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Basil McCrea
Committee Chair
Employment & Learning Committee
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

20th October 2011

Dear Mr McCrea,

I write on behalf of the Post 19 Lobby Group to request an opportunity to meet with the Employment & Learning Committee to provide information on the challenging issues around Post 19 Transition which is faced by all young people with severe learning disabilities and their families across Northern Ireland. This is an issue that we would like to have influence the thinking and discussions on the new Programme of Government.

Transition is the process which indicates the end of education and children's services with a move over to adult services and for young people with severe learning disabilities (sld's) this happens at 19 years. The process is designed to begin between 14-16 years with the introduction to further education colleges and work placements-completely supported by the school staff. However it is often the case that things are being left to the last minute and this does nothing to ease the transition for those young people who find changes in their routine to be extremely upsetting.

There are a number of challenges which parents/carers and young people with severe learning disabilities face, and these include:

- Appropriate placements outside the Day Centre "catch all" for those with complex and multiple disabilities-the "one size fits all" approach doesn't work
- Meaningful opportunities for life long learning pitched at the pace of the young adult learner-person centred care

- Direct Payments , which actually work for the benefit of the young person with severe learning disabilities and not driven by budget constraints.
- A recognition in the Local Assembly that the rising unemployment rate amongst young people 18-24 years is not exclusive to the non disabled population as the levels of unemployment within the learning disability are equally difficult to overcome, if not worse as there is no government thinking on how to resolve this particular issue despite the fact that cumulatively the unemployment figures amongst this vulnerable group continue to rise.
- Benefit/Poverty trap-not only for the young person with severe learning disabilities but for their parents and carers. If a suitable Post 19 placement is not secured when leaving special school, parents and carers are facing tough decisions about their own ability to continue with their employment. Falling household incomes are difficult enough in the current climate but the added social exclusion that comes with staying at home to care for a young person with severe learning disabilities can be equally challenging.

The Post 19 Lobby Group is made up of parents/carers and special schools from the following areas of Northern Ireland-Antrim; Armagh; Ballymena; Bangor; Banbridge; Belfast; Coleraine; Dungannon; Downpatrick; Larne; Lisburn; Londonderry; Magherafelt; Newtownabbey; Omagh and Strabane. The Lobby Group is also supported by Carers NI; Disability Action; Mencap and The Northern Ireland Office of the Commissioner for Children & Young People (NICCY).

The Post 19 Lobby Group would welcome the opportunity to meet with the members of your Committee to discuss these challenges and suggest some further research through which solutions could be found that will be beneficial not only to the families of young people with severe learning disabilities but for society as a whole, as the saying goes, "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members." ~ Mahatma Ghandi

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely
Julie Jamieson

Chair Hill Croft School PTA
Lead Post 19 Lobby Group