

include YOUTH

**Written response to an invitation from the Committee for
Employment and Learning to comment on the dissolution of
the Department for Employment and Learning**

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For further information contact Sara Boyce
Research and Information Co-ordinator, Include Youth, Alpha House, 3 Rosemary Street,
BELFAST, BT1 1QA

028 9031 1007
www.includeyouth.org

sara@includeyouth.org
twitter.com/includeyouth

As an organisation which exists to promote and protect the rights and best interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people through policy advocacy, practitioner support and service provision, the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) has been one of the key government departments we interact with.

Among the relevant areas for Include Youth which DEL has had responsibility for are ESF funding, careers, skills training and policy development. Include Youth has developed good working relationships with the various divisions within DEL. In 2010 we established an Operational Partnership Agreement between our Give and Take Scheme and DEL's Careers Service; recognition of this partnership came in the form of a national award at the 2010 ICG Annual Careers Conference.

Our Give and Take scheme aims to improve the employability and increase the self esteem of young people in need or at risk from across Northern Ireland. It supports young people to overcome particular barriers that prevent them from moving into mainstream education, training or employment and towards independent living.

At a policy level Include Youth has been heavily engaged in contributing to and influencing government's cross departmental strategy to reduce the numbers of young people most at risk of remaining outside of education, employment or training (the 'Pathways to Success' strategy).

In the context of that work we have promoted the need for a more inclusive model of training provision which supports a continuum of service provision, encompassing both mainstream training programmes such as Training for Success but also specialised pre-vocational training programmes such as the Give and Take scheme.

We have also urged government to address the current inequitable situation regarding the lack of provision of any financial support in the form of an EMA type allowance to young people on pre-vocational training programmes, an issue which has recently secured all party support within the Assembly.

In this regard both the current Committee for Employment and Learning and its predecessor have been extremely effective in scrutinising government around its development of the Pathways to Success Strategy in general and the issue of EMA provision in particular.

It should be noted at the outset that while DEL has certainly had a central role around all of this work, responsibility for addressing the needs of these young people lies with a large number of Departments. Key amongst these are DE and DHSSPS, but DETI, Justice, DSD and OFMDFM and others also carry responsibility. Indeed, the cross cutting nature of the issues faced by young people who are NEET is a central tenet of the Pathways to Success Strategy.

Responsibility for these young people cannot and should not be parcelled out or assigned to one government department, whether that becomes DE or DETI. Young people face the

risk of becoming NEET for a whole range of complex, inter related reasons including family circumstances, failure of the education system to meet their needs, poverty, health problems including mental health problems, substance abuse, inter-generational trauma and various forms of discrimination.

Addressing these risk factors and barriers required a strategic, co-ordinated, adequately resourced response, led by the Executive with a commitment from all government departments and involvement by all stakeholders.

Notwithstanding the good working relationships that exist with DEL a major concern to Include Youth has been the continued lack of prioritisation of the needs of young people who are 'NEET', especially in the face of the growing numbers of young people falling into this category. Almost one in five young people are unemployed and the economic cost of youth unemployment in Northern Ireland alone is somewhere in the region of £250 million.

Yet despite positive statements by the Minister for Employment and Learning regarding his prioritisation of this issue, **there is little evidence in the draft Programme for Government and draft Economic Development Strategy that it will receive the kind of attention and resourcing required over the next four to five years.** While the Pathways to Success Strategy is identified as a building block there is no specific commitment to deliver on the Strategy, nor are there any time framed realisable targets attached.

The draft Pathways to Success Strategy itself does not have any funding attached to it. Despite it being a cross departmental strategy it does not convey a sense of inter-connectedness or alignment with other high level strategies. Additionally there appears to exist a lack of an integrated, co-ordinated policy response within DEL itself, as evidenced for example, by the Success Through Skills Strategy 2 which largely overlooked the needs of young people who are NEET.

Within DEL there has not been, at least not until recently, a dedicated unit or branch to address the issue of young people who are NEET.

In view of the issues highlighted above Include Youth is extremely concerned that there is a real danger, following the dissolution of DEL and the transfer of its functions to other Departments, namely DE and/or DETI, that the already inadequate focus on the issue of young people who are NEET will fall further down the priority list within government. This must not be allowed to happen.

As noted above the issues affecting young people who are NEET would not fit solely under the remit of either DE or DETI, traversing as they do the areas of education, youth work, skills and training, employment and enterprise. For this reason it is not a simple matter of preferencing either DE or DETI.

Include Youth strongly urges that in any discussions regarding the transfer of functions from DEL to DE and/or DETI the following issues should be considered:

- Much greater priority must be given to the issue of young people who are NEET than has been the case to date. Priority 2 of the Programme for Government, Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health and Well Being must include a Key Commitment, with associated Milestones and Outputs in relation to delivering on a strengthened Pathways to Success Strategy, rather than simply listing it as a building block as is currently the case.
- Similarly the Economic Development Strategy must ensure that its emphasis on ‘rebalancing the economy’, with its important focus on moving young people further up the qualifications ladder and into business and science based areas of work, is not to the complete exclusion of those young people who are either not on or are at the bottom rung of the qualifications ladder.
- Delivery of the Pathways to Success Strategy must be led by one Department, which has established within it an adequately resourced, dedicated unit/branch to work on the issue of children and young people who already fall into the NEET category or are at risk of becoming NEET.
- An **effective** mechanism for ministerial oversight of delivery of the Pathways to Success Strategy must be established, whether that be a sub-group of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People or otherwise. The relevant Ministers must all be represented. Include Youth, along with others in the community and voluntary sector working with children and young people has been critical of the Ministerial Sub-Committee for its failure to deliver meaningful outcomes for children and young people; we note that concerns regarding its effectiveness were also raised by DEL Committee members with DEL officials.¹ These concerns must be addressed for any ministerial oversight mechanism to work effectively.
- **A delivery mechanism** must be established which is made up of senior civil servants from all the relevant government departments and statutory agencies. Greater detail is required regarding the proposed Steering and Implementation Group (SIG) put forward in the Pathways to Success consultation document and the nature and extent of involvement by the community and voluntary sector on such a body.

¹ Northern Ireland Assembly Official Report (Hansard) Committee for Employment and Learning Pathways to Success 14 December 2011

- The regional approach to joint planning and commissioning of services for children and young people in the form of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership should play a central role in facilitating the implementation of the Strategy from regional agency level down to local level.

- The extremely important role played by the Committee for Employment and Learning in effectively scrutinising the work of DEL on its development of the Pathways to Success strategy must be replicated by the relevant statutory Committee.