



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Belfast Metropolitan College Football
Academy

12 December 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Justin Edwards	Belfast Metropolitan College
Ms Heather Hedley	Belfast Metropolitan College
Mr Tiernan Lynch	Belfast Metropolitan College
Mr Seamus Lynch	Belfast Metropolitan College

The Chairperson: Joining us from Belfast Met are Justin, Tiernan, Seamus and Heather.

Justin, it is becoming hard to explain to people that you and I keep meeting. How did your event go? I really wanted to be there, but, as you have probably gathered, we had certain other political issues on the agenda. Was your schools event a success?

Mr Justin Edwards (Belfast Metropolitan College): It went very well. About 100 teachers and 70 employers attended. In the morning, we had a very good session with the likes of Bombardier and construction firms, and in the afternoon, seven major IT firms turned up. The feedback was excellent, and I have informed various people from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) that I will give them a presentation on the feedback from the schools.

The Chairperson: I told you about the career side of things. I really wanted to go, but issues were distracting us and we had to deal with them. Perhaps you would find a way of letting the Committee know about the feedback.

We will move to the business at hand. Justin, will you introduce the team? The floor is yours.

Mr Edwards: Thank you to the Committee for hearing us today. I know that some Committee members have seen the work that we are doing at the football academy and have become very interested in it. I am accompanied by Heather Hedley, who is head of training and schools partnership

programmes in the college, and Tiernan and Seamus Lynch, who are tutors, coaches and the academy advocates and co-ordinators. They, along with Heather, will lead on the presentation today.

Mr Seamus Lynch (Belfast Metropolitan College): My brother Tiernan and I are co-ordinators at the football academy and part-time lecturers. One of the main reasons why we started looking at the idea of a football academy in Northern Ireland was because we were products of education through football. I have an ordinary degree and a masters degree from Fordham University, and Tiernan has a degree from C.W. Post at Long Island University. At that time, we were first introduced to the concept of being a student athlete and to the blending of the curriculum with football skills development. We were integrated as athletes and part of the student body. We sought to bring that idea here for an age group of 16 to 19 because, in football terms, it is too late at the age of 18 to get a scholarship to college. So we looked at 16- to 19-year-olds, and we wanted to blend the level 2 and level 3 BTEC diplomas in sports with a full-time football training programme. That was the initial concept. Currently, the kids train from 9.00 am to 11.30 am daily at The Dub. After lunch, they have classes in the afternoon right up until 5.00 pm. As part of that programme, they learn essential skills and gain first aid certification.

One of the major factors is the hook of football, which is what differentiates our programme. Kids are taught elements of psychology, nutrition and physiology as part of a normal BTEC diploma, but when we put the focus on football, it is of much more interest to them. The elements of psychology in our programme may be about goalkeepers who have made silly mistakes and how they dealt with it, or we talk about Rio Ferdinand and Eric Cantona and the anxiety and stress that they face. That is more interesting for them, and they can relate to things in football terms. They pick up the skills and information that they need, but we keep them engaged through football, whereas a lot of them are not normally interested in those subjects. We have tried to use the hook of football to make them come in every day and attend classes. They have to attend their classes; otherwise, they do not get to play football. It is a carrot-and-stick approach. As a result, we have noticed a massive difference in their discipline and focus. The football academy is the focus of their lives. For many, football is the only thing that they are interested in. Through training, having to look after their bodies and understand nutrition, and taking care of the academic end, which is really important, we add a little discipline to their coming to the academy. We spoke to a lot of these kids and their parents. Many had poor school attendance. Now, they seem to have a focus. Football is the carrot that gives them that focus. They follow a blended curriculum.

I will give you an idea of the kids who attend the academy. They are 16- to 19-year-olds with aspirations to be professional footballers. Many are attached to Irish League clubs. They have this aspiration that they can still make it and earn some kind of a living, whether that is in the UK or in the Irish League. They are in an elite bracket of athletic and football ability.

Geographically, the academy is located at Belfast Metropolitan College, but we pull kids in from as far south as Newry, as far north as Ballymoney and as far west as Maghera and Magherafelt. There are also kids from Carrick. We have a number of kids from well outside the Belfast area. Some get up at 6.00 am and get two buses to get to The Dub. Cross-community and ethnicity are really important features of our academy. In Belfast alone, we have kids from Ballybeen, Ballymurphy, Ardoyne, Shankill and New Lodge — right across the community spectrum. We have kids who consider themselves Irish, British, Greek and Northern Irish, which is a new one.

The Chairperson: It is not all that new. Some 21% of people —

Mr Seamus Lynch: Possibly. We are still trying to work that out. It is your job to work out what that means.

The kids are from various socio-economic and educational backgrounds. A survey that we did revealed that more than 80% are on education maintenance allowance. That suggests that they are from a lower economic background. Educationally, some of the kids come on to the programme with absolutely no GCSEs; others have five or six. That is the difference between the level 2 and level 3 programmes.

The Chairperson: How many are on the programme?

Mr Seamus Lynch: In our first year, we had 40. This is our second year, and we have 70.

The Chairperson: Does the programme run for one year? Is that 70 over two years?

Mr Seamus Lynch: In the first year, there were 40 full-time student athletes. We had 18 kids on the level 2 programme, which is a one-year programme and 22 on the level 3 programme, which runs for two years. All completed their first year and were successful in their first year of level 2 — there was 100% completion. Only one person did not move on to level 3, so it was very successful. Of the 22 level 3 students, 19 went from year 1 to year 2.

Mr Anderson: How many can you eventually get to? What is your aspiration?

Mr Seamus Lynch: We have nearly reached the capacity for the programmes that we run right now, which are for elite athletes and footballers. We are here today because, this year, we declined 140 applications to our year 2 programme. That was simply because, from an elite perspective, they were not playing Irish League or youth league at a high standard. As a body in Belfast Met, the programme, as run now, is successful. Word of mouth is increasing, and we have 140 applicants. We need to come up with another programme so that we can engage these kids. We think that we have come up with another one, which would run along similar lines to the current programme, in which football is the hook. If we lower the elite football status and bring it into a different realm of coaching football rather than playing football, we will be able to engage these kids at the same level.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that you would keep the elite course separate?

Mr Seamus Lynch: Yes.

The Chairperson: So this is an additional course for people who might have a more general interest.

Mr Seamus Lynch: Yes. It is education through football. The hook is football, and it is for everybody. It is not just for those who are playing football.

The Chairperson: Everybody wants to get a bit better. I get it.

Mr Lyttle: It is about coaching as well and having a slightly different element for non-elite players.

Mr Seamus Lynch: Coach education is the most tangible element for non-players, and it is where they are able to pick up a lot of the skills that coaching involves, which include employability skills for the future. We have been looking at having more of a community-based project, whereby the kids will bring skills that they learn through coaching football back into their communities.

Mr Lyttle: Currently, those communities have a lack of capacity for coaching and community development.

Mr Seamus Lynch: There is a lack of quality coaching.

The Chairperson: Have you much more to say in your presentation?

Mr Seamus Lynch: Sorry, some of your questions overlapped.

The Chairperson: We will let you say what you have to say, and then we will get stuck in.

Mr Seamus Lynch: OK, not a problem. As far as success on the field is concerned, the lads won the Belfast and District Cup last year as well as the Belfast and District Football League. There is a sense of community in the programme among the young lads from different areas. They have a motivation: in two years, they have lost only one game, and there is a great sense of determination and focus.

The Chairperson: Did that defeat come when they played the Northern Ireland Assembly football team?

Mr Anderson: We beat them. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lyttle: That match has never taken place.

Mr Allister: By the sound of things, I would not advise it.

The Chairperson: I think that you are right.

Mr Lyttle: It would be a cricket score.

Mr Seamus Lynch: I am showing you a couple of slides of the lads at training. Gerry Armstrong, who is in the current picture, is the ambassador for the academy. During the year, there were a couple more prestige events: the kids met the President of Ireland and the Queen.

As we come to our second year, we have doubled the numbers and are up to 70 in the academy. I will play you a snippet of what the students say about the programme.

The Chairperson: The volume is not great, but we get the general message, which is that they like it.

Mr Seamus Lynch: That was just to give you an idea of what they think. The kids do like it, and the approval rating from parents is phenomenal. They say that they could not get the young lads to attend school regularly and that the programme has given their children a focus, which makes them attend classes.

The Chairperson: We get the general feeling. We have a lot to get through. Obviously, the kids are very enthusiastic. Guys, if anybody is interested in speaking, please indicate.

Mr Lyttle: I will start by saying that that was one of the best presentations to any Committee that I have been on. The visual quality and the content were superb. I am a fully fledged, signed-up fan of the programme. I think that it is amazing. As a footballer and somebody who is passionate about engaging hard-to-reach young men —

The Chairperson: The only person whom he has ever talked about like that is the Minister for Employment and Learning. He is such a lick. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lyttle: Credit where credit is due, Chair.

Football is an excellent way to engage hard-to-reach learners in communities, and the outcomes that you achieve are superb. The Committee and the Department need to do everything that they can to support the programme's expansion.

What sort of support can the Committee or the Department give to the secondary programme that you are considering?

Mr Edwards: We want to develop a coaching programme. Currently, we run the programme with further education funding. There are opportunities in training and apprenticeships, with parallel routes and progression routes, particularly for coaching.

There are challenges, because we are waiting for the re-contracting of Training for Success, but, even without that, the level 2 coaching certificates and the essential skills and first aid qualifications will be available, and we will be able to encourage participants to get placements in social economies or community groups. If we can fit that back into the framework, we could do something very exciting at that point.

Mr Lyttle: In our NEETS inquiry, we identified that people not engaged with mainstream learning needed new and creative ways to link into learning, whether through sport or otherwise. You are making an excellent contribution to that. You certainly have my full commitment to help in any way that I can with that process.

The Chairperson: Davy, you are interested in football.

Mr Hilditch: There are rumours of that, yes.

The Chairperson: Forgive me, Fra, because Davy is interested in this. Can we get a quick headline of the numbers involved in the football college at e3?

Mr Hilditch: Some of the guys outside gave me the figures.

The Chairperson: OK, you got the gist of it, then.

Mr F McCann: There are a couple of things that I want to talk about. I had the pleasure of being invited last year, and again earlier this year, to presentations for young people who came through the programme. That was my first contact with it, and it was a pleasure to witness the comradeship and enthusiasm, not only of the young people but of the parents and coaches.

As you know, I have often said at this Committee that there may be a NEETs strategy, but there are quite a number of people on whom the strategy has no impact. Many of those whom it does not touch have a love of sport and, particularly in my area, a love of soccer. Many are underachievers in school. Programmes such as this could tap into the whole NEETs issue. It not only encourages young people to take up sport; it encourages people, through sport, to get back into education. There is an opportunity with this project to widen what is already being done. It is a shame that you had to turn away 140 people because many of them will just drift back into their communities without any prospect of moving forward. Your excellent programme has my full support. It is a great adventure, and it will offer opportunities for young people to get back into an education system that has failed them up to now.

I want to ask you about the application process and schools, especially at secondary level. We are constantly told that, if you do not get kids at primary school or early on at secondary school, you have lost them. I know that a lot of people will tap into the training end of the programme. Pupils at some schools in my constituency would be regarded as low achievers. How would you encourage them to take part in a football programme or, when they leave school, a training programme?

Mr Edwards: I will let the guys talk about what they do to support learners when they apply. This is one of the courses that we want to get out to schools through marketing. We go out to schools to promote it. The great thing about this course is that it is self-marketing. The word of its success is spreading rapidly, even without our going into schools.

I will go back to your point about the 140 people whom we turned away. The process that we established in the college last year ensures that we will revisit anyone who applies to us but is unable to get on to their first-choice course. We will explore all other opportunities in the college with them. When we were dealing with this programme — thanks to the two chaps next to me — the question was how quickly we could expand and still give the quality provision. We will, and have planned to, expand through training and apprenticeship, but we are still putting in place alternatives. If the programme attracts people to the college to talk to us, that is a major step forward. People are coming in and having a conversation, which allows us to look at other options with them. If they have no qualifications, we can look at essential skills and build those in. However, it always comes back to the football. The football is the hook; the football is the magic.

Ms Heather Hedley (Belfast Metropolitan College): Chris, you asked what we would like to take back to support us. The answer is that we want to collaborate with the Department to align the Training for Success model in a community context. The twin goals of social inclusion and economic development are in that model but not to the same extent as traditional apprenticeships.

This is about setting the programme in a community context, getting young people engaged in their communities, giving them autonomy and empowering them. That does not necessarily fit neatly with an economic development model. That is where we would like the Committee to support us by telling the Department that there is value in the scheme. There are certainly progression routes into an apprenticeship model, but the issue may be that the kids do not enter as apprentices in the first instance.

The Chairperson: Good. I will come back to that in a wee moment.

Mr G Robinson: I congratulate the team on an excellent presentation. Have any of the young players gone on to play for teams in the Irish League or across the water?

Mr Seamus Lynch: Just this week, one young lad, Josh Robinson, was on trial at Doncaster. We have quite a good success rate. The boys train full time, so the programme develops their football no

end. Four lads have made first team debuts at Irish League level since coming to the academy, and we have three Northern Ireland schoolboy internationals.

Mr G Robinson: Excellent.

Mr Anderson: George touched on the point that I was going to make. Thank you very much for the excellent presentation. No one can deny that football and sport are ways to engage young people. Seamus, you mentioned some areas in Northern Ireland, but you did not touch on Portadown for some reason. *[Laughter.]* I was a wee bit disappointed in you.

Mr Seamus Lynch: Do they play football in Portadown? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Anderson: Yes. Did you not know that?

Mr Seamus Lynch: We have a young lad, Aaron Duke, who plays for Portadown Reserves and is going to be a superstar.

Mr Anderson: With the attachment to clubs and all these young players coming through, what is the clubs' involvement? What do they do? Do they put anything into the academy to help you?

Mr Seamus Lynch: Not currently. We have a verbal commitment from the clubs. We have talked to different Irish League clubs and their managers, including Stephen Baxter and David Jeffrey. The first year that we ran the programme, we had no one from Linfield because it would not commit its young people to the academy. This year, we have 12 Linfield players at the academy because the club realised the programme's value and that its players were missing out. Previously, they had a "They are our players" attitude and protected them. However, they saw how the academy was run, its successes and the development of players, and we now have full commitment from David Chisholm, who runs the Linfield academy.

Mr Anderson: Are most of the Premier League clubs and others coming on board?

Mr Seamus Lynch: Everyone is on board verbally. They all think that the programme is a great idea. In the current economic circumstances in the Irish League, anything that develops their players without their having to pay any money is great. We have verbal commitments, and they have asked whether there is anything that they can do for us. Crusaders sponsored two players. The £500 fee for the course gets players all their equipment, kit and training gear.

Mr Anderson: What could you ask of the clubs so that you might get sponsorship?

Mr Seamus Lynch: We are trying to get them to sponsor a player or two from their club or to donate x amount of money that would cover however many players they had in the academy. Right now, 95% of the kids are attached to an Irish League team.

Mr Anderson: I think that the clubs do need to get engaged.

Mr Seamus Lynch: The programme we are talking about hopefully being able to run in the future would be, as Heather said, community based. If we could get those young people back into the clubs, even at administrative or marketing levels, we could take the skills they are learning on their courses, such as IT skills, and use them to set up and run a club website. That is what we are talking about when we talk about engaging them in football. It is about learning skills through football that they can then bring back to the Irish League clubs or their communities in general.

Mr Edwards: One of the important conversations to have with the clubs is about a post-football career. The programme gives them other skills — health and safety, essential skills, etc — so that, after their career, when they are, for example, 30, they have something to go out with. If we could integrate entrepreneurship with this, they could set up their own businesses. It is not just about the football career; it goes beyond the football career. We have talked to the likes of the International Rugby Board. It says exactly the same thing. It is about what we do with these people. Yes, we have them as stars and professionals, but it is about where they go with their career after that and whether they have the skills to move on. The whole academy has opportunities to develop those long-term skills.

Mr G Robinson: Added to that, it benefits them from a health point of view.

Mr F McCann: I have one follow-up question. You talked about the Irish League clubs, but what about the amateur league? There are some really good footballers playing at amateur league level. Can you tap into that?

Mr Seamus Lynch: One of the better amateur league teams at the minute is Newington, and we have two or three kids who play for Newington. We do not exclude anyone. You do not have to be from the Irish League. However, in looking for the better players, the tendency is that you will find them in the Irish League youth set-up. The point, again, is that, in the amateur league itself, a lot of volunteer work is going on in those clubs. If we could educate some of those players, they could then give back to their club on a different level with different skills.

The Chairperson: We have got the general idea. The problem, Fra, is that 140 people applied, and they have only —

Mr F McCann: I understand that, but there is much more to football than just the Irish League. The Irish League feeds off the amateur league in many ways.

The Chairperson: Fra, they get that. They are here to tell us how we expand the programme. So, let us expand it. Let us see what we can do. I did not mean to cut you off, but we are all sitting here nodding in agreement.

Mr Lyttle: We will get him back, do not worry. *[Laughter.]*

Mr F McCann: It will be payback time, shortly.

The Chairperson: I was going to say something, but as the meeting is being reported by Hansard, I better not.

Mr Lyttle: Please do not.

The Chairperson: Let me paraphrase Heather's main point, and, if I have not got it right, please correct me. She said that the current support is for what are seen as being economically important tasks. Being a football professional may not be one of those, but there are other societal benefits to that. So, you would like the Department to consider widening its support to courses that have advantages other than the strictly economic. Am I right?

Ms Hedley: It is in recognition of the fact that, if you look at the profile of the current training across Northern Ireland, you will see that there are 5,185 young people aged 16 to 17 in programme-led apprenticeships. Now, that is not really where the Department would like them to be sitting, but the reality is that that is where they are. From there, the exit point has to be into either an apprenticeship, further education or employment. Given that, I feel that it is important for the Department to consider that, even though it might not be an economic development model, the programme certainly will give skills that can be used by young people in the future.

The Chairperson: Is that the main point that you want to get across to me? Everybody is saying that you are doing a great job, and we are all going to sign up.

Ms Hedley: I feel that the Department may perceive that if, at entry point, a young person cannot enter an apprenticeship first off, it is not a model that sits easily within a training programmes model. I am arguing that the benefits outweigh that.

The Chairperson: OK. I get that argument. Does the Committee get Heather's point? With the Committee's agreement, we need to get this onto the list of priorities, even though, you might say, it is not computer science or whatever other things we have got going. It is an opportunity to engage with young people and to give them other skills and opportunities. Those may lead on to a career in sports or just to being better skilled and trained and going to do something else. We would like the Department to recognise that formally.

Mr Lyttle: Yes, I agree.

The Committee Clerk: This is the new coaching, yes?

The Chairperson: Yes. Well, I think that there is a general point. In support of what Fra was saying, I think that it will go deeper than 140.

Mr Lyttle: Chair, I am in the process of trying to identify who the best person to speak to in the Department would be in relation to this issue, so I am happy to align with the Committee direction and to work with you on this.

The Chairperson: There are a couple of things. I would be interested in the college developing a proper paper on this. OK, we get what you are doing, and it is tremendous — A+. Now, I need a paper that says, "Here is what the plan might look like." There are two things that, I think, it is really important to bring out. One is that, when you have them there doing sport, you have the opportunity to teach them something else. That would include careers advice, by the way, and you can dress it up in a way that says that even the superstars of professional sport eventually need other skills. Obviously, not all of the lads will make it to the top flight, so they need to be looking at what you can learn — discipline and skills — and do in addition to what you are doing. I think that you can make the argument that it is careers advice based upon an interest they have.

I would also be interested, when you are doing the paper, to know about parents. At the last meeting, Justin and I were talking about this as one of the big issues coming out. To make a big impact on society and on moving people forward, you must get parents thinking about things. I am sure that most — or at least some — of the parents would be interested in how their lads are doing or whatever. It would be interesting to see how you would encompass this within a whole-family approach to the value of education.

So, if you talk about those aspects and the numbers that you might approach, I am absolutely convinced. I take Heather's point. Forgive me; I just happen to agree with it. We have a lot of people doing programme-led apprenticeships who do not want to be there. They are demotivated and are just filling spaces. You might as well get them into something that they want to do and try to teach them on the side of that. I take that argument, but you need to present it for me in a more structured format.

Ms Hedley: Crucially, I think, from this programme and working a lot with young programme-led apprentices, they come to us without any real self-concept or self-awareness of themselves or their communities. They do not know where they are in terms of how they fit into the economy or their communities. This is a really good model that we could replicate in other areas if it is successful. We could engage young people back into their communities again. It has to be a win-win situation.

The Chairperson: You know, Heather, the terrible thing is that, when you agree with someone, all you can do is nod. We get it. The people here get it. My colleagues are very — apart from Fra, who has taken the hump with me. *[Laughter.]*

Mr F McCann: If I take the hump with you, you will know that I have taken the hump with you. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I know that.

We get it. What we are saying to you now is this: by all means make those arguments and do it in a structured and academic way. Cover all the different issues. Do not be constrained in your ambition about the numbers. I do think that it is something that colleges should take on a Northern Ireland basis. I also think that there are people in our schools who we ought to encourage to move out and do more with sports, if we had the facilities to take them. However, it needs a genuine shift from the Department, and possibly from the Executive as well, to say that we have to move from purely economic criteria into slightly softer, skills-based economic criteria. So, if you make us a paper and do the work on it, we will consider it and get it to the right people.

Ms Hedley: Great. Thank you.

The Chairperson: Is that OK? Does the Committee agree with that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much indeed for that. All the best.