

NORTHERN IRELAND IMPACT FORUM MEETING
14 June – Hollywood Library

Present: Trevor Neilands (Chair); Paul Donaghy (Open College Network NI); Mark Ravenhall (LWI); Kath Ray (LWI); Sandra Bailie (NICVA); Peter Shields (Action Mental Health); Paul Kelly (Libraries NI); Betty Murray (Extern); Evelyn Mooney (OU); Peter Matassa (BBC); Ben Harris (Older People's Commissioner's Office); Ben Hendriksen (AONTAS); Lorraine Boyd (Bryson International); and Colin Neilands (Convenor).

Apologies: Deirdre Timoney (Business in the Community); Norrie Breslin (Big Lottery); Anne McVicker (Women's Resource and Development Agency); Claire Muldune (Ulster University); Arlene Bell (National Museums NI); Martin Flynn (OCNNI); and Ann Marie Doyle (Prince's Trust).

The Chair offered thanks to Paul Kelly for hosting the meeting. He then introduced the theme of the day, namely learning in work and went over the agenda, before introducing Kath Ray.

Kath Ray – Head of Research at L&W particularly focusing on low pay and progression in work: also with a focus on learning to support progress for those in work.

Please refer to slides 1-6

Kath opened by presenting the key stats re current UK challenges. Those in low paid work tend to stay in low pay for long periods (c75% still in low pay after 10 yrs) which has a real impact on the economy generally – it incurs a huge cost in terms of benefits and links to low productivity. Low opportunities for learning with employer – limited careers support available. As people know there is a significant gap in part term learning generally in England and this is not being picked up by employers – this has been particularly noticeable over the last decade. And then there is the usual disparity – those with qualifications retrain much more and find it easier to access financial support.

It is best if there are clear pathways in terms of career and if employers are involved in designing courses to meet local skill needs.

Kath then turned to barriers to learning, particularly those quoted by the lower skilled (see slide 5) these are both perceptual and 'real' e.g. cost, time etc. We need to address the individual's barriers, but also think of building a learning culture in workplace: and employers need to be creative around how newly acquired skills can be used to help in workplace .



Kath finished by flagging up her EAAL work package which she presented on later.

In follow-up questions Peter spoke of how he could relate to Kath's presentation as AMH have to focus on delivering skills to clients to increase their employability but also focusing internally and developing staff. Lorraine spoke of the local culture of people not being willing to move out of their area for work – same issue with immigrants – people like to remain in their comfort zones. Kath spoke of Warwick University's research around travel and employment which revealed that geography matters most with those with low skills and that most prefer to travel no further than 2 km from their homes. Paul D suggested that outcomes based commissioning could help. He also quoted government figs saying that there is a significant increase of those in work having qualifications across levels 1-4. Economic inactivity in NI is still the highest in UK and when unemployment figures are broken down it is clear that the unemployment rate is not dropping significantly for young people.

Evelyn Rooney– (Staff Tutor, Nursing – Open University)

Evelyn opened with some general info on the OU. Almost all courses are literally open with no entry quals – except for nursing because entrants do require some ES qualifications. 75% of OU students are working around their job and the average age is 30 – actually a drop over the past decade. Costs and debt are very off-putting for her students so studying with OU is an easier option than entering other universities.

Funding support however is still a challenge. In terms of uptake of the nursing course there is good geographical spread and its improving especially in NI. Recently delivery has started expanding into the independent sector – not just the Trusts. The increase this year has been because of a boost of funding from Dept of Health. Clearly for future development there needs to be support across key depts – not just health.

Mentoring is very important embarking on these courses.

In follow-up Trevor asked how learners are recruited. The OU works closely with RCN and Unison. In theory recruitment comes via the appraisal system, but in fact potential students find out more via chances to meet with staff from OU etc. – so a lot of the time it is up to the individual to have some initiative to approach and ask.

In discussion members reflected on how policy and funding remain siloed while at practice level there is more recognition of need to cross over –we need to show models that work such as this OU example.

The appraisal system works ok but those doing it need more support themselves to be more effective.

There is a need to create more pathways to show that there are many choices people can make. So what can the IF do – perhaps promoting a proper guidance service for adults – including developing many more pathways.

Updates

Mark Ravenhall gave an update on the wider UK programme. He referred to pp 15-17 of the EAAL Report 2015-17 for details of the current contract. Europe is placing emphasis on upskilling pathways but the UK is interpreting this as developing inclusive pathways. There are 7 work packages and Mark talked through these. There is optimism for future - that the UK government will continue with E+ - (which supports the EAAL programme),

England is moving towards outcomes-based funding. In England the big development is the devolution of adult education (50% of budget going out to new devolved areas). In London the Mayor's major strategies are outcome based and adult learning is seen as contributing to all these.

Regarding WP6 –for which Mark has responsibility – the idea now is that he will commission think-pieces on professional development for AL workforces and related workforces - what are implications for joint practice? There will then be a symposium and publication (although hard copy publication will depend on further funding).

Trevor then gave a local update. Reflecting on what Mark had reported he said that we frequently look to Wales & Scotland, but now we should also look at the devolved areas in England: it is interesting that we are more and more all taking similar approaches.

In terms of local advocacy we have been engaging with the political parties, going via contacts and has been working – there have been positive meetings with DUP, SF, Alliance and SDLP. Mervyn Storey is proving particularly. He has written to the head of the civil service; he has commissioned RaISe (The Assembly research team) to map HWW report against PfG and then later against PfGs for Wales & Scotland; he has arranged a meeting with top managers in Belfast City Council and another with the civil servant in charge of PfG. We hope that the RaISe reports will be ready in time for our autumn conference. This will take place on 12 Oct and the working title is Borders, Boundaries & Bridges: Learning with our Neighbours. We are continuing to approach the councils too.

We want to revive an IF working group to help focus/direct further advocacy and to plan for the future of the IF – funding might conclude at the end of 2019 so what should our legacy be? Any volunteers please contact Colin.

Kath Ray – Work Package on Developing inclusive skills pathways for adults in low-paid work

See slides 7 and onwards

The package aims to develop inclusive skills pathways for adults in low-paid work and working with stakeholders in local areas to develop bespoke approaches for selected target groups. But it is very open to responding to local needs.

Kath then described a number of examples from across the UK which are set out in slides 10-14.

Responding to the Questions slide there was wide ranging discussion by Forum members. A conclusion was that no-one locally is researching in this area – can LWI help re research gaps? We've had lots of good short-term projects but no-one is gathering learning – a lack of research yet again.

Can we produce something that works for the WP but also contributes to the work that IF is trying to progress?

Mark proposed that a good idea for the WP might be to produce a report that frontloads all the existing research of LWI in this area and then follow with 4 examples of good practice development in the 4 nations.

A local proposal from Trevor was work for NI similar to what Kath has shared from England. This would then be useful to us for our advocacy once Assembly is up and running again with good arguments to mainstream the good practice we've developed. This was agreed.

LWI will draft something, circulate to IF members for feedback and perhaps set up a working group to further refine. Members can also assist by identifying examples of good practice, focusing on low-paid employees and progression/support.

To Conclude

Working group on IF advocacy and legacy will meet as soon as possible.
Next full meeting of the IF will be conference on 12 Oct