



RECRUITMENT & TRAINING

Battling the perfect storm

As sure as a wet weekend in August, Northern Ireland's great exam results make front page headlines. All credit to the hard working teachers and pupils, but when will we start to really look behind the headlines and see the thousands of young people who didn't make the grade, asks Ian Jeffers, Director of The Prince's Trust in Northern Ireland?



We are in the middle of a perfect storm for our young people. Record levels of youth unemployment, massive competition for university places, a private sector that is struggling, a public sector that isn't recruiting entry level roles like it used to and an education system that produces thousands of young people without the basic qualifications for most jobs.

We need to wake up to the reality that if we do not support our young people now, we will be paying for many years to come. The Cost of Exclusion, research conducted by The Prince's Trust, shows that youth unemployment in Northern Ireland is costing the local economy a staggering £4.5m a week.

There isn't a 'one size fits all' solution to the problem but there are many things that can be done that will make a big difference and the private sector has a massive role to play in making sure our young unemployed do not become our young unemployable.

I would argue that the private sector is already doing a considerable amount for our young people but that with a bit more support from government it could do a lot more.

There are two things that many of the

young people we support lack; role models and aspiration. Providing these will not cost anyone a fortune and look at any company in Northern Ireland and you will find both in abundance. Getting a young person into a meaningful work placement for two weeks will do more for that young person's self esteem and confidence than six months sitting at home on the dole. But it is more than just providing work experience. It's about linking that work experience to qualifications and the potential of employment. We talk to young people every day who struggle to see how they can break the cycle of no qualifications and no work experience.

We aim to break that cycle. Two weeks work experience on its own isn't a solution. But take a young man that wants to be cook and teach him about food and hygiene, give him some basic knife skills and then give him some work experience and all of a sudden you have got a motivated young man who believes he can and will be a chef. This isn't a pipe dream, it works. From cooking to construction we are showing our young people that we believe they can succeed. One of The Trust's long term partners is the construction and facilities management company H&J Martin. Their System's Manager,

Geoff Martin is in no doubt about the need to support young people, saying: "We recognise that investment in our local young people is an essential part of our planning for a sustainable future. The Prince's Trust has been invaluable in this process, providing young individuals who enthusiastically embrace work experience opportunities. The practical work placements we provide at H&J Martin prove a stepping stone for these young individuals."

This is a partnership – a partnership with the private sector that can provide the work placements and staff to support and motivate a young person, and The Prince's Trust that can create the programme of basic training and then provide the mentors to help that young person move into employment, education or training.

This cost-effective intervention works – three out of four people we support achieve a positive outcome. This wouldn't be possible without an engaged private sector.

As our political masters on the hill debate the next Programme for Government they should be considering how the private sector can be encouraged to provide meaningful work placements and how the provision of programmes such as those delivered by the The Prince's Trust can become universal. With this solution our young people can ride out the storm and we can all play a part in better preparing them for the future.

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