



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:
Stakeholder Event

3 December 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mrs Alison Anderson	Belfast Metropolitan College
Mrs Donna Crothers	Department for Employment and Learning
Mrs Christina Kelly	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Terry Park	Department for Employment and Learning
Ms Claire Linney	Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council
Mr Tony O'Reilly	Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
Ms Julie Jamieson	Post 19 Campaign
Ms Elaine Henning	Praxis Care
Mrs Mary Shannon	Southern Health and Social Care Trust
Mrs Sharon Frazer	Southern Regional College
Mrs Ruth Walker	Sperrinview Special School
Miss Kathryn Bryson	Springvale Group

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Thanks for this morning's efforts. I will now ask the rapporteurs to report to the Committee. As we said earlier, Hansard is here to report your comments, so we will have a record of that. Each table will have five minutes to report. Then we will open the floor to other tables for any comments on that theme. I ask those who wish to speak to raise their hand, and the Committee staff will provide you with a microphone. When the microphone is with you, please give your name and organisation before making your point. I want to stress how important that is for our official record.

I will start the discussion with table 1 on the choice and availability of educational courses and further education and vocational training. Please turn off your electronic devices as they interfere with the recording. Will the rapporteur for table 1 make themselves known to the staff and feed back their comments after stating their name and organisation?

Mrs Alison Anderson (Belfast Metropolitan College): I am reporting on the findings from table 1. The first point that the group wanted to make was to do with the impending financial cuts that are

going to face not only the further education sector but other sectors that impact on further education for people with learning difficulties and disabilities. We would like to make the point that colleges should be encouraged to maintain provision at level 1 and below. It needs to be protected in the cuts that are going to hit colleges so that opportunities can be maintained for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities across the sector.

The second point that the group wanted to make was with regard to transition planning and how vital it is. Further education's input into transition planning into college should start at the age of 14-plus. Progression planning from college on to other forms of provision or other lifestyle choices is also vital. We think that whole area needs to be explored in depth with a range of organisations. Linked into that, there is a need for closer partnership working with voluntary and stakeholder groups that can support people in further education and provision in further education and can help the transition for young people into further education programmes and progression from further education. That will be vital as we move forward.

The other big issue that was a source of much discussion and dialogue around the table was the urgent need for joined-up working at the highest level between the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education to enable appropriate support packages to be put in place for young people in transition from school to college. Very often, there is a breakdown in that. The transition from children's social services to adult social services happens at the same time as the transition into colleges. Sometimes, young people, or their families, have no social work support. The feeling around the table was that, if a medical or care package needs to be put in place to enable the young person to access further education, it is very often further education that makes the representations for that to happen. There needs to be some partnership and joined-up working to enable that transition to be smoother. We spent quite a long time discussing the issues around that.

We also had a significant discussion around the Training for Success (TFS) programme at level 1 and below for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities and the disparity between the support mechanisms available through the Training for Success programme and further education through the additional support fund (ASF) 02 and 03. In particular, the £3 that is available to each student under Training for Success is not sufficient to meet their support needs. We felt that the disparity between mainstream FE and Training for Success, particularly where support is concerned, needs to be addressed in some way.

We also felt that there was a need to track destination routes for young people leaving further education full-time programmes. That would help further education to monitor the success of those programmes.

There was some discussion around a review of the legislation and looking at what may be happening in legislative terms in England, particularly with the 'Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years'. We might look at having a similar system here in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Do any of the other tables want to feed back on that subject? Does anyone from the table want to add anything? If not, we will move on to table 2, who were discussing increased opportunities to work.

Mr Terry Park (Department for Employment and Learning): The first key issue that we looked at was benefits and the so-called benefit trap. We all agreed that that is a real issue for people with disabilities and their families. Whilst it is a policy issue for the Department for Social Development, our key message was that work has to be seen to pay and that it has to pay in reality for people if they are making the major decision to do that.

The conditionality regime around the employment and support allowance is prohibitive. It is prohibitive in reality and also prohibitive by perception. We are aware that, at times, people are being ill-advised by some in the advice sector. In some cases, people are being stopped from availing themselves of the really good community and voluntary sector projects by a fear that, if they even take part in those, they will be in danger of losing their benefit. People and their families are very fearful, and that is an issue. Proposals on universal credit, if they do as they say, might be a resolution to this as it is meant to allow people to work fewer hours but retain a sizeable proportion of their benefit, but that remains to be seen.

Social firms were seen as very beneficial, especially in relation to the other topic of work experience. A lot of the time, people with disabilities come out with their qualifications at level 1, or maybe even

level 2, but are lacking in work experience. Social firms allow someone to move fairly smoothly into the working environment with appropriate levels of support. That enables them to get used to the day-to-day working situation, which can be really beneficial when their own organisation or the Department then tries to support them into either full-time or part-time employment beyond that. The community and voluntary sector has a lot of really good social firms and social economies, including Liam Devine's Clanrye Group and a number of others that I am aware of. The issue was raised of whether FE provision could be aligned with social firms to allow the transition from the classroom into a social firm that was attached to the FE colleges.

We touched on transport, which, again, is a very real issue. Independent travel training is provided but probably not on as widespread a basis as it needs to be. A comparison was made with the SmartPass for public transport that is available for older people. It was felt that it would be very worthwhile to look at that. There is our own Access to Work programme, which is valued by people who use it. However, it may be that not enough people with disabilities, especially those starting work, know that Access to Work would be available and allow them to avail themselves of taxi transport on a daily basis.

We also talked about the idea of local workforce development networks. That does not need to be a majorly costly exercise, but it would need to be funded in part. It would bring together key stakeholders from the statutory sector and the voluntary sector and key employers in the area. They would then be able to come up with policy ideas, proposals and solutions for their own location.

The idea of an auditing body to monitor the quality of provision of services to the special educational needs client group was raised. That would be akin to an ETI-type body, but it would specifically monitor what we are doing in DEL, Education, Health and Social Services and DSD in relation to provision for young people with special educational needs when they are exiting full-time education. We need a clearly signposted route from full-time education into a suitable menu of provision, be it through careers, further education, training or directly into employment services. That whole area of transition is very confusing, particularly for parents to know exactly whose role it is to advise on which particular area of transition. I am led to believe that education transition officers and social workers can be there sporadically until the person is 18 and then their role seems to dissipate. That leaves people hanging as to where to go next for the support. There is a real issue here for not only DEL but other Departments, particularly DHSSPS and Education, to step up to the mark on if this is going to be successful.

On the provision of educational and vocational courses, are we offering the right programmes to prepare young people for the types of jobs that are available in the local labour market? Or, through FE and other bodies, are we delivering what we always delivered because it suits us, gets the numbers in the doors and continues our funding stream? We thought that we need to be a bit more strategic about that. There is no point in delivering vocational training courses in a locality where there are very few jobs even for non-disabled people. There needs to be a better linkage with the local labour market. We maybe need to review and challenge the curriculum of both departmental provision and community and voluntary sector provision.

We need to avoid duplication at all costs. I am aware that some individuals could go through Training for Success, FE provision and projects through the European Social Fund (ESF), and it would all be effectively delivering the same thing over a period. We are just sending people through cycles.

The issue of the funding model between FE provision and TFS was raised in our group as well. For the people we are trying to support under TFS, the funding is insufficient.

I will finish off on some of the issues that we talked about. We do have the disability, employment and skills strategy that is being developed between the Department and the sector, and I would like to think that it will not only enhance the provision for people with disabilities in each of the different DEL areas — careers, FE, training, HE and employment — but ensure that there is clear linkage and an almost seamless transition between each of those services. We did touch on the other departmental services, and they need to come on board as well, but at least if we can take a lead in being responsible for the linkage between our own services, that would be an obvious starting point. Also, through the recruitment and development of disability employment officers on the ground, it would ensure that that linkage is maintained and that we track client progress. I think that that was raised by the previous group. There is a serious lack of tracking clients from when they come into the system until they reach their eventual outcome, whether that is employment or something else.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Thanks, Terry. Do any of the other tables want to feed into that topic of increased opportunities to work?

Mr Tony O'Reilly (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland): Terry, you mentioned Access to Work. It is important that, when looking at Access to Work, you take on board the Sayce recommendations, which have highlighted the fact that people with learning disabilities in particular and those with mental health issues are not being catered for in the Access to Work provision.

Also, as you are probably well aware, the supported-employment sector has said to the Department that Access to Work should possibly be looked at and extended to consider support for people with complex, high-support needs on training placements, not just within the context of employment. There are a lot of benefits that Access to Work could provide if it were considered in a much broader way.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): As no one else wants to add to the feedback on that topic, we will move on to table 3 and accessing community leisure facilities.

Miss Kathryn Bryson (Springvale Group): Good afternoon. The Springvale Group is one of the largest social enterprise providers of employment and learning programmes to young people throughout Northern Ireland. This year, we have taken on our first group of transition students who have joined our mainstream TFS programme.

At our table, we were small in numbers but keen, and we have been looking at the access to community leisure facilities. First, we looked at existing models of good practice, including Belfast City Council's Boost scheme, Newtownabbey Borough Council's Zest scheme, the Fit 4 U scheme, parkrun [*Inaudible due to mobile phone interference.*] To summarise our discussions, we started by looking at the existing models of good practice where leisure facilities have attempted to make themselves more accessible. That includes the likes of the Boost scheme, the Zest scheme, Fit 4 U, parkrun and the Special Olympics movement, with its strong volunteer base. At Springvale, where we have a target audience of 130 16- to 19-year-olds, we have done work to attempt to link to local facilities on the ground, for instance Falls Leisure Centre, which has provided us with facilities for students to access personal trainers and spin classes.

Once we had discussed some of the models of good practice, it linked us on to some of the barriers to provision. When we started to look at what our models of good practice were and at where we could learn from other countries, we found that there is a difficulty in finding other models of good practice that would be appropriate for us to link to or to learn from. That is one area of research to follow up. That also led us into a discussion where we said that, if there were any research trips to Ayers Rock in Australia, we would certainly be willing to go.

We found that major barriers to provision included access to space and to venues. We are aware that there is space available in communities — for instance, in schools and community centres — but it is about accessing those at appropriate rates and prices. We are aware that transport can be a big barrier to provision and to accessing community facilities. Equally, there are strong transport links on the ground. There are a lot of specially adapted buses, but quite often they are parked up during the day and are not made available to other groups that could use them at different times to support community groups with the links.

We felt that, on the ground, there are many support providers, but, at the moment, we lack a collaborative approach. There are the new council superstructures coming on board, as well as DEL and the trust, but one of the barriers to provision can be that each of the Departments considers that it could be another Department's responsibility. Whose responsibility is it to provide? That actually provides a barrier to provision. Can we find an overarching solution to that in some way? There is already a commissioner for disability and a commissioner for young people, so could we even have an overarching champion of special educational need provision that could link the different organisations out there and provide a collaborative approach?

We identified that, within the transition phase, we have problems with a less joined-up approach to provision. We find that sometimes there is an issue with information swapping from the schools throughout the transition. We feel, on the ground, that increased support is required. Certainly, there are social workers and transition coordinators doing a very good job, but we could have more of them on the ground. So, we called out for the following: an overarching directory of services and someone allocated to regularly update that; a champion of disability services; and further research on models of

good practice, looking at previous reports, why they were not implemented and what action points we could take forward and build on.

One final point that was raised by Robin was that we discussed extending the length of the special educational needs (SEN) statement. Rather than it finishing at around the age of 19, if that could progress on to the age of 24 or 25, it would allow the young people to access support for longer and might go towards providing that collaborative approach. I am going to hand over to Mary if she wants to add any other points.

Mrs Mary Shannon (Southern Health and Social Care Trust): We talked about the benefits of accessing community leisure facilities for promoting healthy lifestyles — mental health as well as physical health — the inclusion and community identity for young people, being able to get out socially like their siblings, promoting maximum potential for independence and creating and maintaining friendships. It was noted that, in schools, a lot of young people, as part of their school leavers' programme, already go to their leisure facilities. We need to try to promote and encourage that at the point when they are leaving school so that they can connect better with their communities.

There is one model of good practice that I referred to. I am the transition coordinator in Armagh and Dungannon, and we have had community access workers recently appointed to our children with disabilities team. We have had a good example of practice in the Fivemiletown area, where we supported parents in developing greater links with their local school, which had a swimming pool and different facilities that they could use. We were able to do a lot of partnership working with the parents and with voluntary organisations like Mencap. The school was also able to provide the volunteers from among its A-level students, so it helped them with their CVs, and we were able to signpost to the relevant training for both parents and volunteers. Now the parents have formed a committee, and that has helped them with their funding sources in order to continue with the project, which, I understand, has been very successful. It is really about looking to our local facilities and trying to build partnerships so that our young people can avail themselves of social outlets in their own community. That is just an example that I wanted to flag up.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Thanks, Mary. Do any of the other tables want to feed into that?

Mrs A Anderson: Quite a few of the courses provided by further education colleges are predicated on a healthy lifestyle. We have several courses on building links with the local community, and we work in partnership with the Belfast Hills Partnership, the Boost programme and Active Communities. We are also building on the work that we do with some of our older people with learning difficulties. Local communities have set up new schemes for community gardens, sustainability and grow-your-own food, which lead into a healthy lifestyle. It is important that further education is also highlighted as a model of good practice in that respect.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Would anyone else like to comment on that topic? No? In that case, we will move on to table 4, which considered the future roles of health and social care day centres and day opportunities. I ask the rapporteur to identify herself.

Ms Claire Linney (Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council): The key issue identified by the group was that young people with learning disabilities leaving school at the age of 19 do not have the same opportunities as others of the same age. Our recommendations for provision do not focus just on the health and social care trust. One recommendation for consideration is that there is the potential for a college for 19- to 25-year-olds with learning disabilities. It was felt that young people with learning disabilities start developing their life skills between the ages of 14 to 19, and, whilst these years are very proactive, that period could be longer. That would not delay the problem until age 25; it would give them greater opportunities to develop their life skills.

Another table raised the issue of opportunities for days out for a key group, which makes up 85% and more of the target audience coming out of SEN schools and consists of those with medium requirements. They do not have complex needs, but neither are they more independent. This group needs greater choice and day opportunities, but they must be supported opportunities with supported transport and access.

There are various solutions and suggestions as to how this could happen. There is the day centre model with satellite units, which people felt had worked very well in their area and provided development and job opportunities in a supported environment. We also recognise the social enterprise model, and there are great examples of that in the voluntary and community sector. It is

important to give support to good models, but it must be long-term support and not start-stop funding. Furthermore, where the voluntary and community sector is not delivering, we did not want a postcode lottery, whereby the trust or another government organisation intervenes to try to stimulate activity in the area through that sector. Who could provide for an area where that is not happening?

It was recognised that it is not just about the trust providing through the day opportunity model. There are other providers, including councils and other statutory organisations. However, it is very important that people know what their remit is from the beginning and are very clear about what they should be providing. Is their remit simply to provide generic leisure opportunities, or should they provide supported opportunities that ensure that they meet the needs of the target audience?

The hub model is another solution to provision, and it does not have to mean a new building. It might be a safe environment with safe access where people congregate before going out, with their support person, to avail themselves of opportunities.

One of our recommendations touched on the importance of lower level entry to courses in our colleges. The importance of such courses was raised previously. Higher level courses meet a target audience, but they do not cater for everyone. Lower level courses are important, and those lower than entry level 1 are critical. The duration of such courses should not be restricted, because some young people may need to do a course several times. The restriction on doing so should be taken away.

We moved slightly away from our brief when we agreed the need to ensure that courses below level 1 are funded from within the current SEN sector and are part of the entitlement framework. SEN schools should not have to run on a deficit in order to provide these courses for young people who really need them and have an entitlement to them as part of equality.

Another issue that came through, and which impacts on the other issues raised, was transport. There is a need for accessible, safe and supported transport for young people who are not independent so that they are able to access opportunities. An integrated approach is needed. There might need to be a review of how transport is provided. Should we go back to the old model of dedicated transport buses? How do we get the door-to-door support needed?

The need for integrated, joined-up working and how to achieve that is discussed continuously. Is there the potential to put people from different Departments together in teams? Is there any reason why they could not be located together? That would include community access and Pathways to Work workers, and it would mean that staff would be together and could work across teams.

There is another parallel issue. We recognise that those in the statutory sector need to work together, but it is also important to support those in the community and voluntary sector to work together. There are limited resources, and further cuts mean that we will need to make the money go further. How can we do that? Is there a way of looking at integration and shared resources? Is there a potential for the community and voluntary sector organisations to work smarter and not compete with one another for limited resources?

My last point is on the importance of ensuring that provision is not a postcode lottery. There should be a review of standards so that everybody gets the same level of provision across every area, whether urban or rural. If a sector is not providing for young people in an area, whose remit is it to kick-start provision so that they do not have to move house to get a better service?

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Thank you. Do any other tables want to feed in or support anything that has been said?

We move on to table 5, which was considering the coordination of post-school services for individuals. I ask the rapporteur to identify herself.

Mrs Sharon Frazer (Southern Regional College): We were asked to look at the choice and availability of educational courses in FE. One of the major issues we looked at — it was raised at all the tables — was the whole transition process. It begins at 14, but we in FE are not included at that stage. We are trying to suss out whether we are seen as a real choice. At transition, the young person comes in and is seen as a new student because there is no sharing of the statement, or at least no mandatory requirement for the sharing of the statement, between schools and FE. We have found this to be a source of difficulty when trying, along with parents and others, to meet all the needs of the young person with learning disabilities. We have to work out what the requirements might be within our provision.

A lot of good, but sporadic, work is done in the Belfast Met, and in lots of FE and other colleges, to build relationships. We are taking these relationships forward ourselves and having meetings and assessments to try to build up an individual learning plan for each student. We are concerned that there is no mandatory provision and no statutory requirement that this be done. When young people reach the age of 16, they are detrimentally affected by the fact that that statement ends there and does not travel with them to the FE sector.

Some of us have found that, sometimes, a key worker is appointed at the point of transition. That can help to inform the provision offered or how we take forward provision in the future. It came to light that the students that we receive range from mild disability to moderate learning disability, with all of the accompanying needs.

We tried to get a solution, and one of the solutions that we came up with was the creation of a body within an existing Department. This body would look at the legislative approach and, by getting together all the key players, represent a collaborative approach between DEL, the Department of Education and DHSSPS. We all have our role to play, even in the planning from age 14 on, and such a body would take leadership, ownership and accountability for what happened in the transition formation.

The second solution that we looked at was to do with the availability of provision for those with a moderate-to-severe learning disability. We had a discussion based on whether FE and training provision was seen as a real choice. We thought that it was, but we also had concerns that when young people reach the age of 16 or 19, sometimes the only provision put to them is day care, where their education ends. I brought up the point that in further education, our aim is lifelong learning. Do we assume that the fact that someone has a disability means that their learning stops at age 16 or 19? We also looked at whether, if young people are in an out centre, we should be going in there to provide support for them. We also looked beyond educational support. Our individuals with disabilities also need support with lifelong skills, their personal skills and independent living skills. We looked at the whole statementing process in light of the English model, which is based on 16-to 25-year-olds. Who says that it should stop at age 16? Do we stop learning? Does the learning curve stop at that age? We want to recognise that learning does not end there but goes beyond, keeping in mind that everything should be based on equality.

The third issue taxed all of us — I do not know how other tables found it. We find that the biggest barrier for us in FE colleges and for other providers is the provision of transport. The statementing process provides transport to age 16, and, when young people reach the age of 16, it stops. I know that, rurally and in towns, we have all tried to move forward by using rural transport. One college has provided two buses to bring people in, but, again, once the young people reach the age of 16, the statutory responsibility for transport seems to end. We are trying to come up with lots of solutions for that.

I must end by saying that, to ensure that there is equality and consistency, not further marginalisation of people who are already vulnerable, we must look at a legislative approach. That is what we were trying to put forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Thank you. Does anyone from any of the other tables want to feed into that?

Mrs Donna Crothers (Department for Employment and Learning): I am involved in transport, and there are a couple of things to pick up on. First, young people with disabilities who attend college can avail themselves of the home-to-college transport scheme, which will cover them to the age of 18. That is for all young people, including those with disabilities. We are looking at transport assistance beyond the age of 19 because it does stop there for young people in general. We are very conscious that these young people's disabilities do not disappear at 19 and that they may still need some assistance. The Department is looking at transport, at what is available, where the gaps are and identifying the number of people whom we could possibly help. We are very conscious of that and are aware of it even in the remit of table 1 provision. Provision, particularly in rural areas, can be curtailed to a central spot, and that causes problems for people in outlying areas, but, if the transport issue is addressed, that will, hopefully, not be as big an issue.

Mrs Shannon: I would like to flag up a fact about transport. In the past, we had what seemed like very workable post-school options for some of our young people outside their district council area, and

the use of rural transport may have been a feasible option. We cannot place extra demands on our working parents. Even parents who do not work have other commitments. So, when talking about using facilities outside district council areas, we need to look at transport to make that a workable solution for our young people who leave school after the age of 19.

Mrs Christina Kelly (Department for Employment and Learning): I am from DEL's Careers Service and want to add that DEL careers advisers work in all post-primary schools across Northern Ireland and attend all transition plan meetings that we are invited to. We feel that that is a very important part of the service that we have on offer. Our experience is that there is a very clear difference in the range, breadth and choice of provision and options for the typical student who is going on to do GCSEs or A levels compared with that for a young person who is statemented with special educational needs. There can be complications in the mix, such as benefits, parental expectations and transport. It is a very difficult time for parents and young people. It is a very complex discussion, and we feel that we have a very important role to play.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): I will move on to table 6, which discussed the coordination of services in a locality.

Mrs Ruth Walker (Sperrinview Special School): The first question that we were asked was whether there is a coordinated effort by all agencies and bodies to provide a holistic service for all those individuals leaving school with a learning disability in the local area. Sperrinview in Dungannon is a school for children with severe learning difficulties from the Dungannon and Cookstown area. Our table is heavily weighted towards FE: we have three colleagues from FE colleges and a parent. We had interesting discussions and did not always stay on task, but we will do our best to answer the questions with a flavour of where we are coming from.

We feel that an audit should be carried out in each locality with a view to creating a local model. Maybe that should not be too prescriptive but based on the needs of each area. Colleagues from Belfast raised very different issues from those raised by those of us from rural localities. We think that that needs to be reflected but that we should also meet a minimum requirement. What that should be is up for debate, but we think that some things should be prescriptive and others very flexible.

The current inter-agency approach lacks cohesion and is very dependent on the relationships within those areas. There is variation in the transition process across education boards and health trust areas, and that usually involves the statutory bodies and not the community organisations. There was a lot of chat about using libraries and schools etc, but that does not really happen in a coordinated way. It happens only if the relationships have been built, but that depends on individuals; there is no overarching body that makes sure that it happens.

The next question was whether parents were being left to discover support for themselves or whether signposting was in place. Parents feel that they have a lot of work to do here. There is some signposting, but, again, it depends on whether transition coordinators are in place in an area. That is not common across all the boards. If there is a coordinator in place, they do some signposting, but, in some areas, that person is not there. The parents have a lot of work to do. They feel that perhaps there could be some e-update or some sort of regularly updated — perhaps annually, or even more often — online directory to give information on what sort of opportunities there might be post-school. The personal service is very important, so, again, the transition coordinator role comes in there. That is somebody who coordinates all the information the parent needs and takes in the parent's needs to find out more from other agencies, if necessary.

We could talk about transport for a long time; every group has mentioned it. Transport is a huge issue. It is definitely limiting the opportunities for young people leaving school. Up to 19, the young people are lifted from the door and left back, but then, all of a sudden, that comes to an end. In rural places, that is a big problem. Many of our parents work full time, and services often do not start at 9.00 am; they might start at 10.00 am. How does that work for parents who are working? Some of the opportunities available can use local community transport, but, again, you cannot book it in advance, so you do not know whether it is going to turn up. For children on the autistic spectrum especially, that is just not acceptable; they have to know that it is coming, and they have to get to the place that day and get home again. That is a huge problem in our area. It is definitely limiting choices. In the transition process, if an opportunity is there but does not have transport with it, it is discounted.

The protocols are in place in education for the transition process. That is statutory. We know exactly who is going to be invited to those meetings, but that is interpreted differently in different areas and

across different schools, so you will not necessarily always get the same group of people. It is not about having more people in the process — parents often find that quite off-putting — it is about having the right people in the process. If you are considering an option of FE, it is more sensible to have the FE representative there than somebody who is going to take the message to FE. It just makes more sense. There should be flexibility in, and maybe a little bit more emphasis on, that transition process, because it is very hard for parents to have a meeting for which they are all geared up and which everybody is making out to be a big thing but the key player does not turn up. You cannot make any decisions if the right people are not there.

Adult services, particularly from social services, must be represented. New transition protocols have recently been drawn up in the Southern Board and Trust area that are going to require the adult services to be there for the final transition meetings. We hope that that will be rolled out across all areas.

Our discussions then moved on a little bit, and we discussed things like post-school provision. We found that we had very different expectations of what that was going to be, depending on whether you were a school, an FE provider or a parent. Parents really want continuity. The idea of going on to 25 was very strong, whether that involves maintaining the statement until 25, the people staying in a school setting until 25, there being a specialist college in place, or FE courses being compulsory in a way for everybody until they are 25. The other thing was that every child leaving special schools, not just those who are level 1 or entry 3, got to continue in education. Those right down to entry level 1 and below also had an entitlement to continue their education and learning. Learning does not stop when they leave school at 19. Other groups have said that as well. There should be some formalisation of and accountability for that as they move into health services or FE.

We also talked about employment, employers needing support and an exit strategy from college. If you are working in a college and you have done a work placement, wouldn't it be a really lovely thing if you could move on into voluntary work or paid employment? Paid employment is our preferred option. There are issues with trying to get employers on board. We talked a lot about FE having job coaches and so on, who are doing really good groundwork with employers in trying to get them to take young people on, but we are finding in our area that that is not really happening. Even though Dungannon is full of industry, there is not very much uptake from employers in keeping young people on after they have left education. What can we do about that? Can something be put into legislation that requires employers to keep a minimum number of places for people with learning disabilities? I am not sure how that would work.

We also talked about independent living being a goal for many young people and working towards that through FE. It is not always just about vocational and academic courses but about their own personal development and moving them towards living as independently as they possibly can. With regard to exit strategies, obviously, what is next after two or three years or when they get to 25 years old? It is all very well that the transition process is being extended to age 25, but you end up with the same problem at the end, which is where do we go with this? Somebody needs to think that one through as well.

Mental health and learning disability was mentioned as an issue. They tend to be kept separate. It is certainly separate for the remit of this study, but mental health issues are a reality for a lot of young people with learning disabilities. That needs to be taken into account in the level of support that they require and their development post-school.

I think that that was pretty much it for the discussions that we had. Then, we talked about our possible solutions and recommendations. Funding would obviously be a great solution. So many of these things are not going to be free. They will require input and more funding. Where does that come from? That is more of a question than a solution. Could budgets be coordinated to provide shared services? Yes, they could, but it would be extremely complicated. The mechanics of that would be beyond us. It would be great if there was a joined-up approach from the top. I agree that, if they are in one room in one building or sitting in one committee perhaps, that would be much more likely to happen.

Many ideas have been brought forward today and certainly from past reports on why all this has not been implemented. We agree with other groups that have said that we require a champion. Can we have a commissioner for people with learning disabilities or something like that? Can it be enshrined in legislation, such as a Bill or whatever? There are statutory requirements for education. Up to the age of 19, we must provide this, this and this, and we must have a statement. Then, it just stops. Could there be follow-on legislation that means that somebody has to do it and they are held to

account for it? We feel that there should be a commitment to lifelong learning in a variety of settings and ways, but an educational element is important for the early years particularly.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Thanks. Ruth, you talked about entry level into education and the different levels. For the record, could you explain that?

Mrs Walker: Yes. Most young people in a school for children with severe learning difficulties are working below level 1. Levels are talked about if you are doing GCSEs or A levels. You might be level 5 or level 6 — it goes right up to degree levels. When you come down the levels, level 1 is primary-school foundation-stage level with regard to learning and, from a qualification point of view, is really the entry level point for FE. They do not really do anything below level 1 in the mainstream setting. Below that is entry level 3, entry level 2 and entry level 1. You go backwards. A lot of young people with severe learning difficulties are working around entry level 1.

The group on education were talking about the entitlement framework courses at level 2. They carry entitlement-framework funding. Below that, they do not. So, education is missing out there. They give us an amount, but it is not based on the qualifications that we do because entry level 2 is the only thing that carries funding. So, those lower-level qualifications are not hugely recognised, even in education. When we get into college, it is hard to get entry level 2 and entry level 1 courses. They tend to be discrete courses. More of them are appearing. That is a good thing because young people need to have choice when they leave school and not be excluded from FE by the fact that they are not at entry level 1. It is getting much better. The three colleges here all do it in very different ways. They have very different models for it. All of them have their merits. The problem is that there is one here, one there and one somewhere else. Again, there is that problem of some sort of uniformity and equal access no matter where you live.

Mr Park: Just following on from one of the points that Ruth made there about the exit strategy for people who are exiting the likes of the FE courses in particular. The whole idea of the strategy that we are currently developing with the sector is to address that gap because we are receiving lots of feedback that people with special educational needs, right across the disability spectrum, have a schedule and a pattern and are achieving things and, then, they come to that last six months or so of courses and it is, "Right, what's next?"

The model that we are trying to develop is that each of those young people for whom employment is a realistic and chosen goal will be assigned to a disability employment specialist officer who will work very closely with that individual. Tying in with the employment market, they will go to local employers for whom that young person has an idea that he or she would like to work, should that be in retail, some sort of clerical or administrative role, or a higher professional role if you are working with young people coming out of university. They will be their personal advocate. So, it is putting in place that personalised employment support that, without doubt, is the requirement for people who have significant disability where there are barriers to work, but who, if the right support package were put in place, could maintain a job. That is the model that we are trying to develop.

We have been running a pilot with two of the FE college campus areas for the past two years. At the moment, we have achieved 44 successful paid-employment outcomes, both part time and full time. A lot of those young people were not aware themselves of their capability. Certainly, some of the parents were pretty nervous about allowing their young people to go into that market. Trial periods are put in place. Then, the package is put in place, predominantly through Workable. I know that Access to Work has been mentioned, but Workable is the programme that tends to support more people with learning disability. Again, it is something that we need to get out there and let employers be aware of.

The only other thing that I would like to mention is that I think there has been a lot of emphasis on FE — I know there is representation across the FE sector here and there are questions for us to ask departmentally and in the sector itself about what we provide to young people who are exiting full-time education in the FE sector. I think that it is about giving parents choices that are not just restricted to FE. There is a danger here of stretching a sector in which capacity is already an issue. I would like to think that it is a choice between FE, other community and voluntary sector training provision, TFS or an improved TFS, and also better day-centre activity options for parents of young people for whom level 1 or lower level is not appropriate. That is something that needs to be addressed through this. Otherwise, it becomes a much more narrow inquiry than maybe it needs to be.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Terry, you can be assured that this is a wide-ranging inquiry and that we are not just concentrating on the provision in FE.

Mr O'Reilly: I just want to respond to some of the comments regarding a commissioner for people with learning disabilities or specialist provision. The Equality Commission is responsible for the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and indeed for the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005. We also have a role in the Independent Mechanism for Northern Ireland (IMNI). We are responsible for ensuring that government takes into account the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The convention, in its preamble, general obligations and general principles, makes explicit reference to people with high, complex support requirements, including people with learning disabilities. There are specific provisions in article 19 on independent living. I just want to make people aware of that. If they do want a commissioner for a specific impairment or category of people, how will that work with regard to other people with disabilities, and how do we look at that with regard to the convention and our obligations under it as well as our current obligations on domestic equality legislation?

Miss Bryson: Robin, you asked for clarity on the different levels. Just to follow up on that, in Springvale, we have a robust programme of essential skills. For anyone in the room, when we talk about level 2, we are talking about an equivalent roughly to a GCSE grade C. Level 1 is equivalent roughly to grade D. Then, you have entry 1 to entry 3, which are the lower levels. Entry 1 is recognising simple words and symbols and moves up to entry level 3, which is writing simple sentences.

Our group talked about post-19 choices and the pressure that parents are under in accessing information and having either a directory of services or an online directory of services. One of the things that can alleviate stress for the parents is just having a range of choices, whether it is possible to offer a choice for certain students so that it is appropriate for them to stay on at school a little bit longer until they mature a bit further, or whether it is appropriate for them to go through a transition phase at the age of 19 to somewhere like Springvale or a further education college. A robust programme can be put in place just to improve the essential skills to add a course for personal social development, employability skills or life skills. Packages are available that could be put together to provide a comprehensive package for those who are dealing with issues but want to continue progressing.

Ms Julie Jamieson (Post 19 Campaign): I listened to everything today, and it was great to have this discussion. However, it has not been made clear that 50% of the children coming out of special schools in the future will have profound and complex needs. They will not be going anywhere near an FE college; they will be going straight to a day centre. We have to look at how we can provide education in the environment that is best for them as regards their safeguarding, their medical needs, their care needs and all those other things. I listened to those round the table talk about some of the courses that are provided in the FE colleges, and that is fantastic. However, those courses need to go to places where our young people are, and that is what our campaign is about.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): That concludes the feedback from our six groups. Does anyone want to make a general statement? I am willing to take it and have it recorded.

Ms Elaine Henning (Praxis Care): We work very closely with the trusts to provide day-care services for people with learning disabilities, mental health issues and acquired-brain-injury issues. We get the message very clearly from the trusts that funding for day care will be cut. We will reach crisis point.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Committee, thank you very much for this evidence gathering session for the next step of our inquiry. The majority of the issues that have been raised have been raised through our stakeholder events or the visits that we have already had with a number of the organisations represented.

With regard to the feedback, if the rapporteurs have a chance, could you expand on your notes or feed them back to the Committee staff so that we can expand on some of the topics that have not been picked up? We are willing to take whatever conversations you have had around the table to make sure that we capture everything that we can.

The discussion of budgets has been realistic. We know that services will be curtailed in different areas. If the Committee can come up with recommendations that see better cross-working between Departments — that has been mentioned a number of times — we are prepared to do that. The Committee has agreed to bring forward legislation if necessary, and that is unique; it will be only the

second time in the history of the Northern Ireland Assembly that a Committee has expressed a willingness to do that if need be. We may not need to do that but, if necessary, we will do that.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for your participation and the feedback that you have given to the inquiry to date. If there is anything else that you want to feed in at any stage, the inquiry will run for another couple of months, and we are willing to take further submissions or testimonies on best practice or bad practice. We need to cover the full remit of everything that is out there at this time.

Before I close, Sydney, you are very welcome to your first meeting of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Mr Anderson: Thank you, Chairman. Apologies for being late. I was in Craigavon at another event with the Health Minister.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): You are more than welcome. You will be well embedded in this topic by the time we are finished.

Ladies and gentlemen, the next stage is another event similar to this one, and it will be held on 4 February in the Dunsilly Hotel in Antrim. An event is also being organised for individuals with learning disabilities and difficulties to gain their views as well, because we want to get as wide a cross-section as possible.