



The Belfast Agenda

**Jobs, Skills and
Education Board**

Workshop Summary Report

10 September 2021



1 Introduction

Members of the Jobs, Skills & Education Board agreed at its meeting in May 2021 to hold a workshop to feed into the Belfast Agenda refresh process and to identify and focus attention on small number of priority areas for collaborative actions over the next 6 – 18 months.

The workshop was hosted virtually by Belfast City Council via MS Teams, chaired by Alistair Reid and facilitated by Ciaran Boylan and Dave Simmonds.

Appendix 1 contains a list of attendees.

1.1 Purpose

To consider the current economic and labour market position in Belfast in the context of the existing Belfast Agenda ambitions and commitments and secure collective agreement on a small number of priority interventions that the Board can drive forward over the coming 18 months to make a measured impact on performance and improve the economic outlook and educational attainment within the city.

Desired Outcomes:

- To challenge, reaffirm and/or refocus the current priorities and activity of the Board
- To consider and identify requirements and/or opportunities for new priorities and collective actions – taking the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic into consideration
- To identify convening action leads for the priorities and associated actions
- To consider how the Board could work more effectively, adding value beyond business as usual (maximise productivity and partners expertise and commitment)
- To shape and influence the refresh of the Belfast Agenda, ensuring appropriate consideration of jobs, skills and education issues and identifying priority areas for collaborative activity.

Appendix 2 sets out the workshop format.

2 General Considerations

A number of key overarching areas for consideration that emerged during the workshop discussions are summarised below:

- There was general consensus that the priorities in the emerging Belfast Agenda delivery framework are focussed in the right areas
- Noted that Covid is widening inequalities, NEETS and economic inactivity rates are rising and therefore a collaborative approach to addressing these challenges is required and critical
- The importance and potential of the Labour Market Partnership was noted along with the need to ensure we provide a voice for partners and those furthest removed from the labour market – Noted that the emerging action plan presents a flagship opportunity for the city
- The opportunity presented by the *'Fair Start Action Plan'* to address educational underachievement was highlighted – it is important that we develop a Belfast proposition which draws out and builds upon this regional approach with a focus on enabling and encouraging place-based delivery with supporting budgets

3 Priorities and Collective Focus

3.1 Belfast Agenda Refresh – Open Discussion

The first session of the workshop started with a presentation from Alistair Reid and John Greer. This provided members with a recap on the community planning journey to date along with a summary of key delivery highlights and remaining challenges, particularly within the context of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the City.

Members were provided with an update on the Belfast Agenda review process and the emerging delivery framework which has been co-designed with a core group of community planning partners. Ciaran and Dave facilitated an open discussion around the following questions:

1. What value can the Board offer/what should it focus on?
2. What are the big issues likely to shape our work in the coming years – economic issues and key policy developments?
3. Does the reflection echo partners' experience to date?
4. Are the areas of focus and ways of working right? Anything missing?
5. What would make it more effective?

3.2 Belfast Agenda Refresh – Summary of Open Feedback

This section summarises the key points received during the open discussion:

- There was general consensus that the priorities in the emerging delivery framework were focussed in the right areas
- Important to establish how we deliver on these priorities. The launch of the Skills Strategy, the emergence of skills councils and linkages with the Labour Market Partnership in Belfast and the need for partnership working were referenced
- Noted that the learning city adoption in Belfast potentially provides another platform to bring some cohesion and further collaborative opportunities to connect into many of the priority areas
- Noted the connection between attainment and progressing for those who did not achieve their desired grades into other skills programmes – this requires DE & DfE collaboration. Noted the need to be better connected in terms of addressing educational underachievement particularly around transition between schools and into further education – cited an example that BMET are not always welcome in schools and we need to consider how we can broker this conversation.
- The Skills for Life and Work Programme and Traineeship were noted. The creation of seamless transitions is something that is required. Massive increase in demand this year.
- It was highlighted that Covid is widening inequalities, NEETS and inactivity rates are rising and within this context collaboration is critical. Noted the need to ensure that those who are furthest removed from the labour market need prioritised and supported the most and that we need to ensure we address the disability employment gap and catch people who are NEET before they fall out of the system

- Noted that the primary purpose of education is to enable young people to fully realise their potential. Stated that we need to be careful that the economic and jobs agenda does not dominate over the education and potential of children and young people.
- Stated that Labour Market Partnerships are welcome and that the membership of the partnership groups should be extended to strengthen the process
- It was suggested that community planning partners should have more stake in community planning and be more focussed on delivering outcomes. We need to ensure the right partners are at the table and need to be more direct/focussed in the contributions that are sought from partners with respect to delivery. Would like community planning to have more ‘teeth’.
- Business community and Invest NI are willing to engage with those furthest removed from the labour market – referenced the Job Start Programme and working closely with DfC

3.3 Understanding the JS&E Priorities and Focus – Group Discussion

The facilitators introduced the first group discussion, providing partners with the opportunity to consider, challenge and reaffirm the current priorities and focus of the JS&E Board.

There were three discussion groups:

- Group 1 – Economic Recovery
- Group 2 – Employability & Skills
- Group 3 – Educational Attainment

Each group worked through a template answering the following questions:

1. Are the current priorities the right ones to focus on over the next 6-18 months?
2. Are there any additional priorities/opportunities that need focus?
3. What’s currently going well / what’s having an impact?
4. What’s proving difficult / barriers preventing delivery?
5. What are the linkages to the emerging cross-cutting themes?

3.4 Understanding the JS&E Priorities and Focus – Group Feedback

This section summarises the feedback received from each of the three discussion groups:

Group 1 – Economic Recovery:

Current priority areas & opportunities (1 & 2)

- Everyone agreed with the emerging delivery framework priorities
- Need to consider how we create skills and opportunities i.e. what sectors, what type of jobs etc?
- Noted that the economy has come alive and there is some optimism about the next 6 months
- Recruitment in professional areas should be a priority
- The learning city adoption by Belfast potentially provides a platform to bring some cohesion and collaborative opportunities i.e. learning neighbourhoods

What’s going well / having an impact (3)

- Investment in the city is attracting companies – hybrid working model is also enabling this

- Belfast has shown its resilience during the pandemic and the associated economic shock – A spirit of partnership and collaboration exists and there is a willingness to make things work
- Visitors from the South have been flocking to Belfast and this is matched by an increased number of businesses who are keen to set up in Belfast, all of which is creating economic benefits and opportunities
- The City Centre has come alive and there is great optimism for the next 6 months for growth and investment in business – creating jobs is not going to be difficult

Barriers to delivery (4)

- Government is fragmented and there is a disconnect
- Deep rooted problems and challenges meeting labour market needs - Children still choosing traditional areas e.g. plumbing/hairdressing, careers advisors not having the right conversations – currently lack of digital skills but children are not being advised to take these career paths – important that this is fixed in schools
- There should be a campaign for young people promoting the opportunities associated with jobs in the digital sector
- Need more flexibility and alignment in terms of supply and demand – ability to move quickly
- BMET and universities need to work better in terms of the offer for young people

Linkages (5)

- There is a need for better linkages and alignment across all of the priority areas

Group 2 – Employability & Skills:

Current priority areas & opportunities (1 & 2)

- Key point was to make sure that governance arrangements and partnership that cover the board priorities are effective and rationalised so that they are suitable for delivering the priorities of the Belfast Agenda – linking education, training and employment is important – also important to align with national strategy through DfE, DfC and DE
- Agreed it is important to see the purpose of education as more than just a supply to the labour market
- The importance and potential of the Labour Market Partnership was noted along with the need to ensure we provide a voice for those furthest removed from the labour market
- Governance will be important to ensure alignment
- The most requested skills in the labour market are – communication, problem solving, leadership building – it is important that we focus on attainment and ensuring people have a grasp on soft skills
- Need to prioritise how we meet employer needs and demands – need for collaboration and connectivity

- Need to consider the young people at the heart of the challenge who may not have realised their potential in school perhaps due to inflexible systems i.e. no maths or English GCSE so no access to their desired FE/HE course even with good results in other subjects.
- A priority should be to gain and reflect national priority digital spine / digital imbalance – we need to establish how this relates locally and what the practical steps are across the 3 priority areas to effect change
- Producing people who can access opportunities is key to provide positive outcomes – they can only do this if they have been through an effective school experience or system
- Key challenge – how we get a greater understanding of the education system

What's going well / having an impact (3)

- DfC & DfE have been having positive engagement at grass roots level and can see a change of direction and complimentary advice is working well
- The Labour Market Partnership is a real flagship opportunity – important for stakeholders to drill down and help shape LMP actions -
- Delighted with flexibility in ecosystem in response to the pandemic – demonstrates positive changes in DfC/DFE

Barriers to delivery (4)

- There are continued challenges with inactivity, including those with disabilities – we need to pool collective strengths, so they are not left further behind
- Stark reminder that those excluded from the labour market will be more excluded. Important that we meet the needs of the most excluded groups and give them opportunities.
- Engagement with those that need our help the most and are resistant to work with JBO's – we need to consider how we reach out and engage with those people
- Failure to Attend figures have risen from 30% to 50% post covid – very real challenge getting people to engage with the service
- Not meeting people in person has proven difficult to identify barriers to help
- We need to build a confidence in learning and opportunities that realise at neighbourhood level, build connected opportunities for health, learning and employment within communities. Much of what we talk about sits above local areas and doesn't translate to those who need help.
- Noted that Brexit is going to have significant impacts on the labour market and that we are losing a sizeable proportion of the workforce i.e. any EU Nationals not living here before January 2021 and even those with settled or pre-settled status face barriers to employment based on discrimination due to their immigration status

Linkages (5)

- Careers advice and linkages to employment – The Labour Market Partnership should consider this as it develops
- Need to ensure that the links between education attainment priority and children and young people priority to avoid duplication and maximise cohesion.

Group 3 – Educational Attainment

Current priority areas & opportunities (1 & 2)

- Early years is important as outlined in the *'Fair Start Action Plan'* – it is important that we focus and collaborate around this area across the appropriate areas of community planning and aligning regionally through DE.
- It is important that the *'Fair Start Action Plan'* is written large in the next version of the Belfast Agenda and that we seek to capitalise on any opportunities emerging from this
- It is important to recognise the importance of collaboration in the design of programmes and budgets – need to reduce the replication and duplication of activity
- Importance of date was noted – including the need to be smarter in terms of how we measure success as the standard exam-based approach takes a long-time
- There is value in summer interventions – transition communities supported by schools.
- Important to ensure awareness within schools and young people around the range of pathways available to them (eco-system of options)
- Need to define the 'how' and the forward planning element – commitment to co-design an action plan for the educational attainment priority

What's going well / having an impact (3)

- REACH Project (literacy) – there have been notable successes with further information coming in the evaluation report which will be useful learning going forward
- The role of youth services and their involvement in schools working with young disenchanted people likely to drop out of the system
- GCSE revision programme is having a positive impact across the city
- Taking Boy Seriously conference was discussed along with 5 principles they wish to trial within communities and schools - there is an appetite for community planning link in with this
- Suggested focus on lifelong learning going forward – opportunity to link in with the new Skills Strategy highlighting "Creating a culture of lifelong learning" as a key recommendation for building skills for life
- Positive collaboration between BCC, government departments and communities. Covid has shown strength of communities and local intelligence – this can be built upon by developing needs-based intervention

Barriers to delivery (4)

- Lack of integrated family support across the city for those facing difficulties and impact and influence of families on children and young people
- Lack of awareness funding to ensure young people know the available pathways

Linkages (5)

- Important that the educational attainment priority and the work of the supporting task group is aligned with regional plans via the A Fair Start Action Plan
- Important to ensure alignment between the educational attainment and children and young people priority within governance, delivery and the wording within the new Belfast Agenda

4 Collaborative Delivery

4.1 Action Planning and Delivery – group discussion

A short presentation was provided in advance of the second group discussion, which provided a recap on the role of the board and the key principles of community planning that should inform the development of actions:

1. **Outcomes focussed** – delivery should contribute to Belfast’s long term outcomes
2. **Partnership & collaboration** – Requires collaboration of more than one community planning partner (public, private or community & voluntary sector)
3. **Creating added value** – focus on collaborative gain and not business as usual activity. Actions should create added value through working better together
4. **Impact orientated** – Emphasis of delivery should be on practical interventions that deliver impact. Partners need to monitor impact by measuring the performance of actions
5. **Resourcing** – Delivery should require joint resourcing, commitment and effort i.e. staff, time, services or investment. Ultimate aim is pooled budgets but this is not a pre-requisite
6. **Evidence informed** - Priorities and actions identified will be informed by data, research and evidence

Partners worked to establish opportunities from a delivery perspective over the next 6-18 months, with questions covering the following areas:

1. Identify the right actions to focus on over the next 6-18 months? (max of 3 actions per theme)
2. Consider the best lead convenor & other partners that need to be involved
3. Identify key enablers to support implementation
4. Consider and identify key milestones (if possible)

4.2 Action Planning and Delivery – group feedback

Group 1 – Economic Recovery:

- We need to get better at gathering local intelligence from the hospitality sector e.g. how many specific roles do we need – can this be gathered on a weekly basis?

- Consideration of developing an adult apprenticeship programme – define what it looks like and promote it to cohorts trying to re-access the labour market through a new career
- Consideration of how we enhance the enterprise offer – promoting entrepreneurship as a career path / opportunity in schools/colleges. There is a lot of good work happening through Tedex Programme which could be built upon or aligned with
- Important to focus on PR, communications and other activities to drive footfall back into the city centre and support retail recovery
- A strong focus is needed in supporting business start-ups in Belfast, which will help support our economic recovery
- Using Belfast careers and jobs promotions programmes to create a focal point for digital careers – there are lots of jobs and opportunities in this sector that need to be communicated/promoted
- Digital South Programme with linkages to schools has proven successful in South Belfast and could be expanded upon or lessons learned elsewhere
- Following discussion agreement was reached on the following key actions:
 - All age apprenticeships
 - Assured Skills Programme
 - Development and promotion of a new enterprise and entrepreneurship programme which targets some of the more experienced / skilled people who have been impacted by furlough/pandemic
 - Sharing intelligence & developing partnership working – linkages with labour market partnership

Group 2 – Employability & Skills:

- Note that we already have an emerging labour market partnership action plan which has been developed in collaboration with community planning partners and others – important that we stick to this
- Agreed to progress with a Labour Market Observatory to give better labour market intelligence with a programme to be put in place to take forward. BCC are happy to facilitate but noted that no one body can take forward alone. DfC/DfE/BCC to have a further discussion to determine next steps in taking forward
- Agreed to engage with growth sectors (digital and tech) to develop pathways and positive outcomes under the oversight of LMP and JS&E Board – Collective approach is required to complement growth and how it is organised across the city
- The importance of drilling down past the stats i.e. to identify how many jobs, which sectors, trends moving forward etc

- Noted that managing transitions is critical and that we need more work between schools and employability providers in relation to people who are not staying in school at 16

Group 3 – Educational Attainment

- It was agreed that a collaborative action plan for the educational attainment priority would be set against three key strategic intents:
 - a) Improving educational attainment and employment opportunities and outcomes for children and young people
 - b) Use of quality data and information to inform effective planning, programmes and interventions
 - c) Collaborative partnerships with key stakeholders to enhance the learning and lives of children and young people
- The opportunity afforded by the *'Fair Start Action Plan'* was highlighted – it is important that we develop a Belfast proposition drawn from this regional approach to enable and facilitate place-based delivery
- Agreed to build upon areas of success such as the GCSE revision and youth support programmes
- Developing co-ordinated supports for key transition stages was discussed, particularly with respect to early years and readiness to attend pre-school and primary school
- Agreed to link in with BAOG to ensure that the educational attainment and children and young people priorities to identify opportunities for collaboration and avoid duplication
- Agreed to engage with young people, schools and communities to inform and support future delivery/funding – enhancing voices involved in the process and being as inclusive as possible
- Noted that place-based delivery is essential and partnership working and collaboration will optimise impact and outcomes
- There is recognition that the educational attainment challenge is cross-cutting and is influenced by a myriad of factors
- Agreed to build upon today's workshop by undertaking further action planning sessions with members of the educational attainment working group to develop and agree an Action Plan

Appendix 1: Workshop Attendees

Facilitators: Ciaran Boylan / Dave Simmonds

In Attendance: Alistair Reid (BCC), John Greer (BCC), Colin Summerville (DfE), Susan O’Kane (INI), Damien Duffy (BMET), Simon Hamilton (Belfast Chamber), Lisa Toland (BCC), Patricia McNeill (F/SOUTH), Mike Dawson (Belfast Harbour), Jamie Uprichard (BCC), Karen A Gillespie (BCC), Stephen McGowan (UV) Kendal Bousquet (VCSE), Joe Duffy (WBPB), Necole Donaghy (BCC), Deirdre Ward (DfC), Martin Boyd (DfC), Graeme Wilkinson (DfE), Joan Pedan (BHSCT), Alistair Stewart (QUB), Duncan Morrow (UU), Maggie Andrews (Eastside Partnership), Naomi Doak (BCC), Danny Power (Learning City), Susan Russam (LMP), Iain Deboys (HSC Board), Dr Heather Dickey (QUB), Jonny Cockroft (EA), Katherine Calvert (EA), Mairead Harvey (CCMS), Dale Heaney (DE), Aileen Cummins (QUB), Kevin Lavery (BMET), Jackie Redpath (GSP), Dolores Atkinson (Learning City), Angie Mervyn (WBPB), Laura Feeney (VCSE), Kevin Heaney (BCC), Carol Diffin (BHSCT/BAOG), Sinead O’Regan (BCC), Jonathan Twinem (BCC), Bronagh Lawlor (BCC), Brian Carr (BCC)

Appendix 2: Workshop Format

Item	What	Who	When
1.	Welcome and Introduction	A Reid	12.30-12.35
2.	Purpose and Structure of the workshop	C Boylan / D Simmonds	12.35-12.40
3.	<p>Setting the Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recap on current position & progress Refresh of Belfast Agenda (2022-2026) commenced Added Value of the Board / Opportunity to reaffirm short-medium-term priorities <p>OPEN DISCUSSION - Reflections from Group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the reflection echo your experience to date? Are the areas of focus right? Anything missing? What could make it work better? Are the ways of working right? What would make it more effective? <p>GROUP BREAKOUT DISCUSSION (1)</p> <p>Understanding the JS&E Priorities and Focus</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Are current priorities the right ones to focus on for 6–18 months? Are there any additional priorities/opportunities that need focus? What’s currently going well/ what’s having an impact? What’s proving difficult/ barriers preventing delivery? What are the linkages to the emerging cross-cutting themes? <p>PLENARY - GROUP FEEDBACK (1)</p>	<p>A Reid / J Greer</p> <p>ALL</p> <p>ALL</p> <p>ALL</p>	<p>12.40-12.55</p> <p>12.55-13.10</p> <p>13.10-13.35</p> <p>13.35-13.45</p>
4.	<p>Session 2: Collaborative delivery (6-18mths)</p> <p>Looking forward – each group to pick no more than two activities to focus on in each of the three areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic Recovery Employability & Skills Educational Attainment <p>GROUP BREAKOUT DISCUSSION (2):</p> <p><i>Action planning and delivery</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Identify the right actions to focus on over next 6-18months 	<p>C Boylan / D Simmonds</p> <p>ALL</p>	<p>13.45-14.10</p>

	ii. Consider best lead (convenor) & who needs to be involved iii. Identify key enablers to support implementation iv. Consider and identify key milestones (if possible) PLENARY - GROUP FEEDBACK (2)	ALL	14.10-14.20
5.	Summary comments and next steps	C Boylan / D Simmonds	14.20 - 14.30
6.	Close	A Reid	14.30