

Mrs Cathie White  
Clerk to the Committee  
Committee for Employment and Learning  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

**Our Ref: COR/108/15**  
March 2015

Dear Cathie,

**ACTION ON HEARING LOSS (AHL) EVIDENCE TO COMMITTEE**

I refer to the Committee's email request of 5 March 2015 regarding the above.

In September 2014 the Minister for Employment and Learning helped launch the AHL commissioned Report. The Minister welcomed the useful contribution the research was making in helping government, the Department, and also the Department's service providers, to better understand the genuine and practical issues of concern which have been identified in the report. He emphasised its importance to everyone who has a role in providing support, as it can help to make improvements to services for this vulnerable group of young people.

The findings from the research have been shared across all key policy areas within the Department as it identifies a number of issues which are of particular relevance to us and our business partners.

The Department's current provision aims to offer a range of client-centred services which provide additional support for people affected by hearing loss. For your information, the attached **Appendix** outlines the key support services which the Department offers that aim to help support young people with hearing loss and also, highlights areas where the Department works in partnership with AHL or where they provide a direct contribution.

The Minister has also corresponded directly with AHL on this matter.

Although the Department is facing a particularly difficult budgetary period, the Minister has made clear that the Department will continue to place a high priority on delivering support that helps vulnerable individuals overcome barriers. In this regard

a number of strategic initiatives are being taken forward, in conjunction with a range of key stakeholders such as Action on Hearing Loss, to help develop and deliver new and/or improved services.

These include:

- developing a new Disability Employment and Skills Strategy to better support people with disabilities across Northern Ireland. Action on Hearing Loss is represented on the Strategic Working Group that have been leading on this development;
- the allocation of an additional £1 million in funding to improve the level of support provided for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities enrolled in further education provision;
- the implementation of recommendations from a review of careers policy and practice, which aims to ensure that provision reflects the needs of a modern vibrant and dynamic economy, in which all individuals have access to independent, high quality advice. The Careers Service will also play an active role in the delivery of the new Disability Employment and Skills Strategy;
- the implementation of a new Northern Ireland European Social Fund programme from 2015. The programme will have a dedicated thematic objective to promote active inclusion with a view to promoting equality of opportunity for all of our citizens. It will provide funding to support employment programmes designed specifically to support people with all forms of disability or health conditions to overcome barriers to employment;
- the outworking of the Widening Participation strategy “Access to Success”. This aims to increase the numbers of students from groups who are currently under-represented, in particular students from disadvantaged backgrounds – including those with disabilities such as hearing impairments; and
- the development of new Further Education Strategy for Northern Ireland. One of the key themes in this strategy is social inclusion, which is driven by improved job skills and capabilities. The new strategy will ensure that colleges continue to address the issue of social inclusion by widening participation in further education, including learners with barriers and those who are furthest from the labour market.
- The development of a new strategy to tackle the persistently high levels of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland. The strategy will seek to help a range of economically inactive groups of working age (16-64) (lone parents, carers and individuals with a work-limiting health condition or disability) on a voluntary basis to overcome their personal labour market barriers and to move towards, and into, employment.

- The implementation of the new Apprenticeship Strategy includes a commitment to widening access to apprenticeships to underrepresented groups. This will be achieved by addressing imbalances and removing barriers to participation and identifying areas where additional support is required to overcome difficulties in accessing apprenticeships.

In addition to these new initiatives there are already well established arrangements in place to facilitate individuals with a hearing disability to participate fully in suitable programmes. Details of the support are outlined in the attached **Appendix**.

Our work on new and existing initiatives highlights the Department's commitment to work collaboratively with Action on Hearing Loss, and other key stakeholders, in order to identify the barriers faced by young people and also, our intent to improve services.

Yours sincerely,

**FIONA STANLEY**  
**Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer**  
**Enc**

## Appendix

### DEL services for hearing loss clients and activity with Action on Hearing Loss (AHL)

#### Disability Employment Service (DES)

1. DES provides a range of support to assist people with disabilities, including those affected by hearing loss, to obtain and retain employment. Programmes include the following:
  - **Work Connect:** aims to improve client employability and assist appropriate clients to find and keep work. Work Connect enables the Department to deliver, in partnership with a strong consortium of local disability organisations, a programme that offers quality pre-employment and employment provision to people with disabilities who are capable of moving into full and part-time work with the right type of support. **AHL** are part of the consortium delivering this programme on behalf of DES throughout Northern Ireland.
  - **Access to Work:** a flexible, individually assessed programme providing financial assistance and support to help disabled people overcome practical and other disability related barriers when trying to access or sustain paid employment.
  - **Workable (NI):** provides a flexible range of support to assist people with significant disability related barriers, move into and stay in work, offering the opportunity for people to progress into unsupported employment. It is delivered on behalf of the department, through a number of specialist provider organisations from the local disability sector, including **AHL**.
  - **Occupational Psychology Services:** offer advice and guidance in areas relating to work, disability and health. People who have a health condition or disability can access an employment assessment conducted by an

Occupational Psychologist to help identify the impact of their condition, strengths and abilities for work and training.

2. DES has a contract with **AHL** (via Access to Work) for workplace occupational/ technical assessments for hearing loss clients. DES also provides support to people with hearing loss through meeting the cost of independent interpreters and works closely with a number of organisations, including **AHL**, to promote services and employment opportunities for people a hearing disability.
3. In the past two years, Access to Work has been used to assist people with a hearing impairment throughout the duration of major recruitment competitions with organisations such as Premier Inns Hotel chain, Fitzers at the Titanic Quarter and Belfast City Council. **AHL** also had direct input into these recruitment exercises whereby they were invited by DES to nominate their own clients who may be interested in the job roles that were on offer.

#### European Social Fund Projects

4. DES has provided public match funding for twelve local disability employment projects throughout Northern Ireland, being supported primarily through the Department's European Social Fund. One of these projects is the Employability Programme for Deaf People which is delivered by **AHL**. This project delivers vocational and employability skills, training and work preparation for deaf people.

#### Disability Employment and Skills Strategy

5. DES is currently working on the development of a new Employment and Skills Strategy for people with disabilities across Northern Ireland. This is being developed in close partnership with the local disability sector, through a strategic working group. **AHL** is represented on the strategic working group and have contributed to the draft public consultation document. As part of a thorough pre-consultation process, eight Engagement events were organised and facilitated by DES and the respective disability organisations. At the request of **AHL**, a specific consultation event was organised for **AHL** clients at

their Belfast premises. The feedback from all of the events has been analysed and will be factored into the new strategy.

### **Social Clauses**

6. The Employment Service helps deliver the Programme for Government (PfG) 2011-15 commitment to include social clauses in public procurement contracts for supplies, services and construction. The Department's social clause team, situated within Employer Engagement Branch provides a supply chain and monitoring role for social clause contracts notified to the team.

### **Careers Service**

7. The Careers Service is an all age, all ability service. Careers advisers offer support to individuals, including those with a hearing loss, at all stages in their career journey. Careers advisers are professionally qualified and receive disability awareness training. The Careers Service works closely with external disability support agencies, such as **AHL**, to ensure their services are fully accessible.
8. To ensure that pupils in education have access to appropriate careers guidance the Careers Service has partnership agreements in place with post-primary schools including special schools. These agreements allow careers advisers, in consultation with schools, the opportunity to offer a range of services appropriate to the needs of their pupils, including those with a hearing loss, and to support them in the transition process.
9. Working with multi-disciplinary teams including teachers and educational psychologists, they contribute to the young person's Transition Plan by providing impartial careers guidance on the range of educational, training and employment opportunities available to them. These meetings enable the young person and their parents/guardians to access information and guidance regarding all the options in education, training and employment open to them on leaving school as well as the support available.

10. In relation to the recruitment of careers advisers with hearing loss, the Civil Service is committed to making appointments based on merit in fair and open competition, and without unlawful discrimination of any kind. The Civil Service is also committed to ensuring that our processes are open and transparent and create confidence amongst all sections of the wider community to apply for and compete for job opportunities.

### **Training**

11. There are arrangements in place for training participants with a disability, including a hearing disability, on the Training for Success (TfS) and ApprenticeshipsNI programmes. The following organisations are contracted to deliver disability support services: Sensory Learning: Ulster Supported Employment Ltd (USEL): the Cedar Foundation: and Disability Action.

#### **Training for Success**

12. The Department provides a guarantee of a training place through the Training for Success (TfS) programme to those who are unemployed and in the 16 and 17 year old age group, with extended eligibility for those with a disability or from an in-care background.

#### **ApprenticeshipsNI**

13. Disability support services are available for apprentices with a hearing, visual, or other physical disability.
14. Specific arrangements for people with a disability include:
  - extended eligibility under TfS up to age 22;
  - payment of a supplement to help a Training Supplier provide significant additional input of resources, such as specialist equipment;
  - funding to provide specialist support , for those who have a moderate, severe or profound hearing loss; and

- the provision of a Pre-Entry Support Service under TfS to help identify and put in place support requirements on entry to training.

### **Further Education (FE) Colleges**

15. FE Colleges must comply with their legal duty under the Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005 (SEND0) to make reasonable adjustments to allow students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (SLDD) access to both premises and mainstream curriculum. For deaf or hard of hearing students, adjustments include the provision of interpreters, assistive technologies, modified exam papers and/ or one-to-one support outside the classroom.

### **Additional Funding and Support**

16. Colleges also receive additional funding from the Department's Additional Support Fund (ASF) to help provide any additional necessary technical and/or personal support, such as signers or notetakers, and specialist software. It has two elements:
  - basic ASF helps colleges meet the cost providing additional technical and personal support for all SLDD; and
  - discrete ASF gives extra support for SLDD who cannot be accommodated within a college's mainstream provision
17. The ASF is currently £4.5 million per annum and has increased by £1 million (from £3.5m) over the last two years.
18. Funding is based on an assessment of need. Students who declare a learning difficulty and/or disability are assessed by a Learning Support co-ordinator to determine the level of assistance required. Students are reviewed twice-yearly to ensure their support remains appropriate, and to better involve the student in their own progression planning.
19. The Department has also supported the delivery of accredited, needs assessment training to learning support staff in colleges, delivered by the



BRITE (Beattie Resources for Inclusiveness in Technology and Education) Centre in Edinburgh. In addition, the Department funded BRITE for the delivery of a suite of specialist virtual training for lecturers who teach or support learners with a diverse range of needs, including deaf or hard of hearing students. Through their linkages with the BRITE Centre, colleges have been able to access specialist information, advice and training on inclusive education, assessment and associated enabling technologies.

20. The Department funded a 3 year sector-wide 'Delivering Excellence' programme, as part of which, the six NI colleges developed innovative ways to build understanding and capacity to respond to the needs of SLDD, including those who are deaf or hard of hearing. As part of the programme, colleges collaborated with **AHL** and other external stakeholders to deliver awareness training to staff in the FE sector on the needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. In addition, training was provided in a number of areas including assistive technology to support students with a range of sensory disabilities.
21. The Department has provided funding for an information/advocacy resource hub to signpost services for both existing and potential learners to improve access to information about college provision, services and the support available for SLDD.
22. The Department also provided funding for the development of online access guides for SLDD (Disabled Go), which provide information on campus layout and helps disabled learners, visitors and staff to access college premises and make best use of facilities.

#### Course provision

23. In this current academic year (2014/15), there are 19 British Sign Language courses (levels 1-3) and 4 Irish Sign Language courses (levels 1-2) being offered by colleges in Northern Ireland. FE colleges do not currently offer courses in Lip-reading, Lip speakers, Speech to text reporters or Electronic Notetakers. However, college curriculum staff will respond to any demonstrated demand.

24. There is no additional funding for sign language courses within the Department's recurrent funding to colleges under the new funding model for Further Education which came into operation in 2007.

## **Higher Education**

### **Sign Language Tutor and Interpreter Provision**

25. In order to improve Sign Language Tutor and Interpreter provision in Northern Ireland, the Department for Employment and Learning has provided funding, up to 31 December 2015, for 20 deaf tutors to undertake a specially tailored programme at Belfast Metropolitan College and the University of Ulster. This will enable these individuals to gain the necessary qualifications to teach in the further education sector or the voluntary and community sector. Furthermore, the University of Ulster has provided Deaf Awareness training to frontline and support staff thus providing additional help for these deaf tutors.
26. Eleven individuals, who were funded by the Department to undertake a Masters in Interpreting (Sign Language) at Queens University, Belfast, successfully graduated in December 2013. This has effectively doubled the number of fully qualified Sign Language Interpreters in Northern Ireland.

### **Training of Audiologists**

27. The University of Ulster has stated that, in academic year 2012/13, there is a change pending in the course outline for the Clinical Physiology degree in line with the English model of curriculum design. If the University receives strong support from employers, including the DHSSPS and the profession, then the School of Health Sciences would be willing to pursue the development of Audiology education in the future. However, unless accredited placement opportunities are available for NI students, the programme will not seek professional body recognition.
28. An Audiology programme at the University of Ulster was proposed for accreditation in 2009 as part of the BSc Hons Clinical Physiology suite of

programmes. However, the proposed programme was not accredited due to a shortage of placement opportunities in NI.

### Widening Participation in Higher Education

29. Widening participation in higher education by students from groups who are currently under-represented is one of DEL's key strategic goals in particular students from disadvantaged backgrounds – including those with disabilities such as hearing impairments. The Widening Participation vision is that any individual in NI should be able to gain access to education that is right for them, irrespective of their educational or social background. Learners should be able to progress to a level which fulfils their potential and to get proper recognition and respect for their achievements from employers, educationalists and the wider community. The Department has a number of initiatives in place to ensure that young people with disabilities including those who have hearing impairments receive appropriate support when they transfer to Higher Education. These are:

#### Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs)

DSAs help students with the extra costs they have from studying their course as a direct result of their disability, mental health condition or specific learning difficulty. The allowances can help with the cost of a non-medical support provider, items of specialist equipment, travel and other course related costs. A student can apply at any time before or during their course and the amount they can get does not depend on their income or their family income and this allowance does not have to be repaid. In financial year 2013/14 the Department provided Disabled Student Allowances funding of over £3m.

#### Disability Needs Assessments

When a higher education student presents at a university with a disability a Disability Needs Assessment is carried out to determine the support needs of the student and an assessment report which makes recommendations regarding the support needs is submitted to the local Education and Library Board who determine the students' eligibility,

and process applications for, financial support. The cost of this needs assessment is met from DSAs.

#### Register of Support Providers

Through Disabled Students Allowances the Department also provides funding to meet the administration costs of a Register of Support Providers in each of the two Northern Ireland universities. These are registers of freelance professional and non-professional support providers who are recruited and trained to provide one to one personal support to students with disabilities. Support from a register is available to all students with disabilities and learning difficulties in the universities, university colleges, and students on affiliated higher education courses in further education colleges and students can avail of a range of support provider roles including note taker, proof reader, typist, campus assistant and library assistant.

#### **Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme, 2007 – 2013**

30. Priority 1 of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme (ESF), 2007-2013, is entitled 'Helping people into sustainable employment' and aims to assist unemployed and economically inactive people by helping them to enter, remain, and make progress in sustained employment. The priority provides support for a broad range of individuals experiencing disadvantage in the labour market, including young deaf people amongst others.
31. Priority 1 projects may be delivered by any relevant public, private, voluntary or community sector organisation, although a large majority is delivered by voluntary and community organisations. There are currently 95 projects funded under Priority 1 that provide training and personal development opportunities throughout Northern Ireland. The projects provide support to individuals of all ages and abilities, and work with people to improve their ability to compete in the labour market. The projects can and do provide support for

deaf or hearing impaired participants, and receive funding for the provision of communication support for deaf participants.

32. Any project may be funded to provide support for deaf or hearing impaired people among a wider group of participants or, as in the case of one particular ESF project, may provide support exclusively for deaf people.
33. The Employability Programme for Deaf People is promoted by AHL and is funded to provide support specifically for deaf and hearing impaired clients. The aims of the project include the development of employability programmes, access to accredited training, work placements and employment customised for individual participant needs. The project also receives funding to facilitate communication support for participants.
34. Funding provided to projects under the current ESF programme ceases on 31 March 2015. The programme will be succeeded by the Northern Ireland ESF Programme 2014-2020, which will continue to support people with a disability, including people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment.

#### **Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme (ESF) 2014 - 2020**

35. There is a regulatory requirement for 20% of ESF funding to be allocated to Priority axis 2 in the new ESF Programme – Promoting Social inclusion and combating poverty – and disability is one of the areas DEL has chosen to address under this priority.
36. Furthermore, a total of 30% of ESF funding will be allocated to this priority to reflect our determination to address the issues around disability and social exclusion. The total amount of ESF funding available under Priority 2 is €61.6m, of which €51m is allocated specifically to interventions relating to people with a disability. This figure is matched with funding from other sources giving the total amount available for people with a disability to €127.7m.

37. Specialist, tailored training and employment support projects to address individual need will be supported. Specific actions will include the provision of opportunities to gain vocational qualifications and improve employability skills. Progression into mainstream education or employment programmes, and the attainment of paid employment will also be supported.
38. Priority 3 of the new Programme – Skills for Growth – supports Apprenticeship and Youth training, 40% (€82.1m) of ESF funding is allocated to this priority area. A further 60% (€123.2m) is match funded by DEL, bringing the total amount available to €205.3m.
39. The structure of the programme was supported by respondents to a consultation exercise which took place during 2013.

### **Pathways to Success Strategy**

40. In 2012 the Executive agreed the Northern Ireland cross-departmental “Pathways to Success” strategy aimed at helping young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). The strategy contains a three tier package aimed at: preventing young people missing opportunities for Education and Training, and/or becoming unemployed, assisting unemployed young people aged 18-24 generally and support for helping those young people facing a range of barriers in the 16-18 age group.
41. These barriers are seen as factors in a young person’s circumstances which for the most part tend to occur for those who: are at an economic disadvantage; have had a negative experience of education; have suffered from bullying at school; have literacy and numeracy problems; have been in care; left care; are on the edge of care; are carers; are parents; have been involved with drug and alcohol abuse; have a physical or learning disability; have committed a crime; have a mental illness; and/or are homeless.
42. Young people who are not in education, employment or training are clearly not a homogeneous group and it is recognised that some of these identified

circumstances are likely to leave the young person needing additional support in order to make a successful transition to education, training or employment. The purpose of the support is to compliment mainstream employability programmes and help progress young people towards positive destinations.

43. There are several specific DEL Pathways to Success programmes which aim to support young people generally in the NEET category and how they approach young people who may be deaf is further illustrated below. From April 2015 these will be funded through the ESF Programme 2014-2020.

#### Collaboration and Innovation Fund (CIF)

44. CIF funded projects explored new approaches to addressing the specific and general employability barriers faced by disadvantaged NEET young people, including those who are deaf. It supports a broad range of provision including mentoring, vocational qualifications, personal development, motivational and life skills and employability skills and the cost of any additional communication support that enables young people who are deaf and in the NEET category to participate fully in project activity on an individual basis.

#### Community Family Support Programme

45. The Community Family Support Programme (CFSP), is an initiative designed to help families make life changing decisions to enhance their prospects and support them to become full participants in society. It also supports families with a high level of need in developing their capacity to reach their full potential. During the 26 week programme families will receive help to address the health, social, economic, educational, employment and training issues that impact on their daily lives.

#### Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS)

46. The Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) is a community employment initiative designed to help the “hardest to reach” in targeted areas. The service is provided by local community employment organisations in the

areas identified by the Noble Indices of Multiple Deprivation as having high levels of deprivation and unemployment in Northern Ireland.

47. In addition to these areas, LEMIS is also available on an outreach basis throughout Northern Ireland to individuals with a common employability barrier to employment, i.e. young people aged 16-24 not in education, training or employment (NEETs), individuals that are homeless, ex- offenders/ex-prisoners, individuals with a history of drug/alcohol misuse and care leavers. Although not specifically a programme for people with disabilities, any identified barriers will be addressed including any additional communication support for those who may be deaf.