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Committee for Employment and Learning Inquiry into post Special Educational Need Provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities

Mencap in Northern Ireland's submission of evidence

1.0 About Mencap in Northern Ireland

- 1.1 Mencap is the voice of learning disability. Everything we do is about valuing and supporting people with a learning disability, and their families and carers. We work across Northern Ireland, England and Wales.
- 1.2 Mencap has over 60 year's experience of working alongside and representing the views and interests of people with a learning disability and their families. In Northern Ireland we deliver a range of services, support a membership network of local groups and clubs and campaign for equal opportunities and chances for people with a learning disability.

2.0 Mencap's definition of a learning disability

- 2.1 A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities - for example household tasks, socialising or managing money - which affects someone for their whole life.
- 2.2 People with a learning disability tend to take longer to learn and may need support to understand complex information, develop new skills, and interact with other people. The level of support someone needs depends on individual factors, including the severity of their learning disability.

3.0 Current range of choice and opportunities for people with a learning disability leaving full time schooling

- 3.1 Further education, training and employment opportunities offer people with a learning disability the chance to develop new skills, be as independent as possible, develop and maintain friendships and contribute to the life and economy of their local community. They also play a critical role in supporting families to continue caring, in enabling

parents to pursue their own lives and to continue to work, if that is what they wish to do.

- 3.2 Being able to access high quality training and/or further education is essential if people with a learning disability are to gain the skills, experience and qualifications they need to find and keep a job.
- 3.3 Young people with a learning disability are twice as likely to be NEET as those without a learning disability.¹ Only 17% of people with a learning disability are in any form of paid work, compared to 46% of disabled people and 80% of the general population.² Even where people with a learning disability do work, it is often for low pay and for part-time hours. Too often, the work carried out by people with a learning disability is described as 'work experience' and does not lead to real pay or a real job.
- 3.4 Young people with a learning disability and their families continue to tell us about the significant difficulties they experience when they transition from school into further education, employment or day opportunities and from children's services to adult services within health and social care services. Concerns remain about the underdevelopment of further education and employment opportunities; the effectiveness of transition planning; whether provision meets the growing demand for day time support; the short term nature of funding for new initiatives; and the lack of options for people with complex or high support needs.

4.0 Current range and opportunities: Mencap in Northern Ireland's employment service

- 4.1 Mencap's employment services have been supporting people with a learning disability to find and keep jobs in Northern Ireland for more than 20 years. Mencap offers a continuum of provision, across the province, that enables us to help each person we work with to develop their employability and achieve their career goals.
- 4.2 Through our employment and training services we provide help to young people and adults with a learning disability to prepare for, find and keep a job. We help individuals with a learning disability to explore their options, provide skills training in the workplace and work to remove the barriers to work for each person. In 2012/13 our employment service supported 641 people with a learning disability through a variety of projects and programmes. This includes 28 trainees who progressed into part-time or full-time work, and 60 people who were supported to retain full-time employment.
- 4.3 Trainees can remain on Mencap's employment services for 2-3 years, depending on their individual support, development and progression needs. Individuals with a learning disability apply directly to Mencap's

¹ Young people not in education, employment or training, Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Library Service, 2009, p.3.

² Centre for Disability Research, 2008.

employment services. We also receive referrals from a range of sources including family carers, Personal Advisers from Jobs and Benefits Offices, schools, FE colleges and local HSC Trusts. Mencap staff work closely with each new applicant to complete a vocational profile, which clearly assesses and identifies their aspirations and support they will need to achieve this. From this, a training plan is developed and agreed with the new trainee. A suitable work placement or college course is then secured, to help the trainee develop the skills and knowledge they need to progress into paid employment. The college or work placement is monitored as appropriate and regular reviews are held with the trainee and the placement provider.

4.4 Key features of our service include:

Support for young people with a learning disability moving from school into college/work

- 'Transition service' - providing targeted support, through work preparation and training, information and signposting to 16-24 year olds who are moving from full time education.
- Specialist 'Job Clubs', based in local FE colleges – a dedicated resource to help college students with a learning disability develop their employability and secure employment

Support for adults with a learning disability to gain employment

- 'Core' employment service - working primarily with adults with a learning disability who have left school or full time education, to help them progress towards and into employment.

Engagement and support for employers

- Employer engagement – on-going relationship-building and negotiation of jobs and placement opportunities with employers at management and operational levels
- Disability equality training - delivered to employers and their staff, by 2 Mencap employees who have a learning disability.

5.0 Best practice example in post school provision for people with a learning disability: HYPE Project

- 5.1 The HYPE (Helping Young People enter Education or Employment) project is run by Mencap in Northern Ireland's employment service, funded by Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) in partnership with the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB). The project supports 15 and 16 year olds with a learning disability who are preparing to leave school. The project works within learning support centres in 7 mainstream schools, supporting 5 young people in each school. The aim of the project is to better prepare young people with a learning disability to transition into adulthood and progress to the world of work. The project promotes individuality, respect, self-determination, informed choice, empowerment and

flexibility, supporting young people to have their say on their post school options and achieving their aspirations.

5.2 Some of the key outcomes of the project are:

- Development of good working relationships and capacity building with local schools, agencies and employers to support career choices of young people.
- Identification of best practice in further education and development of progression pathways for school leavers with appropriate support to achieve recognised qualifications to secure and sustain future employment.
- The development of positive and supportive partnerships between statutory and voluntary agencies working closely with families, helping individuals to achieve their potential and improve their mental health and well being.
- Develop the young people's ability to give their views on what matters to them, share their experiences and develop their self confidence and capacity to participate in and contribute to their community.

Views and experience of people with a learning disability:

Luke Hutchinson, aged 17, got involved in the HYPE project last year as he prepared to leave school.

"I got involved in the HYPE project as I did not have the opportunity to do qualifications in school and I felt that the staff didn't always listen to me, the staff didn't believe I could get into college. I didn't get the chance to try new challenges and courses that my friends did. The school didn't help my peers to understand me and help me to fit in. I felt that I wasn't part of the school and I often felt like an outcast, neglected and unimportant. I had low confidence and self-esteem, I found it difficult to meet new people and try new things, I didn't think I had a future.

However through the HYPE project things changed. The supported transition programme changed how I felt about school and my future. The project made me believe in myself and showed me that anything is possible. Through a range of activities I explored what I could do after school. I gained skills and knowledge that helped my understanding the world of work. I did an Employability Course which is a recognised qualification, which opened up the door to college. I completed work experience at Lynas and volunteered at Kilcreggan Urban Farm. We got to do lots of activities which built our confidence and allowed us to try new things with new friends, such as a rope course, paintballing and even zorbing!

6.0 Through the project I have gained confidence, learnt new skills, made new friends and found out that I can do things I never thought I could. I am now completing a Level 2 BTEC Diploma in Sport. The HYPE project helped me to get into the course as I needed a level 1 qualification and some work experience. After all the outdoor activities we did in the project, in the future I hope to become a sports coach with the support from Mencap's employment service."

6.1 **Learning disability as a distinct group**

Different terms and definitions are used across government departments in relation to learning disability, with learning

difficulty/learning difficulties, special educational needs and disability as well as learning disability being used. This can cause confusion and presents a challenge in monitoring and analysing the specific barriers to participation faced by young people with a learning disability.

6.2 Range of learners with a learning disability

Learning disability encompasses a wide range of needs and abilities ranging from someone with a mild learning disability to someone with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

The 'pathway' from school onwards for young people with a learning disability will also vary, with some young people leaving school at 16 years and others remaining in school until they are 18 or 19 years old. It is important to take account of the possible different ages, routes from school and into college or work as well as the different sectors and agencies involved with this group of learners and the impact that this has on the specific barriers to participation and inclusion they face.

There needs to be sufficient quality provision **at every level** and in every style of learning to reflect the wider range of people with a learning disability who are accessing education, training and employment opportunities. It is vital that there is consistency of provision and approach across Northern Ireland and that staff have the right skills to support them and to address the multiple barriers to participation that people with a learning disability experience.

It is vital that opportunities for life long learning are available to everyone with a learning disability, including individuals with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

6.3 Targeted access to information and advice

Young people with a learning disability and their families must have access to the information and advice they need about the range of real options available to them.³ This information should be in a format that is also accessible to the young person concerned and support should be provided so that the young person can make informed decisions about their future.

Whilst there is a statutory process for planning the transition from school for young people with a statement of special educational need, there is no parallel duty in relation to leaving college and yet this may be as problematic a transition for young people with a learning disability and the time when they are also vulnerable to being NEET. It is vital that career advice for school or college leavers includes the development of links with a wide range of employers and avoids duplication or course repetition at college.⁴

³ Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance Manifesto: review and update, 2012, p. 32.

⁴ Don't box me in: disability, identity and transitions to young adult life, DR B Kelly, QUB, p. 14.

6.4 Best practice example in providing information, advice and support to young people with a learning disability and their families post school: Mencap's transition project.

Mencap's Transition Project is run by Mencap in Northern Ireland's employment service and is funded by European Social Fund (ESF), Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT) and Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). Mencap staff work with young people aged 16 to 19 and their families in preparation for leaving school. The young people who are in their final year of school are supported to make informed choices and gain information about further education, training and employment options.

The project delivers:

- Support to the young person and parent/carer through the transition planning process
- Support at the school leavers review
- Information on and visits to college and training organisations
- Support to develop work placements
- Sourcing of transport to chosen provision
- Interview skills, support to apply for college/training funding
- Collaborative working with other professionals and agencies who provide information to young people leaving school

All the young people who are supported through the transition project move into college, training or employment. The participants of the project recently gave feedback about their employment officer and the support they receive. They said the following, 'They helped me to talk to my parents and teachers about what leaving school', 'I feel like I have a choice of what to do after school' and 'My employment officer helped me to get a paid job.'

Professional perspective:

Denise Sweeney is an employment officer in Mencap's Transition Project.

"Parents also need support through the transition process as their son/daughter. Parents told me that they entered their son/daughter's final year of school with high levels of anxiety and uncertainty. Having gone through the year with the support of Mencap's Transitions Project, their anxiety had gone. I feel that the main cause of their anxiety is because they didn't have information about course options, available funding and transport."

6.5 Provision based on individual aspiration and needs

Post school provision should be based on individual's aspirations and needs taking into account their hopes and wishes for the future, the skills and experience they need for their chosen work and career. There is a perception that the availability of further education courses and work programmes are based on quotas and funding arrangements rather than individually tailored and flexible support. We are aware of people with a learning disability who undertake a course in subjects they have little interest in or have done before because of the lack of alternatives available or the lack of support available in their preferred area of study.

Views and experiences of people with a learning disability:

Rebecca Brogan, aged 17, is a Young Ambassador for Mencap

“At the moment, I am doing a health and social care course in Rutledge Training Centre. This course will help me to get to where I want to go in the future. Eventually I want to be a social worker.

In school, there was a health and social care course available but I didn't get to do it. I didn't get any choice. I even had the right grades to do this course. This made me angry because I was stopped from doing the course I wanted to do just because my school thought that I wouldn't be able to do it. For a long time, all I have wanted to be is a social worker. I know that I would have been able to do this course with some support and help.

In the special unit in school, we were treated differently to other students. Everyone that has a learning disability should be involved in their future plans. We are still human and have the same rights as everyone else. We should still have a choice when picking courses and the chance to try out different options. It is not fair that we were told what classes we were doing rather than being asked.

Regardless of what happened, I am now doing the course I wanted to do. I am enjoying it and excited about the future.”

6.6 Quality of support within further education

Parents and young people with a learning disability can have concerns about the quality and flexibility of support available in FE colleges. While attending school, young people with a learning disability receive support throughout the day. In college students with a learning disability are often supported within the classroom but may struggle with activities outside the classroom, such as the social aspects of attending college and interacting with other students.

Professional Perspective:

Colette Slevin, Head of children, young people and families for Mencap in Northern Ireland, has 10 years of experience working with young people with a learning disability and their families

“Parents tell us that they are worried about the support their young people get at college. They recognise their vulnerability in certain situations and are concerned that they won't get the support they need to participate in college life. Staying on at school until they are 18 or 19 years old often seems like the better option but we have seen

6.7 Changing environment and impact of other policies and strategies

Other key strategies and policies are impacting on education, employment and training opportunities for young people with a learning disability leaving school. The Health and Social Care Board recently consulted on a regional day opportunities model for people with a learning disability.

The consultation defines day opportunities as “a package of community based day time activities which engage adults with a learning disability in areas such as paid supported employment; accredited further education; volunteering; social enterprise activity and opportunities to meet and make friends and use local leisure and recreational facilities.”

Under the proposals, there will be fewer people with a learning disability attending traditional day centres and more accessing day opportunities within their local community. Further education colleges may see an increased demand in the numbers of people with a learning disability, with additional support needs, who want to access college courses. This demand may well be for provision and support that the college may not have experience in providing, which could impact on the amount of courses that are on offer and stretch existing resources within the college.

Like everyone else, people with a learning disability rely on transport to get them to work and training opportunities. People with a learning disability, particularly those with significant or complex needs and those living in rural areas face particular difficulties in being able to access affordable transport which takes full account of their needs. While there have been improvements to the provision of public transport due to the investment by the department, there continues to be a range of significant barriers which make it difficult for people with a learning disability to use the transport they need. This includes the cost of using transport, the inaccessibility of information, for example bus/train timetables, transport routes which may not go directly to the destination a person needs to travel to but requires the use of more than one bus and/or train, the need for transport companions etc.

6.8 Monitoring, tracking and data collection

Mencap believes it is vital to collect data on the number of young people with a learning disability who are in or are not in education, employment and training. It is also essential to monitor access to and benefit from the range of DEL funded programmes by young people with a learning disability

Without robust data we will never be able to get an accurate picture of what people with a learning disability are doing when they leave school and the particular barriers to further education, training or employment faced by them or indeed whether existing provision is effective in supporting people into college or work

7.0 The barrier to co-ordination across departments, regionally and locally

- 7.1 Mencap believes that it is essential that there is a joined up approach between government departments such as DEL, DE, DHSSPS, DSD, DRD, OFMDFM and DETI to ensure that people with a learning disability have the support they need to have fair and equal access to education, training and employment opportunities in Northern Ireland. With regard to transition of young people with a learning disability from education, it is particularly important that there is effective cross-departmental working across the 3 departments that have the most impact on the lives of disabled young people at this stage i.e. DE, DHSSPS, and DEL.
- 7.2 Mencap in Northern Ireland is a member of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP), whose membership is made up of key statutory bodies and voluntary and community groups. Mencap is represented on a number of CYPSP regional sub groups including children and young people with a disability, and transitions of children and young people into adulthood. The CYPSP Transition Sub Group has published an action plan for 2011-2014 on transition into adulthood for children with disabilities, which lists key actions for departments in delivering six high level outcomes for children with disabilities.⁵ This plan has been developed on a cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary basis and underwent public consultation. Mencap would recommend this as a good starting point from which to take forward effective co-ordination of transitions planning and provision, both on a strategic and operational level.
- 7.3 There are less than 1 in 5 (17%) of people with a learning disability in any form of paid work.⁶ Employment should be viewed as a realistic option for people with a learning disability throughout the education system and opportunities should be provided for young people to develop their employability. There is a need to explore the diversity of

⁵ http://cypsp.org/publications/subgroups/transition/cypsp_transition_draft_action_plan.pdf

⁶ Mencap 'facts and figure' paper, Jane Alltimes, 2013.

work placement options, including apprenticeships, which would enable young adults with a learning disability to gain important skills to help them compete for jobs. They should have access to transport to get them to and from work and benefits to support people with a learning disability to gain or remain in employment.

8.0 Key recommendations

Based on the issues raised and evidence provided above, Mencap would like to highlight the following as key recommendations to the Committee for Employment and Learning:

- 1. For the Department of Employment and Learning to carry out a comprehensive review of the availability of tailored support and specialised guidance to students with a learning disability within further education provision to ensure that barriers are identified, gaps in provision highlighted and the needs of all students with a learning disability are being addressed.**

Further education colleges currently enrol approximately 7,000 students with a severe learning difficulty or disability (SLDD) every year, in both discrete and mainstream provision. Mencap believes that current FE structures, provision and funding arrangements are not adequate to meet the needs of young people with a learning disability and help them progress into meaningful and sustainable employment. It is also clear that demand for FE provision, which is not currently being fully met, will increase in the coming years, as the numbers of people with a learning disability increase and the health and social care plans around the Regional Model of Day Opportunities across Northern Ireland are implemented.

- 2. Effective and targeted monitoring to ensure that young people with a learning disability have access to adequate support to achieve their career aspirations, gaining accredited qualifications that directly relate to the world of work and help them to secure employment and become economically active.**

With less than 1 in 5 of people with a learning disability in any form of paid employment, the economic inactivity levels of this client group are unacceptably high. Research carried out in England in 2010 by Mencap indicated that 65% of people with a learning disability want to work.

- 3. Ensure the provision of targeted information, advice and support for young people with a learning disability and their families about the personalised guidance and support available and the adjustments that have and can be made within further education, training opportunities and employment.**

Information and advice is essential in ensuring that people with a learning disability can make informed decisions about what to do after school and what steps they need to take to achieve their career aspirations and families have the information they need to support their young person as they make the journey into adulthood.

- 4. Ensure that the Department for Employment and Learning collate specific, disaggregated data on young people with a learning disability who are or are not in further education, employment or training, including those who are not known to health and social services.**

Without monitoring the uptake and benefit of DEL funded support by people with a learning disability in education, training and employment, the impact and effectiveness of this support can not be evaluated and the barriers faced by those unable to access this support cannot be identified and addressed.

- 5. Mencap would recommend the action plan developed under the CYPSP Regional Transitions group as a good starting point from which to take forward effective co-ordination of transitions planning and provision, both on a strategic and operational level.**

Effective cross-departmental and cross-agency collaboration is essential to ensure that people with a learning disability have the support they need to have fair and equal access to education, training and employment opportunities.

9.0 More information

9.1 Research

Further Education: What people with a learning disability said about attending college in Northern Ireland. Report by Patient & Client Council (2011). This survey gathered the views of 88 further education students about their experience at college.

'My day, my way.' Report by the Patient and Client Council (November 2011). The purpose of this report was to give people with a learning disability the chance to voice their opinion on the ways in which they spend their day and on the range of day services and opportunities available to them.

'Review of transitions to adult services for young people with learning disabilities.' Prof L Lundy, Dr B Byrne and Dr P McKeown, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (September 2012). The report provides a critical analysis of transition to adult services for young people with a learning disability in Northern Ireland

in the context of: education; employment and training; and health and social care.

'The impact of transitions on family life.' Research report by Julie Jamieson, Post 19 Lobby (2012). This report details the key findings of family life where there is a child with a severe learning disability. It looks at family demographics, caring responsibilities, transitional arrangements and the impact on caring on the family. The report stresses the importance of lifelong learning, particularly for those with more profound and complex learning disabilities.

'Don't box me in: disability, identity and transitions to young adult life.' Dr B Kelly, Queen's University Belfast (2013). A follow up study of ten young people with a learning disability who participated in a study examining the family support needs of disabled children and their families over a decade ago. The current study investigates their transitions from child to adult life and explores their young adult life experiences.

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