



**INCLUDE YOUTH'S RESPONSE TO THE DEPARTMENT FOR
EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING'S CONSULTATION ON SUCCESS
THROUGH SKILLS 2: THE SKILLS STRATEGY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

16 September 20210

**For more information on this consultation response please contact
Sara Boyce, Research and Information Co-ordinator, Include Youth**

sara@includeyouth.org or 90-311007

Introduction

Include Youth welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Department for Learning and Employment's Success Through Skills 2: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Include Youth is a not for profit organisation that actively promotes the rights, best interests of and best practice with young people in need or at risk. Include Youth believes that effective policies and services for children and young people can only be achieved through the full realisation of their rights. We achieve this through policy advocacy, the provision of young people support services, the development and promotion of resources, training, information and support for practitioners and organisations.

Include Youth's 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. The Scheme works with approximately 135 young people from a care or criminal justice background, that cohort of young people who are classified as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETS). The Scheme aims to support young people to overcome particular barriers that prevent them from moving into mainstream training or employment and towards independent living. 75% of young people on the Scheme are care experienced and Include Youth has strong partnerships with all of the Health Trusts and with DEL's Careers service. The Scheme provides essential skills training (ICT, English and Maths) to all of the young people. **Given this direct involvement in the provision of skills training to some of the most vulnerable young people in Northern Ireland we have a particular interest in engaging in the consultation on, and hopefully influencing the development of a ten year Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland.**

Consultation

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory obligation on public authorities in carrying out their various functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity across nine grounds, including age and disability. While the age range of young people who participate on Include Youth's Give & Take Scheme is 16-21 years **the majority of participants are aged between 16-18 years of age. In addition just under half (49%) have experienced mental and emotional health problems while 17% have a learning/physical disability.** As such this group of young people come under both the age ground and the disability ground for the purposes of Section 75.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 exists to ensure that equality considerations are central to the policy decision making process; it places a statutory obligation on all designated public bodies, which includes DEL, to carry out a screening exercise on proposed policies and give consideration to carrying out an equality impact assessment.

The Equality Commission's guidance states that the term 'policy' "is used to denote any strategy, policy (proposed/amended/existing) or practice and/or decision, whether written or unwritten"¹. It also notes that "*policy is a broad inclusive term*"² and that regardless of what status or label is accorded to an amended or new policy, for example 'draft' or 'high level strategy' the equality implications must be considered in terms of assessing the likely impact of the policy.³

It further notes that the Commission recommends applying the screening procedure, and if necessary, subjecting the policy to equality impact assessment.⁴ Include Youth has identified the potential for adverse impact of the proposals in Success through Skills, particularly on the grounds of disability. (Outlined further in our response).

¹ Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 Guide for Public Authorities. Equality Commission Northern Ireland April 2010. Page 30

² Ibid paragraph 1

³ Ibid page 31 paragraph 4

⁴ Ibid

In view of this Include Youth would ask the following questions:

- **Has the ‘Success through Skills 2’ consultation document been screened? If not, why not?**
- **If it has been screened what was the outcome of that screening process? Are there any plans to conduct an EQIA? If not, why not?**

Direct consultation with those likely to be directly affected by proposed policies is not only important in ensuring that their views are fully represented in the overall process, it is also a legal obligation on government and its departments including DEL. In this regard direct consultation with young people is essential in ensuring compliance with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, but also in ensuring compliance with DEL’s obligations under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).⁵

The Equality Commission’s Guidance on Implementing section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, coupled with its Guidance for consulting with children and young people ‘*Let’s Talk, Let’s Listen*’ makes it very clear regarding the obligations placed on designated public bodies in respect of consultation with children and young people.

In addition to consultation with those likely to be directly affected by a policy DEL has indicated that it increasingly engages in informal pre-consultation with Section 75 groups.⁶

The Skills through Success 2 consultation document recognizes that the lack of essential skills, including literacy and ‘technology literacy’ are serious barriers to employment and social inclusion. It is precisely because of the skills deficits they experience, in particular basic literacy and ‘technology literacy’ skills, that simply disseminating the Success Through Skills 2 consultation document to those young people involved in the Give & Take Scheme, or making it available online does not constitute effective consultation under Section 75.

⁵ See paragraph 29, CRC/C/15/Add.188 and paragraph 33, CRC/C/GBR/CO/4

⁶ DEL Annual Progress report on implementation of Section 75 1 April 2008-31 March 2009 paragraph 2.1

In light of this Include Youth would ask

- **Did DEL undertake any informal pre-consultation with Success through Skills 2? If not, why not?**
- **What steps have been taken to consult directly with young people on the Success through Skills 2 consultation document, and in particular with young people not in education, employment or training?**
- **Why hasn't an 'easy read' version of the consultation document been produced?**

Failure to address the needs of young people not in education, employment or training.

In outlining the benefits of the Success Through Skills 2 Strategy the consultation document clearly recognises the role that skills play in enabling people to engage positively in society, which in turn leads to a more peaceful, fair and prosperous society. Include Youth supports the identification of 'social inclusion' as one of the twin goals of the Skills Strategy (the other being to raise the levels of productivity).

It is difficult to reconcile the priority given to social inclusion at the outset of the consultation document with the subsequent almost complete absence of any reference to those people who are the most marginalised and vulnerable, 'the socially excluded' or NEETS cohort, to the multiple barriers they face in accessing and participating in skills training or to any focused actions to address the barriers they face. Quite simply the consultation document would appear not to recognise these young people as 'stakeholders' on an equal basis as other individuals.

In a Skills Strategy which has one of its twin goals as social inclusion it is incomprehensible as to why the term 'NEETS' does not appear once throughout the consultation document. It is even more inexplicable given the ongoing work by DEL on NEETS, with the recent publication of a Scoping Study and the likely development of a NEETS Strategy in the near future.

The latest Labour Force Survey Figures showed that for 16-19 year olds the figures for those in the NEET category stand at 13% or 13,000⁷ in Northern Ireland. As the Scoping Study found, those children and young people who fall within the NEET category are not a homogenous group – they can include children and young people in care or who have left care, carers, young parents, those with a physical/learning disability or a mental illness, those who have had negative educational experiences, those who have experience of the youth justice system, those living in poverty or those young people who are homeless.

Include Youth's experience of working with these young people is that there is much preparatory work, including personal development and mentoring work designed to build a young person's self esteem, confidence and social skills, which need to be undertaken before they are in a position to participate in formal essential skills training. Whilst we recognise that all of these underlying issues do not necessarily fall to a Skills Strategy alone to address, there appears to be a real lack of recognition of the barriers faced by young people in the NEET category in accessing formal essential skills training. In designing a Skills Strategy DEL must take account of the long distance many young people who are NEET must travel before they are in a position to access the most basic formal Essential Skills training.

In considering Future Skills needs there is a strong emphasis in the consultation document on higher level skills and the need for 'up skilling'. While these are valid considerations which need to be addressed in the Skills Strategy Include Youth's concern is that there is an imbalance in the priority being accorded to the higher end of skills training, with the real concern being that the focus on Essential Skills will be downgraded.

Include Youth has been delivering the Give and Take Scheme for 22 years. In that time valuable lessons have been learned as to what works in terms of skills training and acquiring qualifications for the NEETS group of young people. Key elements of the success of the Give and Take Scheme have been that it is young person centred, incremental, flexible and that it employs specialist tutors who understand

⁷ Labour Force Survey 2010, Quarter 1.

the complex needs of the young people and who develop a good working relationship with them.

Up until 2008 Essential Skills tutors for the Give and Take Schemes were supplied by the FE colleges. In 2008 a total of 12 qualifications were obtained by the young people participating. Include Youth then decided to employ its own tutors for the reasons outlined above. The number of qualifications obtained by young people in 2009 shot up to 110. We would suggest that there is some valuable learning here which needs to be harnessed by DEL and incorporated into the Skills for Success Strategy 2 if it is designed to seriously address the twin goal of social inclusion.

Lack of integration and coherence with other Departmental Strategies

As noted above the lack of reference in the consultation document to ongoing work by DEL and others in relation to children and young people in the NEETS category is very difficult to understand. The other major omission in terms of relevant government strategies appears to be the Children and Young People's Strategy⁸ and its associated action plans. This inter-departmental strategy, which over arches all other departmental strategies of relevance to children and young people, under the High Level Outcome of 'Enjoying Learning and Achieving', includes indicators in relation to 'disengaged' young people who have re-engaged with education, training and employment, as well as similar type indicators for young people in care or who have left care. The Success Through Skills 2 Strategy could and should contribute to achieving these targets. However for the reasons outlined above, as it is currently constituted it is most unlikely to.

⁸ Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006-2016.

Recommendations

1. DEL needs to ensure that the Success Through Skills 2 Strategy addresses the skills needs of those young people not in education, employment or training.
2. The equal priority which the document purports to place on the twin goals for the Strategy of increasing productivity and enhancing social inclusion must be evidenced in the analysis and proposals contained in the document. Currently the balance weighs heavily in favour of productivity – this singular focus will serve to further exclude those most marginalised of young people and, in the longer term may paradoxically serve to undermine levels of productivity and economic growth.
3. The development of a ten year Skills Strategy presents a real opportunity to draw on and incorporate the learning and experience gained by those organisations delivering skills training, particularly to the most marginalised and ‘hard to reach’ groups of people so that the Skills Strategy can successfully deliver on its aims and goals. This is particularly relevant in relation to the issue of Essential Skills provision.
4. DEL should conduct a screening exercise in relation to the Success Through Skills 2 consultation document and an EQIA if necessary in compliance with its Section 75 duties.
5. DEL should produce an easy read version of the consultation document and disseminate it widely including to Further Education colleges and Registered Training Organisations, and in particular to Specialist Support Providers and the Youth Service, in order to encourage and facilitate marginalised and ‘hard to reach’ young people to respond.