

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

NOW Background Information

NOW is a NI-wide organisation providing training, employment and volunteer support services for people of all learning abilities and who are often furthest removed from the labour market. Since its set up in 2001 as a limited company with charitable status, NOW has developed a range of services to help the people it supports to realise their full potential and change their lives for the better, focusing on the areas of training, employment, transition and volunteering. The aim of these services are to ensure that clients: have the support they need to make informed decisions about their post-school future; have access to quality, accredited training which helps them prepare for independence and the world of work, and; to provide clients with the support they need to access the job they want, and keep it.

In 2013, NOW became the NI-delivery partner of the Lloyds Banking Group's personal money management programme, Money for Life. This award-winning programme is delivered across the UK and targeted at young people and adults in the wider further education, work-based learning and community learning sectors, helping them to manage their money better.

Recently NOW was appointed as the Northern Ireland partner for the delivery of Barclays Money Skills 'weeks', a money management programme designed to strengthen the financial, enterprise and employability skills of students' in further education. The programme aims to increase students' knowledge and confidence in these areas, reduce their financial stress and increase their chances of achieving their future goals.

NOW also operates two successful social enterprise businesses called Loaf and Gauge, the profits from which go back into NOW's work in supporting people with all levels of learning abilities.

Loaf consists of two cafes and an outside catering delivery business. Loaf Cafes are accredited assessment centres and provide training and employment opportunities for NOW trainees.

Gauge specialises in measuring and evaluating the social impact of organisations across the third, private, public and philanthropy sectors in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Submission

1. To examine the current range of choice and opportunities available for those with Learning Disabilities on leaving full time schooling.

Currently NOW offers a range of opportunities for young people of all learning abilities – including those with learning difficulties / disabilities - who leave school.

1.1 Transition Service (Funded under Project Workforce II): Supporting school leavers and families/carers to make decisions about the path to employment and training after school.

1.2 Youth Service (16-24 year olds): This service takes NOW in a new direction, directly responding to a need for an innovative personal development course to engage young adults who may have experienced difficulty with learning and communicating.

1.3 Project Workforce II (16+ with a learning disability or difficulty): Engaging those furthest from the labour market to gain accredited training and support towards getting the job they want and keeping it.

2. To seek the views of young people, family carers and groups representing children and young people with learning disabilities what services they would like to see in place and how the current situation meets their needs.

“I want to be able to get a job as I can be just as good a worker as anyone else. I might have a learning difficulty but that does not mean I have to sit in the house all day. I want to have a job that gives me my own money so I can buy things for myself and I want the support to get that job.”
NOW Employment Service client.

“I moved to a new school that was more academic and I fell behind. I didn’t have any friends and I lost confidence as I wasn’t able to learn the same way everyone else did. I dropped out and just sat around the house all day. After joining (NOW’s Youth Service) they sat me down, we talked about what I wanted to do and what I was interested in. They put a plan together for me and helped me get the training and mentoring I needed to suit me. I was able to learn better, I made friends and my confidence grew. Now I’m on an accredited training course that will help me get the job I want. Mainstream school didn’t suit me so you need different ways to training and learning to suit people like me who can’t keep up with mainstream schools” Former NOW Youth Service participant.

“Our experience of transitioning was very negative. It was a real change for my son to leave a group of friends and peers he had from age of 2 to 19. It had an effect on his mental health. A day care centre was never going to be an option for him. It is only now at the age of 28, with the involvement and support of voluntary organisations, that he has been able to progress and think about where he wants to go in life. What I found as a parent of a child with learning difficulties is that, outside of some voluntary and community organisations, there is no in-between for young people who don’t need the totally reliant environment of a day centre but also do not need the total independence of going to college.” Parent of a former NOW Transition student

3. To research best practice in post school provision for those with learning disabilities.

NOW has continuously monitored post school provision and has evolved our Transition Service to best meet the needs of the individuals referred to NOW. The prevalence of gaps in provision, particularly around young people with mild to moderate learning disability or those on the Autistic Spectrum, informed the introduction of an innovative Youth Service that is delivered in Collaboration with Stepping Stones NI. The Youth Service, which was launched in May 2013, is designed to meet the needs of these young people post-school.

4. To examine if the quantum and quality of post school provision for those with Learning Disabilities is meeting the demand and develop recommendations to address barriers to participation and delivery of high quality provision.

NOW continues to monitor and track young people through its Transition Service to identify good practice and any gaps or changes in provision. The Transition Model delivered by NOW is constantly evaluated by the organisation with a high importance placed on evaluation of the young people and families who avail of the service.

The changing profile of young people going into Further Education (FE) and the courses available to them have increased dramatically over a number of years. The traditional route for those young people leaving special education schools at 16 or 19 years old is now more typically to engage with FE College or Day Care Centre where there is more complex needs. This may not always be a good match for certain young people who could then fall into the 'NEETs' category if their transition plan is not successful. The voluntary sector's contribution to meeting the demand of supporting people through DEL/ESF/BHSCT funded projects has assisted in the development of new approaches to ensuring individual aspirations and goals are met. However NOW believe this provision requires a greater allocation of resources be allocated to ensure the provision meets demand and establishes best practice models across a wider geographical area.

5. Given the complex and interrelated needs of individuals in this group to identify the barriers to co-ordination across departments – regionally and locally – and make recommendations for improvement.

NOW has monitored and tracked a number of individuals post transition and continues to provide support if and when required through further successive transitions.

We recognise a greater need for better inter-departmental work to resource transition services regionally.

Individual transition plans should follow each young person and be reviewed at timely intervals to ensure they continue to meet the needs of the individual. Organisations should be flexible and be able to offer alternative provision or to signpost to other providers.

Community and voluntary organisations should be included in transition planning for young people and could act as the continuum between school and post school activities.

Transitions continue on for a number of years post-school and can often happen at a later stage when the young people leaves college, which may not be until early or mid 20's. Therefore, transition provision should not cease because someone leaves school or is no longer the responsibility of the Education & Library Boards.

6. To report the Committee's findings and recommendations to the Assembly.

NOW welcomes that the Committee for Employment & Learning is seeking the views of relevant stakeholders to help inform its enquiry into post Special Educational Need Provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities in Northern Ireland.

NOW's innovative Transition and Young People's services has been enabled by support from the Department for Employment and Learning and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, via European Social Funds. We hope to replicate this service across the rest of Northern Ireland as our programmes changes people's lives and make a measurable impact.

We certainly feel that more needs to be done to ensure better working relationships between the different government departments, statutory bodies and voluntary sector organisations involved in the Transition process to make it fit for purpose. We need to ensure that the vulnerable young people we all help do not end up falling through the cracks because of a 'one size fits all' approach to transition.

- 7. The committee must give permission for written evidence submitted by witnesses to be made available to the press/public at evidence sessions. Unless indicated otherwise it will be assumed that those submitting written evidence have no objections to it being made public by the committee. If witnesses give oral evidence, copies of their written evidence may be made available to the press and public at the hearing and treated as being in the public domain thereafter. Written evidence submitted by those not giving oral evidence will usually be made public by the committee at the end of the inquiry, by publication or other means.**

- 8. Those submitting written evidence should indicate if they wish to be considered to give oral evidence to the committee.**

No.