



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Students with a Learning Difficulty and/or
Disability (SLDD) Provision in Further
Education, including Transport Issues:
Department for Employment and Learning

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This distinction does not undermine its importance. You will see that the slide refers to the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. Colleges have to give regard to that cohort of learners, and that is further underpinned by the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (SENDI), which, as you know, requires colleges to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that the cohort of learners is not placed at substantial disadvantage. I want to draw out the point that this agenda is important. It is in the colleges' DNA, and the Department's policy intent is to support colleges in removing barriers for individual learners and ensure that those learners who declare a disability are not disadvantaged in undertaking further education.

The next slide details how we do this through the additional support fund (ASF), which is our key policy intervention for addressing the needs of learners. Again, this will be familiar to you, but I want to draw out a number of features of that policy framework. You will know that the funds are available to learners who study in mainstream FE provision and to those whose needs determine that their learning is delivered in a discrete setting, primarily in smaller class sizes where more individual support is available to them.

Two key aspects to the fund are outlined in the slide. Some £2.5 million is available for technical and personal support for all students with a learning difficulty and/or disability (SLDD) in FE. This takes the form of specialised equipment such as brailers, IT adaptations, specialist software; and personal support can take the form of a support worker, a note taker or someone who supports specialised individualised assessments for the learner. The other element of the fund is the £2 million set aside for the discrete learners. This is over and above the technical support available and meets the additional cost of delivery in the smaller class sizes for those learners who cannot participate in mainstream provision.

One other important feature that I would draw out from the policy guidance is the bespoke nature of the support available. At the inquiry event last week, we discussed the merits of statementing in some detail in the FE setting. Our vehicle for that bespoke support under the ASF is what we call a supplementary learning agreement. Without going into too much detail, the benefits of that are to ensure that the needs of each individual learner and any identified barriers are met. The assessment is undertaken with each individual student. At the outset in college, you will sit with the learner and a programme of provision will be agreed, along with any additional support required to support the learner in undertaking that provision. That is reviewed twice annually to ensure that the learner's needs continue to be met.

Another significant point of discussion last week and something to draw out is that integral to the SLA is the issue of progression. This is not about sharing or day provision. The same considerations are applied to mainstream learners as with this cohort of learner, and that is a focus on accredited provision where the learner can achieve a qualification that is portable and will allow for progression, either to other further education or into employment. This ties back to our opening slide and the purpose of further education and those who engage with FE as a pathway. That whole ASF policy guidance is reviewed annually to ensure that it continues to be effective.

The final bullet point refers to the increase in funding since 2012 and demonstrates the commitment to intervention for this area of provision. It is anticipated that this will be held flat going into 2015-16, subject to final budget confirmations internally.

Whilst ASF is the main policy intervention around SLDD, the next couple of slides detail the wider financial support available to all students, and that includes those who declare a disability. This is an important context. Sometimes it is forgotten when we discuss the support available to learners, whether they declare a disability or not. I will not go into the detail, but there are FE awards for learners over 19 to meet the additional costs. In 2013-14, the Department paid out £5.4 million in FE awards and assisted a total of 3,642 students. Likewise, home-to-college transport is another fund that provides assistance for travel to college for students under 19 in full-time provision, and £5.1 million was committed, which assisted 7,872 students. The hardship fund provides further financial support for those experiencing financial difficulty; £2.4 million support was made available in 2013-14, which assisted 2,294 students. We are not able to break that down to specific amounts paid to SLDD students, but the point I want to draw out is that, in addition to the £4.5 million dedicated fund for ASF, there is a financial support package in place for around £12 million for all cohorts of learners, including those with learning difficulties or disabilities. The intention is to meet different needs for different learners and address different barriers.

Another fund, although it does not significantly impact on the FE provision that we are focused on, is the disability students' allowance, which is administered by higher education (HE) colleagues. It

applies equally to those studying HE in the FE sector. In 2013-14, £3.6 million available support was provided to HE disabled students.

That was a very quick run through our policy framework. The next couple of slides give you some of the data and figures around that to provide some scale as to what this looks like operationally. There are 5,381 students declaring a disability or a barrier, and that reflects 8% of the total student population. They are spread fairly evenly across mainstream provision not requiring additional support; then there is mainstream provision requiring support; and then those in discrete provision. It is those last two cohorts — those requiring support and those in discrete provision — who access that £4.5 million additional support fund directly. Those 5,000-odd students are undertaking over 10,000 enrolments between them, and those enrolments generated £14.2 million in funded learning unit (FLU) recurrent block grant funding. Together with the dedicated ASF fund, that is an investment of almost £19 million for 8% of the total student population, to give you some scale around that.

In terms of the profile of those enrolments, the analysis shows they are enrolled across a range of levels: 30% of the enrolments are at entry level; 14% are at level 1; 28% are at level 2; and 20% are at level 3. For the age profile, 44% are aged 16 to 18; 22.5% are aged 19 to 24, and 33.5% are aged 25. You can see the mass there; the younger age group and entry level and level 1 provision. That all demonstrates that there is a breadth of learning ongoing for a large number of enrolments. The ASF and the policy interventions are addressing the barriers and needs of those learners enrolled, which is particularly encouraging from our perspective.

Another slide looks at retention, achievement and success rates for learners. It reflects the fact that SLDD learners across all three categories are performing better than those learners who have not declared a disability. I will give you the figures for that: retention is 93.3% for those declaring a disability, compared to 88.8% for those not; achievement is 81.6% compared to 76.3%; and success is 76.1% compared to 67.8%. This is encouraging. It demonstrates not only the quality of the provision given by our colleges but that the supplementary learning agreement that I referred to earlier is effective in its operation. We believe that needs are being identified and addressed, they are being reviewed twice annually, and they are ensuring that learners are retained and are achieving qualifications. We are all aware of the wider policy agenda around skills.

I will give you a couple of case examples, although I will not go into too much detail. I have provided a snapshot of examples of how this is happening on the ground, and it is difficult to portray in a slide the work that is ongoing in this sector. You will have heard personal testimony through your inquiry. I provided evidence to the Committee before, and I personally believe in further education and the role that our colleges play. We can see how it changes the life of individuals, families and friends. That is not just a sound bite: FE has the potential to change lives. The first example is of a learner with very complex physical disabilities who had technical support provided through ASF for assistance with technology. The college was partnered with the Cedar Foundation to ensure a return to learning, supported by a care worker to take notes and act as a scribe.

There is also the achievement of the essential skills student for Northern Ireland. That individual has since progressed on to an access course for progression to university. I find that inspiring and encouraging. We had much discussion last week around the issue of partnership, and this is a good example. No sole policy intervention, such as ASF, will work in isolation, and we see the greatest benefits coming from colleges that collaborate and work in partnership with external agencies.

Committee members will also recall the Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) event recently in the Long Gallery, where a number of learners and individuals came to the microphone, which must have been daunting in itself, to give their experience of their learning, what they were studying and their work experience. They were going into employment and were able to have a degree of independence and responsibility. They understood their role in that, and they were delivering customer care. In particular, employers understood and knew their role, and they undertook that diligently. Again, that changes lives, not only of those individuals but their families. That is a snapshot of the change that can be effected by FE.

I mentioned partnering with external organisations — other college initiatives — and that is a critical aspect of this area of activity. Our policy intervention cannot meet every need. It is just a framework that provides a tailored approach to individual learners. The needs are often complex and the transition to further education is often difficult. It is met with fear from individuals and parents, and we recognise that.

In recent years, we have found that colleges have developed more extensive links with other statutory and voluntary bodies in ensuring that those needs are met and that they can participate in further education. It can take many different forms, and there are numerous examples of how it works in practice. Often, the solutions are innovative. One such example is in transport, and I know that the Committee has been concerned about that. For example, there is independent travel training, which is an integral part of Belfast Metropolitan College's entry level to its full-time programme for new first-year students. The students follow a programme called ACCESS Belfast; one day a week they explore the use of public transport by bus and rail. The programme covers where to get the bus or train, the timetable, how to behave on public transport and how to buy a ticket. That progresses to students travelling independently following year one. It is an interesting approach, particularly to that aspect of independent travel. I point out that, where that is appropriate to the individual concerned, it prepares those learners for progression and future employment opportunities, again, changing lives.

There are good models and practice out there in the sector. There are bespoke solutions to individual problems, the key being that those solutions are usually delivered in partnership with other organisations.

Just putting a closer focus on the travel and transport issues for SLDD, we are aware that, for some school-leavers, independent travel is not feasible when they first leave school. They have been in a very supported environment and have been transported on school buses from door to door through their school life. It is a concern for parents and families, as it is a very big step to come to the big, bad world of FE, as it were.

I touched on the financial support packages that are available from the Department through those earmarked funds. Students requiring transport assistance can access each of those schemes. As part of the initial assessment process, colleges work in partnership with external organisations, social workers and transition officers to establish whether there is an identified need for individual learners and to ensure that they are advised of the supports that are available. That means not only the departmental support but that through collaboration with other organisations, such as the Cedar Foundation, Mencap, the National Autistic Society and community transport partnerships. They also collaborate with those organisations to provide independent travel training to prepare students for a more independent lifestyle. Colleges also have a wide range of other partnerships in place on transitions and travel issues, such as with Action on Hearing Loss, RNIB and the Northern Adult Autism Advice Service, to name a few.

You will also know that DRD is developing its accessible transport strategy for 2015 to 2025. That is intended to address the wide-ranging barriers that impede everyday travel for people with disabilities and older people. The delivery of an accessible transport system extends across a number of Departments. DRD, as part of that work, will establish an interdepartmental group. It will be a key stakeholder in that discussion and will participate in it fully in due course.

I appreciate that that is a very fast run through SLDD, what the provision looks like, its scale and what our policy intervention is. We will, hopefully, have some time for discussion. The policy, by its very nature, continues to be under review. There are always improvements to be made from our perspective and in the colleges. In the closing slides, I just wanted to highlight some of the big-ticket pieces of work that will shape our thinking in the coming months.

The inquiry will obviously be of significant interest to us. We have enjoyed the stakeholder events and the engagement with people. They have been lively and have challenged our thinking. You already received a briefing from colleagues in the Department on the disability, employment and skills strategy and some key pieces of the jigsaw references, for example, that the transitions piece and the NDN service. Joining the dots up with all the services that we have in the Department, you can see that there are various programmes and interventions. The pilots that the disability employment service ran were of interest to us, and they will feature in any strategy. Again, that links back to our thinking and our policy direction under the ASF and our focus on skills, qualifications and progression. The new further education strategy will, of course, have a theme on social inclusion and addressing the needs of those with barriers. We look forward to consultation on that shortly. The careers review will link up on that transitions piece, again, with the disability, employment and skills strategy. As you know, we participate in a number of cross-departmental groups, such as the Bamford Ministers' group, the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, etc.

I trust that that is helpful. I will take a breath now. My colleague Donna Crothers leads a very committed team in this area. If there is information that we cannot provide you with today, we will follow up on that. We are happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Thanks, Andy. You referred to being at a number of our stakeholder events. Do you think that the policies and strategies that you have put forward are actually what people see and are feeling on the ground?

Mr Cole: It is a very difficult space. The thing that I would say — I referenced this in my presentation — is that ASF alone is not the only intervention that will resolve all the problems. A significant support package is available there. We know that ASF is working from that perspective. The supplementary learning agreement is working but not in isolation. It works best when colleges are partnering with other organisations and external agencies to provide support that we cannot directly provide in our policy intervention. Our policies are effective but not on their own.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): One of the frustrations that we are hearing, mostly from parents, is about not knowing what is out there. Is that a failing? It may be that your policy is achieving what you think it is, but it is about parents knowing what they are entitled to or what the provision is.

Ms Donna Crothers (Department for Employment and Learning): That is where transitions comes into it. That is the key to all this, because it is about identifying what these young people have the ability to go on and do. If that is to go into FE, it is key to identify that at a point where systems and processes can be put in place to smooth that passage for them. I have been working in this field for a number of years now, and one of the key things I have found is that there are lots of young people for whom further education is not going to be an option. That is the difficulty that I found when I engaged with parents' groups and the variety of people who were at the Committee's stakeholder event as part of its inquiry.

We will certainly work in the Department and with other Departments to try as best we can to help young people with ability to progress in further education or to identify the gaps and what else we can do to enable them to access that. One of the key things that we need to do — the colleges are already doing this — is to look at the organisations that provide the help, support and training that is specific to those young people, particularly those with severe learning difficulties, who may not be able to access FE. Those organisations can be used to prepare the young people for the transition from a special school or a learning support unit towards FE. That issue is there as well. From all the discussions that I have had, I have found that there is a clear need to try to use all the resources that are available in different Departments and organisations in the voluntary and community sector to work together to move things forward and to ensure that there is some sort of provision for these young people.

Mr Cole: There is no question that transitions is a really complex piece of the jigsaw. It is working better in some regions than in others, and we heard that at our table at the event last week. Where it works, they do engage. A big piece of it is about managing schools' and parents' expectations of what FE can provide. Our focus is on progression, qualifications and skills, so where it is appropriate for those learners for FE to be a pathway, our role is to support them when they engage. The transitions piece is very complex, but there are weaknesses in it, and it could definitely be improved.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): I am not sure whether it was at your table, Andy, so I am not going to pin you down on it, but there was a comment from one of the tables last week that had a number of Department representatives at it. The parents there got the feeling, which I think is reflected across society, that those people were saying a lot, "This is not my Department's problem; it is your Department's problem". That was the conversation, maybe not intentionally, that the departmental officials started to have. How overarching are your policies when it comes to putting an onus on other Departments to take up their responsibilities?

Mr Cole: I have tried to articulate how we cannot provide the whole solution. Therefore, ASF and our policy intervention for support once they engage is our responsibility. However, there are wider issues that extend beyond our Department that are shared, such as accessible transport with DRD.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): That is what I am trying to get at. If it is a shared service that is delivering young people to a further education college, should it be DRD's responsibility? What onus do you put on DRD officials to make sure that there is a package there, rather than it being DRD's, DEL's or the Health Department's responsibility?

Ms Crothers: I am a member of the children and young people's strategic partnership transitions group, which is made up from across Departments and agencies and has disability action groups and

young people sitting on it. Its purpose is to get an integrated plan across the whole spectrum of services for young people. It is for young people who are moving from children's services into adult services and the whole spectrum of difficulties that they face as a result. Education and learning is one aspect of it, but there is a wealth of stuff on health, environmental and social issues as well.

Mr Cole: There are formal and informal mechanisms for that engagement. You are right: it should not be the case for the learner or the parent that we hide the wiring on that. Engagement can always be improved cross departmentally. There are mechanisms there to do that, but I accept that it could happen more seamlessly. We all have challenges in that.

Ms Crothers: I think that one of the important things to do is to get the message out to parents so that they know where responsibilities lie and who they need to speak to. That is one of the challenges for the children and young people's strategic partnership group. It hopes to shortly introduce an integrated plan that will allow parents and young people access to all the details that they need on where they can get information and support and on who has responsibility for what areas. I think that that integrated plan is going to be essential for young people in moving forward. That is the overarching part of it, but we all have responsibility within it to make sure that we all do the bits that we are supposed to do.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Who administers the children and young people's strategic partnership group?

Ms Crothers: It is chaired by Iolo Eilian from the Health and Social Care Board. All the Departments, as well as agencies, the trusts, disability groups and young people themselves are represented on it.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): If members so wish, we should ask those people to come to the Committee as part of our inquiry.

Ms Crothers: We discussed that at one of the groups, and I think that they would be quite happy to come.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): If that is their overarching function, that may be useful to us.

Andy, I want to go back to that part of your presentation on the numbers of people in further education with SLDDs. I think you said that 33.5% were aged 25 and over.

Mr Cole: Twenty five plus, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): What courses are they doing? What was their path prior to coming into FE at 25?

Mr Cole: They come from day care as well, or they would come in just as direct entrants.

Ms Crothers: They come from a variety of pathways. A lot of people over 25 have already come in at 22 or 23, and this is a progression for them. This is giving us a snapshot of the age profile in that year. Those young people could have already been in at a different entry-level point and are progressing up. That is why they are there at 25. Similarly, quite a lot of young people who are 25 and over are being referred to FE for a variety of reasons. Some of them are being referred because there is no day centre provision. So, a lot of older people may be getting referred to FE.

Mr Cole: There is potentially a pressure point there.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): I just want you to clarify and expand on that. Are you saying that, if day centre provision is being reduced for people who are 25 and over, they are being put into FE?

Mr Cole: That is a potential pathway to FE.

Ms Crothers: That happens if they have the ability to go into FE.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): It is quite a high percentage.

Ms Crothers: There is also quite a significant number of young people who have left a learning support unit in school or a special school and did not do anything and are now being caught up through a variety of disability groups and different organisations. They are being captured now and helped through and put on to FE because they just missed out. That is like any young person who sometimes drops off at the end of school and maybe picks up and continues their education later. The same thing applies to people with learning difficulties.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): It is just that it is quite a high percentage.

Mr Cole: Progression is important for each of those learners, particularly in that age group. That is referred to in the SLA. We are not looking at churning these people around in the system or replacing day care centres; we are looking at people achieving skills and progression. Catherine Bell mentioned earlier a piece of work that we are undertaking on the destinations. That is a really big and exciting piece of the jigsaw. We have focused our attention on achievements and success in recent years. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) is carrying out that work, and the early results are due in May. We will be able to see what happens to people when they achieve and leave. Some policy considerations will no doubt flow from that, and SLDD learners will be part of that. So, progression is key in this whole space.

Mr Irwin: It is good that so many are getting into further education. Are there any statistics on how many get a job after leaving an FE college?

Mr Cole: We do not formally gather those statistics. We have anecdotal evidence only. I mentioned the work that we are undertaking on destinations. We have the experience of the disability employment service pilot schemes that we carried out in a number of colleges a couple of years ago.

Ms Crothers: The Northern Regional College and the Southern Regional College piloted a scheme that will hopefully form a big part of the disability, employment and skills strategy. This is particularly geared to those who are coming out of discrete provision, meaning people with more severe learning difficulties. They are ultimately the people who find it more difficult to find employment. Prior to the disability employment service's involvement, two young people found employment. At the end of the pilot programme, 45 found employment. That was excellent. It is about setting up a system and putting it in place so that they have good, sound work placements; it is not just about getting to the young person at the end of their education. In a lot of cases, through that intervention, those placements are leading to employment in the company where the intervention through the placement was. Hopefully, that will be rolled out across all the colleges. However, it will be particularly in the disability, employment and skills strategy, which will lead to a big benefit.

Mr Irwin: I think that that is important. I employ a guy who is autistic. He has been in my employment for 10 years. He is on an employment support scheme, which I think are important in trying to get those people into employment.

Mr Cole: There are a number of interventions on the disability employment service side. As we mentioned, we have a job to do in the Department to join up all the dots in the strategy. Part of that is progression either through our remit on skills or progression to employment. Those pilots have certainly brought some positive news, but they need to be rolled out.

Ms Crothers: There are also elements where our partnerships with the disability organisations come into play. They play a key role in educating employers about the benefits of taking on somebody with a learning or other disability. So, I think that a key role of our partnership is to encourage those links.

Mr Irwin: It is good not only for the young person, or the adult they become, but for their families.

Ms Crothers: Absolutely.

Mr Cole: It changes lives.

Ms Sugden: Like William, I have a lady with learning difficulties working in my office. From listening to her experiences, I feel that you can go back to the idea of the colleges as a type of day centre. She goes to a number of other organisations and charities. She actually became very frustrated with the college, and it did not really inspire her in any way. I accept that that could have been a personal issue. The question I am trying to ask is this: what happens when people fall through the net or

maybe do not come back? It seemed that her relationship with the college kind of petered off, and there was no follow-up. Now, of course, she does not go there. I am curious to know what support there is for people who are maybe finding things frustrating in an environment that is probably quite difficult for them.

Ms Crothers: Do you mean in FE?

Ms Sugden: Yes.

Ms Crothers: The support is certainly there. The student services and learning support units in all the colleges provide additional support, even outside the support that is available through the additional support fund. FE can certainly be a quite challenging environment for a lot of people, particularly those with learning or other disabilities, because they are coming out of a very structured environment, be that a special school or a learning support unit in a mainstream school. That is a very supported environment. Going into FE, where there are a lot of much older students in a much more informal environment, can be a big transition. That alone can be very challenging for young people. The support is there to try to help them, but, in moving on, I know that some of the colleges engage, keep in contact, and bring people back for refresher training to help them to move on to employment in case they have lost that sort of learning. Once they leave, that learning tends to diminish if they do not get employment or something else to move them forward.

Mr Cole: I accept that it is sometimes dangerous to look at data, but the retention rate of 93% and the positive achievement rates seem to indicate that needs are being addressed, with the SLA being reviewed twice annually. That does not happen everywhere, and it should.

Ms Sugden: If we acknowledge that it is a challenging environment for these people, surely we should put in more support.

Ms Crothers: There are probably two schools of thought on that. Again, this is where the partnerships with other organisations come into play. I know that some organisations like Mencap and the Cedar Foundation carry out some training, which is like an intervention. That happens when young people, particularly those with severe learning difficulties, are leaving a special school. They are not really equipped to go into FE immediately, because it is a big change to move from a special school into an FE environment. Those organisations provide perhaps a year of training that helps those young people to develop their skills —

Mr Cole: Confidence and integrating.

Ms Crothers: Yes. The training is even in the softer skills such as integrating with other people and moving at a different pace and with less support than they have been used to. All that will help them to move into FE, become more independent and, hopefully, move on to employment. FE can do what it can do, but we need to use all the resources available to us through the other organisations to try to help to bridge that gap and help those people to move forward.

Ms Sugden: I have just one more point. You mentioned the organisations that you have relationships with. Does that extend to more localised organisations? I know that, in Robin's constituency, there is a fantastic organisation called Compass Advocacy Network, which extends into my constituency. The girl who works in my office has had great experiences with it, because it tailors its business around the needs of people with learning difficulties. Are there more local relationships?

Ms Crothers: It is the colleges that have those relationships, and most of them have been built up through local knowledge and with local organisations. I could not pick one, but I know that, apart from the bigger organisations that we are all well aware of, a lot more local partnerships are in place.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Andy and Donna, thank you very much for your time and your presentation.