

include YOUTH

**Response to Department of Economy consultation on a
Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10X
Economy**

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Include Youth

Include Youth is a regional rights-based charity for young people in or leaving care, from disadvantaged communities, or whose rights are not being met to improve their employability and personal development. We work with over 800 young people a year aged between 14-25. Our main offices are in Belfast, Armagh, Ballymena, Derry, Enniskillen, Newtownards and Omagh.

The young people we work with and for include those from socially disadvantaged areas, those who have had poor educational experiences, those from a care background, newcomer young people, young people with mental health issues, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs and/or alcohol, engaging in unsafe or harmful sexual behaviour, or at risk of being harmed themselves. We provide a range of tailored employability programmes for these young people, including programmes delivered in partnership with community-based organisations.

Our Give & Take Scheme adopts a youth work approach to improving the employability and increasing the self-esteem and confidence of young people aged 16 to 24 who are not yet ready to participate in mainstream training. We work across 9 primary sites and a number of outreach locations. The core components are personal development, mentoring, training, work experience, essential skills and transitional support.

Many of these young people have experienced social exclusion, poverty or have other complex challenges in their lives and therefore need additional support to overcome these barriers and positively progress their education, training or employment needs. Seventy-five per cent of young people on the Scheme are care experienced, while over a third has a background in offending. We offer a range of tailored programmes including:

- Core - for young people aged 16-21 referred to us through the Health Trusts, a 12-24 month intensive employability programme for care experienced young people who are furthest away from mainstream education, training and employment opportunities. In 2019/2020 101 young people participated in Core.
- Start Programme – a collaborative partnership employability programme with community based organisation Northern Ireland Alternatives, targeted at young people in the North Down, Ards and Belfast areas. In 2019/2021 111 young people participated in Start.
- Outreach – for young people requiring additional support to move into employment, education and training and delivered through community groups and schools throughout Northern Ireland. In 2019/2020 191 young people participated in Outreach.
- One to One – for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation. In 2019/2020 13 young people participated.
- Transitional support – for those moving on from our Scheme and into mainstream education, training or employment or access work related courses. In 2019/2020 60 young people received support.

As part of our programme we offer care experienced and other disadvantaged young people the opportunity to gain essential skills and qualifications. Our Learning for Action programme

is delivered by a team of in-house tutors who deliver weekly classes and one to one tuition to enable young people to gain qualifications at entry level, level one and level two in Literacy, Numeracy and ICT. Learning for Action is a core component of Include Youth's Give and Take scheme. Young people are given a second chance at learning and an opportunity to gain essential qualifications in settings that are informal, adaptable, flexible and that cater to their individual needs. In 2019/2020 162 young people, on the Give and Take scheme, received 240 qualifications.

Meant to Work is a one to one mentoring service for young people aged 16-24 which helps young people gain and sustain meaningful employment. Meant to Work Plus is delivered in partnership with Belfast Trust and supports care experienced young people access employment and other vocational opportunities. These programmes have supported 70 young people in 2019/2020.

Include Youth also delivers an Employability Service on behalf of two of the five Health Trusts for young people aged 16 + who have had experience of the care system. This service is designed to offer tangible and concrete opportunities to assist young people leaving care to prepare for and engage in work. 179 young people have received this service in 2019/2020.

Strive is a cross community, cross cultural, and cross border programme that engages young people aged 14-24 in good relations, person development and citizenship. We deliver this with our partners Newstart Educational Centre, Northern Ireland Alternatives, Youth Initiatives and Lifford/Clonleigh Resource Centre. The programme is delivered through local youth groups, schools and Youthreach. In 2019/2020 200 young people participated in Strive.

Include Youth also engages in policy advocacy work in the areas of employability, youth justice and policing. This work is informed by relevant international human rights and children's rights standards, is evidence based, including that provided by young people and practitioners and is based on high quality, critical analysis.

Human Rights Framework

Any initiative designed to improve the lives of children and young people should be built on a human rights framework, which provides the foundation and guiding principles on the entitlements of young people with regard to all areas of their lives. There are a number of international human rights instruments which contain articles that are relevant to the topic of improving the skills of young people and ensuring all young people have full access to education, training and employment opportunities. International human rights law clearly sets out the UK government's obligations (and those of the devolved assemblies) regarding the education, training and employment rights of all young people. They also specify that vulnerable groups of children and young people should not be discriminated against in any way but rather should be provided with additional protections and supports.

The two most directly relevant international instruments are the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter UNCRC) and the UN Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (UNESCRC). The UK government has ratified both of these international human rights

treaties, and while they are not binding in domestic law, the UK government and its devolved administrations are bound by them under international law.

Article 28 of the UNCRC on the child's right to education incorporates the right to vocational education, underscoring the importance of education having relevance in the child or young person's current and future life.

The UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which pre-dates the UNCRC by some three decades, is also a useful source of international human rights standards on the education, training and employment rights of young people. Its provisions also cover young people of 18 years and upwards. Article 13.a (b) of the UNESCRC closely mirrors the provisions of Article 28 and 29 of the UNCRC, underscoring the importance of effective access to various forms of education, including vocational and work-related training, as well as the principle that education should be viewed in a holistic manner. The UNESCRC's General Comment No 13 on Education explains the right to education as encompassing requirements on the state to ensure that education is available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable.¹ These essential elements of Article 13 must be measured differently in different social and economic contexts. In the context of a high developed, post industrial state such as the UK it can be argued that they encompass the need to provide the requisite levels of support to enable vulnerable young people to effectively access, participate in and achieve through further education and/or vocational training.

At a European level the European Social Charter also provides a set of legally binding standards in respect of education, training and employment for young people. The revised Council of Europe charter of 1996, ratified by the UK government in 1997, sets out minimum social and economic rights to be guaranteed by the state. Article 9 spells out the obligations on government to provide all young people with vocational guidance '*with due regard to the individual's characteristics and their relation to occupational opportunity*', while article 10 emphasises the right of all persons to technical and vocational training.²

Specific Comments

Chapter 2: Strategic Context

Are you content with the overarching strategic direction set out in the section Programme for Government, our Economic Vision and the Skills Strategy for NI?

“the Skills strategy must be directly aligned to the Programme for Government aim of improving wellbeing for all by supporting efforts to tackle inequalities, providing low skilled, low paid or unemployed individuals with the opportunities they need to work in “better jobs” whilst concurrently focusing on provision of the skills qualifications needed to drive economic growth and competitiveness in the sectors where N Ireland has real global potential”

¹ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1999). General Comment No 13 on the Right to Education. paragraph 11

² Council of Europe European Social Charter revised 1996.

We agree that the Skills Strategy must align to the priorities set out in the PfG to improve the well being of all, tackle inequalities and provide opportunities for low skilled or unemployed individuals.

We are however concerned that the prioritisation on narrow economic growth sector areas could limit the opportunity to open up life chances and better outcomes for a wider range of individuals, and especially those who have experienced exclusion and social deprivation. Although the document recognises these concerns on page 29, we believe there is still much discussion to be had to address these concerns. We recommend that further consideration is given to ensuring the strategy is balanced and equitable in its reach and approach.

Within the five steps listed under Our Vision for a Decade of Innovation, we are particularly supportive of the commitment to “ensure everyone has opportunities to thrive” under Talent and to “disperse economic and societal benefit to all” under Diffusion.

We support the commitment to address skills imbalances as an overall objective of the new Skills Strategy. It is imperative that the strategy delivers for all people, but especially for those groups who have faced the most barriers to learning and education. We welcome the acknowledgement that unless social and educational inequalities are addressed, the strategy will fail to deliver benefits for all people and that efforts must be made to ensure appropriate pathways are in place to enable all citizens to reach their potential.

Building on the `strengths of our education system` must also include tackling educational inequalities that exist and closing the attainment gap. No-one must be left behind in our education system. Unfortunately, the evidence shows that too many young people are not achieving in education.

As the consultation document states, the Skills Barometer has provided evidence that NI has a considerable distance to travel to overcome the existing inequalities, demonstrating that there are growing numbers of people with low or no qualifications.

Include Youth offers specialised services to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people, including young people who have experienced the care system. We support children and young people who are in or leaving care, from disadvantaged communities or whose rights are not being met, to improve their employability and personal development . Staff are professionally youth work qualified or have significant experience of working with the most marginalised .

The Skills Strategy must address the particular needs of the young people that Include Youth works with.

Profile of IY young people:

The young people Include Youth works with are/have:

- Unemployed
- From a care background
- Early school leavers

- No qualifications
- Essential skills difficulties
- Drug and alcohol misuse
- Mental health issues
- Unsettled accommodation
- Contact with criminal justice system
- Experience of paramilitary threat
- From areas of social and economic deprivation

Participant Profiles April 2018 – March 2020 highlight the complexities and range of personal, social, and financial barriers that affect the young people we work with and for.

- 100% Unemployed
- 85% In Care / Care Background
- 79% Essential Skills Need
- 72% Mental / Emotional Health issues
- 69% Economic / Social Deprivation
- 65% Early School leaver
- 60% Unsettled Accommodation
- 57% Experienced Abuse / Neglect
- 44% Alcohol / Substance misuse
- 36% At risk of suicide / self-harm
- 32% Offending background
- 31% Experience of / at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)
- 30% Learning / Physical disability
- 15% At Risk of Threat from / Involvement with Paramilitaries
- 9% Young Parent

These young people experience many barriers to participating in education, training or employment and therefore have poor qualifications and employability related competencies.

Our programme seeks to achieve positive outcomes such as assisting in progressing into education, employment and/or training. In this context, the programme aim is to improve the employability skills and self-esteem of young people aged 16 -24 who are not in education, employment or training, face complex barriers to engagement and come from communities of greatest disadvantage.

The draft Skills Strategy notes that young people and especially those with no or low qualifications have been and will continue to be one of the groups most impacted by Covid: The increase in unemployment in the 16-24 age group represented 69% of the increase in total unemployment over the past year. In a similar vein, when broken down by age, the economic inactivity rate in the 16-24 age group rose by 11.1pps to 52.8%. We hope that the Strategy will seek to reverse deepening inequalities.

In particular, we hope that the strategy will address the specific needs of care experienced young people, as outlined and prioritised in various government strategies.

Existing strategies relevant to care experienced young people

The PfG Draft Outcomes Framework refers to the specific needs of care experienced young people and the need for departments to give them the 'best possible standards of support', including addressing attainment gaps and improving life chances. One indicator is to increase the % of care leavers aged 19 in education, training and employment.

The Children and Young People's Strategy (CYPS) states: 'evidence shows that children and young people leaving care are at greater risk of not transitioning well to employment, training and education...it is therefore important that care experienced children and young people are supported'.

The recently published DoH/DE strategy for care experienced children, 'A Life Deserved' includes an outcome for children and young people to learn and achieve, with commitments to action which include providing tailored support to looked after children in education and addressing the educational attainment gap. IY's Give and Take programme is referenced in the strategy as example of an employability programme meeting needs of looked after children.

It is vital the Skills Strategy recognises the relevance of these various strategies and ensures that the role of the Department of Economy in meeting these promises to care experienced young people, is clearly identified and actioned within the final Skills Strategy.

Outcomes for care experienced young people

In 2019/2020 of the children of compulsory school age and who have been in care for 12 months or longer:

- 24% had a statement of Special Education Need (general school population 5.5%)³
- 61% received some sort of special educational support (general school population 19.3%)⁴

In 2019/2020 of those leaving care aged 16-18 years old:

- 56% leaving residential care had *no* qualifications.

³ [Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2012/13 \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/children-in-care-in-northern-ireland-2012-13)

⁴ [Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2012/13 \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/children-in-care-in-northern-ireland-2012-13)

- 23% had statement of SEN (5% NI average)⁵.
- 34% left school with no qualifications⁶ (0.6% general school population).
- 27% achieved 5 GCSEs grade A* - C (NI average 86%).

In 2019/2020 of care leavers aged 19 years old:

- 27% who were in contact with HSC Trusts were economically inactive or unemployed.
- 27% were not in education, employment, or training (NEET)⁷.

Despite attempts to improve the educational and employment outcomes of care experienced young people emanating from the current PfG and related strategies, the statistics reveal how far we still have to come to ensure these young people are given every opportunity to reach their full potential.

Further information on Include Youth's concerns with regard to the educational outcomes of care experienced young people and ideas for how these concerns can be addressed are included in our written evidence to the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement.⁸

The Skills Strategy must include actions to address the current outcomes gap for care experienced young people.

There has been a number of recent reports which have identified the current barriers that exist for care experienced young people in terms of education, training and employment outcomes. One such report is the Access All Areas report compiled by an alliance of voluntary organisations made several key recommendations. We would like to draw the Department's attention to the recommendations in relation to education and ask them to take these into consideration when developing proposals to improve the skills and outcomes for care experienced young people. Access All Areas key recommendations include:

- 1. Increase understanding of and respond to educational barriers faced by care experienced young people.** Significant resources are being provided to improve the educational attainment of care experienced young people. While the picture is improving, a considerable gap still exists when compared to the general population.
- 2. Recognise and respond to unique needs of care experienced young people within educational, training and employability programmes.** Many care leavers' educational pathways are seriously disrupted. Employability services and alternative education and training programmes are vital provisions. All relevant government departments and agencies as corporate parents are in a position to ensure there is flexibility within these structures to support care leavers and to provide additional employment and training opportunities.
- 3. Collaborate to reduce financial barriers and obstacles to engaging in and sustaining pathways into employment.** Corporate parents need to fully address the financial barriers and obstacles faced by care leavers engaging in and sustaining pathways into employment.

⁵ [Northern Ireland Care Leavers 2019/20 \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](https://health-ni.gov.uk)

⁶ [Northern Ireland Care Leavers 2019/20 \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](https://health-ni.gov.uk)

⁷ [Northern Ireland Care Leavers 2019/20 \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](https://health-ni.gov.uk)

⁸ [Microsoft Word - 276EE5CA2E0AFA49C08DF39378278056.docx \(includeyouth.org\)](https://includeyouth.org)

Current systems create financial disincentives to young people accessing or changing routes into education, training or employment.

Include Youth would also like to draw the Department's attention to the financial inequalities that exist in relation to financial support provided to different groups of young people who are pursuing further education. Young people attending our programme remain ineligible to claim Education Maintenance Allowance despite the fact that their peers attending Further Education courses or mainstream training programmes qualify for this payment. This inequity had previously been addressed with the decision to introduce the Pathways EMA in the Pathways to Success Strategy in 2012. This decision followed a lengthy campaign by young people on Include Youth's Give & Take scheme and their advocates. Our campaign highlighted the inequity of a situation whereby young people continuing on in school post 16, participating in FE or Training for Success all received a financial incentive and support for their efforts, while those young people who faced the most barriers to participation and were the most disadvantaged received no such incentive.

On the publication of the Pathways to Success Strategy, Minister Stephen Farry indicated that he had listened to the concerns expressed, including by the Assembly's Employment and Learning Committee, and that the introduction of the Pathways EMA was a response designed to "address the anomaly that exists in the system for those who are participating under the European Social Fund schemes".⁹ Unfortunately, this decision which was based on addressing inequality was short lived and we continue to campaign for our Executive to recognise the financial plight of young people attending Include Youth's Give and Take scheme and similar programmes. Young people participating in such schemes, who are most in need of support to participate in education or training, should be entitled to receive non means tested EMA alongside their peers in mainstream education and training. We would recommend that this inequity is addressed in future actions to address the skills and attainment gap of care experienced young people within the Skills Strategy.

Need for tailored, dedicated programmes for care experienced young people.

IY firmly believe that if we are to address the skills needs of care experienced young people, there must be provision for tailored, dedicated education, training and employability programmes for this cohort of young people.

We know from the statistics cited that there is clearly a need for dedicated projects to support care experienced young people, such as Include Youth's Give and Take programme. The young people represent a number of communities and localities but their life experiences and in particular the challenges they face are all too similar. Additional and specialised support is required to help these young people reach their full potential. We know that without the input of holistic, tailored support, the combination of challenging life experiences presents our young people with enormous barriers to them fulfilling their potential.

Based on our experience and through the voice of our young people we have developed a Give and Take model of practice comprised of 5 core components: employability, essential

⁹Official Report (Hansard) Mon 2 July 2012 Vol 76, No 3, page 194

skills, personal development, mentoring and transitions support. These are all underpinned by a youth work approach and are delivered by professionally trained staff.

IY Essential Skills delivery:

We have been delivering essential skills for over 15 years with a high level of success. Initially we accessed essential skills teaching through local colleges, but this resulted in limited success as in 2007 we achieved only 14 qualifications. Include Youth recognised that change was needed and applied for funding to employ its own tutors through the Big Lottery Fund. The success of this was significant as in 2011, 138 young people had achieved an essential skills qualification. Our Essential skills provision has grown from strength to strength through continued support from the Big Lotteries Fund. Over the course of our previous Big Lottery Funded programme we exceeded our targets with 520 young people gaining 853 essential skills qualifications. We are currently in our third and last round of funding from Big Lotteries. Unfortunately this funding is due to finish in December 2021 and without securing a new funding source, this vital work which is increasing the educational achievement and life chances of disadvantaged young people will cease.

We currently have 9 highly experienced tutors that work across 10 sites throughout Northern Ireland offering young people literacy, numeracy and ICT. Working in small groups, our tutors build meaningful relationships with the young people, are compassionate to their needs and understand the importance of working with young people where they are at. Each local team comprises of two youth workers and a tutor/s in literacy, numeracy and ICT who provide the necessary support for young people to address complex issues and barriers in order to achieve qualifications, gain confidence and progress in life. Include Youth provides practical, emotional and financial support as well as a second chance at learning.

We are confident that what we provide at Include Youth in terms of direct service provision to some of our most disadvantaged young people is directly addressing educational underachievement and barriers to employability. The young people in our programmes benefit from our model of working and succeed in achieving the necessary qualifications and skills for them to proceed to mainstream education, training and employment. Evaluations of our essential skills provision demonstrate that there is a continued need for essential skills to be delivered as part of small group youth work setting, linked to personal development and employability. As our independent evaluator says:

The young people who join the Give & Take Scheme carry varying levels of trauma both from their childhood, and that are ongoing, resulting in barriers to education. A mainstream further education setting, while suitable for some children and young people from a care background, is not suitable for many at this stage. If mainstream was an option, it would have worked before now; something different is needed. The Give & Take Scheme provides space for nurture in the form of belonging to a group (for Start and Core), and relationship with youth workers and

tutors helps change attitudes to education. In time this changes attitudes to and choices in employment, and ultimately leads to greater choices in life.¹⁰

Young participants confirm the positive aspects of the programme:

My time in Give and Take was a wonderful experience. I started off with no education whatsoever, having failed multiple GCSEs at school I felt like an absolute failure. Give and Take taught me that learning can also be a wonderful experience, in my two years in the programme I started my music career, got my Maths and English and started a full time employment. With the help of Give and Take I have been working there over 8 months. ...I want to thank Give and Take for giving me a second chance at life. (Give and Take Core participant)

When I first came here, I didn't believe I would ever be capable of gaining a qualification. I have come so far. (Give and Take Core participant)

I left school before I was sixteen with no qualifications. I didn't get on with the teachers, they were too strict, there was no freedom... In Start, the tutors would have sat beside you and helped you through it. (Give and Take Start participant)

[What attracted me was] The qualifications, because I left school with none.

I joined because I wanted Maths and English essential skills, and then I progressed. If it hadn't been for Start, I wouldn't have qualifications. (Give and Take Start participant)

We firmly believe that the essential skills provision model that Include Youth offers, is for some young people the most effective means of ensuring learning in a supportive environment. For many of the young people we work with, essential skills provision in a mainstream FE setting is not suitable. There are a number of reasons why we believe this to be true.

- a) Young people do not have the same **relationship** with FE tutors as they do with IY tutors:

Tutors understand the background of the young people and are skilled to be able to know when a young person should be pushed and when they need time out. They are flexible in their approach and give young people the time and space they need to deal with the other pressures they have in their lives. (2021 Learning for Action Evaluation, page 20)¹¹

Tutors recognise that essential skills may not be the priority if the young person isn't sure where they are going to sleep that night or are hungry. Young people talked about how they get fed at Give & Take when they may not have enough money to buy food, they also feel they can talk to the Give & Take staff about anything that is going on in their lives. (2021 Learning for Action Evaluation, page 22)

"The tutors make you feel better... when I first came here I couldn't talk to anybody. But when I got talking to the tutors, that changed." (Young person, IY Submission to Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement, page 35)¹²

¹⁰ David Thompson, Independent Evaluation for Include Youth for Essential Potential (The Essential Skills Component of the Give and Take programme), 2018.

¹¹ Thompson, L (2021) Interim Evaluation of Include Youth's Learning for Action Project.

¹² Include Youth (2020) Written Evidence to Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement

- b) IY tutors have specific skills and are trained to work with young people who have experienced trauma and will work at a pace suitable for the young person:

The young people who join the Give & Take Scheme carry varying levels of trauma both from their childhood, and that are ongoing, resulting in barriers to education. A mainstream further education setting, while suitable for some children and young people from a care background, is not suitable for many at this stage. If mainstream was an option, it would have worked before now; something different is needed. The Give & Take Scheme provides space for nurture in the form of belonging to a group (for Start and Core), and relationship with youth workers and tutors helps change attitudes to education. In time this changes attitudes to and choices in employment, and ultimately leads to greater choices in life. (IY Evaluation Essential Potential 2018)

“They think more about your lifestyle and your situation rather than - yes they think of you getting educated - but they definitely will look at your life first, where in school they put statistics and grades and all first. They wouldn’t really have sat and got to know you. That was a main factor with Give & Take and how it was so different to school or tech or something. I really appreciated that because I needed that, I didn’t know I needed it, and it has helped me grow so much.” (Young person, 2021 Learning for Action Evaluation, page 21)

“They understand me better at Include Youth.” (Young person, IY Response to Improving Children`s Lives, page 12)¹³

“I’ve noticed with Give & Take, if anyone was having a day where they’re struggling literally there’s no pressure whatsoever, they will push you, they’ll give you that push that you need, like maybe just try to do one task or maybe look at this, but if it’s getting too overwhelming you could go off and sit and have a cup of tea and a chat and maybe then go back and look at it but they’re so about you and how you’re feeling.” (Young person, Learning for Action Evaluation, 2021, page 21)

- c) IY provides personal development and emotional support alongside ES learning:

The personal development element of the Give & Take Scheme and the emotional and practical support from both youth workers and tutors lay the foundations for young people to be able to learn. Tutors try every method available to them to encourage and motivate the young people to come into classes or engage with online learning including phoning, texting, WhatsApp and checking in that the young person is ok. It is evident that the tutors and youth workers care about the young people, show them the utmost respect, and truly believe they can achieve. Staff have observed that those who attend, even for short periods can gain a qualification and so their strategy is to make every effort to support the young people with their routines, to get out of bed and to attend when possible, engage with the learning. (Learning for Action Evaluation, page 21)

¹³ Include Youth (2018) Response to Improving Children`s Lives: Strategy for Looked After Children

Especially the young ones from care, they need that so much, they need to know that you care, that they're not just a statistic, all the tutors are all about taking on board their problems. That's why communication between tutors and youth workers are so important if you have a good relationship with the youth workers then you tend to know more about the young people and you can show much more empathy and connect better with the young person. If you understand why they're kicking off, why they're tired or whatever their issues are then it's going to make you a much better tutor and you'll be able to recognise they don't need pushed today, I'll give them a wordsearch and make them feel that they've done work. It's all about tuning into the young people and being prepared for every sort of situation that might arise." (Staff member, Learning for Action Evaluation, page 22)

- d) Large group teaching in FE college can cause anxiety for young people. At IY we teach in small groups or one to one:

"the girls have gone back to tech numerous times and they don't like it, they don't do well there, they do better here with us." (Staff member, IY Response to Improving Children's Lives)¹⁴

"...it can generally go right down to the bare minimum of just having a lack of concentration in a big class setting, like mental health. In Give & Take there's not that many people so you can get one to one. I don't care what schools say you need that one to one or be pulled aside into a smaller group...Personally my anxiety went through the roof, I couldn't do big classes, that wasn't my fault, it wasn't my teacher's fault it just happened. I just loved that setting being able to have the one to one." (Young person, Learning for Action Evaluation, page 19)

"It's easier for people to concentrate and Give & Take is for people in the care system and there's obviously been lots going on with family home and stuff. It gives them the chance to meet other people with similar experiences and be able to talk about it where in a school setting you just weren't able to do that if you talked about that in school you got bullied." (Young person, Learning for Action Evaluation, page 20)

- e) FE colleges conditions:

Within mainstream FE provision there is little leeway for poor attendance or erratic timekeeping. IY understands the reasons why young people may miss classes and does not penalise poor time keeping or non-attendance when it is clear that the reasons for non-attendance are related to the many difficulties the young people may be facing on a personal level.

¹⁴ Include Youth (2018) Response to DoH/DE Consultation on Improving Children's Lives: Strategy for Looked After Children.

All Give & Take staff go the extra mile to help motivate young people to engage and do not penalise for non-attendance because they understand the chaotic nature of the lives of the young people. (Learning for Action Evaluation, page 20)

While other training organisations also offer Essential Skills, the Give and Take Scheme has the capacity for small groups to work with tutors, and young people to work one to one where necessary. Part of the relationship-based approach is an acceptance of some flexibility in the timing of sessions, allowing for the chaotic lifestyles of many of the young people. Flexibility that is not available on other schemes with much larger cohorts. Smaller groups and a more young person-centred approach to learning is also critical in building confidence of the young person. (Evaluation of the Give and Take Scheme, 2021, page 91)

“We don’t penalise, if you go to the college if you miss so many days you’re out. We don’t penalise our young people. We will ring the young people and say just come on in and just have a cup of tea, I’ll give you easy work, so it’s that flexibility is major, we’re prepared to take so much from the young people and let it roll off us, we will say to them in jest ‘what time do you call this’, but it’s taking what they say on the chin, being flexible and making them feel valued is so important.” (Staff member, Learning for Action Evaluation, page 21)

“The young people’s lives and some of the turmoil they have to face, essential skills might not be the priority, if they’re worried about where they’re going to spend the night or if they’ve got kids, if they’ve issues with drugs or alcohol, mental health issues and that makes essential skills not a priority, that can lead to poor attendance.” (Staff member, Learning for Action Evaluation, page 22)

Essential skills provision is critical to IY Give and Take Scheme and is recognised by Health Trusts as providing unique service:

Gaining ES qualifications is the main reason why young people join/are referred to Give and Take. The 2018 evaluation reported that 78% of respondents in the survey stated that the specialised ES provision at IY was their primary reason for joining/referral. Health Trusts place a high value on the ES provision at IY and recognise that it is a unique service for care experienced young people which is not offered elsewhere, and which undoubtedly leads to young people progressing in their life goals.

“The young people need more than the providers that are out there. There has to be something geared towards the young people who need the extra support; training organisations don’t offer the same support ... Give and Take are the step before that, for young people who need someone to walk alongside them.” (Trust referrer, Give and Take Evaluation, page 98)

“Essential skills is our biggest need, the tutors are excellent. I know if I sent someone to Give and Take for essential skills, that if they didn’t get it there, they’ll not get it anywhere.” (Trust referrer, Give and Take Evaluation, page 99)

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We know that providing young people with the necessary supports to enable them to sustain education, training and employment opportunities is a critical element in ensuring they reach their potential. The distinctive approach that our Transitions project provides means that help is there for young people to sustain their placement/job. We know from experience that many young people encounter difficulties within the first six months of securing a placement/job and it is at this point that they are particularly vulnerable to falling out of their placement. Include Youth's research report, 'Removing the Cliff Edge', focused on a group of marginalised young people who frequently do not realise their true potential due to the barriers and disadvantages they experience in relation to education, training and employment.¹⁵ Its aim was to explore what works in enabling care leavers to make successful transitions from supported education and training environments, within which they typically achieve positive outcomes, into mainstream education, training and employment provision, where they tend to face considerable barriers to achievement. The findings of the research informed our current practice with regards to transition support. Our Transitions staff play a critical role to support young people to overcome barriers and ensure they retain their position.

Through our direct practice with young people, Include Youth is delivering to support the personal development of young people, building confidence and self-esteem. Improving employability is at the heart of our work, both of care experienced young people and of other young people facing multiple barriers to employment.

Include Youth has extensive experience of supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged young people to access training and employment. Young people with complex unmet needs were already finding it a struggle to access training and employment, but those barriers have multiplied even more in the last year, due to the impact of COVID-19, lack of employment opportunities and increased competition in the job market. The young people we work with are increasingly feeling that they have no future or prospects and they have slipped even further down the employment ladder.

It is essential that the Skills Strategy helps our most marginalised young people develop their skills set and employability and that this should be done in such a way that takes into account the individual and often complex needs of the young people. We hope that the Skills Strategy will take account of the particular needs of at risk young people and enable them to develop their skills and employability in programmes which are best suited to their needs.

ESF : We recommend that reference is made within the strategy to the contribution that ESF funded projects have made to increase the prospects of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people, combating poverty and social exclusion. We are concerned about the lack of any clear plan to ensure continuity of funding for ESF projects and the lack of detail on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund's design, purpose, implementation and level of funding. It is critical that no gap in funding exists between the end of ESF funding and the succession programme. ESF funded programmes in NI have been instrumental in delivering

¹⁵ Sara Boyce and Jennie Bronte, Removing the Cliff Edge, An exploration of what enables care leavers to make successful transitions from supported employability programmes into mainstream education, training and employment, 2016.

core services for young people not in education, employment or training. The targets and outcomes from the current programme have consistently been delivered on and it is vital that this good work continues to be developed. Any gap in funding would significantly impact on this important work, resulting in already disadvantaged young people being further disadvantaged. We know that young people are predicted to be acutely affected by the economic impact of COVID-19, in particular school leavers and the young unemployed. It is critical that under the PfG that the supports currently provided for under the ESF programme are maintained and protected so that they can continue making a vital contribution to tackling poverty and addressing social exclusion, which we anticipate shall be critical to the COVID-19 recovery response and beyond.

Chapter 4: Strategic Goals and Policy Objectives

4 Acknowledging the need for the development of “Smart” targets, do you agree that the skills supply gap identified under the Skills Barometer’s high growth scenario should be placed at the centre of the proposed Strategy?

We are concerned that the skills supply gap identified under the Skills Barometer could lead to a sole focus on developing skills in high growth areas to the detriment of the skills which need to be developed in other business areas. While we recognise the need to meet the demand in high growth areas we would like to see additional employment areas considered, to ensure that everyone is able to secure the job that is right for them.

There is also a danger that the strategy will focus predominantly on developing skills which are at high level, degree level and above, which are most likely needed in the high growth areas. The strategy must address the skills needs across all levels, ensuring those with lower qualifications are included and are supported to move beyond the barriers that have held them back to date.

We support the policy objective to `address skills imbalances`. While we support the three targets listed we would also like to see a specific target to address the barriers to skills attainment for the most marginalised young people, including care experienced young people and those who leave formal education with no qualifications.

We support the intention to direct investment in the education and skills system. This investment must address the needs of those people who have had negative experiences within education and for whom a tailored and supported pathway is necessary. Investment should go beyond mainstream sectors and should include learning which is delivered by the community and voluntary sector.

Impact of Covid 19 – as the consultation document states, the impact of the pandemic in relation to employment opportunities has had a greater negative effect on younger and low skilled workers. We are concerned about the damaging and long lasting impact that the pandemic will have on the employment prospects of the young people we work with, who were already struggling to get a foothold on the employment ladder pre-pandemic. We would support the Skills strategy addressing recovery for these particular groups.

We welcome the dedicated section within the strategy to Young People and the acknowledgement that young people's exposure to the economic impact of the crisis has been considerable. However, we would welcome further detail on how the Skills Strategy will specifically increase opportunities for young people, especially those young people who are furthest away from the labour market.

Views on Proposals

We welcome the proposed commitments but have points of concern on the following commitments:

Proposed Commitments

Proposed Commitment 1 – We are concerned with the proposal to expand remote learning provision in key areas of essential skills, employability skills and digital skills. While the ability to provide remote learning has been vital during the pandemic, we do not believe this format of learning is suitable for all learners. It is also critical to acknowledge the impact of digital poverty and to ensure that no one is disadvantaged because of lack of access to digital technology.

Proposed Commitment 2 – We welcome the commitment to DfE and DfC working collaboratively with central and local government to develop the education and training provision necessary to underpin the Skills Strategy and Employability NI Strategy. However, it is imperative that this collaboration extends to include involvement from the community and voluntary sector, who are central to providing education and training provision and employability skills to the most marginalised groups. Projects funded under the EU European Social Fund are providing vital and high quality services and have consistently met their targets over the years that funding has been received.

Proposed Commitment 5 - to ensure the FE sector has the resource and capability to deliver its dual objectives of providing essential, entry level pathways to education and professional and technical skills, we would recommend the inclusion of a commitment to support the voluntary and community sector's contribution to delivering essential skills to our most vulnerable and marginalised young people. Under the ESF programme a body of work has been carried out by the community and voluntary sector which cannot be adequately provided by the mainstream sector. Young people furthest away from the labour market require tailored and specialised support to help them overcome the numerous barriers to learning that they experience. These specialised programmes have been shown to work for young people with complex needs, when learning in the mainstream environment has proved to be unsuitable.

Proposed Commitment 7 – Include Youth fully support the Minister for Education's decision to conduct an `Independent Review of Education`. We wholeheartedly agree that this review should examine if our education system is delivering learning which results in the best outcomes for all children. As part of this review Include Youth will be highlighting the specific needs of care experienced young people and providing information on what model of learning we believe is required to support this cohort to reach their full potential.

Proposed Commitment 10 – We welcome the commitment to introduce new measures of careers guidance outcomes. Many of the young people we work with have not found careers advice in schools to be helpful. A number of young people reported that the advice that they receive in school is not adequate. They claim that rather than receiving general information, they should be advised about specific jobs and offered guidance on how to get these jobs. Some young people feel that they are pushed into STEM subjects and that insufficient advice is offered for any other career pathway. What is also apparent is the lack of standardisation of careers advice, both within mainstream education, and across alternative education projects. Those from alternative education can feel considerably more disadvantaged when it comes to being given the resources they need to provide careers advice.¹⁶ This recommendation must ensure consistency in the quality and suitability of careers advice across all learning environments, mainstream and otherwise.

Proposed Commitment 11 – We welcome the commitment to invest in a consolidated portal which will provide access to information on labour market skill needs and applicable study/work opportunities. The information provided in the portal should extend beyond the proposed remit to include access to information on learning provision/ employability programmes across all sectors, including that provided by the voluntary and community sector. This information should be fully accessible to all young people and should include specialist provision and supports for those furthest away from the labour market, including care experienced young people. The portal should also be co-designed with prospective users.

Proposed Commitment 12 - We agree that there should be greater engagement between the business and education sector and greater access to the world of work for young people. Include Youth provides numerous opportunities for the young people on our Give and Take programme to take part in work experience opportunities, visits to employers, employment placements, training in CV building, interview skills etc provided by various employers.

Proposed Commitment 15 – We support the commitment to remove barriers for individuals to adult learning opportunities. We agree that finance and access to childcare can be significant barriers to participation. It is also important to recognise the plethora of barriers to participation that exist, even beyond financial. The strategy must address all the barriers that often prevent people from accessing learning. We know from our direct work with care experienced young people that although essential skills provision is free to access in FE colleges that for many young people provision in the mainstream sector is just not suitable for their needs. These young people often have additional support needs that are not being met by FE colleges.

Proposed commitment 16 – We support the commitment to expand childcare support to enable all individuals with parental responsibilities to participate in lifelong learning.

Proposed commitment 23 – We support the commitment to develop a collaborative project which will define what employability skills means in the NI labour market and to propose a series of actions to improve the performance of the education system. This must include collaboration across all learning sectors, including in the voluntary and community sector,

¹⁶ Include Youth report to Belfast City Council on Developing a Belfast City Youth Pledge, 2018.

where there is substantial experience in delivering tailored employability programmes to hardest to reach groups and those facing the most barriers to participation.

Proposed Commitment 24 - We agree that keeping pace with technological change and ensuring everyone has access to digital skills is vital. We know from our work with young people during the pandemic that access to digital technology is not equitable, with many young people having difficulty accessing the technology they need to maintain their learning needs. We hope that the `Digital Skills Action Plan` will address the challenges of digital poverty to ensure no group is left out of learning opportunities.

Additional proposals under Addressing Skills Imbalances, Driving Economic Growth:

Include Youth believe that the Strategy needs to clarify and cement the Department's commitment to address the current skills inequalities that exist for the hardest to reach groups, including young people not in education, employment and training and those who are care experienced. Many of these groups are currently having their needs met by ESF funded programmes. It is critical that these individuals continue to have access to appropriate programmes that are successful in delivering holistic, tailored learning that supports pathways into training and employment. We would recommend that care experienced young people are named as a specific group that the Skills Strategy will seek to support.

Additional proposals under providing an ambitious and comprehensive approach the "Creating a Culture of Lifelong Learning"?

We would recommend that the Skills Strategy provides a definition of lifelong learning and that this definition should be wide ranging, encompassing not just the economic benefits but also the social benefits.

The Strategy should acknowledge the contribution made by the voluntary and community sector in providing life long learning and seek to make a commitment to provide sustained support for this sector to continue with this work.

Chapter Five – Policy Enablers

We agree that there must be a cohesive policy approach to developing solutions. We support cross departmental working to achieve this co-ordinated and cohesive approach. In relation to specific strategies/initiatives which are relevant to young people and which should be interlinked with the Skills Strategy we suggest the Children and Young People's Strategy, A Life Deserved: A Strategy for Care Experienced Young People, the report from the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement and Social Deprivation and the forthcoming independent review of education.

Proposed Commitment 25 – The proposed NI Skills Council, if it is to truly develop an approach which will make a difference to people's lives, needs to speak directly to those individuals who have most to gain from the Skills Strategy. This should include linking in with young people who experience the most barriers in accessing education, training and employment.

Proposed Commitment 28 – the NI Skills council should include representation from the community and voluntary sector. These providers have considerable experience in delivering education, training and employability programmes to the most disadvantaged groups and their expertise will bring much to the Skills Council.

Proposed Commitment 30 - The voluntary and community sector should also be involved in agreeing the Terms of Reference of the Skills Council.

Proposed Commitment 31 – The voluntary and community sector should be represented on the Skills Council sub-committee to consider issues of diversity.

Investment in the skills system – Include Youth agrees that there needs to be investment in the skills system and this should be agreed cross departmentally and include all relevant stakeholders.

ESF - We are concerned that the replacement to the ESF currently delivered by the Department of Economy will be designed and run centrally by the UK government. The lack of information and clarity on the remit and roll out of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund is causing much concern for ESF funded groups. There is concern that central government will not understand the specific context of NI, that much expertise which has been developed in NI will be overlooked and as a result funding will be less strategic and impactful. The NI government should have a major role to play in deciding on the design of the future funding allocation and evaluating and monitoring the roll out.

Concluding Comments

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the draft Skills Strategy and are looking forward to continued dialogue on the final draft. We are happy to be contacted for further details on any points raised in our response.