



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Post-Special Educational Need
Provision in Education, Employment and
Training for those with Learning Disabilities:
Parkanaur College and Seashell Trust

22 October 2014

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mr David Hilditch
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Ms Carol Hue	ASPIRE
Mrs Mary Canavan	Parkanaur College
Mr Eamon Connolly	Parkanaur College
Ms Sarah Leonard	Parkanaur College
Mr Wilfred Mitchell OBE	Parkanaur College
Mr Tom O'Sullivan	Parkanaur College
Ms Katherine Corey	Seashell Trust

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): I welcome from Parkanaur College Mr Wilfred Mitchell OBE, the chief executive; Mr Tom O'Sullivan, horticultural tutor; Mr Eamon Connolly, residential care manager; and Mrs Mary Canavan, senior tutor. We are joined by one of the students as well. You are all very welcome. Wilfred, over to you.

Mr Wilfred Mitchell (Parkanaur College): You are very welcome to Parkanaur College. As you can see, its setting is a grade A listed building. We thank you for this opportunity to make a presentation on what we have been doing here the past 60 years. I know that you are short of time, so I will not delay any more and will move to our first presentation, which is from Tom O'Sullivan. He will outline what we do at Parkanaur.

Mr Tom O'Sullivan (Parkanaur College): I reiterate what Wilfred said: we really appreciate the time that you have taken and the effort that you have made to come up to visit us to give us the opportunity to demonstrate to you what we do and the role that we play.

There is a principle that I would like to establish. We are the only residential college that offers provision for the very small group of individuals in our community who do not fit into mainstream education or further education (FE). That is what we are dealing with. In England, there are many colleges that offer that provision, but we are the only one that does so in Northern Ireland.

I will divide my presentation into these areas: what we do, by which I mean the curriculum that we deliver; the residential side, by which I mean how we equip individuals to move into employment with the necessary skills, as well as independent-living skills; and what we do to make them employable.

We deal with a range of learning difficulties and physical disabilities. We take in individuals aged 18 years and upwards who wish to train and develop the independence skills that they need to move into the workplace. We offer four core curriculum areas: business admin; catering and hospitality, for which there are two set-ups here; horticulture, as you would imagine, being based in this great estate; and upholstery and woodwork.

Around that, we offer a number of other courses that take individuals from the home or care setting, or from the community, and skill and educate them with accredited qualifications and whatever other skills are necessary.

That is the core provision when it comes to the curriculum that we deliver. As well as that, to support the curriculum, we have a number of small enterprises. We have the walled garden, which some of you may have had the opportunity to visit, and the manor house that we are in at the minute, which is used for a lot of different functions, such as weddings and conferences. That provides students with an in-house ability to get hands-on experience and apply what they have learnt in the various curriculum areas.

What really differentiates us from FE or higher education (HE) is that we can take individuals and put around them the necessary skills for living. You and I may take that for granted, but we appreciate that a small section of our community is very disadvantaged yet have their rights and desire the same availability that we do. They do not, however, easily fit into the FE/HE situation.

We are able to bring them in and provide the independent-living skills: how to care for themselves; how to structure their life; how to put a schedule together; and how to keep to a routine. As a result, we can be confident that, when they go out to find employment, they do not only have a qualification and are not just going through a course but that they have the essential skills, knowledge and ability to move the situation forward themselves.

Of course, they have to have the ability to fit into and work within society. We are able to put around the curriculum, and its residential aspect, a lot of other activities that help them develop the social ability to go out into the workplace and sustain and develop that.

Finally, —

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Sorry, Tom, just a wee minute. Members, there is still a phone on, which is interfering with the recording equipment. Sorry, Tom.

Mr O'Sullivan: No problem. As we all know, what is important is to move them into employment. We are able to do that through the selection of curriculum topics that prepare them. In other words, the things that you and I have very little difficulty in doing — preparing materials to send; contact with employers; sourcing information; where to go for help — we are able to help and skill them to go out into the marketplace with the basic knowledge of how they can go about doing that.

They leave here with those materials like a kit in order to go into the work environment and be able to apply their skills. One of the most valuable aspects of the training is that we try to take them from being those individuals who may have been reserved at the beginning of a two-year period and get them into a period of work-based experience.

We are able to provide that here in many cases, so that is a transition into the workplace. More importantly, we are interested in securing for them real-world, life experience in a commercial setting, where they are able to get into the secular employment environment, with, at that point, the support and assistance of the individual or business, and with Parkanaur providing support and monitoring the situation to see how that develops. As that goes along, we are working towards increasing their independence. At the end of that period, we will have taken individuals and provided them with the skills and knowledge, and, more importantly, the ability to live independently of the situation that they may have found themselves in before. We have made the transition to the work environment for them, and, hopefully, as they leave, they are able to continue that and sustain that with the support that they received here. What differentiates us is the principle that I mentioned at the outset. These are individuals — a small niche in our society that we are aware of — who need that support.

What about the figures? I know that that is what you as a Committee will be interested in. Let us look at some of our training partners that have already engaged with us in providing the experience. I was looking through some of the documents to give us an idea of the need that exists in Northern Ireland. Some might provide as a justification the argument that there is not the need here that there is in England, but what do our statistics tell us? The statistics estimate that there are 40,000 people with learning disabilities throughout the Province. There is another document from OFMDFM that we will come to in a minute. There is another estimate that between 1% and 2% of the population has a learning difficulty or disability. Importantly, the table shows the trend from 2007 onwards. The right-hand column shows that there is an increasing demand, from 14.9% to 19.7%. The OFMDFM report highlighted the fact that, although the intake figures remained fairly static — in fact, the post-primary figures have gone down — the percentage of pupils with a need, which we are catering for and trying to develop, is increasing. Therefore, the evidence is there.

Another slide shows the enrolments for FE from 2006 to 2010. Again, apart from the last figure, we have seen an increase. Feel free to ask any questions.

Mr Mitchell: We will take questions at the end.

That moves us on to the second presentation, which is from Katherine Corey, who is the deputy head of Seashell Trust. I think that, at the end, she may touch on the Children and Families Act 2014, which will have implications for us in Northern Ireland in the near future. Katherine is home-grown, from Coalisland. We are pleased that she has taken the time specifically to come here to make this presentation for us to compare and contrast the two provisions.

Ms Katherine Corey (Seashell Trust): For football reasons, it is Brackaville that I am from.

Seashell Trust is a school and college, and we provide residential provision for children and young adults. We do so for young people with learning disabilities from the ages of two to 25. I am the deputy head of the college. We are an independent specialist college, the same as Parkanaur, and we are one of 72 that exist in England. We take students with severe or profound learning difficulties, much more severe than the students at Parkanaur have. The vast majority of our students have no verbal communication, or, if they do, it is very limited and, in the most part, is not functional. A third of our students have autism spectrum conditions. A third have deaf-blind dual-sensory disability. Some of the students have hearing or visual impairments, profound multiple learning difficulties and complex physical disabilities, as well as a range of other medical needs. We have a medical centre on the site because some of our students have severe medical needs as well.

What we are about is creating total communication around the students. Our students lack the ability to communicate, and that is what we are trying to provide. We do that through sign language, the picture exchange communication system (PECS), objects of reference or whatever else will work for students to enable them to communicate. You may take it for granted that they will have been taught that in schools. They have not. A lot of them come to us at the age of 19 and have not had experience of a formal communication system. It has been very ad hoc up until then.

We offer a range of different placements. We have day provision and residentials, which are 38-week weekly boarding placements from Monday to Thursday or 38-week termly boarding placements, which mean that students go home at the holidays. We also have 52-week boarding, and I think that five students live with us all year round. The reason that that they are with us all year round is that they have become extremely challenging in the family situation and the family is unable to cope any more. We also offer short breaks, so, if they want to stay for one night or come for an evening activity, that is also provided.

We have a number of facilities to meet the range of needs of the students. We have our own swimming pool. We have a hydrotherapy pool, specifically to meet the physical needs of many of our students. We have a sports hall with a climbing wall. We also have sensory rooms that meet the needs of our students. As I said, several of them have visual and hearing impairments, and the sensory rooms are about acting on the remaining senses. We have seven senses, and it is about providing for all of those. We also have a small animal care unit and an audiology centre. We were originally the Royal Schools for the Deaf. We still have quite a large population of deaf students, and that is why we have an audiologist on site. We also have, as I said, a medical centre with two nurses and 24-hour medical care if we need it. We have a lot of cycling facilities, a fitness suite and horticultural activities.

Our students have such profound learning difficulties, so our curriculum is individualised, based on the young person's preferences. We aim to provide our students with meaningful opportunities, which is about promoting their independence, getting their voice heard and getting society to recognise that they are valuable and have the right to be heard. Obviously, some of our students will not progress to employment. That is not the whole point of college. The point is to give people opportunities to explore avenues and expand their horizons, and that is what happens with a lot of our students. They move into 24-hour supported living, may have personalised day services and may go on to further learning. We are hopeful that one of our students will progress to the Manchester College, and that would be the first student of ours to do that. We also offer supported employment, where appropriate, to the student's needs and aspirations. We got paid employment for one of our students for the first time three years ago, and we have now managed to get paid employment for five students. We try to achieve any form of employment for our students.

We have a team of therapists on-site to meet the specialist needs of our students. We have two physiotherapists, two occupational therapists, three speech and language therapists and an audiologist, whom I mentioned. They all work with the education side to have as great an impact as possible on the students. They cannot work in separation. There is a push among local authorities in England to separate the functions and for the colleges to provide the education and them to provide the medical care. It does not work like that. You need it all together. You need students who are able to sit in classrooms in the correct chair and with the correct posture, and that is not possible if you do not have the physiotherapists and occupational therapists on-site with you.

Therapy is embedded throughout the curriculum. Therefore, when students are working in horticultural or life skills sessions, they are in standing frames, walkers or any other form of equipment that we can get to ensure that they have longevity in their limbs for as long as is possible. The therapists also provide input to our on-site houses and to families and carers.

We are very lucky in that we have a really progressive and inclusive work programme. All our students have one-to-one support when they are out in the community. A member of staff from the college goes with them to the employment opportunities.

I am showing you a slide of two students, both of whom are non-verbal. Ballal on the right is a young man with autism. On the left is Alex, who is also non-verbal, has a tendency to bite everybody in sight and is a wheelchair user. As you can see, we have found tasks that most people take for granted as being at the boring end of the job market — jobs that nobody really wants to do. Our students tend to love those jobs. The repetitiveness gives them structure, and they know what is coming next.

We work with a number of companies. They include Lakeland, which is a company throughout England that started off in the Lake District; Sodexo @ AstraZeneca, the pharmaceutical company; Hilton Hotels; BNY Mellon; Deanprint; Thinkmoney, which has offered paid employment; and Tatton Park, which we have a picture of on the slide. We work with quite a number of organisations that all see the benefits for having our students as their employees.

This year, we have also started what we call an adapted supported internship, because supported internships are quite big on the English political agenda at the minute. We have nine students who are based off-site, and the majority of their curriculum is obviously work-based. We are trying to teach them work skills and are working on their CVs. Those are not CVs as you would expect to see; rather, they are in a form that make sense to the students. They also learn how they should dress appropriately for work, and, although none of our students can keep time, all the work is on schedules. We provide therapy for all the students who are funded for it. All are expected to gain paid employment — nine students out of the 26 leavers whom we have this year.

The organisation that we are working with in Wythenshawe has nominated us for a Be Proud award, and we have been working with it for only six weeks. It has seen the impact that our students have on their community building, which is used for weddings, functions for the elderly, different things for single mothers, and so on. The organisation has seen that the grounds and everything to do with the building have improved dramatically as a result of our students' participation.

We are building a new build, which will see the development of 17 houses on-site. Those will be adapted to meet the students' needs. That is our plan at the minute.

Our prices are all individual. Each student is assessed for the hours of support across the education, care and specialist support services that they need. Therefore, the prices vary accordingly. For a 36-hour day student with a high level of specialist support, such as a student with autism and very low

levels of challenging behaviour, you are talking about £44,000. A non-verbal wheelchair user who attends for 41 hours and needs a lot of therapy would attract fees of £54,000. A student who requires 152 hours a week residential, 38 weeks a year — that would be a student with autism and severe challenging behaviour, so we are actually talking about a 52-weeker — fees are £162,000. We have 71 students, of whom 29 are residential.

The major legislation that has had implications across the special educational needs (SEN) sector is the Children and Families Act 2014. That has brought in an ideological change, and it focuses on our type of student, who is the type of student who has been neglected by mainstream education — in fact, by special education. It will bring in a broader education policy and the concept of autonomous schools. There is a lot of movement away from local authorities controlling the schools to the schools controlling themselves. It will also place parents in the position of being choice-makers and put them in control. For us, that would obviously be our young people as well. I do not know whether it is even in place in Northern Ireland, but England has the mental capacity assessment. Therefore, anybody over the age of 16 has the right to make decisions about his or her future. Everybody has the capacity to do that unless it is proved otherwise. We do mental capacity assessments with our students to see what their ability is to make decisions. Quite a lot of our students can make decisions but do not know the long-term implications of them, so there would then be a best-interests meeting.

Obviously, there is also an economic change. A new funding drive has come across. The Government want us to put funding as close to the young people as possible. Where it originally went to local authorities, it now goes directly to the young person. The following is from the Department of Education:

"Our proposed reforms respond to the frustrations of children and young people and the professionals who work with them. We want to put in place a radically different system to support better life outcomes for young people; give parents confidence by giving them more control; and transfer power to professionals on the front line and to local communities."

The case for change was made in the 2010 Ofsted review of special educational needs. Ofsted found that there were widespread weaknesses in the quality of what was being provided for children with special educational needs. Some schools were focusing well on working together and on the outcomes of the young person. The monitoring of progress, and the quick intervention and thorough evaluation of its impact, consistently worked well. Schools and colleges that were doing well had high expectations for the students and wanted them to be as independent as possible. The need for a continuing focus on the highest expectations for disabled children and young people and for those with SEN is not an issue just for schools and colleges, or even local services, but for all national bodies. That has come on to the agenda more — this goes with the Northern Ireland figures — because of advances in medical technology, the number of people with severe and profound learning difficulties is rising, as they are surviving from birth. Therefore, there are further long-term implications for the numbers will impact on education and care.

The difference between SEN and disability is that in England — I think that it is the same here — students have a statement that says that they have special educational needs for which they need certain things put in place. The 2014 Act is all about changing that. In England, 1.5 million young people have learning disabilities. Of those, 95,000 attend maintained and non-maintained special schools; and 73,000 go to independent special schools such as ours. We are still talking about a small percentage of school-age children attending special schools.

The Act is about identifying a new approach to SEN that means that the Departments that deal with education, health and care will work together. There is now a single assessment process, so, as I said, instead of the statement that says that you have special needs, a young person with learning difficulties will have an educational health and care plan. The local offer cited on the slide is what is available in that local authority. Therefore, in Manchester, it would list all colleges and schools in Cheshire or Lancashire, depending on where you are based. By that token, parents will have personal budgets. They will be in charge of the money and how they want to spend it on their children. That is usually to do with short breaks or supporting somebody into employment. It was about giving parents a real choice of schools. The educational health care plan states the school or college to which you want your young person to go. A school or college named on the plan has to take that young person. There is no getting out of it. A number of local authorities are having major heart attacks over the implications of this, but it is the Government's plan and it is what is going forward. The key element was to provide integrated service provision. Co-created local plans are about the mixture of healthcare and education all coming together. The thing about statements meant that, when you left a school at the age of 16, you did not have a statement to go into colleges or

further education, which was ridiculous because you still had the same needs at 17 as you did when you were 16. Just because you were in a different setting, it did not make sense. So what the Government has done instead is to provide that education and health and care plans are in existence until the age of 25, if the young person stays in education. Already, some of our parents are coming to us saying, "You have given us a three-year plan, but my son is 22; what will happen to him for the next three years? Can you provide for him for the next three years?" So those are the implications that it is having at the minute. Obviously, it brings in the personal budgets for the families, and the key element for the Government is about parental choice as well.

Also, dispute resolution prior to tribunals — when the statements were in place, everything had to go to a tribunal. Now there are different stages for trying to have disputes resolved before they have to go to a tribunal. And there is a new code of practice, which is about 500 pages. Previously, FE colleges did not have a code of practice; they were only in schools. Now they are in FE. The new code of practice outlines the statutory guidance to parents, schools, local authorities and others. It incorporates the statutory guidance on inclusive schooling. It is intended to be streamlined. What it intends to do, and what the Government are hoping, is that a lot of people who now get statements of educational need will not get EHC plans because their needs are not severe enough to warrant it. The hope is that schools and colleges will absorb that as the norm into their budgets. EHC plans will be for the most severely disabled and those with the most severe learning difficulties.

It came into force on 1 September 2014, and, obviously, a lot of the local authorities are still in turmoil at the minute because they do not know which way this is going to work for them. A lot of paperwork is needed. The EHC plans need to be completed for any student in the transition years — which are years 14, 12 and 10 — by September 2015. The local authorities do not even have the people in place at the minute to be able to do that.

What the SEN reform is looking at is the 2-8% of the school population which has statements, rather than the 17% of people with SENs but without statements. That is what I was talking about. The Government expect that 17% to be streamlined and adapted into education. The EHC plans and the Act are for the 2-8% of the school population.

That is me finished.

Mr Mitchell: You thank you very much, Katherine. That was a very comprehensive overview of a comparison to what is in Northern Ireland. I am going to leave the last word to a student, Sarah Leonard. However, I would like to state what we, Parkanaur College, would like to see. We currently have contracts with the Disability Employment Service and, in the past, we used to be able to provide contracts for students for a three-year course, but it is now down to two years. We used to have day placement; you have heard that there are quite a few day placements, and about their cost. We do not have any day placements in Northern Ireland. Carol Hue from ASPIRE was to come here to speak on that, but we do not have time, so I will just make that point. What we would like to see is our full recruitment, given the disability in Northern Ireland proportionately to the rest of the UK, and we would like assistance with employment placement at the end of the programme, since that problem is now becoming more acute for us in terms of fulfilling our contract with the Disability Employment Service. We would like assistance with that. It is one of the main outcomes that we have to achieve.

I now hand over to Sarah Leonard, one of our students, who is in catering and is responsible for some of the food that you have had and which you will have later on.

Ms Sarah Leonard (Parkanaur College): Before I started at Parkanaur, I was very shy, scared and nervous. I did not want to leave home. Now I am glad that I came here because I have made loads of new friends and can make my own decisions. The multi-skills programme was interesting, but I knew that I wanted to do catering. In my first year, I have learnt many new skills like how important hygiene is and what makes a healthy diet. In the catering department, we are responsible for preparing, cooking and serving meals for all the residents and staff in Parkanaur. At the minute, I am looking for a work experience placement near where I live. I hope to have a place soon. Maybe if I work hard, I will get a job at home when I finish.

As well as the catering, I have improved my IT, literacy and numeracy skills. I know how important these all are in getting a job. It is not all work, you know: I have made some good friends here and taken up new interests like dancing and going to the gym. Last year, I was chairperson of the student council and spoke at prize-giving to family, friends and total strangers. I never thought that I would be able to do something like that.

I have matured in my time here. My family has seen this. The staff at Parkanaur have seen it, too. I now am more confident in my work, social skills and independence. These will prepare me better for getting a job in the future.

Mr Mitchell: Thank you very much. Mr Chairman, that is our presentation.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Thank you, Katherine and Tom, for your presentation. Can I especially thank Sarah? Thank you for giving evidence to the Committee today. It has been one of the strongest presentations. I do not mean to take away from the other two, but I think that that is really what our inquiry is about: how we can help you to get that job that you want to do. Thank you very much for attending and giving that contribution.

Katherine, you have indicated the support. Can I just ask about the figures that you put up there — the £44,000 and the £162,000? Where does that funding come from to you? Where do you get that funding from?

Ms Corey: The local authorities.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): It is all local authority?

Ms Corey: Yes. It is all from local authorities.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): How, Wilfred and Tom, does that compare to yours?

Mr Mitchell: We get £16,285 per year for a residential student. In the past 16 years, it has not increased other than by £200 or £300.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): So that is £16,000 against your £162,000.

Mr Mitchell: We are not asking for the same. We are just emphasising the point that an increase would be very beneficial.

Ms Corey: We could not survive as a college if we did not have those fees. We provide such a huge service to the local community. We are spread across England. We have students from Bristol. We have quite a huge population from Wales as well. We are needed. Specialist independent colleges are needed. It will probably take around seven years before the EHC plans come into effect over here. I actually do not know how parents in Northern Ireland do not know that they have the right to specialist independent college education for their children. I am surprised that there is only one such college in Northern Ireland. I could not believe that there was only one. In Manchester, where I am, with a population of 1.5 million, there are three. It has the same population as Northern Ireland. Those children get lost in the mainstream system. Their needs are not met in the way in which they would be in a specialist independent college.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): How many pupils do you currently cater for, Wilfred? What age range are they across the needs?

Mr Mitchell: They start at 18 years old. They are considered adults in the residential side. We do not have day placements. We used to have day placements; that was taken away. There seems to be a demand in the area for day placements. We have 24 beds, en suite, on this site. We are now starting supported living, which will be another dimension of our support — another area our students who come through the college will be able to progress onto. On site, we have 24 places of which DEL buys 15. At the minute, we depend on it for places. We have just fallen below that. We try to work for a September start, and we are below full capacity now.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Is that just because people are not aware that you are here?

Mr Mitchell: I think, like Katherine, that parents are not aware of their rights. People may be directed to the cheapest option, not the most appropriate one.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Who does the work, then, for the facilities that cater for the under-18s? Is there a bit of education work that needs to be done with them so that they know of your provision?

Ms Corey: In England we used to have a connection service for young people, before the Government got rid of it. It used to give information to school-leavers at open nights in year 14 or year 12. It would have given the information and gone to the reviews of all of the students, because the statutory reviews are compulsory for the statement. It would have gone along and said, "These are the options for your young person; which one do you want to go to?" I do not think that that is available here. I do not think that parents are being told that Parkanaur is here. It has been here for 60 years, and the only reason that I know about it is because I met Wilfred at a conference two years ago. I knew that Parkanaur was here, because I am from six miles down the road, but I did not know what it did, and this is the field that I am in.

Mr Mitchell: Apart from the areas that we are highlighting, newspapers have recently reported that there is a 67% increase in autism in our area, and the demand is growing. Most of our special needs mainstream schools are well over capacity and growing. If that is all progressing up to the ages of 16 and 18, so is the demand for what we are providing. In the early days, when I discovered about the colleges in other parts of the UK, I realised that we were, in some cases, sending people over there to schools for the deaf and for the blind. With this facility having been gifted charity status for this provision 60 years ago, we are not utilising its full capacity in Northern Ireland.

Ms Corey: I have a family at the minute form Cheshire East, which is probably one of the wealthiest local authorities but tightest with its purse strings. The authority decided that it would not fund two of our students to come here. The parents have taken legal action against the local authority, and, at the minute, those two students are in our college. The local authority has stipulated that it is for one year, against this law — the new Children and Families Act 2014. That is illegal. The council also acted illegally by saying that the students could not come in the first place. They were trying to get in before the law came into effect. However, that is what it means in England: parents know their rights, and they are taking legal action against local authorities.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning. It is delightful to be here to see the unique facilities. Our concise remit is to have an inquiry into special educational needs as people leave the educational market. We are very focused on that, and that is a result of a strong lobby across Northern Ireland from parents who, as they get older, feel that their children are, in many regards, being abandoned by the state. We are trying to look at things such as how we can do things better and what additional priorities should be brought in. What are your specific thoughts on that? I am not taking away from the holistic approach that is taken here in the most profound and complex cases. One can only imagine the work that goes on with those who have those needs. It is really and truly an intensive care residential setting; the young people are getting very intensive care.

I also have another question. Sarah, good for you, and I hope that you do well in your career path. Keep smiling, because you are doing well. You are obviously proud of what you are doing, which is most important.

For the likes of Sarah — for every 100 young people coming in here — how many go out that door into full-time work?

Mr Mitchell: Five or six years ago, the Disability Advisory Service, as it was called then, rather than the Disability Employment Service, carried out a survey on Parkanaur and went back over seven years. They paid Deloitte and Touche a considerable amount of money to see how cost-effective it was.

To cut a long story short, at that time it proved very successful. Since then, though, we have students with more profound and complex disability, which makes that more difficult, but we have not been given the provision to address that in terms of progressing into employment. We have a senior tutor, who is quite busy, but to make the step into employment, that would nearly need another full-time person to facilitate and constantly progress that. So that is a gap, and I think that is being addressed in the colleges across the water.

Ms Corey: Also, outcomes just cannot be measured in a person attaining a job. The outcomes that come from a college education — for me, going to university — was the experience that you get from actually meeting and seeing other people, and having those experiences. With our students, it is

about communicating, getting their needs met, being able to tell somebody, "I want a biscuit", without having to smack them in the face to get it because they do not have those skills.

It is a lot more than just getting a job. I understand that in economic times we have to look at the financial outcomes, but it is a lot more than just financial. It is social. I know that this is an Education Committee, but, if you help someone to control and manage their emotions when they are younger, that will have fewer implications for the social care budget in the future.

Mr P Ramsey: Do not misread me or judge what I am saying. We clearly have a role. I chair the all-party group on learning disability at Stormont, so I come to it with not just a political interest but a fundamental personal interest. I understand the complex needs of speech and language, occupational therapy and the other elements required for the progression of a young person.

The Department is in the process of launching a disability and employment strategy. We are trying to hold the Department to account to make sure that best practice is there at all times, to ensure that Sarah has a greater opportunity. The figures constantly say that someone with a learning disability is four times less likely to secure employment than someone who does not. What can we do better to make sure that there are greater opportunities for Sarah?

Ms Corey: Can I show a little video — a little clip that was made, that I had on this PowerPoint?

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): If you have the connection.

Ms Corey: I actually have employers talking about our students.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Katherine, if you send us the link to it, we will probably be able to look at it.

Ms Corey: It is about getting society to understand the implications of what somebody with a physical or learning disability can do. Last week, Lord Freud just completely destroyed that altogether. We all hate putting labels on things. It is about job carving. It is about taking a job and realising that, OK, this person cannot do all of this job but they could do this bit, this bit and this bit, and they can be valued for that part of the employment and paid a wage that is equal to what they are actually doing — not less than an able-bodied person, but the same. It is about trying to educate our employers and the wider community about the benefit of having somebody with learning difficulties in their employment and the implications that that can have for the other staff that they have there and for their business.

Mr P Ramsey: One can imagine that, given the presentation, we have possibly three areas here where you have young people coming in whose needs are so profound that they need to be permanently in a residential setting. You have other young people coming in who require to be here for three or four days. In many regards, some could see that as respite for families. And then I want to explain on the day placements that you no longer have. On the overall picture, what does the Department for Employment and Learning bring to the table on all of these projects?

Mr Mitchell: For the first time ever, we are working quite well in identifying some of these areas. It is curtailed by the budget. For example, there is one particular student with profound difficulties, and his mouse for the computer was faulty. We could not find anybody to be responsible for replacing it. We got letters saying that there was no money. That gives you an example. Mary, do you want to say anything on this?

Mrs Mary Canavan (Parkanaur College): No.

Mr Mitchell: This particular fellow is fairly intelligent, but he is wheelchair-bound, and he is even restricted in terms of weights of how you lift him. So, what will happen to that person's quality of life in the future? Four or five years ago, the United Nations made it law that you are supposed to provide the appropriate further education for people to meet their needs. There are different arguments about what we are obliged to do for the individual with regard to their human rights and with regard to their quality of life. Employment is our objective at the end of that, but we have to start on the journey.

Going back to some of your earlier questions, we are now identifying an increasing number, which is getting quite large all the time, in the special needs schools. There is a backlog coming. They are not provided with the further education to meet their needs the way that mainstream further education is.

There is a complete gap there in Northern Ireland, and it is going to get bigger, if you look at the statistics and facts and figures. So what we are looking for is to consolidate what we are doing, but then we want to develop in the future. This is a charity site. It can be easily and cheaply adapted for the future. It is central in Northern Ireland. It is an ideal location and an economic location to develop provision in Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Sullivan: I will contribute to that as well, Pat. A differentiation has to be made. This is the role that the Committee can really support, and I think that it addresses the point in your question. There is a tendency in Northern Ireland, as opposed to what Katherine has clearly highlighted in England, that we are streamlining everyone into an FE/HE setting. Do you agree with that? That has been the tendency over the past few years, and that is what is going forward.

We are working in a sector that has specific needs that are being overlooked. How can we put a framework around those young people to provide the education at a level and a pace that they can deliver? How can we fulfil their specific needs in a setting that FE/HE cannot provide, and then make that real transition with tangible results of getting them from the setting that we have here and which is already a progression from them being at home seven days a week or in some kind of sheltered housing? There is progress to here. How do we get tangible results as we progress them into the market? The holistic provision and support that the Committee can provide Parkanaur with in all of that would be helpful.

Mr F McCann: Thank you very much for the presentation. I think that, for all of us, the post-19 SEN inquiry has been a learning curve. In other inquiries, many of us picked up that there was a need for a service, but it is only when you start to attend meetings like this and listen to presentations that you start to realise that not only is there a need to provide a service but that people do excellent work and have commitment and dedication to doing it. What is happening here with lack of funding and resourcing has been going on for quite a while. Have you taken that up with the Department, and, if you have, what was the response? I saw a photograph of the Minister cutting a tree here. Did you raise it with him, and what sort of advice did you get? Do the laws for local authorities that pertain in England exist here? Does it open a possibility of challenges from parents who, along with yourselves, are quite clearly not getting the service that is required to provide the type of training and education that young people need?

Mr Mitchell: The very fact that the Disability Employment Service changed its name to the Disability Employment Service — it used to be the Disability Advisory Service — has changed the emphasis, as Pat said. Apart from anything else, it does not have extra money; its budget is curtailed. As I said, the money that we have had over the past 15 years has not followed any economic increase; there has been no relation at all. So, we have made our own provision by the social economy. We have doing weddings in this facility. We tried to cut our costs on the walled garden. So, we tried to do social enterprises to make up for that, and that kept us with the pace. We are now trying to start supported living. We do all our developments ourselves, and we pay for it all ourselves. Colleges across the water get 40% towards any developments to start with. So, it is very restrictive, and we are having to do a lot of things just to survive and to then maintain the quality of service and the quality of education that we require. The issue of the minimum wage is in the news this morning, and a lot of our carers, as Katherine will tell you, do not understand how we exist.

Ms Corey: No.

Mr F McCann: I think and hope that the inquiry that we have embarked on will raise all those issues and will allow us to try to bring pressure to bear so that things are resourced. I know that an element of this is to do with Health, which, as a Committee, we have no control over, but, as part of the recommendations, we can point out where there are inadequacies in funding. If you were to tell us what needs to come out of the inquiry and which issues we need to raise, what do you think we should be doing?

Mr Mitchell: Do you mean what we should be doing now?

Mr F McCann: I am talking about us as a Committee and how that could be part of our recommendations.

Mr Mitchell: The main thing is young people who have been identified at 16 or 18 in a special needs school. In the past, they were lost for two or three years and then suddenly eventually found

somewhere like us and went in. We need continuity that is the same as that provided by mainstream schools for pupils going to further education. So, we need to identify the people from the special needs schools who can benefit. It is not just, as Katherine said, people who have certain physical disabilities. For some people, the home environment curtails their development a lot. So, when some people come here who are less physically disabled but who may have a mild learning disability, we look back at the home environment and see that it was holding them back. When they come into a residential setting and increase their self-esteem and self-worth, they become motivated and then look for employment. So, if we could get them in here at the age of 18 and keep progressing them for a three-year contract, which is what we used to have, we can then signpost them into further education, employment, supported and independent living so that they are less dependent on the state.

That is a continuum, and there are three or four options there. The whole thing is about getting them early when their expectations are to get a job and lifting their morale and self-worth. It is just not their fault that some people are born with disabilities, and they should not be punished and deprived of further education.

Mr F McCann: I have just one question. You mentioned further education. In some of the sessions that we have done with groups, there seemed to be a bit of a problem when somebody goes from a setting like this on to further education. It is the same with some employers. What sort of relationship do you have with employers and FE?

Mr Mitchell: Around two weeks ago, Mary and I went down to Newtownabbey to learn what they have as best practice in the same way as we are learning from the residential colleges here. So, we have started to look at and work with the Newtownabbey college, which has six other campuses. It covers Ballymena, Coleraine and Magherafelt. We are working together with them through the Disability Employment Service.

Mr O'Sullivan: To add to that, Fra, we recently held a business lunch and breakfast to which we invited businesses. We had good support for that and a good offering and desire to be engaged in a work-experience programme for some of our students. That was a good indicator of the appetite and desire for work placement and, hopefully, of the potential after that, were they to contribute. Some of the students, as they progress, are able to engage already with some of the provision in FE institutes. So, there is some relationship there that has already been used to enhance what we can do here.

Ms McGahan: Thank you very much for your presentations. I am not sure whether I should declare an interest, but I have a daughter who works here on a very part-time basis. She works at weddings, and she absolutely loves it. Thank you, Sarah, for your presentation. It was excellent.

I am interested to hear what you feel are the blockages to referrals to Parkanaur. You mentioned that it is important to get people at a very young age, such as 18. I am very well aware of the difficulties here in this district, where is little or no educational resource. Only recently did we get one full-day course at the local FE college. I have been talking to parents, and even yet, they are still not happy about that provision. So, I would like to hear from you what you feel are the blockages, apart from funding. Do you work with ASPIRE, the local post-19 group here?

Mr Mitchell: I am trying to keep the time short, but Carol from ASPIRE is sitting behind me. Perhaps you want to make a few comments about that and where you think the blockage is, Carol.

Ms Carol Hue (ASPIRE): I am a parent and a member of ASPIRE. We are a local group that looks just at post-19 services. My son has gone down the direction of the day centre because he has more profound needs, but most of our parents' children are due to leave Sperrinview Special School in one, two or three years. They are in the transition process. My son got into the day centre, because I pushed for his place. As we all know, with the new model of day opportunities, there will be very few day centre places. Those places may not be five-day placements. There are a lot of young people out there with learning disabilities, but there is nothing in the local tech at their entry level. There really is nothing out there, and parents are just becoming aware of that. Not everybody wants a residential setting for their child. We would like to see day places here so that young people, when they finish the special school at 19, could come here for a couple of years. They are always learning. There is absolutely no difference from when they go out the door of, say, Sperrinview at 19. They need to keep learning for their self-esteem and their future, and, basically, to have a good day and to keep them busy and stimulated.

So, we would like to see day opportunities here. Dungannon, as you know, has very few day opportunities. We do not see the health trust really coming up with much. Young people could come here, where it is local. It is a very peaceful environment, and it is maybe not as daunting as the further education college. They could pick up on what is here, such as upholstering, cooking and a lot of things that they would be interested in, such as IT. I think that Sperrinview is going down the line of having more IT and those things so that young people can follow on. There really is so little, so we think that it would be probably more cost-effective than residential settings.

Ms McGahan: Can you elaborate on the difficulties with the local health trust? You mentioned that you are not seeing a big pile coming from it.

Ms Hue: We were told that there was a consultation. We are not really sure where that is at the minute or whether it is done and dusted. We do not really see any background work being done with employers in particular. As far as I know, in Dungannon, there is only Print It, which is a social enterprise, but you must have autism to be involved. That lasts for two years, but, after that, I do not think that there is very much, to be honest. There is one-day men's health in the leisure centre. The real problem is that, if people in the day centres are reassessed and maybe have to move out, what is there for them?

Ms Corey: I find it incredibly sad that you had to fight for a day place for your son. In England, it is a given that he would go to a specialist independent college. It takes my breath away that Northern Ireland is so far behind the rest of the UK in its provision for people with learning difficulties.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Katherine, I think that you will appreciate that the Committee is undertaking this inquiry to highlight that and to see what we can do about it. It is not that we are ignoring it or that we are complacent about it; the fact is that we want to do something about it. That is why we are here. The Committee agreed at a previous session that we are willing to bring forward legislation, which, in the Northern Ireland Assembly, is quite a rarity; I think that it has been tried once. All parties on the Committee agreed that we will not be lacking, and that is why we are going through this evidence session.

Ms McGahan: On the point that you just made, what legislative change do you think should be brought here that would have a positive impact on the whole area of special educational needs? You referred to the education and health care plans for nought to 25-year-olds.

Ms Corey: That is the Children and Families Act that came in in England in September.

Ms McGahan: So, that could benefit provision.

Ms Corey: It definitely could benefit, because the pressure would be on not just the Department of Education. There would be the realisation that the Education and Health Departments and the care sectors all need to come together to provide that. When it comes to residential places, local authorities have said to us, "Well, we'll pay for the education, but we're not paying for the residential". That leaves families in turmoil. For example, I can think of Holly, who threw her brother down the stairs, and she threw an iron at her mother. They cannot live together as a family any more. Either she goes to residential, or she goes to a secure unit. She does not need a secure unit; she just needs education to help her to control her emotions and to teach her the strategies that she can use instead. With this plan, the hope is that Education will put something into the pot, Health will put something into the pot if they have epilepsy or any sort of medical condition that will impact on them, and social care will pay for the living arrangements. In England, there is also a standard three-year entitlement in an FE college after they finish secondary school. A lot of the FE colleges work under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA). Did that come into force in Northern Ireland?

Mr P Ramsey: There is no SENDA here.

Ms Corey: The SENDA came into force the early 2000s and meant that all buildings had to make physical modifications to allow people with physical disabilities to enter them. They also had to make reasonable adjustments to courses and everything else. That Act would be really powerful if it came in here.

Mr Eamon Connolly (Parkanaur College): I want to make a subjective comment on Bronwyn's question about what the local health trusts are doing. I worked in the local trust for 30 years until I

came to work here. I worked with people with learning disabilities and was a ward manager and a trade unionist. I have been very involved in moving people from hospitals into the community. So, I have seen it from the start to the finish, whereby we used to provide day care services and send people out with those services. I saw the change from that to sending them out to daytime opportunities. It was clearly a cheap option to change the name and call it something different, and it left it very ambiguous and meant that anybody could do anything. The trust saw that it was a much cheaper model to use, and that is why the daytime opportunities came along and the day care services were cut. I have been personally involved in that for the past 20 years. The trust was leaving it up to some other Department or agency to pick up the cost for all that.

Mr Mitchell: To reply to part of what Bronwyn was saying, there is clearly a need for joined-up government between the Health and Education Departments. They are ahead of us with that in parts of the UK when the package is determined. In the past, we had to do a lot of fighting if we had a student who was in training but needed a care assistant. That did not happen. Even though they might have had that assistant in their special needs school, it was dropped when they hit 18 and came to us.

That has been recognised only recently. The cost is a big issue. However, it is that person's right to have that provision. You really need to look at the person holistically and at the person and their individual need. The two Departments need to come together.

Ms Corey: I just want to add a little tiny thing to that. A poor outcome for us would be if one of our students moved to a day centre.

Ms Lo: Thank you very much for your presentation, particularly you, Sarah. You did very well. I wish you the best of luck.

I am new to the Committee, but, Wilfred, you may know me from the Environment Committee. I am absolutely staggered to hear the difference here compared with the Seashell Trust.

I want to double-check a few figures with you. You said that you get £16,000 per student from DEL.

Mr Mitchell: It is £16,282, roughly.

Ms Lo: And DEL buys only 15 places.

Mr Mitchell: That is for residential; it is not for day persons.

Ms Lo: OK. They buy 15 places from you, but you have capacity for 24 beds.

Mr Mitchell: Yes.

Ms Lo: So, you are not at full capacity at the minute.

Mr Mitchell: No.

Ms Lo: You have no day courses; you are only residential.

Mr Mitchell: We used to do that, but it was stopped.

Ms Lo: Who stopped that, and why was it stopped?

Mr Mitchell: We do not know why; it was just stopped.

Ms Lo: Who funded it before?

Mr Mitchell: It was the Disability Advisory Service.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): That was DEL.

Ms Lo: DEL stopped it. Was that all down to cuts?

Mr Mitchell: No, it was some time ago, before the cuts. Somebody somewhere along the line thought that there was no need for residential places in Northern Ireland. If it was airbrushed away there would be no case, and there would be no meeting here. If it did not exist, there would be no presentation. Our break-even point was 15 students, and for the last 15 years our contract has been for 15. We have very seldom held the 15, so we have had to fill the other places with residential respite.

A lot of our students want to stay when they finish. Everybody is called a student here, because we want to make them aware that our expectations are that they are going to develop in lifelong learning and that they will keep going by obtaining more choice, living independently and, ultimately, getting some form of employment.

Ms Lo: You obviously have connections with other special schools. Do they refer students to you, or do parents have to get to know where you are and your availability and apply themselves?

Mr Mitchell: It is quite inconsistent. There is a mixture. Some are aware and some are not. Sperrinview is aware of us, but we are unsure to what extent beyond that. I cannot afford to send somebody around the whole of Northern Ireland to market the college to find out. I could if I was funded to do so.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Wilfred, if you had day services, what sort of capacity would you have?

Mr Mitchell: It would be unlimited. We have a two and half acre walled garden, the forest is all ours and we can do any amount of IT. You can see that we have a three-storey building in the courtyard that is not used, and underneath the building are large cellars. So, what we could do for day placements would be unlimited.

Mr O'Sullivan: If I could add to that, to differentiate from the FE side of things, we have the availability of many different curriculum areas. The core curriculum that we provide at this point for the residential students could be enhanced and broadened for the capacity that would come in through the day programme to take in a wider spectrum and provide greater opportunities that are not available to them in FE. So, we could enhance the provision to cover a gap that exists.

Ms Lo: Excuse my ignorance, but are there any special FE colleges for SEN children or young people in Northern Ireland?

Mr Mitchell: I am not aware of any.

Ms Lo: So, you are the only one, and you are only residential. So, there is a clear lack of choice for parents and young people.

Mr Mitchell: Not only that, but there is a lack of utilisation of what is here.

Mr P Ramsey: This is not so much a question, but I ask you to reflect on the terms of our inquiry into the employment and training of young people post-19. Given all your experience, how can we home in on areas where we can clearly make a difference, whether through collaboration or ensuring that it is part of outputs on health, education and employment? Remember, our focus is on employment and training, but there may be areas where it is not happening. At some stage, we may have to look at best practice models in England like Katherine described, but that is for another day. I ask you to reflect on that and to let us know what your thoughts are to help and assist us with our inquiry.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Wilfred, we will have a number of stakeholder events as part of our inquiry and will focus some specifically on young people — the service users. If possible, it would be very important to have input from the likes of Sarah, who has chaired your student council.

Katherine, there is just something that I am thinking about. Would the Seashell Trust be open to a visit from the Committee, if we could facilitate something? We would like to make the comparison.

Ms Corey: Absolutely.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): OK. Thank you all very much. Sarah, thank you very much for coming along.