

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

RADIO 4

TRANSCRIPT OF "FILE ON 4"- 'LEARNING AND SKILLS COUNCIL'

CURRENT AFFAIRS GROUP

TRANSMISSION: Tuesday 20th February 2007 2000 - 2040

REPEAT: Sunday 25th February 2007 1700 - 1740

REPORTER: Allan Urry

PRODUCER: Ian Muir-Cochrane

EDITOR: David Ross

PROGRAMME NUMBER: 06VQ3634LHO

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

“FILE ON 4”

Transmission: Tuesday 20th February 2007

Repeat: Sunday 25th February 2007

Producer: Ian Muir-Cochrane

Reporter: Allan Urry

Editor: David Ross

URRY: The Government's been spending a fortune trying to increase Britain's productivity to meet the challenge of a global economy by improving the skills of young people.

ACTUALITY ON PLUMBING COURSE

MAN: So what stage are you at at the moment?

MAN 2: We've just fitted the radiators to the wall.

MAN: Oh right, so you're piping it up in the low carbon steel rather than copper?

MAN 2: Yes.

MAN: Okay, so, how are you finding?

URRY: This year the Government's main planning and funding agency, the Learning and Skills Council, has been given a budget of £11 billion to spend - that's bigger than the Royal Navy's. But what are we getting for that investment?

ACTUALITY ON BUILDING SITE

URRY: We've been onto the building sites, into the classroom and out to the workplace to put that to the test. We hear the frustrations of a company which can't get grants to train electricians at a time of national shortage, yet colleges admit taxpayers' money has been used to fund too many classroom courses for other trades. Even the Government's new Skills Envoy says time is running out.

SIR DIGBY: For the last seven or eight years it's been going in the wrong direction and skills has not been given the pre-eminence it deserves to make our economy competitive. We're at five to midnight, and I don't want to live in this last chance saloon, I want it sorted.

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY ON SITE IN LIVERPOOL

MCNEIL: Liverpool at the moment is really a hub of building activity. We're standing here in Paradise Street development in the middle of Liverpool, which is probably one of the largest developments currently going on in Europe, valued at probably over £900 million in total. It's only one of a number of major building sites which are currently going on in Merseyside.

URRY: They're calling it the Big Dig - the re-building of Liverpool, European capital of culture 2008, and it's been underway for two years already. Yet, in an area which has struggled for local employment for the past two decades, migrant workers from Poland and other eastern European countries are hard at work on these sites. Tom McNeil, of CITB Construction Skills, the national training body, says they're filling a gap.

MCNEIL: It's well known and well talked about, the influx of Eastern European labour in particular that we have within the Merseyside area. That, I think, is probably a short term solution, it's a solution which will satisfy the immediate requirements of developments like this one, which are maybe ongoing over the next three to four years. But as things move forward I think we have to move very very much towards our own home trained, if you like, workforce, which will satisfy our long term requirements.

URRY: What's been the skills shortfall then, the one that the Eastern Europeans have been making up?

MCNEIL: Those have been traditionally general trades – joiners and plasterers and bricklayers.

URRY: I'm told on some of the sites around here that the health and safety notices are in more than one language. Is that right?

MCNEIL: They are. We would obviously supply health and safety information in a variety of languages to suit the requirements.

URRY: The reliance on a migrant workforce in Liverpool is a stark reminder of the skills gap in construction, an industry which has been enjoying a boom for several years now. But there's also been a big drive to encourage employers to train new blood and take on apprentices. So two years down the line, you might expect one of Europe's largest construction projects to have building sites full of eager new faces.

MCNEIL: One of the unfortunate things is, in a project of this size, we probably haven't seen the number of trainees coming through that we would have liked.

URRY: Do you know how many you've got here?

MCNEIL: I don't, because it's split across so many different companies.

URRY: But not many?

MCNEIL: Well there's a couple of major contractors obviously involved in the site, but I think what we look at then is the number of subcontractors they have working for them. And this is the bigger problem that we have, I think, within the industry generally, is where the vast majority of the customers and employers that we deal with are subcontractors to some of the majors, and a lot of these guys are very small companies.

URRY: But I just wonder why, in an area like Merseyside, which for decades now has been struggling for full employment, why it still is that, with all the money going into training and skills and apprenticeships, you still can't get a local workforce to rebuild the city.

MCNEIL: I think there's been some short-sighted thinking in terms of some of the major construction companies in respect of apprenticeship recruitment, particularly over a number of years.

URRY: Why the short-sightedness?

MCNEIL: The pressure, the economic pressures that were on these companies a few years ago to remain in business and to make money has probably taken their eye off the ball a little bit in terms of training, and we need to redress that.

URRY: We wanted to find out more about the number of apprentices on the Big Dig. So we asked Construction for Merseyside, a publicly funded body which is supposed to be a partner to employers to create the workforce the area needs. It says it's trying to persuade companies to take on trainees. But no-one could tell us how many apprentices were helping rebuild the city. Figures, we were told, are "hard to come by". To chivvy business and industry, the Chancellor's appointed a big dig of his own - the new Skills Envoy, Sir Digby Jones, former Director General of the CBI. Sir Digby has taken the job unpaid - he says that's so he's free to criticise policy, if he sees fit - and he does.

SIR DIGBY: The employer will say, 'I have a choice here. I can actually invest in some of the time of a trained person to train an unskilled person on the job in an apprenticeship, but they won't turn up everyday. At the end of the day they won't have the work ethic, they won't have a thirst for knowledge, hugely expensive and they're going to let me down. Or I can go to Ukraine or Poland or Hungary and I can get a fully qualified one for the same money and I can have this built on time, make a profit and deliver what Liverpool wants for the money that they've given me.' Now what am I going to do?

URRY: Where's the incentive then? Where's the policy incentive to make them change?

SIR DIGBY: So what you have to do is you have to make it free, you have to make it easy and you have to reward them when they've done it. I, for instance, would like to see the Chancellor bringing in some system of fiscal bribe, that at the end of the day, if you get that kid through their apprenticeship and fully qualified, there's something in it for the employer. You've got to do it, otherwise people won't do this sort of thing.

URRY: That's not happening at the moment, is it?

SIR DIGBY: No it isn't. And that's got to change.

URRY: The Learning and Skills Council, Britain's largest quango, has been pouring money into Further Education colleges for vocational training to increase the supply of those hoping to become tradesmen and women, but they've left the tap running.

ACTUALITY IN PLUMBING WORKSHOP

MAN: How are you getting on, mate? Are you all right?

MAN 2: Yeah, it's all right.

URRY: Is it hard getting an apprenticeship?

JOSH: Yeah, very.

URRY: Have you tried?

JOSH: Yeah. I've got cover letters out everywhere at the minute.

URRY: You've written letters. Have you had any positive replies yet?

JOSH: Not yet, no. If you haven't got an apprenticeship by the end of the two years, then you can't go on to actually be a plumber.

URRY: Why not?

JOSH: You need to get an apprenticeship because it's assessed on a job site.

URRY: Do you think you will get that?

JOSH: Hopefully, yeah.

URRY: The problem for Josh Clayton here who's only sixteen, and many of his mates in this workshop, is that there's not enough employers to take them on. However it hasn't stopped the Learning and Skills Council continuing to fund these courses. Even senior college staff like Jim Branney think there's too many.

BRANNEY: We have a hundred and thirty first year students started this year, but the local labour market intelligence tells us that there's only fifty jobs in Yorkshire and Humberside available this year for apprenticeships, so clearly there aren't

BRANNEY cont: as many jobs as there are students in training. But the policy here is that if students want to do a plumbing course, that's what they do, so we have to take every sixteen to nineteen year old student who knocks on the door.

URRY: When you say you have to, what do you mean?

BRANNEY: Well, it's an open door policy here. The college expects that every single student who comes and applies to do a course will be catered for, and that's what happens across every curriculum area, not just mine.

URRY: I assume that the college can't turn away the chance for funding, because otherwise where are you going to get your money from?

BRANNEY: No, that's it exactly. We have certain LSC targets that we have to meet every year for sixteen to nineteen year old students, but we exceed them every year purely because of the policy that we don't turn students away. And if the LSC is prepared to pay for that, then the college is prepared to accept the students.

URRY: But it must be frustrating for you knowing that they can't often get a job on the end of it?

BRANNEY: It is very frustrating. I would be happy with fifty students a year if I could get them all jobs.

URRY: Have you taken that up with the Learning and Skills Council and said you need to be more targeted?

BRANNEY: The meetings that I attend is the plumbing industry interest group, they constantly have this item on the agenda, that the LSC need to change their funding methodology to address the skills gap rather than just to give students any course they want.

URRY: Why aren't they listening then?

BRANNEY: I don't know. It's government policy at the minute. Until that changes, I can't see an awful lot changing in the industry.

URRY: And with the funding tap left open, there's been a flood. Twenty-four thousand students are doing tech certificates in colleges. Blane Judd of the Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering, the trade body, says that's far too many.

Don't your members have a responsibility to the trade at large to take more young people on and to offer them the work experience that they need for their apprenticeships?

JUDD: And we do do that. But of course, part of the problem with that is that there are far more many people out there that want to be plumbers than we actually need. We probably need somewhere in the region of about 3,000 plumbers a year to satisfy the demand within the UK, and once you actually get to that level it's very difficult to find employers that are prepared to take on young people - or any form of trainee for that matter - in the sure and certain knowledge that at the end of the process they're either going to have to make them redundant or they're going to lose work themselves and close their business.

URRY: Blane Judd used to be operations director of an organisation called Summit Skills. It's part of the system set up by Government to make sure industry gets what it wants.

JUDD: I joined Summit Skills when it first got its licence, and I think that was the point at which the Government realised that they had, for too long, allowed the situation to be supply-led. What happened was that colleges were looking for any opportunity that they could to get people in, to give them the right to learn. But unfortunately what that meant was that they were flooding the market with people that were not appropriately qualified. Those people were then going out and looking to try and find employers. The demand just wasn't there, and as a consequence of that many of them will actually set up their own business to try and recoup some of the time and money that they have invested and as a consequence of that we're finding situations more and more where professionally qualified plumbers are having to go in and repair work that's been done by people who aren't professionally qualified

URRY: So, far from raising quality in the industry, policy mistakes have unleashed thousands of partly trained hopefuls, some of whom are trying to compete with skilled craftsmen. And it's not just the market place which is flooded.

ACTUALITY IN SHOWER

ELLIFF: Water was coming up and trying to come through these bottom gaps here, but it couldn't escape because of the way it had been ill siliconed round the bottom there.

URRY: What about the pipework itself?

ELLIFF: It leaked, the water was getting round behind there and going down both into my bedroom and downstairs through the ceiling, and it got into the lighting works as well.

URRY: Louise Elliff lives with her husband and three children in a small terraced house near Bishop Auckland. She bought a new shower but needed it fitting. She thought she'd found a plumber who could do that, through an advert in a telephone directory.

ELLIFF: It was basically 'fully qualified plumber' that I saw. It was a box advert – 'reliable, all aspects of plumbing work undertaken'.

URRY: Did you check his qualifications with him?

ELLIFF: I actually didn't, but he actually came to the house and he was really really nice and I just took his word for it. He arranged to start the work, he started on time, he completed the job and then the electrician came in to wire it up. We noticed the following day that we had leaks.

URRY: So what did you do?

ELLIFF: We phoned him up. We asked if he'd come and put the work right. He refused, and after that he started to get a little bit narky, so I issued him with a warrant and we took him to county court and I won my case.

URRY: And what did the judge say?

ELLIFF: The judge actually swung it for me. He was saying he was fully qualified, waving his what he claimed to be a fully qualified certificate in front of the judge, and the judge had said, 'No, this is basic plumbing.'

URRY: Did the court accept that he wasn't fully qualified?

ELLIFF: Oh definitely, yes, yes.

URRY: The plumber was ordered to pay damages and costs of nearly £1,000. But Mrs Elliff didn't get her money, because his business became bankrupt. She says the whole affair has cost her between £3,000 and £4,000 to put right. We tracked down the bankrupt plumber. We're not naming him. He's a 37 year old man who told us he'd been made redundant from an engineering firm, where he was a semi-skilled worker handling materials. So he decided to get some training at a college of further education, and enrolled for a tech certificate in plumbing, the basic classroom qualification.

What did they tell you about the course?

PLUMBER: Just that it was a full time course and it would lead you into gainful employment in the plumbing industry.

URRY: As far as you were concerned, were you going to get a qualification that would lead you straight into a job?

PLUMBER: Yeah, I thought it would be a recognized qualification, and after passing it I would be able to go and put CVs out there and hopefully get a job from it.

URRY: At what point on your course did you realise this was going to become a problem?

PLUMBER: It was about halfway through, and by then it was either give up and have a wasted year or just continue on and just try and get a higher qualification in it.

URRY: But the plumber has pressures of his own. He's three children to support as well as being a carer for his wife, who's been unable to work because of illness. So he decided to start his own business, having had no real on the job experience.

PLUMBER: I have done one or two jobs for such as family, and when you actually get out there and you're faced with changing a bathroom suite, when you first do it for the first time out there, it's very intimidating.

URRY: How well do you think you were able to perform or were able to perform at that level as a working plumber?

PLUMBER: Yeah, I had no problems. Family that I did jobs for and one or two people other than that didn't have no complaints about my work. It was always done on time, I didn't have a problem with it at all.

URRY: You did end up in a court case, didn't you, because there was a problem with a shower that you fitted?

PLUMBER: It wasn't nothing to do with the actual plumbing, it was to do with the fitting of something else.

URRY: What was the problem?

PLUMBER: I'd rather not go into it, to be honest,

URRY: When you were advertising during that time, you were advertised as a fully qualified plumber. Is that what you thought you were?

PLUMBER: No, that was a mistake on the printing. By the time it went to print that couldn't be changed.

URRY: It was a printing error?

PLUMBER: Yes.

URRY: Well just let me ask you one more question, which is whether you think that you did a good job on that particular shower?

PLUMBER: Yes, I do.

URRY: The man told us he's carrying on with his plumbing training. This time he's on a course learning higher level skills. The Government says it's recognised the oversupply problem and a number of other complaints that employers have been voicing about the skills strategy. It set up organisations called Sector Skills Councils, licensed by the Secretary of State for Education. They are employer-led organisations which are supposed to draw up agreements with the public sector about who needs what training and how that's to be achieved. Summit Skills, the council for plumbing and related trades, is one of them. Its former operations director, Blane Judd, says a jumble of policy targets has left the sector with a mess to clean up.

JUDD: What Summit Skills are doing is looking at where the funding needs to be invested for the whole of building services engineering, of which plumbing is a part, and then going back to the Learning and Skills Council and saying, 'This is where you need to invest your money, public money.' Now there are 25 Sector Skills Councils doing that and they cover somewhere in the region of 98% of the occupations in the UK. It's a process that will take some time, because what we're looking at is organisations being able to introduce the changes in the funding regime so that we don't actually end up closing down all our technical colleges and having nowhere for our people to go to be trained.

URRY: But on that point about training too many people, shouldn't that have been foreseen in the first place?

JUDD: It's true that there were opportunities along the way to spot that this was happening. But unfortunately there are so many different bodies with conflicting targets, so the Learning and Skills Council had targets on the number of people that they needed to fund through training, the colleges had targets with regards to the number of people that they needed to put through training programmes in order to be able to be financially viable, and then within all of that, prior to the Sector Skills Councils we had national training organisations, and those bodies were focussing on getting as many people through NVQs as they possibly could. So what happened was that we ended up with a conflict where everybody's targets were actually fighting against everybody else's, and as a consequence of that we ended up in the situation that we now find ourselves in.

URRY: The funding and planning agency at the centre of this is the Learning and Skills Council, which says it has a single goal - to improve the skills of England's young people and adults, ensuring a workforce of world class standard. It has £11 billion to spend this year alone on doing just that. Rob Wye, the LSC's national director of strategy, argues the training it pays for is now better directed.

WYE: We invest over £100 million a year in plumbing apprentices, a mixture of younger and older apprentices. Apprentices can't be apprentices unless they get an employer to take them on, and so it's very much a demand-led programme and a response to what employers are looking for.

URRY: Well, we've been to one college where they've got 180 students on what's called a tech certificate, but there are only 50 places for them with employers.

WYE: It's a shared responsibility between the state, the employer and the individual to make this training system work and really we need to ensure that employers recognise the need to take on plumbers. They're always complaining about skills shortages, if they don't help us with the training programmes then those plumbers won't be trained.

URRY: Do I take it, then, you're accepting at the moment there is this imbalance that's going on?

WYE: Well, young people want to come forward and train for those plumbing places, they're very attractive. What we are not managing to achieve is the take-up by employers. We don't determine the number of places that employers are offering, that's the employers themselves.

URRY: There are 24,000 doing tech certificates, but only 7,000 doing NVQs, which are the apprenticeship end of it, so we're training 24,000 but only 7,000 of them are doing a proper apprenticeship.

WYE: Well, I don't think you should disparage any form of training.

URRY: I'm not disparaging it, I'm simply saying there is a mismatch here.

WYE: No, you are disparaging those who are undertaking the tech certificate and I think that's a disservice both to them and their colleges.

URRY: I would agree if I was doing that, but let me just point out once again I am not disparaging people for training. What I'm saying is, what are you doing to address the mismatch that's gone on between the amount of training and the amount of available places in industry?

WYE: The move towards the new demand-led system that we're putting in place through Train to Gain where we train people who are in line with employer demand and so that will, over time, ensure that demand and supply are fully matched.

URRY: Train to Gain, launched last August, is the big new policy initiative at the heart of the Government's strategy. The LSC is spending £230 million on it this year. Skills Minister, Phil Hope, emphasises that it's putting employers in the driving seat.

HOPE: The clue is in the title. It's saying to employers, 'Train your workforce because you will gain something from that, you will gain in productivity, you'll be gaining profitability.' It's a programme that's rolling out nationally this year based on the experience of twenty pilot areas, and it's a service to employers where a broker, a Train to Gain broker will talk to an employer, identify their skills training needs and steer that employer towards good quality training providers in their area. Some of the training needs will be fully funded by the Government, some of it part funded.

URRY: But File on 4 has discovered the effectiveness of this new system is open to question.

ACTUALITY ON SITE

URRY: We've spoken to a company in Cheshire which wants to take on more trainee electricians at a time of national shortage, but it says it can't get any help from the demand-led Train to Gain service.

JOHNSON: The wealth of our company is the people who work for us. And if you haven't got trained staff, then we're dead in the water, so we're committed and have always been committed, because your company is only as good as the people that work for you.

URRY: Diane Johnson is a director of an electrical contractor and engineering firm near Northwich. It's her husband's company, a family business, which currently has fifteen apprentices on the books..

ACTUALITY ON SITE

MAN: Give it five metres mate...

MAN 2: Enough for five metres ...? That's enough, mate, plenty.

URRY: In this part of the country, some of the bigger businesses have folded over the years, and there's a steady stream of applicants with useful complementary skills from those firms, applying to Johnson's to become trainee electricians. But according to Diane Johnson, they fall outside of the categories the Government's decided to pay for.

JOHNSON: My understanding is that if you have an NVQ Level II or above there is no funding. Train to Gain is up to NVQ Level II.

URRY: And how useful is that for employers being trained up to a certain level, level II in this case?

JOHNSON: In our industry it's a waste of time, because why I say that is, most of the people that apply to us for a job have already got a GCSE, which is classed as an NVQ Level II. So who do I get into this company, at what level would that person be who would require Train to Gain? It's more high tech now than it's ever been.

URRY: You don't get any funding at all?

JOHNSON: No, no nothing at all. We thought Train to Gain would help us by saying, this person's been in the industry, or a welder or whatever, his industry has gone. We know that he's got quite a lot of skills that we could harness and bolt on the electrical side he would be useful, but we can't get the funding.

URRY: But you've tried this, have you?

JOHNSON: We've tried. I've phoned up and asked, you know, was there any point in me seeing a Train to Gain advisor, because this is what I'm trying to do? 'I'm sorry, no.'

URRY: Diane Johnson is not only a company director, she's a senior figure in the Electrical Contractors Association and on the board of Summit Skills, one of the 25 employer-led councils on which the Government relies to balance supply and demand. Mrs Johnson welcomes the notion of the employer shaping the demand, but she says Train to Gain is not delivering this.

JOHNSON: To me, the more you can skill people, the better it is, and all we're saying is, we can get the bods, that's not a problem. We can get the people into this company, if you want us to up-skill people then we need some funding to help us do it.

URRY: The Government's still tasked with the job, it says, of trying to raise skill levels. Now is this vehicle that it's created then, Train to Gain, fit for purpose?

JOHNSON: In my opinion not at the moment. It could be. It could be absolutely brilliant, but at the moment it is not fit for purpose.

URRY: Do you think the Government understands that?

JOHNSON: You'll have to ask them. In my opinion no.

URRY: So we did. Skills minister, Phil Hope, argues that the new demand-led system is having some success.

HOPE: Well we set them a target where 58% of the employers that are being drawn in – this is the current figures – are those who have never trained before or aren't training at the moment, so that we're bringing people into training – employers and employees – into training in a way that they haven't been done before, bringing direct benefits to those individuals and those companies.

URRY: Well it's curious that we go to an electrical company, one of those hard-to-reach smaller, medium sized businesses that this is targeted to, and they complain that they can't get Train to Gain money for the electricians that they want to train.

HOPE: Obviously I don't know the company you're talking about, I don't know the details. What I can say to you, that every company, whichever sector they're in, is entitled to access Train to Gain money, fully-funded – in others the

HOPE cont: Government, the taxpayer pays for all the skills for life, literacy and numeracy and any training that gets them up to a level II qualification for the first time and part funds the level III.

URRY: Well, you see, what they've been told is they don't want the basic, they want to train them up as fully qualified electricians. Because they don't fit into the narrow categories that have been decided for funding, they can't get the money.

HOPE: It's helpful hearing examples about that, because I'm sure we can learn from them. The truth from the surveys we're doing is that some 88% of employers have told us they are satisfied or more than satisfied with the Train to Gain service that they've received.

URRY: So we asked the Learning and Skills Council to put us in touch with a good example of the new scheme in action, one of their satisfied customers. We were surprised to find ourselves at a football ground, only twelve miles away from Johnsons the electricians, who have been left empty-handed.

ACTUALITY OF FOOTBALL MATCH COVERAGE

URRY: Despite that goal, it's not been the best of seasons for Crewe Alexandra, who are in the bottom half of Division 1 of the football league. But off the pitch, things are looking up. Train to Gain has put up money to help fund stewards at their Gresty Road stadium take a National Vocational Qualification. Thirty of their one hundred and ten stewards are on NVQ courses and, when it's not match day, they are in the classroom or at the ground practising skills like control at the turnstiles.

ACTUALITY AT TURNSTILE

MAN: I've got my ticket.

STEWARD: Have you had a drink?

MAN: One or two, aye.

- STEWARD: Do you know it's an offence to try and enter a football ground whilst under the influence of alcohol?
- MAN: Look, if you don't get out my road, I'm going to give you one. Now I'm telling you
- STEWARD: I'm sorry sir, I can't let you through.
- MAN: I'm telling you, get out of my road.
- STEWARD: Right, I'm going to get on the radio to the supervisor.
- URRY: But stewards like 50 year old Terry Dunning and John Edmondson, who's 62, have been doing this work for years, so are they actually learning anything ?
- EDMONDSON: We've had some good instructors, so we come for about three to four hours every time and ...
- DUNNING: It's basic stuff, but you do need a qualification.
- URRY: Is there one thing that you've heard in the training that you didn't know about that has really made a difference to your job?
- DUNNING: Not really, no, because I've been here six years, I've dealt with most stuff anyway.
- URRY: You had those skills anyway, didn't you? This is to get it sharpened up a bit, yes?
- DUNNING: Yes, it is. It's just basically honing your own skills.

URRY: In fact Crewe's been training its stewards since the early 1990s, it's just that now the NVQ certificate means on match days they can sometimes take the place of police officers, who would otherwise have to be paid for. Stadium manager and safety officer Cliff Simpson sees the value for the club.

SIMPSON: We've always done training and we used to do it to what they call the Football Stewarding Qualification, which was brought in by the football authorities, but unfortunately that wasn't externally verified and we needed something with external recognition.

URRY: Are they replacing police officers then?

SIMPSON: I can understand where the police are coming from, if they see a team coming down here and they look as though they're going to cause a problem, then obviously because of the risk assessments they do and the risk assessments that I do on the match, then we would employ police officers. But a normal match where there's no threat from the supporters, then we'd go police-free, which indeed we have done this year.

URRY: And how much does that save you?

SIMPSON: It's saved us 40%, which is a substantial amount of money. Crewe's not a big club by any stretch of the imagination, when you look at the Premier League clubs, but to save that amount of money on policing costs is brilliant for us.

URRY: Brilliant for Crewe, it will save the club £40 thousand a season, but it's costing the taxpayer almost that amount to train thirty stewards at £1,200 a head through Train to Gain. Rob Wye of the funding body, the Learning and Skills Council, argues the investment of public money is worthwhile. Effectively what's going on at Crewe is that taxpayers' money is being used to save the football club £40,000 a year on policing costs. I'm sure that the club is delighted, but is that really good value for the taxpayer?

WYE: The qualifications that are being undertaken at Crewe are qualifications which are at Level II or below, which are the sort of qualifications that people, young people get when they leave school. So we're talking here about adults who the state school system has failed, they haven't got those basic levels of qualifications that make them employable, not just at Crewe Alexandra but across the piece, in other locations.

URRY: But these people are being trained to be stewards when they are already stewards and have been doing it for years.

WYE: They are being trained to ensure that they've got the full range of stewarding qualification that will be improving their skill, upskilling them. Crewe Alexandra wouldn't be investing in this if they didn't see a bottom line benefit.

URRY: Well they do see a benefit and they get £40,000. I mean anybody can see a benefit as a business to that.

WYE: The whole philosophy behind the investment in Train to Gain is that where individuals, through no fault of their own, have missed out on basic literacy and numeracy or basic school leaving level qualifications, that it's right and proper that the state should invest in getting them to that level.

URRY: The Government argues that Train to Gain proved its worth during pilot projects, conducted before the national programme was rolled out late last summer, but evidence from an independent evaluation of those pilots by researchers commissioned by the LSC showed it had hardly any impact on the amount of additional training undertaken by employers - an extra half of one per cent. And not only that - Professor Frank Coffield of the University of London, a leading academic who's studied the skills sector, including Train to Gain, says the pilots also failed to persuade those companies to stick with it.

COFFIELD: It was research that simply went to employers and said, 'Did you do training under Train to Gain?' Yes. 'Did you get payment for your staff, take them out of work to send them on training?' Yes. 'Would you have done this anyway?' Yes. So why is the taxpayer being asked to pay for training that employers

URRY: Others also see the need for rationalisation. The CBI has called the national skills system dysfunctional. And a two year independent review into the UK's long term needs, led by Lord Sandy Leitch, published in December, made it clear the system must become more efficient and responsive to market needs. Lord Leitch also identified the need for institutional reforms and simplification, a responsibility of the Skills Minister, Phil Hope.

Academics say that this is a sector in which there's too much policy and too many agencies. Employers and others are drowning in an alphabet soup of agencies that are all competing with each other and it all gets terribly confusing.

HOPE: I recognise that criticism. It's one that Lord Leitch made as well, so we're making a number of changes to ensure that we make the system as straightforward as we can. So the purpose of the Train to Gain service is, an employer says, 'Hmm, I'd like to do some training of my staff, where do I go?' There's one place they go, there's one service they get and there's one outcome, which is they get the training that they need. So we've made it as straightforward, a one-stop shop approach to getting the training an employer needs. But the demand-led system means for the employer, they haven't got to worry about the wiring, all they've got to worry about is, I've got a training need, can I tap into some resource to do it, and they can.

URRY: The big problem here is there's, across the sector, you are failing to really engage the employers, aren't you? You've got to accept that part of this is a policy failure.

HOPE: Well, I think Lord Leitch was right to say there is a skills gap. There are real challenges in terms of making sure that we have a good partnership between employers, Government and individuals to both deliver a system of training that meets the individual employer's needs and which appropriately uses public funding in partnership with private funding to deliver that. I think Lord Leitch has laid out a well researched, well rooted, well founded statement of the problem and some of the solutions and challenges, if we are to become a successful nation in 2020 against the likes of not just America, France and Germany, but China and India too, who are massively investing in skills in their workforce.

URRY: But Britain has been spending vast sums too. The LSC has had a multi billion pound budget for six years - and that's just for England. Sir Digby Jones, the Government's new Skills Envoy, says it's imperative now that we start getting a return on that investment.

SIR DIGBY: It's been going in the wrong direction and skills has not been given the pre-eminence it deserves to make our economy competitive.

URRY: But the Government has, to be fair, hasn't it, the Government has put billions of pounds into this initiative, it's created all sorts of quangos and agencies ...

SIR DIGBY: Yeah, but that's what I call the British Leyland school of management – you know, you put an awful lot of money in the top and you might get an Austin Allegro at the bottom.

URRY: Is that what we're getting – an Austin Allegro?

SIR DIGBY: Well, it is what we've had in the past. And, you know, the old answer has always been, 'Let's pay more money, put more money in, that's the answer to everybody's problems.' Well it isn't. A) It's not how much you spend, it's how you spend it, and B) It's about ensuring that you deliver what the employer want. Now ...

URRY: But employers are complaining they're not getting what they want and the Government is spending more money on it.

SIR DIGBY: Quite, so it's got to stop and it's got to change. I think the investment of the last few years has made a difference for the better. What it hasn't done, it's like an oil tanker, isn't it? It's turning the oil tanker round, it just hasn't done it quickly enough. We're at five to midnight and I don't want to live in this last chance saloon, I want it sorted.

SIGNATURE TUNE