

Mrs Cathie White
Clerk to the Committee
Committee for Employment and Learning
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
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Our Ref: SUB/621/14

December 2014

Dear Cathie,

On the 8 October 2014 Departmental officials provided a briefing on research concerning labour mobility. During the subsequent discussion, the Committee sought information on the work of the Department, in conjunction with other Executive Departments, on the issue of transitions for young people with severe learning disabilities.

The background to this matter is that following significant interest on the subject from parents, representatives and Assembly Members, the Minister for Employment and Learning raised the issue with the Bamford Ministerial Group on Mental Health and Learning Disability. As a result of this, Ministers agreed to establish a working group of officials from across relevant Departments, led by the Department for Employment and Learning. The aim was to consider gaps in provision and identify opportunities for making improvements.

Subsequently, in conjunction with other Departments, DEL has developed and is finalising a paper and related Action Plan. The Bamford Ministerial Group discussed progress at its last meeting on 20 November 2014 and officials will meet to determine the way forward.

I attach at **Annex A** an update on progress.

Yours sincerely,

FIONA STANLEY
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer

Transitions for Young People with Severe Learning Difficulties/Disabilities (SLDD)

Overview of Progress

Following significant interest on the issue of transitions for young people with severe learning difficulties/disabilities (SLDD), the Minister for Employment and Learning responded to concerns by instructing the Department to undertake a range of actions aimed ultimately at examining, and where possible improving upon, current provision. In addition, the Minister raised the issue with the Bamford Ministerial Group on Mental Health and Learning Disability (the 'Ministerial Group').

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) emphasised that whilst is strongly focused on supporting the economy and will allocate resources accordingly, this will not be to the exclusion of a wider range of activities and support. The Bamford Ministerial Group agreed that DEL would chair a cross departmental group of officials who would consider current gaps in provision and opportunities for making improvements. The officials' group consisted of representatives from DEL, OFMDFM, DSD, DARD, DHSSPS, DRD, DCAL, and DE.

Data

Each Department holds information on people with SLDD accessing its services. The key data to emerge so far are:

- DHSSPS statistics (April 2012 to March 2013) show that 9,192 persons with a learning disability were in contact with HSC Trusts.
- DE statistics for the 2012/13 academic year show that, for people leaving school: 577 had mild to moderate learning difficulties; and 132 had severe

learning difficulties. There were 23,338 school leavers in the 2012/13 academic year.

- DEL statistics (April 2012 to March 2013) show that, for persons with a learning disability or learning difficulty: 7,284 were enrolled in Further Education; 275 were enrolled in Higher Education; 494 on employment support programmes; and 11 in residential training.

Although this information is useful, it is considered there is scope to focus further on those with SLDD to better address their needs.

Cross departmental group of officials

The group of officials met on four occasions from February 2014 until August 2014. There was also a limited engagement with a range of organisations, including parents and carers, who represented the interests of young people with severe learning disabilities in order to hear about their concerns and to better inform the work of the group. Whilst some young people with SLDD were invited to attend meetings, in the end they were unable to do so for various personal reasons.

Action Plan

A draft Action Plan for young people with SLDD leaving school into adult services is being finalised by officials and identifies the following seven main issues:

- Lack of awareness among young people and parents/carers about transition process, with an emphasis on role of transition officers/key support workers
- Lack of post-19 opportunities for young people.
- Inconsistent levels of transition support/ services throughout Northern Ireland.
- Lack of meaningful full time provision restricts personal development. Also, this can prevent carers from being economically active.
- Not learning from or applying best practice models of transition from school to adult life.

- Limited access and opportunities to participate in social, cultural and sporting activities, including evening and weekend events, to help develop and maintain social skills.
- Limited awareness among some frontline service providers of the needs of young people with SLD.

The draft Action Plan is seeking to outline the proposed Departmental actions which could help better address the reported gaps in provision/issue of concern, many of which will require cross departmental work in order to deliver improved provision.

Wider Issue

During the Group's engagement with parents/carers and representatives of young people with SLDD, a substantive issue of concern arose which was wider than the issue of transitions for young people from school to adult life. This entails the need for adults to have access to a lifelong provision of support that enhances their quality of life and meets their long term development needs. There is a reported need for lifelong support to match people's changing needs and the changes in service provision.

This relates to the short term nature of funding for some support services, particularly those delivered by the voluntary and community sector. The concern is that effective transition planning throughout an individual's life cycle is hampered as planned for services may no longer be available which can cause significant additional frustration to this vulnerable group due to their need for continuity and routine in their daily lives.

Education and Training Inspectorate Report - Transitions

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by DE to evaluate the effectiveness of transition arrangements from special schools/mainstream learning support centres to post-school provision. The Report (see **Appendix 1** for more details) was published on 1 September 2014.

ETI found that the transition programme has improved and examples of effective collaborative working are evident. The report highlights the good practices which ensure the smooth and effective transition for the majority of pupils and, in contrast, the poor options and choices for those pupils at post-19 stage, for which health and social services have responsibility.

The Report makes a number of recommendations with the highest priority recommendation highlighting the need for a comprehensive review by DE and DHSSPS of the transition arrangements for a minority of the most vulnerable pupils in order to help restore the confidence of parents and schools and improve the provision which these pupils deserve and are entitled to. It suggests that it be will be for DHSSPS to address the quality and availability of post-19 provision for these pupils.

Education and Training Inspectorate Report - Transitions

The Education and Training Inspectorate was commissioned by DE to evaluate the effectiveness of transition arrangements from special schools/mainstream learning support centres to post-school provision. The Report (link to full report below) was published on 1 September 2014.

<http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/surveys-evaluations/surveys-evaluations-post-primary/surveys-evaluations-post-primary-2014/a-survey-report-on-transition-arrangements-from-special-schools-and-mainstream-learning-support-centres-to-post-school-provision-2.pdf>

The report highlights good practice that ensures a smooth and effective transition for the majority of the pupils and, in contrast, the poor options and choices for those pupils at post-19 stage, for which health and social services have responsibility. Its key findings are:

- The majority of parents are content with the current transition arrangements and the efforts of schools to ensure that post-school placement is secured at an early stage and is appropriate.
- A small minority of parents of pupils with complex needs are concerned about the lack of post-school provision for their children transferring to adult health and social services provision; the impact on these parents and their children is significant.
- Schools maintain a well-organised careers curriculum and programme of support for almost all of the pupils moving to further education (FE) and training and pupils are benefiting from improved provision across the FE sector.

- Schools are concerned about the need for additional staffing support to provide more effective independent travel-training for pupils capable of making their way to FE colleges and training centres.
- While there is variation between rural and urban areas in terms of accessible provision and support from voluntary agencies, all schools express strongly their constant frustration in securing adult services places and in the variable nature of the quality of these placements.

The ETI summary finds “that the transition programme has improved. Examples of effective collaborative working are evident. However, the transition processes for schools and for some parents of a small minority of pupils transferring to health provision are consistently hampered by a lack of appropriate post-school provision and commitment to working more purposefully to address the deficiencies which this report, and others previously, have sought to highlight in the interests of parents and pupils alike.

The report makes a number of recommendations, with the highest priority recommendation highlighted as the need for a comprehensive review by DE and DHSSPS of the transition arrangements for a minority of the most vulnerable pupils in order to help restore the confidence of parents and schools and improve the provision which these pupils deserve and are entitled to. It will be for DHSSPS to address the quality and availability of post-19 provision for these pupils. The other recommendations, which are largely based on suggestions put forward by the schools, and are focused on DE and DHSSPS provision, are as follows:

- need for further collaboration across the special schools and learning support centres to share the good practice developed to date in transition programmes, for example, to share the good practice in the Belfast clustering of special schools where shared working is effective;
- need to consolidate, review, extend and evaluate progress made in post-16 provision for pupils with moderate learning difficulties;

- need to develop further systems for mentoring, coaching and supporting pupils to develop the necessary social and life-skills to avail of provision post-school, whatever the location;
- need for resources to develop independent travel-training, particularly in rural areas and outlying urban locations; and
- need to engage further with those voluntary agencies not represented outside Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, in order to influence them to extend to those rural areas where provision is limited.