

Ministerial Statement

Review of Youth Training: publication of interim report

Tuesday 18th November 2014

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Today I am announcing my proposals for the future of youth training in Northern Ireland.

I believe that these proposals have the potential to establish a new youth training system which will form a key part of our wider education and skills landscape.

This marks the launch of the publication of the interim report on the review of youth training, and the launch of a public consultation on its proposals.

Context

Building and rebalancing our economy are key strategic priorities for the Executive. Investing directly in people and providing opportunities for personal development and fulfilment, and, consequently, delivering the skills required for the economy, are key overriding responsibilities for my Department, and for me.

We have an important role in preparing our young people for the world of work and sustained employment through improving skill levels. Complementary to this is the need to provide opportunities for education and training at all levels, and to ensure that both current and potential future employers have access to the skilled employees, particularly young people, that they require.

Last year, I launched major reviews of youth training and apprenticeships. I indicated then that I was committed to making these areas major priorities. The aim of the

reviews was to ensure that both youth training and apprenticeships matched the needs of young people, employers and the wider economy.

In June, I published 'Securing our Success' – the Northern Ireland Strategy on Apprenticeships. The implementation of this strategy will establish apprenticeships as the key mechanism through which individuals can gain knowledge and skills while in work. Apprenticeships will commence at level 3, which is equivalent to A-level, and will be available at all levels up to level 8, which is equivalent to Doctorate.

The proposed new system of youth training will primarily serve those young people who are leaving school at 16, and will focus on professional and technical training at level 2.

In essence, this new system will fill the space currently occupied by a wide range of interventions and time bound initiatives - providing consistency and certainty for young people, employers and providers, such as Skills for Work: Level 2 under Training for Success, the current legacy Programme-led Apprenticeships, current level 2 ApprenticeshipNI opportunities and some mainstream Level 2 Further Education Provision.

The new system will ensure that young people can progress to the apprenticeships of the future, provide a progression route into higher level professional and technical training available through further education, and facilitate transition for young people into sustained employment. However, immediate progression is not the only aspiration that I have for this new system, I believe that the changes I am proposing will provide young people with a foundation to support their lifelong learning and provide the stepping stone needed to allow them to adapt and progress in the modern workplace.

Supply and demand at level 2

The focus at level 2 was also informed by supply and demand for skills within our economy. My Department's Skills Strategy, Success through Skills – Transforming Futures, demonstrates clearly that our economy will rely increasingly on higher level

skills, with a decreasing demand for low skills at entry level and level 1. For example, by 2020, the proportion of our workforce with lower skills is set to half from the level recorded in 2005.

In order to prepare young people for the demands of the labour market, achievement at level 2 is critical, but there are challenges on the supply side in ensuring young people reach this level. Last year, approximately 2 out of 5 young people left school without 5 GCSEs at grades A* - C including English and mathematics. This measure of achievement at level 2 is in many cases the minimum requirement for prospective employers, and is a common entry requirement for the progression routes available at level 3 through both apprenticeships and further education.

Process

The Youth Training review team carried out extensive work over the past year which led to the findings presented in the interim report. We engaged with experts in the OECD to identify examples of best practice, and completed study visits to the Netherlands, Denmark and Scotland - the findings of which have been incorporated in case studies throughout the report. My team also carried out an extensive literature review, and tested each proposal through engagement events and meetings with employers, young people and other key stakeholders. A call for submissions and an employer survey were also conducted, and the review has been aided greatly by the Assembly's Committee for Employment and Learning and an Expert Panel.

Therefore, the development of the new system is based firmly on evidence of international best practice and the application and fit of this within the local context. It is a made in Northern Ireland solution that combines local innovation with world class standards.

The current system

My team used the evidence gathered to critique and examine current youth training provision.

One of the key challenges was the complexity of the current system, with a variety of different options available to young people seeking training at level 2. Greater clarity and indeed greater opportunities in terms of progression routes was also a key concern highlighted by stakeholders.

A connected issue to progression was the curriculum offer at level 2. Employers expressed concerns about the rigour and relevancy of the professional and technical qualifications available at level 2, as well as the considerable number that are currently available. Some options at level 2 also require that literacy and numeracy skills be developed at level 1 only, this may inhibit a young person's access to higher level training courses, lifelong learning and progression within the workforce.

The provision of work based learning was also pinpointed as a current weakness with local stakeholders highlighting that work-based learning needed to be integrated into the curriculum to better prepare young people for the world of work.

Finally, at an individual and system level, research indicated that young people required greater support to guide their choices through independent careers advice and guidance, supported by up to date labour market information. Greater monitoring of outcomes and destinations of participants could also help to improve the system.

Vision

The interim report draws on this rigorous analysis and articulates a vision for a new youth training system.

My aspiration is that our new system will be recognised both locally and internationally by employers, further and higher education providers, young people, parents and guardians for its quality, flexibility and transferability.

The system will be centred on the career aspirations and needs of young people, and will be a conduit to support their ongoing career development. Young people in training will be sought after by prospective employers, and the system will be respected by young people, parents and guardians as an alternative progression route to the traditional academic pathway.

By linking a new baccalaureate-style professional and technical award to the needs of employers and the wider economy, the youth training system will better match demand and supply, and provide a seamless progression route for young people to a breadth of professional and technical occupations.

Proposals

To achieve our vision, the report makes 26 different proposals for the future of youth training in Northern Ireland. These can be grouped under four different themes, namely: the core components of the youth training system; supporting young people; delivery and employer engagement structures; and, ensuring quality.

The implementation of these proposals will provide a youth training system that will incorporate structured work-based learning for all participants, including an employment-based pathway, and provide a new professional and technical award at level 2, the curriculum content of which will be informed by employers in order to better match demand and supply.

The system will provide flexible routes and support mechanisms to make training accessible to all young people, and facilitate progression into apprenticeships, further education or higher education, and directly or indirectly into sustained employment.

Core components for the youth training system

Firstly, in a major departure from current provision and for the first time in Northern Ireland, youth training will be available to all young people aged 16–24 who require training at level 2, regardless of where they reside on their employment and learning journey. Importantly, this will include young people who have already entered the job market but do not have the comparable skills and training proposed under the new system.

Therefore youth training will be accessible to those starting a new job, those in existing roles, and those not yet in employment. Through this approach, we will seek

to ensure that the system is flexible enough for all young people to access training at level 2, regardless of their employment status. It will support young people regardless of where they reside in their training and employment journey. I want to ensure that all our young people are provided with the opportunity to compete in the workplace – no-one should be left behind.

Secondly, the youth training system will provide a new baccalaureate-style professional and technical award at level 2, equating to a minimum of five GCSEs at grades A*–C, including English and mathematics. By setting this standard for the curriculum at level 2, youth training will ensure that all those who achieve at this level can progress into higher level options, and that the achievements of those progressing from training are recognised and valued by employers. Research has shown that this is the foundation level for progressing in the workplace and facilitating a platform for lifelong learning.

In addition to this breadth of learning, structured work-based learning, whether through employment or a work placement, will be a mandatory element of youth training. The employed route will be similar to the current apprenticeship pathway, with a young person employed by a business or organisation and benefiting from a mixture of on and off-the-job training. Under the non-employed route, a young person will benefit from an extended work-placement.

Work-based learning will be the primary method for developing skills, including employability, and for those not yet in employment, the system will facilitate short, project-based work tasters to help inform their choice of occupational area.

Beyond this core curriculum, youth training will also provide opportunities to study additional qualifications that are relevant to the interests of the individual young person and to the requirements of employers.

Young people not yet ready to start youth training will be supported to attain a minimum of a full level 1, defined as equivalent to four GCSEs at grades D-G, including English and mathematics at grades D-F. This support should be delivered

through a range of targeted interventions, including further education courses at level 1 and specialised projects funded through the European Social Fund.

The new, baccalaureate-style award for youth training will be designed to take a maximum of two years to complete. However, the system will be flexible to allow those who can complete sooner to achieve and progress into employment or further training, and for those with additional needs to receive more time.

Collectively, these proposals constitute the core components for the youth training system in Northern Ireland.

Supporting young people

The second theme of the report focuses on support measures to help young people to successfully complete their training.

To inform young people's choices and promote progression, independent careers advice and guidance, informed by the skills barometer, will be provided to young people before starting training and upon completion.

Pastoral support will also be provided to address the range of complex issues that young people face and help them to succeed in their chosen occupational area. Indeed flexibility and support will be a cornerstone of provision, ensuring that the new system reflects the needs of young people and the barriers they face as they transition from school to the world of work.

To support young people in the workplace, participating employers will provide workplace mentors to develop their employability skills and achieve their learning outcomes.

Financial support will also be provided to young people, whether through a training wage or allowance.

Support will also be targeted towards those with additional requirements, such as young people with a disability, caring commitments or those leaving care. My

department's forthcoming Disability Employment and Skills Strategy will have a key focus on young people, including those in training.

Youth training will make use of innovative online technologies to engage young people, prepare them for the workplace and facilitate opportunities for international exchange.

Through these support measures, we will hope to ensure that young people engage in training that is relevant to their interests and are supported to achieve and make a successful start to their careers.

Delivery and employer engagement structures

While we can set standards for the curriculum and design support measures for young people, the youth training system will only be effective if employers are engaged in its design and delivery.

Following the approach being implemented through the apprenticeships strategy, a Strategic Advisory Forum will advise government on the youth training system. A common forum for both apprenticeships and youth training can also help to ensure the two systems are aligned, however the forum's roles and responsibilities with respect to youth training will be shaped around the particular needs of this system.

Sectoral partnerships will define the qualifications to be delivered, alongside the duration, structure and timing of work placements. Depending on the skills needs of the sector, sectoral partnerships may be shared between apprenticeship or youth training provision, or established to carry out this specific function for youth training.

Along with these strategic and sector led proposals, there will be more targeted approach towards employer engagement to encourage work-based learning opportunities, and to recruit young people from the youth training system.

A central service will be created to facilitate the sourcing and advertising of work-based learning opportunities for the youth training system.

I am also proposing the creation of dedicated industry consultants to work directly with sectors and employers, and will consider incentives targeted at small and micro businesses and aligned to the priorities of the Northern Ireland economy.

By having in place mechanisms that can 'take the pulse' of the local job market we will be able to assess the extent to which the system is providing young people with the skills to be absorbed directly into the workplace and where necessary take timely corrective action.

My Department will also actively target and work with local councils and the wider public sector to provide work experience opportunities and promote the system at a local level.

A final key aspect of engagement is to support the youth training system through clear branding and marketing for employers, young people, parents and guardians. Effective branding will promote engagement, and improve the image of professional and technical training overall.

Ensuring quality

The final theme of the report sets out a range of measures to ensure that the highest standards of quality for training are maintained.

To ensure a quality work-based learning experience for young people, a registration and approval system is proposed for participating employers. Work-based learning will also be underpinned by a clear contractual agreement between the young person, the host employer and the training provider.

For both workplace mentors and tutors delivering the non-work-based elements of training, new requirements will be set for their industry experience and pedagogical skills.

At a system level, a new quality model will ensure that only those providers who achieve prescribed quality standards will be funded to deliver youth training. The system will also be underpinned by robust data collection analysis and evaluation,

and provide mechanisms for young people to provide qualitative feedback on their experience of training. These proposals will help to ensure that the system can be monitored and improved over time to serve the needs of young people, employers and our economy.

Next steps

From today, these proposals will now be the subject of public consultation over the next 12 weeks.

Particular efforts are being made to gather the views of young people on our approach, including their views on the branding and marketing of youth training going forward. Based on engagement with Commissioner for Children and Young People we will be incorporating innovative best practice into our work with young people. This process will begin with a workshop involving young people to develop an animated version of the consultation, followed by focus groups with young people starting in December. We will also hold road-show events to further gather the views of employers, training providers and other interested stakeholders.

In addition to the consultation, we will also link these proposals to the ongoing implementation of the apprenticeships strategy to identify synergies between these two key mechanisms in our wider skills system.

I believe that our proposals for youth training will deliver for both young people and employers.

For young people it will provide a foundation of knowledge and expertise that will support their lifelong learning and provide a sustainable foothold in the world of work, will guarantee that the training they complete is right for them and sought after by employers and will support those who require additional help and guidance as they transition into and through the world of work.

For employers the new system will offer support to engage and reduce bureaucracy and guarantee that the young people they support will be work ready and trained in skills that are relevant to their immediate and future needs.

I believe that this new system of youth training will deliver a foundation of knowledge and expertise, which will contribute to the skills required by the economy, improved social mobility and facilitate lifelong learning.

I commend these proposals to the Assembly.