



Commissioner for **Older People**
for Northern Ireland

04 April 2014

Yvonne Croskery
Department for Employment and Learning
Adelaide House
39-49 Adelaide Street
Belfast
BT2 8FD

Dear Ms Croskery,

RE: Review of Apprenticeships, Interim Report and Consultation Document

I am writing to you in relation to the review of apprenticeships consultation as the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland. My role as Commissioner is to promote awareness of issues relating to older people and to be an authoritative champion for them.

My office has recently conducted engagement with older people, employer organisations and employers on the project *Valuing an Ageing Workforce*. Themes that have emerged through our roundtables are that older people, especially unemployed older people, feel that younger people could be deemed to have an 'unfair advantage' in the job market. They perceive that due to existing government policy, employers can give jobs to younger people for less pay, or more subsidies. Engagement with employer organisations confirmed that apprenticeships are heavily weighted towards young people, and that 50% of the Government subsidy on offer to employers for training is not in fact available when the prospective apprentice is over 25 (and no subsidy available at all in certain sectors). This is despite the fact that older people have some of the worst experiences of long term unemployment, and apprenticeships have great potential to help them too.

This review shows little appreciation of the potential of apprenticeships to help all sections of society and is very narrowly focused on younger people. Although apprenticeships will be open to all, the "primary focus" will be on "young people aged 16-24." I also note that in the Minister's statement to the Assembly it had even been considered to exclusively focus the programme on younger people, although this was rightly rejected to reflect career changes and the growth of lifelong learning.

I disagree with the approach taken by this report which equates the lowest youth unemployment with the "strongest apprenticeship programmes" in different countries. I do not deny youth unemployment is an important issue, nor decry the value of programmes that seek to reduce it. However, if the department seeks to equate



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successful apprenticeship programmes with low levels of youth unemployment, two things may happen. Firstly, the positive effects apprenticeships can have with unemployed older people could end up being ignored. Older people are also a vulnerable group, some of whom may be long term unemployed, and may lack the requisite skills or qualifications needed in a very competitive job market that is very different from the one they started working in. Secondly, a narrow definition of a successful apprenticeship programme as one that has more focus on younger people, and that leads to lower rates of youth unemployment, ignores the benefits apprenticeships can bring for all. Reducing diversity in the system will in the long term undermine the apprenticeship process. This conflicts with the Department's commitment that the *"development of apprenticeship pathways will lead to a greater diversity of participants."*

There are measures that could help older people if they are targeted at them. A central service to support and promote apprenticeship provision, with a UCAS style portal for applications, are actually ideas that were suggested in a roundtable we held with employer organisations. But in this review it is only their potential relating to young people that is discussed.

I believe that apprenticeships can be very beneficial for older people in gaining a foothold in employment, or re training and re skilling, in a competitive job market where they need to develop their skills. I note with disappointment the single focus only upon younger people and apprenticeships.

If you would like to discuss any of these points in further detail, please do not hesitate to contact the Policy Team via:

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Yours sincerely

Claire Keatinge
Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland