

Appendix 1

Draft Belfast City Council response – for consideration by the Development Committee – 18 March 2014

Response to Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL) consultation on Review of Apprenticeships

Belfast City Council (the Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the above consultation.

Question 1: Do you agree that apprenticeships should be defined as a system of learning, irrespective of branding?

The Council agrees with the principle that apprenticeships should be defined as a system of learning. However, a review of branding is required to ensure the term 'apprenticeship' goes beyond more traditional disciplines, for example, electricians or mechanics, and instead encompass those sectors identified as needed to rebalance the economy. This includes IT, multimedia, renewable energies, science, tourism and hospitality. The original meaning behind the term referred to ongoing learning and we consider that this is a principle that should be retained.

Question 2: Should apprenticeships be for a new employee or, in the case of an existing employee, a new job role?

We recommend a means of providing skills and knowledge to a new employee or an existing employee to help them progress in their organisation or to a new role. We appreciate the views reflected in the consultation that focusing the apprenticeship helps differentiate this from other training available. An apprenticeship is an intensive training support that goes on for much longer than other training provision and the employer needs to be aware of how he/she will be required to support the trainee for the duration. There are other training programmes that may be more appropriate for other training or skills development support within an organisation.

Question 3: Do you agree that the apprenticeship system should commence at Level 3 and above?

At present, the council has direct experience of level 2 apprentices only.

The aspiration of developing apprenticeships at level 3 and above is commendable and will support the wider drive to improve the skills levels of the Northern Ireland population. We note the parallel review of youth training and proposals to develop a range of training support that can offer a "pathway" into the new proposed apprenticeships. We consider that care needs to be taken to ensure a smooth transition from one intervention to another.

Despite the fact that the Government's Economic Strategy identifies Belfast as the key driver for economic growth in the region and the NI Executive references the importance of Belfast to regional prosperity, the following challenges remain within the city:

- Belfast has relatively highly skilled residents but also has a high proportion of people with no formal qualifications. The Centre for Cities comparative analysis¹ of Belfast with 63 other UK cities placed the city at the bottom of the group; and

¹ Presentation on Belfast: Future City Conference (May 2013)

- Belfast's 'no skilled population' sits at almost 30% of those of working age. In some parts of the city, the level increases to almost 90% of the working age population. This is a widely recognised issue, for which finding a solution is key to maximising economic prosperity. Obtaining a level two qualification is out of reach for many Belfast residents.
- The Integrated Economic Strategy for the city (currently at draft stage) recognises the progress made between 2001 and 2011 in skills attainment, where the proportion of Belfast's population with no qualifications decreased from 41% to 30.4%. The challenges of developing skills at levels 1, 2 and 3 for Belfast residents is illustrated in the table below:

Qualification	Share in 2001 (%)		Share in 2011(%)	
	Belfast	NI	Belfast	NI
No qualifications	41.8	41.6	30.4	29.1
Level 1 qualifications	14.8	17.2	10.8	11.5
Level 2 qualifications	13.3	16.4	12.6	14.9
Level 3 qualifications	10.9	9	13.1	12.3
Level 4 qualifications and above	19.2	15.8	26	23.6
Other qualifications			7.1	8.5
<i>Source: Census 2011</i>				

Question 4: Do you agree that the minimum duration for apprenticeships should be two years?

From our direct experience of involvement in the delivery of apprenticeships, we offer the following comments:

- Training should be flexible and modular based. Consideration should be given to the duration of the apprenticeship and should not necessarily depend on 'time served' but delivered at a pace to suit all apprentices. We note that a minimum duration of two years is specified but the maximum is not specified. Higher performers may feel de-motivated if they have to complete a four-year apprenticeship when they have the ability to complete it faster. However, a balance is required in this instance in costs to the employer of their investment, resources and time
- The quality of placement and work experience coupled with strong mentoring is important for retention levels because of the financial investment incurred
- Consideration might be given to more flexibility in delivery and support provided – possibly linked to remuneration and subject to agreement with the employer.

Question 5: Should apprenticeships involve a breadth of training beyond the job role?

As an employer, Belfast City Council agrees that the breadth of training is important. For younger apprentices, bridging the gap between school and employment is important, especially in their first months in the workforce. It is essential that apprentices develop a 'soft skills' set which include the following competencies:

- Customer care skills

- An ability to work in within their own team and in cross-functional teams when required
- Personal characteristics (confidence, temperament and work ethic)
- Social and cognitive skills (communications and problem solving).

Our training programme for apprenticeships contains a range of practical support mechanisms to ensure that participants have access to training on a range of competencies.

Question 6: Should apprenticeships facilitate progression into professional or technical training or onto a higher academic pathway? How can the outcome of apprenticeships support this?

We agree that apprenticeships should facilitate progression into professional or technical training or onto a higher academic pathway. This approach is essential in raising expectations and skills levels of the workforce and benefits the economy. Strong mentoring is essential in bridging the pathway from education to employment. On completion of an apprenticeship, trainees and employees should be able to progress to a higher level, facilitated by the qualifications gained through the apprenticeship. The level of apprenticeship may need appropriate accreditation by professional body, for example the Chartered Institute of Personal Development (CIPD), the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).

Question 7: Should Government only recognise an apprenticeship when it contains each of the components set out in proposals 2-6?

The proposals contained in this report involve a radical reform of the current apprenticeships system. If they are implemented, consideration needs to be given, in particular, to how apprenticeships can link to and support other training provision. This is particularly important given the significant percentage of the population that has low or no skills – both those already in employment and those new and potential entrants into the labour market.

Question 8: Do you agree that there should be a single award/qualification to denote the outcome of an apprenticeship for each occupation at each level?

The Council agrees with this proposal. As the research notes, one of the most significant deterrents to increased uptake of apprenticeships is a lack of awareness of the offer. The single award or qualification needs to be easy to understand for employers, apprentices, careers advisors, trainers, teachers and parents. We recommend that awards should be transferrable among employers and transferable to other European countries. Qualifications should be portable allowing apprentices to continue with training should the employer go out of business or no longer be able to support a trainee. On completion on any level of apprenticeship, good practice would suggest some form of recognition, for example certification.

Question 9: Should apprenticeships be available for all ages? If apprenticeships are open to all ages, how can Government best ensure that young people are not crowded out of apprenticeship provision?

Belfast City Council agrees with this proposal and we recommend that consideration be given to age- specific legislation (including equality screening) to examine any age restrictions to the development of the programme. We suggest that appropriate percentage

quotas should be set, based on employment market statistics. These should be reviewed yearly.

The Council's Investment Plan 2011-2015 recognises:

- The impact that the economic downturn is having on local people, communities and businesses. Employment levels in the region have fallen and there has been a rise in unemployment among young people
- The need to capitalise on a young population and a skilled workforce
- The need for specific, targeted interventions to ensure that people in all parts of Belfast have the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to apply for and secure jobs particularly our young people (16-24) who have been badly impacted by the economic downturn. In addition the Council is committed to looking at how we, as a large employer in the city, can provide job opportunities and extend employment opportunities by supporting those who are unemployed or disadvantaged in the labour market to tackle the barriers to work that they face.

Through the Council's 2012-2015 Investment Programme, we are committed to a range of employability-related initiatives, both as a large employer in the city and as a funder of external projects to address key sectors including:

- Working with local partners to deliver targeted employability initiatives across the city, providing pre-employment support for 1,200 people and helping around 400 into employment (through European Social Fund projects)
- Committing over 400 work placement, internship and apprenticeship opportunities within the Council with a focus on graduates, young long-term unemployed and people with disabilities
- Creating 200 employment opportunities at no additional cost to the ratepayer; and
- Providing a £300,000 bursary fund to help 16-24 year-olds move into further education, training and employment.

Question 10: How can Government best support progression beyond the initial apprenticeship through a variety of pathways including to further and higher education?

The Council recommends that DEL carries out a mapping exercise of recognised qualifications at all levels and how they interlink, for example, entry, apprenticeship levels, degree courses, Higher National Diplomas as well as professional body links to CIPFA or CIPD as well as the levels of apprenticeships. There should be a progression route on courses and qualifications that apprentices can follow either into higher technical levels or into the theory, supervisory or managerial levels. This information should be made available on a central 'one stop shop' website.

It should also be possible to do 'top up training' where there are specialist jobs or contracts coming to city and intensive technical training of the local workforce would mean people are able to compete for jobs

At the end of the apprenticeship after a period of years, apprentices will want to be confident that there are jobs available to apply for. The Council recommends that DEL apply quotas to the number of training places available and works with DETI to plan ahead to ensure supply

and demand is balanced. The Council's research discussed earlier in the answer to question 3 identifies the issue of skills mismatch to training and jobs available. The quality of jobs including pay and flexibility are important to ensure that Belfast's citizens are financially better off when they opt to increase their skills through training.

Question 11: How might Government best secure the portability of apprenticeships within a sector and the wider economy?

Belfast City Council recommends that qualification levels should be standardised so that employers can judge like-for-like qualifications. Information should be presented in a plain English format so employers, careers advisors, trainers, parents and people who are opting to train as an apprentice can make informed decisions based on their needs. Buy-in is also needed from professional bodies such as CIFA, CIPD to recognise the various levels as relevant to the particular career path.

A partnership approach is required between the public and private sector to encourage the transfer of skills. In the answer to question 8, we have discussed the need for qualifications to be portable. We recommend that DEL works to change mind sets to recognise apprenticeships as a worthwhile qualification and career path.

Question 12: How can Government best support learners who have not acquired the pre-requisite level of qualifications to access apprenticeships?

We consider that the review of youth training programmes should consider entry levels and, if possible assess whether minimum entry criteria can be waived, on condition that certain qualifications are achieved within an agreed timeframe. We are aware of positive examples of how employers have introduced this approach – the example of the Bombardier Apprenticeship Scheme focused in the west Belfast and greater Shankill areas. Without a commitment to waive the entry criteria, the significant volume of participants that have found employment as a result of this scheme would not have been able to do so. We recognise that such schemes can place additional burdens on employers and would encourage DEL to think about how they can support employers that take this approach.

Question 13: How might the apprenticeship programme best support opportunities for international exchanges and placements?

The Council recommends the following options:

- A module or modules can be completed on a placement or in formal training
- Candidates have the opportunity to go on a placement in variety of organisations if desired
- There is period allowed for exchanges or placements, for example, on a three-year apprenticeship
- Consider offering language training as a preparation for an international placement
- Build relationships and partnerships on an international or European level
- Map international qualifications to equivalent qualifications in Northern Ireland to ensure that employers are aware of how they compare.

Please provide any additional comments on the underpinning elements outlined under proposals 8 - 13. Are there other underpinning elements that Government should consider?

The Council makes the following recommendations:

- Consistency of approach should be applied
- Streamlining of training programmes based on the skill and job demands of the economy
- Flexibility around eligibility criteria is required
- Re-branding and promotion of apprenticeships as a valuable and recognised qualification is essential
- Both DEL and DETI need to work with employers to create opportunities and to develop career paths for apprenticeships
- Manpower planning is required at a local and regional level based on categories of apprenticeships and supply and demand
- A range of key competencies need to be developed to ensure a holistic approach to education
- Quality control of training needs to be in place
- A review of career guidance is required to examine if it is fit for purpose
- Direct engagement with potential apprentices is required to examine barriers to learning.

Question 14: Would a central service to market, promote and support apprenticeships, which engages with employers and participants encourage greater levels of participation?

The Council agrees with a central service proposal. A 'one stop shop' approach will ensure that effective linkages are formed with potential apprentices, careers advisors, training organisations, educational establishments, parents and employers.

The Council recommends that current information provided is reviewed to ensure that it is up-to-date and that DEL careers advisors have up-to-date information on all the courses or job training opportunities.

Given the significant changes involved in this consultation, we would recommend a comprehensive communication and engagement process to explain the changes and to focus on how the apprenticeships can work alongside other employment and skills development support.

Question 15: Would a central service that provides advice and guidance for employers and potential apprentices on the range of support and training available increase participation?

The Council agrees with this proposal and makes the following recommendations:

- To ensure the service is a quality customer focused service, it is imperative that potential apprentices and employers are consulted and have a say in shaping the delivery
- The advice and guidance service should link with other training opportunities, training provision and jobs

- The service should be highly publicised – see above reference to need for a well-resourced communication and engagement plan around the new programme.

We would also suggest that, while DEL may appoint a range of providers to deliver the apprenticeships service, both employers and apprentices should have access to information on all relevant training programmes, in order to make an informed decision. The current system whereby providers only offer advice and information on the schemes for which they are responsible does not always meet employer needs and can mean a misfit with employer requirements.

Question 16: Would an online service to advertise apprenticeship vacancies across all sectors encourage greater participation?

The Council agrees with this proposal but information should always be provided in a variety of formats. A face-to-face service is very important, especially to level one participants and people who are long-term unemployed and where access to the internet is limited. It is recommended that existing online services are used to direct online traffic, for example NI Direct. Information must be updated regularly.

Question 17 (a): Would a UCAS style portal best inform potential apprentices of the full range of opportunities available?

The Council agrees with this proposal but we recognise that this is a large project. We recommend that the portal contains areas to meet the needs of various audiences including parents, employers, students and advisors. It must be simple to use and accessible on computers, mobile phones and tablets. We recommend that DEL explore collaboration to UCAS to ensure seamless linkages to each learning level – from entry to degree. An area on the site should include a rating system as this would assist with course choices and drive up quality standards.

Question 17 (b): How might such a portal be designed and function in order to generate greater levels of participation?

It will be important to publicise the portal using a mixed media campaign. This can include using social media or developing a mobile app for smart phones to reach applicants. The portal must show value for money. A one stop portal stop would provide consistency in the provision of information, provided it is up to dated regularly. It is important that online information is not the only option considered for disseminating information and face-to-face provision is important, especially for those who are socially excluded.

Question 18: Do you agree that apprenticeships should be offered across a wider range of occupations across the Northern Ireland economy? Please provide your views on how can Government might best facilitate this expansion?

Belfast City Council supports this approach and suggests that, as the research in the document points out, there is an opportunity to ensure greater alignment between priority growth sectors and apprenticeship provision. The document references the opportunities around professional services: we would concur that there are significant opportunities across a range of levels and, given the projected growth within the sector, there are opportunities for progression for entry-level participants.

Focusing on the key growth sectors outlined in the regional economic strategy, we would suggest that DEL should engage with employers to better understand the future skills needs and to explore the potential for flexible and innovative approaches. This would address the potential skills gaps that have been identified in the draft Belfast Integrated Economic Strategy.

Question 19: Do you agree that apprenticeships should be expanded to professional and technical occupations in the public sector?

The Council agrees with this proposal. We are committed to looking at how we, as a large employer in the city, can provide job opportunities for those seeking to enter the labour market – particularly those who are unemployed or disadvantaged in accessing employment. At present, we are only offering apprenticeship opportunities at level 2 for gardeners and electricians. However, with local government reform, the types of services that the council will undertake will change significantly and we will need to be in a position to resource the new services and delivery models.

Question 20: Would employers, in particular micro and small to medium size employers, require specific incentives and support to facilitate participation in the apprenticeship programme? If so, what support measures are required?

We agree that financial incentives should be made available to employers so that they get a return on their investment in training. Invest NI has considerable experience of a range of employer incentives through the Boosting Business programme and the Jobs Fund and reflections on how these enhanced take-up levels of their initiatives should be considered.

However, we believe that employers will need support to train their existing staff in coaching, supervisory and mentoring skills in order to be able to help and motivate potential apprentices. Strong induction and employment rights training for employers, supervisors and employees will ensure that potential programme participants are retained, receive a high quality training experience, and improve business productivity.

The Council makes the following recommendations:

- Small businesses find it very difficult to navigate the range of support services available to them and the range of providers can complicate the picture. Councils and Invest NI – as well as other business organisations engaging with SMEs – should work closely with DEL to raise awareness of the services available to companies and to promote access to these services, regardless of the delivery agent
- Some support initiatives contain incentives, some do not. Again, it is important to be clear to SMEs in particular about what support is available to them and what is expected from them in return in terms of supporting the apprentice
- Greater co-ordination between public and private employers would provide meaningful opportunities and increase shared learning among sectors
- Segmented learning should be offered and employers should be supported to plan training. However apprenticeships will not meet the requirements of all small businesses and the advice provided to companies needs to meet their demands, as opposed to being driven by the supply-side element of the programme

Question 21: Do you agree that the Careers Service should promote the benefits of the apprenticeship pathway to young people and their parents, as appropriate, highlighting the parity of esteem with other pathways such as higher education?

The Council agrees with this proposal. As well as using online methods, making contact with employers through their outreach activities can also assist. Careers road shows can be used to promote outreach.

The Council recommends that a communications and engagement plan is developed with a particular focus on disadvantaged wards. Belfast's 'no skilled population' sits at almost 30% of those of working age. In some parts of the city, the level increases to almost 90% of the working age population. This is a widely recognised issue, for which finding a solution is key to maximising economic prosperity. Obtaining a level two qualification is out of reach for many Belfast residents and engagement is essential. The low levels of skills and the concentration by population in certain areas of the city mean that, unless specific and targeted interventions are put in place, future employment opportunities will remain out of the reach of many Belfast residents. Macro-level changes such as the welfare reform agenda are likely to lead to an increase in those with low or no skills levels seeking employment in a declining market. Equally, the fees for higher education mean that some individuals may seek alternative approaches to enter the labour market, including apprenticeships.

Question 22: Would continued careers support throughout the apprenticeship help to reduce drop-out rates and improve programme outcomes?

The Council agrees with this proposal. Our experience in the delivery of employability programmes indicates that mentoring support is essential. The Council would welcome a wrap-around service that combines careers advice, training, information on jobs and placement opportunities. Strong mentoring support will create a sense of stability and help those further from the labour market more likely to make the transition to work. This approach would ensure that people are not 'shoe-horned' into jobs for which they are unsuitable.

The Council would welcome the development of a monitoring system and the use of a shared database and this would allow progress tracking of individuals.

Question 23: How can a revised apprenticeship programme best support participation by both genders across occupations?

The Council recommends that the scope of disciplines available under the apprenticeship model should be widened to take account of differing participation levels by gender. Gender participation could be promoted via campaigns using positive role models and this would work particularly well in encouraging men and women into non-traditional areas. Revision to the scheme will have to take account of equal opportunities laws.

Question 24 (a): Do you agree that Government should establish an advisory group comprising of the key stakeholders to provide strategic guidance on apprenticeships?

The Council agrees with this proposal. There is a need to ensure that there is a balance on the advisory group between public and private sectors and from all sizes of businesses. It is essential that DEL engages with potential and existing users on programme development and delivery to inform the advisory group.

Question 24 (b): Please comment on which stakeholders should be involved in the advisory group?

The Council recommends that employers, trade unions, job training providers, business representative and sector representatives should be involved as well as people who can offer practical advice and who have served an apprenticeship. Public sector as well as private sector should be represented. In addressing the skills gaps, employers in the growth related industries should be involved (this includes IT, multimedia, renewable energies, science, tourism and hospitality). Consideration will need to be given to the terms of reference for the group, in order to ensure that there is clarity around their role and expectations of their input from the outset.

Question 24 (c): What should be the remit of the advisory group?

The advisory panel should provide guidance on both demand and supply issues. On the demand side, it could include guidance on the structure and content of sectoral apprenticeships as well as feeding intelligence on potential recruitment levels for apprentices and offering innovations in the development of apprenticeship schemes. On the supply side, consideration should be given to lessons learned in previous schemes as well as ways in which to provide better linkages between the training and on-the-job activities and consideration of how wider competency levels can be improved.

Question 25 (a.): Do you agree that Government should establish a range of the sectoral partnership groups to design and agree apprenticeship provision and inform demand annually, at a sectoral level?

We consider that government should use a range of resources including research and analysis from DETI, Invest NI and DEL. This can be supplemented by engagement with employers through existing business groupings as well as sector skills councils

Question 25 (b): Please comment on which stakeholders should be involved in the sectoral groups?

The Council recommends that the public sector as well as private sector is represented. Stakeholders that should be represented should be practitioners across industries and in particular, growth related sectors, industries where there are skills shortages and sectors where there is demand for training that leads to jobs.

Question 26: Do you agree with the following as indicators of the apprenticeship programme's success: quality, achievement and progression? Are there other criteria that should be considered in the monitoring of apprenticeship provision?

The Council agrees with the proposal. However we consider that DEL will need to be clear about what each of these mean and how success will be measured, including what a successful intervention will look like and what targets are to be set for providers in terms of quality, achievement and progression.

Question 27: How might Government empower employers, industry specialists and other key stakeholders to inform content, duration and assessment of each apprenticeship?

There are a range of sectoral bodies as well as the government organisations and business networks working in this field. We are aware of the Advisory Group on the economy – it may be appropriate to consider whether there should be a specific skills sub-group reporting to this group. This would allow for greater alignment between supply and demand.

Question 28: Do you agree that apprenticeships should be subject to rigorous assurance? How should the content, duration and assessment of each apprenticeship be monitored to ensure it meets the needs of the key stakeholders?

The Council agrees with the proposal that apprenticeships should be subject to rigorous quality assurance and cover examinations and practical assessments. This will inspire confidence and trust in the system, both for apprentices and for employers. DEL will need to develop a standardised monitoring system in conjunction with employers and apprentices. In the case of small businesses where there may be few resources for qualified assessors, the system will need to be flexible to offer this support. The programme should be reviewed and audited independently.

Question 29: Do you agree that quality of teaching and learning should be supported through minimum qualification and related pedagogy requirements for each occupational area?

The Council agrees with the proposal. The requisite standards need to be set out clearly so that participants and employers are aware of these levels from the outset.

Question 30: Do you agree that those involved in the delivery of off-the-job training should undertake professional training in pedagogy?

We agree with this proposal, as a means of improving quality standards in provision.

Question 31: Do you agree that stringent conditions should be established for continuous professional development to ensure that those delivering training remain expert in their field?

The Council agrees with the proposal. This is especially important for job areas that are continually changing, particularly in the ICT field. There should be options to join professional bodies such as CIPD and opportunities for peer assessment and sharing best practice. Monitoring reports for delivery agents should include reference to investment in continuous professional development by their staff.

Question 32: Should providers of training be approved only where they meet clear quality standards? If so, what standards should be applied?

Belfast City Council agrees with the proposal. Compliance with requisite quality standards should be a pre-requisite for any providers. One method of assessing standards is to use the ETI (inspectorate) to continually review and update standards.