engage more people. We are also looking at the

colleges providing a suite of provision so that it makes it easier for providers to know what numbers are available and what they can do. In addition, we have built in some arrangements around the community setting to make sure that it is clear where that is available. It is all about encouraging that relationship.

Mr Andrews: We have also engaged with the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) to make it aware that new tendering arrangements will be published very shortly. We have asked it to liaise with the organisations that it represents to make them further aware to be prepared for the tenders coming. When we get to the position at which we formally publish a circular, we intend to supply that to NICVA and to get it to host that on its website. That will further raise awareness in community and voluntary organisations with which we would like the colleges to engage.

Ms Croskery: From a partnership perspective, in answer to your question, we expect the colleges to build into the system a clear communication arrangement so that they can express to one another what their roles and responsibilities are. It is all about a seamless service; it is all about the learner being engaged and seeing no barriers or bureaucracy while on their learning journey. That might be done through concessionary fees or childcare help. It is about the two drawing on their strengths and complementing each other.

Mr Lyttle: It would be really good if MLAs were kept informed of those information sessions, given that we all have to take acute interest in getting the most economically inactive into the programmes. It would be great to be kept informed of those developments.

The Chairperson: Help me on this a wee bit. I am looking for this in the report, but I do not necessarily see it. Where is there an analysis of how the people who provided the service feel about how the scheme went?

Mr Andrews: There are a number of quotations, and so on, throughout the report. PricewaterhouseCoopers had focus groups with third parties, and they were asked to feed back. You will see throughout the different sections of the report a number of quotations that are attributed to the learning and support provider (LSP) representatives.

The Chairperson: We have had comments in the past — although they may not have been specifically to do with this — that there were some difficulties around the selection of recruiters. Have those issues been ironed out?

Ms Croskery: They have. Those issues were primarily at the start, and there is no doubt that there was some distrust. It was a contractual relationship. The feedback in the report, particularly on the past two years, showed that issues had been ironed out. There was some very favourable feedback from the LSPs about the colleges working in partnership, but you are right. At the beginning, there were real concerns about tutors and about colleges' ability to meet the needs of the people whom they recruited. On the other hand, the colleges' problem was the viability of the course. If you have recruited only two people, it will be very difficult to run a course. Through coming forward with a suite of provision and community settings, a lot of the issues were successfully ironed out.

The Chairperson: Now that you are bringing the programme into the mainstream and making some changes, I think that it would be useful if you come back and tell us when you will be ready to bring that provision. When is that likely to be?

Ms Croskery: It is imminent. The Minister has given his approval in principle for a learner access and engagement mainstream programme, and we are just waiting for his final approvals for the business case, which is likely to happen imminently — in the next few days. Following that, the Department will launch a policy circular that the Minister has endorsed, and, from that, the information seminars will commence.

The Chairperson: Given that you are changing from the pilot, the Committee would like to know as soon as is practical within the protocols what the changes are going to be.

Ms Croskery: We are happy to do that.

The Chairperson: Members have indicated — indeed, Mr Lyttle brought it up — that they would like to be involved in this. We would like to find a way of engaging, and you might consider how best to do that, Yvonne.

Ms Croskery: We are happy to do that. Indeed, we will be inviting Committee members to participate in the information seminars across the country when they are launched. We would like you to join us and to raise any questions that you have. Likewise, we are happy to issue a copy of our policy circular and all the details as soon as we are able to. I hope that that will be within the next seven days.

The Chairperson: You have done good work, and I ask that you liaise in the appropriate way with the Committee Clerk.

There is one key issue. Jim raised the issue about the religious split, and I am concerned about the gender profile as well.

Ms Croskery: We are as well, Chair, and we will ask colleges to set targets to ensure that males are targeted. We know from numerous pieces of research that males are more difficult to engage with in this category, so as well as taking one of your members' points about penetration in particular geographical areas, we will be looking for targets aimed specifically at increasing male participation and trying to get a more favourable figure — one that is representative of the community.

The Chairperson: The positive thing is that you have found a way of getting women engaged, but you are not engaging young men.

Ms Croskery: Most definitely, and we are going to do something about that.

The Chairperson: You indicated that you might be doing another pilot or a specific bit of work on that.

Ms Croskery: No, that is for NEETs. We are running a bespoke pilot for those aged 16 to 18, because the report clearly states that the young people were harder to engage and to keep on. We need to do something about that to test it. We have an expectation and will be liaising with colleges to ensure that targets are set locally that will ensure equal engagement of male and female, and penetration in the areas where the hard-to-reach people are.

The Chairperson: We cannot just gloss over it, although I am not suggesting that you are. Page 24 of the document states:

"In addition to attracting more female enrolments, LAE continued to attract a significant number of enrolments from the older age groups."

It also states:

"over one half (53%) of enrolments fell into the over 46 age group".

Although we have to deal with that, there is definitely a problem for us with youth unemployment, NEETs, and that sort of thing. This is part and parcel of that. We need to find a way of getting men, particularly young men, involved. You said that you were going to deal with it. How and when? How do we know?

Ms Croskery: As part of the programme moving forward, we will pilot with this programme a specific NEETs programme that will target 16- to 18-year-olds and look at males and females, based on the number that are in the category, who hold no more than one GCSE/level 2 qualification, with a view to providing essential skills in literacy, numeracy, and information and communication technology. That pilot will test different approaches to get more males and young people on it over three years.

The Chairperson: Where is the overlap with what happens at, say, Hydebank Wood, from where you have young offenders coming out?

Ms Croskery: The programme will be for them as well. We expect organisations that are on tenders with the colleges to be working with the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of

Offenders and the probation service to engage the very cohort that you talk about and help them get into learning. They are the very people who need this support.

The Chairperson: The trouble is, Yvonne, that we keep agreeing with each other. I am trying to find out how we are going to do that. I am a huge supporter of the Prince's Trust, which does absolutely sterling and really effective work. I want to know that we are not reinventing the wheel or overlapping. I would be interested to see where the Department's provision comes in.

Mr Andrews: The policy proposals that we have developed build on the evidence from the PricewaterhouseCoopers report. We have in the circular built in what we feel should be key tendering criteria. Those include the organisation being able to demonstrate that it has a successful track record of engaging at a local level and the hard to reach. They have to show strategies of engaging with the hard to reach and retaining them. Through points such as those, we can improve and focus the efforts to ensure that the organisations that engage through the programme with our colleges are the most successful organisations of their type out there.

Ms Croskery: And have a track record of delivering on the ground. That is part of the evidence base of the contract. We set the policy and strategy at this level. We expect the colleges, through our advice and guidance, which we will issue through a policy circular, to make sure that the tender specification is such that we are satisfied that the right organisations are awarded the contracts, based on their record and ability to deliver.

The Chairperson: I will close it there, because I am in danger of agreeing with you far too much. It is an important issue, and we would like to be involved. There are still issues to deal with the particular things that were brought up, and the Committee will be interested in the ongoing bit. Thank you very much for your time and your submission.

Ms Croskery: Thank you for the opportunity.

The Chairperson: Not at all. We look forward to great things.