

fforwm response to:

***Delivering Skills That Work for Wales:
Reducing the Proportion of Young
People Not in Education, Employment
or Training in Wales
(Consultation Document)***

fforwm 
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fforwm response

Delivering Skills That Work for Wales: Reducing the Proportion of Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training in Wales Consultation Document

Introduction

fforwm welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Assembly Government's (WAG) proposals for to reduce the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) in Wales.

fforwm is the national organisation representing the 23 further education (FE) colleges and two FE institutions in Wales¹. It is an educational charity and a company limited by guarantee. fforwm's Board comprises college principals and chairs of corporations, appointed by member colleges. fforwm provides a range of services to its members including networks, conferences, research, consultancy and the sharing of good practice. It also works closely with a wide range of partners in post-16 education and training. Through fforwm, colleges are represented on various committees, working parties and other groups influencing and shaping policy in post-16 education and lifelong learning.

fforwm recognises that the consultation on reducing the proportion of NEETs in Wales forms part of WAG's efforts to raise skills levels in Wales, as set out in the Skills That Work for Wales Action Plan, published on 15 July 2008.

General questions:

1. *Do you welcome the broad policy direction set out in this document?*

fforwm recognises the long-term impact on the Welsh economy and on the life chances of young people who drop out of education, employment and training at a young age. Policies to bring many of these young people into the mainstream will need to be innovative and radical. Many of those NEET will have been persistently absent from school. Thus a key focus of the NEET strategy must be on seeking ways of working with at risk young people in school - prevention rather than cure. It is important to recognise that young people who are 'core NEET' (para 1.27) may require more sustained investment and support than those who are going through a period of transition. Particular attention will need to be given to transforming the attitudes and behaviour of young people and in providing broad employability skills which will equip them to take up a broad range of jobs.

¹ In this response, the terms further education institution (FEI) and FE colleges are used interchangeably to describe all of fforwm's members.

WAG must give high priority to reducing the number of NEETs. *The Skills That Work for Wales Action Plan* suggests that, in order to raise the employment rate from 72.5% to 80%, more than 140,000 people in Wales will need new opportunities. Almost 9% of these are NEETs.

The estimates of the number and proportion of young people who are NEET may be lower than the actual total. Research commissioned by The Prince's Trust in 2007 on 16-24 years olds concluded that 'almost one-fifth of young people in England, Scotland and Wales are not in education, training or employment. OECD data shows that the UK compares very poorly to other countries in this respect'.² If true for 16-19 year olds, this would mean that the number of young people who are NEETs in Wales could be double the official statistics.

Although funding is not the only factor, improving opportunities for NEETs requires sustained investment. Colleges recognise that young people who are NEET require support and guidance well above that of other more motivated learners who may have the benefit of supportive families and who feel comfortable in an educational institution's environment.

fforwm recognises the findings of the research (para 1.34) that NEETs are diverse and that policies to address the issues need to reflect the different circumstances faced by young people. There needs to be a strong emphasis on meeting individual learning needs.

While fforwm accepts that 16-19 year olds are a key target, it is important that the range of support envisaged for this age group does not disappear at the age of 20. Many NEETs will require continued support in their 20s and 30s and it important that policies are drawn up to tackle to problems of older NEETs.

2. *What should be the priority actions if we are to deliver in line with our ambitions for reducing the proportion of young people NEET?*

Approaches to tackle NEETs have to start in school. Vocational subjects must be viewed as 'core subjects' and made available to younger learners and to learners across the range of abilities. Vocational subjects should not be viewed as suitable to only to lower achieving pupils.

fforwm strongly supports the following, as set out in para 3.6:

- a wider choice and flexibility of programmes
- ways of learning that promote independence, confidence and decision-making
- a central learning core equipping young people for employment;
- a range of personal support through the work of learning coaches,

² Sandra McNally and Shqiponja Telhaj (April 2007) *The Cost of Exclusion*, The Princes Trust with the Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics.

- personal support to overcome barriers to learning
- impartial careers advice and guidance that seeks to put the interests of individual learners above those of the institution

We agree that there must be a strong focus on raising the literacy and numeracy levels of NEETs. The national figures for illiteracy and innumeracy published in *The Skills That Work for Wales Action Plan* are in themselves alarming. The evidence in the consultation document shows that literacy levels of NEETs are even more concerning.

People lacking basic skills often develop various coping strategies, for example, avoiding situations where their literacy problems will be highlighted. This can mean avoiding support services and employment. Offenders and ex-offenders also have disproportionately low levels of literacy and qualifications. The *Skills That Work for Wales Action Plan* outlines evidence that learning programmes can help offenders to secure stable employment'.

3. *Is there anything missing from our analysis of young people NEET (see Chapter 1) which should help to direct our future policies?*

Policies need to recognise that official statistics under report NEET figures. Anecdotal evidence points to many young people working in the hidden economy or in unskilled temporary or piecemeal jobs, on the fringes of being NEET but not gaining access to education and training opportunities and who are not detected by official statistics.

It is important to emphasise that young people who are NEET need programmes that develop skills for employability rather than skills for employment. As noted above, there is a huge challenge in changing attitudes and improving behaviour in order to prepare young people – and indeed adults who are NEET – in the disciplines of the workplace.

Specific questions:

4. *What are your views on the systems we outline in Chapter 2? In particular*
 - a *Should one organisation have lead responsibility at operational level for young people who are NEET? If so, what should this mean in practice?*

Having one organisation take the lead responsibility for young people who are NEET is sensible. Currently, the plethora of different organisations dealing with young people who are NEET (set out in para 2.2) may lead to confusion and duplication. The lead organisation should have responsibility for assessing the position in their area, determining the support available, clarifying who does what, and, of critical importance, regularly monitoring progress and making changes where necessary. This last point is crucial as the lead organisation should be able to reflect on progress and, if necessary, make changes. As the emphasis is on 16-19 year olds, there is a relatively

small window of opportunity to take corrective action if an approach is not working.

The lead organisation should be adequately resourced and have the statutory power to take decisions which cut across other agencies where this might be deemed necessary.

fforwm recognises the importance of Young People's Partnerships (YPPs) working closely with the Careers Service (para 2.5). However, the YPPs do not have in membership the wide range of agencies that can impact on NEETs. FE colleges, with their important experience in providing second chance opportunities to learners, their wide range of vocational courses and their excellent guidance and support services, have an important role to play in providing support for NEETs. Yet many colleges are not in membership of their local YPPs.

It may be preferable to give the lead responsibility at operational level to 14-19 Learning Networks. These bring together the full range of partner organisations involved in delivering Learning Pathways, including FE colleges, schools, other learning and training providers, Careers Wales, learning coaches and other statutory agencies such as youth offending services. 14-19 Learning Networks are required to prepare an options menu for their area. The menu will enable learners to see the range of options available to them. This range of options should include provision aimed at young people who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET. Thus they are well placed to have a broad oversight and leadership role in respect of NEETs.

It may also be useful for local 14-19 Learning Networks to ensure that their strategic plans address the NEET situation in their areas and liaise closely with local YPPs.

c Would there be value in enhancing the information provided to schools on the destinations of former pupils?

The collection of student destination data is central to the monitoring of performance in many colleges. Keeping track of destinations is notoriously difficult as it relies on the young person being willing to disclose information. In addition, young people's circumstances often change. They may move address, and change their education, job and training. Destination data tends to provide only a single snapshot. More regular data collection over a period of time, though difficult to obtain, would be helpful to give a more balanced picture of individuals' progress.

Another key point is that data systems do not facilitate information flows between providers. For example, FE colleges and work-based learning providers report difficulty in obtaining detailed information on pupils from schools. Colleges and work-based learning providers often have to use valuable resources on diagnostic assessments. Transition plans are required for transition from primary to secondary schools. An important part of

transition plans is the sharing of information about learners. Formal transition arrangements similar to those in secondary schools where there are partner schools for colleges would allow a better flow of accurate information.

Destination data is a useful tool for assessing the overall impact of the institution. The collection of such data should be carried out in a simple and straightforward way that does not lead to the imposition of unnecessary regulation. Using a standardised approach across Wales should be a key element of the work of the lead organisation.

d What more can we do to support information sharing between organisations?

Many of those who are at risk of becoming NEETs can be recognised at an early age. fforwm has expressed interest in the unique learner number system that would provide lifetime information on learners as they progress through education. It would be helpful if there was a standardised approach to collecting data on young people so that it could be adopted across Wales. This should include England as some learners cross the boundary to undertake courses.

fforwm supports the proposal that WAG should seek provisions in the Education and Skills Bill to enable data to be shared between different arms of government to ensure a more integrated approach to supplying employment and skills services (para 2.18).

5 What are your views on the provision for learners that we outline in Chapter 3? In particular,

a What more can we do to support 14-19 Networks in developing learning provision for NEET and at-risk young people?

fforwm welcomes the development of individual learning pathways and new vocational qualifications that will have credit as an integral element through the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW). fforwm supports the Learning and Skills Measure that will enable a wider choice of options to be available at the ages of 14 and 16.

It will be important to involve employers in the work of 14-19 networks to assist in programmes aimed at equipping NEETs with skills for employability.

fforwm endorses the need to improve the support given to learners through the appointment of learning mentors and personal tutors.

c Do the proposals go far enough in outlining changes to our national training programmes? If not, what more do we need to do to improve the quality of those programmes for vulnerable young people?

The NEETs policy must be seen in the overall context of the *Skills That Work for Wales Action Plan* which sets out a key policy direction for raising skills levels in Wales.

- 6 *What are your views on the support for learners that we outline in Chapter 4? In particular:*
- a *What more can we do to develop the Support for Learners element of Learning Pathways 14-19 for the benefit of NEET and potentially NEET young people?*

The approach set out in the document is sound. It is important that all learners have an entitlement to personal support although resource constraints mean that personal support should always be directed at those young people who need it the most. Personal support is expensive but crucial, especially for young people who may not have support at home.

It is also essential that there are sufficient numbers available of well trained learning coaches and others with appropriate skills giving support to young people over housing, finances, and drug misuse. Those giving support must themselves be entitled to a clear career path with continuing professional development opportunities to ensure that they perform to the highest standards.

- b *Is the idea of financial parity across different types of learning for 16-19 year olds a good one?*

fforwm supports financial parity across different types of learning covering 'all types of non-advanced education and unwaged training participation' (para 4.32). Financial parity would help avoid the situation, pointed out in the consultation document, where a young person could lose financially if they decided to progress from a Skill Build course to a college option. One way of avoiding the latter situation would be to build in flexibility for funding so that a person transferring from Skill Build to a college option on the basis of success in Skill Build would be allowed to retain the allowance for a set period of time. The same person might be eligible for support from a college's Financial Contingency Fund, but these funds are inevitably limited – they have been reduced for 2008/09 - and may already be committed by the time a Skill Build learner wishes to transfer.

fforwm would support the introduction of statutory entitlement to free basic skills learning for all post-16 learners who have not reached the minimum levels of basic skills.

- c *What more can we do to ensure that learners are not swayed in their choices by unintentional financial incentives or disincentives?*

Assessing the impact of different financial incentives on young people is complex. Indeed a similar observation could be made about mature, well informed and numerate adults.

fforwm welcomes the proposal to evaluate the impact of Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) and the decision (para 4.28) to embed financial literacy education into Personal and Social Education and Mathematics frameworks for 7-19 and 7-16 age groups respectively.

The general principle that payment of EMAs is based on a 'something for something' principle is sound. Incentives to reward learners for attendance and achievement recognise the importance of ensuring that public money is well used. To encourage NEETs into education, there should be more emphasis on rewarding attendance and positive participation than achievement as the latter might act as a disincentive to disadvantaged young people with a history of educational underachievement.

As noted above, an unacceptably high proportion of the adult working population (53%) have a level of numeracy below level 1. This means that many are unable, for example, to understand simple but important financial transactions such as how much change to expect from a five pound note after purchase of a few small items. There is a strong argument that financial literacy should be part of basic skills education. People who are unable to understand relatively simple mathematical calculations are highly unlikely to be equipped to make financially rational decisions at any age.

7 *We have provided draft guidance for local data collection at Annex C of this strategy. We would like to know whether:*

a *the two main categories of NEET are helpful to CYPP organisations for their data collection?*

The two proposed categories – those receiving support and those not receiving support – and the circumstances to describe both are helpful. As noted above, the young people's circumstances change and some may expect to drop in and out of support. Others may be registered on a programme but not actively participate.

The list of circumstances falling within each category should enable useful data to be collected. Accurate data will enable targeted intervention to take place as well as providing evidence of successful and unsuccessful intervention.

b *there be any difficulties in implementing data collection on this basis within organisations?*

Points about data collection have already been made. It is important to emphasise again that the key to effective data collection is that it is kept simple.

c *we could do more to encourage local organisations to collect data in a consistent way?*

Collecting relevant data helps monitor progress and assess whether local strategies are having an impact. To assist local organisations, data demands should be as light as possible. DCELLS should resist the temptation to insist on large amount of information, much of which is never used. Data demands should be simple and based on need and identify individual learners, including some personal details, list the support given and attendance and the outcomes.

Conclusion

fforwm welcomes the WAG's initiative to reduce the numbers of young people who are NEET in Wales. These policies have to go hand in hand with the WAG's commitment to raise skills levels in Wales, improve literacy and numeracy levels and to increase the employment rate amongst adults of working age.

The curriculum for young people who are NEET has to be flexible to meet their circumstances. They need to be able to build up their confidence and to be equipped with skills that will prepare them for employability. Financial support should seek to encourage participation. They also require extensive support and guidance from highly trained professional staff.

FE colleges have a central role to play in delivering the learning opportunities needed by NEETs. The consultation document does not place sufficient emphasis on the work of FE colleges and their provision of a wide range of relevant courses as well as support and guidance. They have the flexibility and curriculum offer to meet the needs of young people who are NEET. 14 - 19 Partnerships should have a lead role in coordinating local initiatives to tackle the problems of young people with NEETs working closely with Young People's Partnerships and with the Careers Service. If it is decided to give this coordinating role to Young People's Partnerships, then FE Colleges must have a right to full membership.