



Damian Hinds
MP for East Hampshire

First Published Portsmouth News
16 December 2010

Raising Expectations and Learning from Britain's Best

A lot of attention continues to be paid to the ever rising number of NEETs, the new term for youth unemployment. According to the Prince's Trust the loss of potential to our economy is enormous and so are the costs.

NEETs are a modern phenomena but this did not happen overnight.

The worst numbers do not have £ signs in front of them. According to Save the Children 1 in 10 children in the UK lives in "severe poverty". Worse, we now know it is possible to predict a shockingly accurate picture of someone in their 20's based on their circumstances before the age of 5.

While the largest concentrations of this may be elsewhere, there are plenty of examples of multi generational worklessness in Hampshire, too.

The seeds for what is rapidly becoming a lost generation were sown over many years; we are reaping the bitter harvest of a welfare system that drew people in rather than lifting them out.

It is a problem that long predates this economic downturn and the solution needs to look beyond this spending cycle.

If our policy on tackling NEETs is targeted at people between the ages of 18-24 we will always be a generation behind the fight. We need a plan which starts at the source, the earliest years. What makes the biggest difference? Inspirational, dedicated teachers and, as Frank Field's report last week makes clear, also the home learning environment.

We probably have the best generation of teachers ever in this country. Their dedication and commitment continue to impress. But there are also some gaps. More than a quarter of our primary schools have no male teachers. We know there is an undeniable link between youth crime and delinquency among young men and family circumstances; young men without fathers, on average, do worse in school and often end up in the NEET category that we are trying so hard to shift. We cannot just construct happy families but we can address the dire shortage of male role models in some schools.

We need to rethink who we are trying to bring into teaching and how we get them to consider it.

In America a concerted effort is being made to attract young men leaving the armed forces to consider teaching. These young men are being explicitly courted as role models, raisers of ambition and figures of authority; things all too often missing when we examine the path to falling, and staying, in the gap between leaving school and finding a job. Michael Gove has announced he wants a similar scheme here as well: it has been dubbed 'Troops for Teachers'.

It's a bold and direct plan to meet a specific need which will also offer a new career opportunity to brave servicemen, who are a credit us all and can inspire the next generation.