



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Transitions Experiences of Young People
with Hearing Loss: Action on Hearing Loss

4 March 2015

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Irwin
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

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| Mr Barry Campbell | Action on Hearing Loss |
| Ms Sally Gillespie | Action on Hearing Loss |
| Ms Sara Kelly | Action on Hearing Loss |
| Ms Claire Lavery | Action on Hearing Loss |

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): I remind members that the session is being reported by Hansard and that they should have their devices switched off. I welcome Ms Claire Lavery, campaigns manager; Barry Campbell; and Sara Kelly, service user. We also have Sally Gillespie, sign-language interpreter. We are glad that you could come to address the Committee. You have up to 10 minutes, and then we will open up the meeting for questions.

Ms Claire Lavery (Action on Hearing Loss): Thank you very much indeed for giving us this opportunity. Before we start, it might be helpful to explain Sally's role as interpreter. She will interpret for all of us and for Sara, so, if Sara is signing, Sally will voice over for her, but you should communicate with Sara. No offence to Sally, but my advice is to kind of ignore her.

We are here to talk to you about some research that we did recently on transitions experiences for young people who have a hearing loss or who are deaf. I am not going to give you a really detailed explanation of all of the research. There is a summary document in your pack that you can read if you get the time. There is also a briefing paper, and I will speak to that now, so you can use that as a bit of a guide. I will give you an overview, and then Sara will speak to you about her personal experiences as a young deaf person going through a transitions experience. Barry will then outline some of the work that we do in his project and why it is successful in working with young deaf people.

We know that there is a problem with transitions for young deaf people. We knew that anecdotally, and we commissioned Queen's to do some research. Some of the background context is that there is a lesser number of deaf students in our universities here than there has been over the last few years.

The number is declining, and you would imagine that it should be increasing. There is quite a small number of deaf people in further and higher education colleges — only 590 people out of a total population of almost 157,000 students. People with hearing loss or deafness are less likely to get a job, and, when they are in a job, they are less likely to progress in that job. The latest facts on the Access to Work scheme, which supports employers to work with people with hearing loss in the workplace, are that there are only 92 profoundly deaf people accessing that benefit — 92 people is a drop in the ocean — and many of those possibly work in the deaf sector, for example, in our organisation.

The context is not great, so we looked at the research on transitions experiences and asked Queen's to scope what services were out there currently to support young people transitioning to assess how effective those services were from the perspective of young people and to identify the common barriers as to why people are not getting work or not progressing into third-level education or training. We interviewed 23 young deaf people, and they were from a range of locations in Northern Ireland. Some were sign-language users, some oral; some were still in college, some at school, some working and some in none of those places. We also spoke to service providers, and we got one-on-one interviews with quite a number of them. They were very open and honest in telling us about their experiences.

The main things that we found were that, generally, you cannot separate the transitions experience from young people's experience at school. As an organisation, we do not deal with children; there is another deaf organisation that does that, so we have to be quite clear about that. However, there are issues relating to their schooling that impact on their transitions experience. Perhaps they do not get enough qualifications or they are not exposed to enough qualifications or not always supported to get those qualifications. There is a general lowering of expectation among parents, teachers and young people themselves as to what their options are. They are not always given positive, aspirational advice that, "You can do whatever you want to do. The only thing that deaf people cannot do is hear; that is what you need to remember." Unfortunately, the lack of that will lead to low self-confidence among many young deaf people.

Young deaf people are not always aware of the transitions process. They do not understand that it is a formal process and that they have a role to play in it. They may not always be aware of what options are available to them once they leave school. There is a bit of a cliff edge that they drop off after they leave school. Quite often, people in school are supported very well, perhaps through partial hearing units; or they may go to Jordanstown School. They are given a lot of support in school, and they are cosseted, to a certain degree. Once they leave school and go into further and higher education, they meet the big bad world, and they can struggle to cope because they have not been given the enabling skills to do that.

We found that careers advisers who visit schools are from the DEL Careers Service and are not necessarily deaf aware. There are not aware of what support is out there in further and higher education and in employment and training for deaf people. They may not have any sign language at all and do not have an understanding of what it is like to be deaf and what options might be available.

Moving to further and higher education, we found that young people, generally, are not aware of what is available to them when they go on to college. There are supports in place, but there needs to be more outreach, and colleges and universities need to engage more with schools to make it really clear what is available, once they start the course. Conversely, young deaf people do not always acknowledge their needs in time. We were just talking about this in the corridor. Depending on their background, circumstances and how their deafness has been treated as they grow older, young deaf people may not feel confident about declaring it. They get to 18, leave school and go to university, and they think, "This is a clean break for me, and I can manage", so they may not declare their deafness or needs in time for the university to meet those needs. Maybe by the time that all comes together, it is too late and they have dropped out of the course. Sara, who comes from a deaf family, has had a lot of personal experience. She is confident in her deafness, and she is willing to declare it and to ask for the support that she needs. She is aware of her rights. However, she is probably in the minority, and her confidence has a lot to do with coming from a deaf family.

Other issues impact on people's access to further and higher education, such as the shortage of qualified interpreters such as Sally. There is an increase in the number of interpreters available over the last few years due to funding from DEL. At the time, Sir Reg Empey gave money for a training course, so we have a lot more interpreters than we did, but we still do not have enough. The budgets that colleges and universities have are obviously not infinite, and they have to make a decision about how much they are going to allocate to a qualified interpreter and whether to pay a fellow student who

will take notes. The deaf student generally gets a combination of supports, but it is maybe not exactly what young people might need. They do not have a personal choice about saying, "For that lesson, I need a note taker and an interpreter", or, "I need a radio wave in that classroom". It may differ, depending on the person's needs, and that is not always taken into account.

I come to training and employment, which is the other end of the transitions process. Training providers do not have a central fund, such as the Access to Work benefit that we talked about, which you might get if you go into the workplace. They do not have a budget to provide interpreters for people who are on training courses. That is a massive barrier for young deaf people in the first instance. Most of the training providers that we spoke to were not engaging with young deaf people. They had no deaf people on their books; they tended to come through more specialist organisations, like ours. We also found that young deaf people are not aware of their entitlements in the workplace, at an interview or in training or of what their rights are. Generally, they are not always aware of what their rights are. Some of the feedback from the research showed that, "Yes, we know that there are interpreters and note takers, but I do not know how to go about accessing those, what my rights are or how I can utilise my rights". There is some work to be done on that. A range of things came out of the research, and, as a result, we are beginning a campaign to try to improve transitions experiences and work with practitioners on the ground. The aim is to ensure that young deaf people are enabled to make decisions about their future and given the same opportunity as hearing young people to progress so that they have a positive experience in transitioning from school and all the support services are person-centred, deaf-aware and accessible to them. The harder thing, which may be more difficult to change, is improving attitudes to employing deaf people. There is still negativity, even in this day and age. There is still a feeling that it will be extra hassle, and there is uncertainty about how deaf people will cope in the workplace and what job they can really do. That is due to lack of awareness.

There are key things that we want to happen, and we ask for the Committee's help with them. Young people have told us that they need more information. Currently, the only information that young people get from the transitions service consists of a leaflet for students. Parents get a similar leaflet, and there is an easy-read version. I just do not think that it is good enough. Young people told us that they want something that is 2015. So, let us put it online, make it interactive and have forums so that they can have conversations with other deaf young people. There could be blogs, a section for parents and reference to other sources of support. We need something interactive, which is not an unachievable ask. There are portals, and the transitions service has a website, but it acknowledges that it is quite static and a wee bit out of date. Perhaps, that is where that could live.

We would also like some way of tracking the outcomes for young people, because we do not know whether the transitions support that they get at this time has any benefit for them. We know, as you can see at the beginning of the paper, how many deaf people are in college, but we do not even know whether they finish. Barry was just telling me about a young guy he heard about last night, a deaf sign-language user, who did well in his A levels and got into Queen's but has now dropped out. That happens quite a lot for a range of reasons, but we do not track it. We need some kind of longitudinal study, over, say, a 20-year period, to see whether the support that they get at 14-plus has a positive outcome. They get [*Inaudible.*] essentially, and are self-sufficient when they are older.

We would also like a consistent approach to transitions support across the education and library boards. Each does something slightly different. I am sure that there are aspects of very good practice, and the transitions officers whom I meet are very committed to what they do, but we need a more joined-up approach between the transitions support from the Department for Employment and Learning, the education sector and health, which also has transitions officers. There are all these transitions services, but they do not necessarily connect with each other. The transitions officers agreed with us that we should establish a working group and try to map the current pathway across the five boards and make a new pathway from the best bits of each. So there will be a best-practice regional transitions pathway that all deliver to, and they have agreed to help us to work towards that, so that is something.

We have written to the Minister, and I have met his officials in the Department. The consensus seems to be that the policies are there and the Minister has made some investment in supporting disabled people. Somewhere, however, there is a disconnect between the policy and what happens on the ground — what young people experience — so we need to join the two.

That was a quick synopsis — I am aware that I speak very quickly — of what we found in our research. If you have any questions at this stage, we are happy to answer them or you may want to keep those until later.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): Is there more? We will take all the presentations together.

Ms Lavery: I will pass to Sara, who will tell you a wee bit about her personal experience.

Ms Sara Kelly (Action on Hearing Loss): Hello. I am a college student. Before that, I went to Mary Hare School, where I did my GCSEs. I achieved those, but, in the transition meeting, the only option given to me was to stay at Mary Hare School and do my A levels there. I thought that, if my results are fine, I will be accepted; if not, I will not continue. However, there was no support on how to access college or information on what support would be available in that college. My older sister Ruth gave me all the information because she had been through that college herself. There was nothing to support her, but she found the information for herself and was able to be a really big support to me.

There was no one for me to contact and ask what options were available. The only option given to me was to stay at Mary Hare School. I felt really unsure about that. Had I not had my sister, I would have been completely clueless about what my rights were, whether I could have had an interpreter, a note taker or, indeed, both, or what communication would have been like at college. I was a wee bit delayed in starting college because they were late in booking the interpreters. That meant that, by the time I got my support, my tutors had to give me extra support because I had missed out on so much of the early classes in my course.

At college, I faced barriers. When I arrived on the course, I met the education support officer, who asked me what I wanted. I did not know what I wanted. I thought that the education support officer should be providing me with options and telling me what was available — note takers, interpreters, laptops etc — so that I could choose what I wanted or what I felt was appropriate. How was I supposed to know what I wanted and explain it? It was as though I had to give them the information, so I said that maybe I needed an interpreter and a note taker. They said that they would look into it, but it was delayed and nothing was sorted out. That took a really long time, during which other students were carrying on. I felt that they should have given me the information; it should not have been me giving it to them. I felt that they really were not aware of what it was; it should have been the other way round, with them giving me support. So that was an issue.

Ms Lavery: You also told me, Sara, that your course tutors were not always deaf aware. It seemed that barriers were put up, and it might have been about attitude and awareness.

Ms S Kelly: Yes, definitely. I am doing a health and social care course, and the tutors asked me why I was doing that course. I said that I was interested in working in health and social care and may want to become a midwife in the future. Their response was, "You want to be a midwife? That is interesting. We will talk about that later". What is that about? They would look through my work and tell me not to worry about it, but I said, "No. I would like help from you. If my work is wrong, I would like it to be corrected with support from you". I experienced an awful attitude, and I was constantly going through that. I was explaining that I can do things or asking them to explain things to me through an interpreter.

During the first week of college, in every class, I had to explain that I had an interpreter who had to sit in a certain place and that everything said would be put into BSL. Every time, I explained that I followed sign language and had a note taker. Each tutor would say that that was fine but did not understand the boundaries. They would look at and talk to the interpreter — "Tell Sara this" — and I sat there wondering why they were talking to her. Yes, the interpreter is my voice, but that is it. There were plenty of issues that we had to work through, and the attitudes were awful. They thought that deaf people could not do anything. I explained that hearing was the only thing that I cannot do and that I can move my hands, walk, write and learn. I told them that there was no issue, but they looked at me as though thinking, "Don't worry about it. We understand. Just you wait your turn", and that is not right. Attitudes did improve — they need to improve.

Mr Barry Campbell (Action on Hearing Loss): I work for a Big Lottery project on health and sport. We are in the sixth year of the project, and, so far, we have over 300 members who are participants in a lot of different sports and courses. The clients whom we work with have very low self-esteem. Their expectations can often be really low as well. Their access to information is poor. They are sign-language users and, quite often, do not understand the health information provided to them. We work with volunteers to support over 300 members, who have been participating for over five years. We are building up the confidence and the opportunities for people to get involved in a wide range of activities. Many of our clients are so pleased to be involved in the activities. They have opportunities now that they never had before. We are talking about transitions, and many have left school with low

qualifications and low expectations. We offer opportunities to be involved as a volunteer, to gain experience and to apply for employment, college or university. It is important to provide role models to show the achievements of other people who are on a par with them, to show that deaf people can achieve as well. It is also important to have positive information shared with our clients. I am a health and sports advocate. We have people who have hearing loss involved in a wide range of sports and becoming qualified coaches. They are providing the courses and the sports clubs. We are working with mainstream sports clubs as well. We have 30 people involved in different sports. They have never achieved that in the past. This is a perfect example of how we can support them to achieve.

My role is all about encouragement and empowerment for the deaf and hard-of-hearing people whom we work with. It is so important to show them that they can achieve, whether it is through sport or employment. That is part of the Big Lottery project. It should be a five-year project, but they made the decision, last year, to extend it for a year, which was wonderful. So far, we have found that many of our clients left school without a sense of direction of where to go in order to achieve in life. They did not know whether it would be college or university, so we realised that there was something wrong in the process here, if they were being left at the side. We realise that transition is a big part of that. The research that was done has been a big support for the project.

Ms Lavery: That is as much as we have at this stage. Maybe you would like to ask us questions.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): Thank you very much for your presentation. Sara, when you were going through school and into further education, did you find that there was a sense of isolation because of your difficulty with hearing? If so, how was that addressed?

Ms S Kelly: Not really, because my family are deaf. I have the confidence and the experience, and I knew that I could achieve. It was fantastic that I learned that from my family. At college, my experience was good. There were barriers, of course, but I am not the only one. I think that a lot of deaf students from hearing families do not get the same support as I did. Maybe their parents think, "We have a deaf child, and maybe they can't achieve the same". I had the support from my family, so I was lucky, and I had the confidence to continue, but others did not.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): What barriers did you face when going through your training?

Ms S Kelly: Communication support, for one, and attitudes. There are so many barriers that it is hard to think, but those were certainly the two main ones. Yes, communication was a big barrier, as was the attitude of the staff.

Ms Lavery: You told me that some tutors refused to work with the interpreter, for example. Interpreters need notes in advance; they need to be positioned in the right place in the room; and they need people to communicate clearly. The tutors in some of the courses that Sara was on actually led her to leave one college. She is at another one now. They just did not want to work with the interpreter.

Ms S Kelly: Yes, that is right. My course, at the moment, is fine, but, previously, I did a level 3 childcare course. The teachers refused to work with me and the interpreter. They tried to ignore the interpreter and exclude them. We asked them to provide notes to the interpreter so that the interpreter was aware of what was coming up and would be able to translate it properly, but the teachers refused to work with them entirely. Eventually, I had enough and withdrew from the course. It was a waste of a few months, because then I had to look for different voluntary work and try to find a different course. Now, I am at the Northern Regional College, which is much better.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): Claire, your presentation showed that, without doubt, there are a lot of gaps in the system and that a lot of work still needs to be done. You talked about setting up a working group. Will there be members from various Departments — DEL, Education and Health, for instance— to try to bring it all together? Will you have representatives from all of those Departments on the working group to try to address the issue?

Ms Lavery: We need everyone in the tent — to borrow a political phrase — who has a role to play in this and who might be able to bring something to it. At the moment, I am involved in an engagement exercise and am out talking to everybody who has something to say about this. I am listening and building our experience, because everyone has their own view and we need to take all that on board.

I imagine that a working group will consist of the deaf organisations: we, Action Deaf Youth and the National Deaf Children's Society all have an interest in that area, and we work together very well. I will also invite a transitions coordinator, and a teacher of the deaf and a careers representative would probably need to be there. I am going to see the Careers Service next week, because apparently the careers review report has some traction in it for us and has things that we may be able to build on. I am going to see the Jordanstown School for the deaf and visually impaired, and possibly it will put a representative on the working group. Its membership will be pretty broad, and, as you say, representatives of the Health, Education and Employment Departments will need to be on it as well. However, we have a very clear steer, and the first thing that we need to do is get the pathway.

Mr Ramsey: That was an excellent presentation. As with the previous group, it puts into perspective those in our community who are most vulnerable.

The universities come here and talk proudly about widening participation. To me, widening participation is all about the inclusion of people who are less likely to succeed but want to succeed. Sara, clearly, epitomises all of that in wanting to succeed and being frustrated by further barriers. The barrier of having a disability is bad enough, but that is compounded when others do not understand, or maybe they do not want to understand. I would like to hear from the universities and the colleges across Northern Ireland. Is there any college where there is good practice in this area?

Ms Lavery: There is some good practice in a few colleges. The South West College, in particular, has worked with us. We have a careers and guidance officer, and, if a student comes to us for support, she will liaise with the college to provide deaf awareness training for the tutors, make sure that the equipment is in place and work with them to ensure that the course is accessible for that young person. That is intensive, one-on-one support. So there are a few pockets of good practice where we have been involved.

I know what you are saying about the universities, but it is not black and white; there is some good practice there, too. It is not a case of a really black picture; there are some pockets of light. The universities will tell you that they have these things in place. Sometimes, young people do not declare their disability or do not declare it until it is too late, and then there is a delay and they drop out. There is money in the sector, and there are supports such as interpreters and note takers in place. Maybe they are not all fully qualified, but it is a process of negotiation. If you were to bring the universities in, I would be interested in hearing what they have to say. They will probably say, as the Minister has, "I have these five things in place, we have put this money into it, and we have invested in it". However, as I said, there is a disconnect somewhere between putting that money in and the practice and experience on the ground.

Mr Ramsey: The disconnect is that the Employment and Learning Minister has responsibility, but the key responsibility for disability in the Executive lies with OFMDFM. For 10 years now, disability groups across Northern Ireland have been waiting for and anticipating the announcement and launch of a disability strategy, which has not taken place. There was to have been an event last month. I do not know, Chair, how we get our concerns about what is happening with the disability strategy into the system. The strategy will give peace of mind and comfort to a lot of disability groups and disabled families that there is a cross-departmental approach, which was your point, Claire. It is necessary to look at primary and post-primary so that people like Sara will have the full advantage. It is disappointing to hear that even disability advisers in the Department for Employment and Learning are not up to speed, and the Minister has been consistently challenged on that.

I would also like to see how we can have a full briefing on this. There are so many groups coming to this that we need to get a full briefing on the disability issues. What are the targets? What are we going to do? What will we do about appointments, for example, when we have the Commissioner for Public Appointments saying that fewer than 2% of public appointments in Northern Ireland are of people who are disabled? Without a shadow of a doubt, I can safely say that those who have profound deafness are probably not represented. There are a number of issues on which we want to hear from the Department.

Clearly, Sara is different. She is a highly motivated, very passionate young woman, compared with some of the others who come here. Sara knows her goal in life, and I certainly hope that she achieves it. Others, maybe, do not, and there is low morale. They are unmotivated and feel left behind, which is disappointing.

Ms Lavery: They are floating around. They might start a course, drop out of it and start another course. They are perennially on a course, not knowing what they want to do. As they get into their twenties, they need to be on a route of some kind. A lot of that goes on. As Sara said, her family has given her great support. Deaf people rely on each other, quite often; they do not get that peer support elsewhere.

You mentioned cross-departmental working. That is a hard one to crack. Everybody talks about it. I read that the new Department of Communities will have equality and disability in its remit. That will possibly be a place to join it together. It is a difficult issue, but it is not just our disability that is affected. I know that learning disabilities have an issue with the cliff edge of transition and concerns about what happens once you leave the school system. Who owns your transition plan? Who guides you after that? So, we are not alone — it is a big one.

Ms Lo: Thank you for your excellent presentation. The report is very, very good. It highlights a lot of points on the marginalisation of disabled people. Sara and Barry, it is generally accepted that Beethoven produced his best music — his best symphonies — when he was deaf. As you said, your only disability is that you cannot hear. You have all the other faculties and all the intelligence. Thank you very much for highlighting that.

You mentioned deaf awareness, training and information for young people. Could we make more use of the Disability Discrimination Act? Pat said that we need to push for the disability strategy, but we have had the Act for many years. You have the statutory right to demand interpreters and support in colleges. Is that right?

Ms Lavery: It is not as clear as that. You have a right to demand a reasonable adjustment, so it comes down to what is reasonable, and there is no clear guidance. It is down to resources as well. Then it becomes a negotiation. We provide guidance to service providers on what we think is a reasonable adjustment. It is not unreasonable to ask for a loop system in this room, for example; nor is it unreasonable to ask for the provision of an interpreter for this meeting. However, it is not a clear-cut issue, and universities and colleges have a finite budget, so they divvy it out, and a good part of their budget for disability support is taken up by communication support. Since interpreters are low in number, it is a costly support service to have, and it eats into the budget. So, it is a negotiation. Our argument is that you need to talk to the young person. You need to say, "Here's what's on offer to you. Do you want to try this for a week or two?" We need to make support person-centred to meet personal needs, because one size will not fit all. The DDA is there, and people have used it and taken cases to court, but it is not great legislation.

Ms Lo: It has no teeth. I would very much like us to give more support and for this working group to progress in pushing for actions and recommendations. I very much want to follow that up. Claire, you say that you speak fast, but look at Sara — the speed of her sign language is magnificent. How well you two work together. I used to interpret in my very early days. How well that partnership works. It is wonderful.

Ms Lavery: This is why you need a qualified interpreter.

Ms Lo: You do.

Ms Lavery: My signing is level 1, and there is level 1 provision in some colleges. I would not want to teach midwifery with my sign-language ability.

Ms Lo: I did a bit of it, too, but I have forgotten all of it now.

Ms S Kelly: When you ask for an interpreter in colleges, they provide the cheapest possible option, and that is it. The money is the issue to them, so, when I go in, I will ask for my interpreters, the interpreters that I want. The colleges say that they will have to look into it and look at the budget. Money should not be the issue. They should provide me with what I need; otherwise I have no rights. If I go in and ask for someone and they say that they will have to look into it, that delays the provision, which is unfair. I need someone who can provide me with the full information. I cannot rely on other organisations to provide the information. I should have the college's support, and it should know what the needs are in education.

Ms McGahan: Thank you, Barry and Sara, for your presentation. I have had a significant lobby of constituents with hearing loss on the challenges faced by audiologists. Is there any link between students who drop out of college and the challenges currently faced by this service?

Ms Lavery: No, they are two separate issues. I am delighted that you have been lobbied about that. That has probably come from —

Ms McGahan: The lobbying letter that I received from my constituents states that this service helps people with hearing loss to retain their independence, maintain relationships and stay in work or further and higher education.

Ms Lavery: This is a separate issue that really sits in the Health Department. Audiologists are hearing aid specialists: they fit and maintain hearing aids.

Ms McGahan: Yes. There are significant delays at the minute.

Ms Lavery: There are long waiting lists for getting a hearing aid and for getting a reassessment of a hearing aid. There is a problem with retention and recruitment in audiology. We have been warning about this for years, and now there is a bottleneck, and people are waiting longer for their hearing aid. It tends to be an older age group that you are talking about. In the main, it is older people who have acquired their loss at a certain age.

Ms McGahan: They still go to college.

Ms Lavery: Yes, some people go to college in their older years, and others stay in work. Some who lose their hearing during their career will drop out of work. We want to make sure that they get the support that they need to stay in work. That is what that argument is; it is not necessarily about access to college in the first place. It is about staying there and overcoming those barriers with proper support from a properly funded and resourced audiology service.

Ms McGahan: You are confident that there is no direct link between students or older people dropping out of —

Ms Lavery: I do not have a measure for that. It would be very hard to measure it, but it would be interesting to see whether it is the case. We know that it is the case anecdotally because people tell us so, and we work with people who retired early because of hearing loss. They do not want to declare it. When they struggle in meetings and can no longer answer the phone, they decide to step out of work. That could be because they are worried that their employer may not be aware enough of hearing loss to support them. It is a slightly different issue, but it would be good to have a clear idea of how many people that happens to. Anecdotally, we know that it happens, but we do not have numbers.

Mr B Campbell: The issue for students with hearing aids is, quite often, note takers. Colleges and universities do not realise that people with a hearing aid still need notes. You need the information from the university lecture, and notes are so much part of that. Yes, the hearing aids are a part of audiology, but students need the backup and support of notes. Without notes and that backup, university students will struggle. So it is not just a case of getting the audiology; extra support is needed. I understand your point and where you coming from, but I do not think that it is a problem only for audiology. We need to work together on this.

Mr F McCann: Many thanks for the presentation. It is always humbling to sit and listen to a presentation like that. In the past, the Committee has had inquiries into issues that we believe create barriers for people. We had a NEETs inquiry, a careers inquiry and we are doing the SEN inquiry at present. The more you go into it, the more you learn.

There is probably a number of issues that we as a Committee can raise, even though it may be cross-departmental. Believe me, it is difficult even for us to get a cross-departmental approach to many issues. However, we can try to pull together all the threads of information. Obviously, we would need help in putting together the types of answers that you need, but it is how we take it one step further. You deal with people in different institutions or walks of life, but it seems that the provision of services that people who are deaf or profoundly deaf require to get on the ladder of life is fairly fragmented. How many people are available for sign language for the profoundly deaf community in the North?

Ms Lavery: Are you asking how many interpreters we have?

Mr F McCann: Yes.

Ms Lavery: I think that there are 17. There is no clear record of how many sign-language users there are in Northern Ireland; the census gave quite a small number. Our educated estimate is that about 3,000 people use sign language as their first language. English is their second language, so they are bilingual in the sense that they use written information. Education, however, is getting much better, and young deaf people have a much better grasp of English than the older deaf community does. There is a very small number of qualified interpreters. There are a lot of communication support workers or communicators working in colleges, with a slightly lower level of qualification. It depends on your situation. If you are going into a divorce hearing or having heart surgery, you want to have a qualified interpreter with you; you do not want someone with a lesser qualification.

Mr F McCann: If people want to learn sign language, is there some place in the North where they can go?

Ms Lavery: A lot of colleges do night classes. Many people do it for recreation; perhaps they will do level 1 or level 2. However, if you want to pursue a career as an interpreter, there is a route. It is something that we lobbied on and were successful on in the past. We got a local course up and running so that you did your basic levels of sign language at BMC and progressed to a Masters qualification through Queen's. That course increased the number of interpreters. However, it has stopped, because we need more deaf people to be trained to teach sign language; sign language is always taught by a deaf person. We need a lot more deaf people to be trained as teachers; they need teacher training qualifications. It is not a simple case of putting them on to a PGCE; they need a tailored course. Then they need qualifications in sign language as well, even though they might have been a sign-language user all their life. I speak English, but that does not necessarily mean that I have a qualification in English. There is a bit of a problem with the infrastructure on that course, and it has ground to a bit of a halt. Seventeen interpreters is a lot better than what it was, but it is still not enough. We need to reinvigorate that course. It was funded through DEL, and that pot of money has gone.

Mr F McCann: I think that it was Pat who suggested that the Committee could ask the Department the key questions that you want answered. We could ask those responsible in the Department to come to the Committee. What sort of response do you get from universities, further education colleges or Departments when you put the demand that you require to move these things forward?

Ms Lavery: It often comes back to money, as deaf awareness training comes at a cost, as does bringing in a sign-language interpreter. In the current climate, "money" is a buzzword. That can be the issue. It depends on one-on-one, so our careers and guidance adviser will liaise directly with a college. We have had successes with some colleges, but with others perhaps not so much. It is not regional; it is a bit patchy.

I want to go back to your original point about the lack of a joined-up approach and how there seems to be a very fragmented way of dealing with people with hearing loss. That all comes back to a massive issue that we have been trying to tackle, and which we will continue to tackle: hearing loss is not taken seriously by society. On average, people take 10 years to do something about hearing loss. Your wife has nagged you to the point that you eventually go to see about it — or husband, not to be sexist — but if you have a sight loss, you will act on it much more quickly. There is a stigma in society — and a personal stigma — about hearing loss. People do not take it seriously. Every time I say where a work, I get a joke in response — every time. If I worked for another organisation, possibly that would not happen. There is massive work to be done on changing attitudes towards hearing loss, and perhaps then it will be taken seriously in terms of service provision.

Mr Flanagan: Thanks for the presentation; it was very useful. It is very helpful to hear an interesting interpreter who puts people's words colourfully into life. Is there much difference between the rights and recognitions of British sign language and Irish sign language? Does that cause problems for people here?

Ms Lavery: We are unique in Northern Ireland in that we use both languages, and quite a lot of sign users are proficient in both. We have official recognition here of both languages. That led to a fund in DCAL, so DCAL has a little bit of money to support the promotion of both sign languages. We are

further on. Irish sign language is not recognised in the Republic of Ireland officially, and BSL is recognised in GB, so we are a little bit ahead in that regard. With recognition, I do not know how much power it brought, but it was better than nothing.

Mr Flanagan: Is there much difference between the two strands of the language?

Ms Lavery: They are different in their linguistic make-up. Maybe it would be better for Barry to talk about that.

Mr B Campbell: They are very different languages. It is the same as any language — French, Spanish and German are very different languages. Therefore, it is the same with Irish sign language and British sign language; they are very different languages. Northern Ireland is unique in having two sign languages. The UK has one sign language, and the Republic of Ireland has one sign language; whereas we have two in Northern Ireland, and it is lovely to see.

Ms Lavery: I should probably clarify that British sign language is not based on translating the English language and Irish sign language is not based on translating the Irish language; most people would be surprised to know that. They have come down through different schools of thought. I think that Irish sign language is similar to the French school. Is it?

Mr B Campbell: Yes.

Ms Lavery: It is more one-handed. It depended on how people were schooled. People in the border counties — Derry, Newry — and parts of Belfast went to the deaf school in Dublin and were taught through the medium of Irish sign language. Others stayed at home and were taught through BSL. That is how that has come about.

Ms Lo: They all interpret the English language.

Ms Lavery: They all interpret the English language, yes.

Ms Lo: It is a bit like different writing — a different style of writing.

Ms Lavery: Yes.

Mr Flanagan: In terms of additional complexities that people with hearing loss might have, such as ADHD or other attention-span deficits, does that present more of a problem for people with hearing problems than for people without a hearing problem?

Ms Lavery: I do not know the answer to that; it is probably a medical question.

Mr Flanagan: I see the huge concentration required to follow the actions of Sally, Sara and Barry; they need to pay full attention and cannot be distracted at all. I am a very flighty person, and if something caught my eye I would be away. For me, that would present a problem. It must present greater problems for someone with a hearing loss.

Ms Lavery: Yes, someone with an attention disorder. There is that possibility. It takes a lot out of people. You get tired; your eyes get tired and Sally's hands will get tired, so it is always good practice to take a break for everyone, including an eye break for the deaf people watching the interpreter. That may well be a problem, but I do not know.

Mr B Campbell: I look at the interpreter and can be fairly relaxed in how I follow, but I can talk at the same time like this, and I can change my communication style depending on the group that I am presenting to or talking with. I can use my interpreter; I can change the way in which I communicate. Yes, I can use an interpreter for a group, but, one to one, I can change my communication style to the different ways. I understand what you are saying. If a deaf person has additional disabilities — autism, for example, or learning difficulties — then, yes, you have to meet their needs in different ways and there needs to be different approaches. There is no one way; you need to have a wide range of communication strategies to involve everyone.

Mr Flanagan: Has your organisation or a similar organisation ever carried out an audit of this Building to see how accessible it is to people with hearing loss? Pat is a Member of the Commission, and I know that he takes a keen interest in disability affairs.

The hand dryers in here have stickers on them to alert people with autism that the dryers will make a loud noise, which is a progressive, helpful step. However, I am thinking about how we conduct our business in a manner that supports people with hearing loss. For example, has a sign-language interpreter ever been provided for Question Time or for a debate? Are Committee meetings accessible to people with a hearing loss problem?

Ms Lavery: The Assembly was the first legislature in the UK to achieve the Action on Hearing Loss Louder than Words charter marks.

Mr Flanagan: Sorry, what?

Ms Lavery: That is our charter mark; it is called Louder than Words. It is the gold standard of access for deaf and hard-of-hearing people, and we worked intensively with staff here to achieve it. All the front-line staff have had deaf awareness training. If you go on a guided tour and require an interpreter, you will get one, the tour guides wear radio aids; all that kind of thing. You were the first, and the others followed. I commend the Assembly, as it has set a very high standard.

Interpreting is not a standard provision, and it would not be provided for plenary debates or Committee meetings unless it was requested. There are so few interpreters that they are needed in other places. It would not be a good use of a small resource to have interpreters here unless they were requested by a deaf person.

Mr Flanagan: I presume that people with a hearing loss have some interest in politics and would like to know what is going on here the odd time.

Ms Lavery: The older generation who acquire a hearing loss are the same as the general population. There is a mixed view on politics among the profoundly deaf community. An awful lot of deaf people would tell you that they feel that it does not impact on them, that it is not accessible to them, that they never see a politician in their community or at their door, and that they would not know how to communicate with them if they did. There is an issue with deaf people's engagement with the democratic process. We did work some years ago to get people to use their rights and to get involved more. Am I right in that, Barry?

Mr B Campbell: Yes, I met Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness a few months ago. A photograph was taken with the Belfast Deaf United Football Club when we won the British Deaf Cup for the third time in four years. Peter Robinson said that he had a photograph of the team in his office. We had a chat outside Stormont and talked about football and who we supported. Peter Robinson is a Manchester United fan, I am a Liverpool fan and we had a bit of a joke about the different teams.

Deaf people know some things about politics, and we have opportunities like that to meet politicians. We had a friendly match with MLAs a few years ago.

Mr Flanagan: We lost. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B Campbell: We beat them 14-0. *[Laughter.]* That is a good way of building a relationship between the deaf community and politicians. We would be really interested to meet you and have more conversations like that to try to improve the quality of life for deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

Ms Lavery: Can I just check? Did you say that the score was 14-0?

Mr B Campbell: Yes, 14-0.

Mr Flanagan: That sounds accurate.

Ms Lo: Were you in the team?

Mr Flanagan: I was certainly. Chris Lyttle and I were both on it.

If we got the Commission to provide an interpreter for Question Time to one of the Ministers or a specific debate, could you mobilise people to come to make use of that?

Ms Lavery: Certainly.

Mr Ramsey: I see a question for written answer coming through.

Ms McGahan: On an action point, could we write to —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): We will look at that at the end of the meeting.

Ms McGahan: Could we send a letter to the Department of Health asking for clarification on the difficulties with recruiting audiologists? We could ask if there is a skills gap or if we are providing the right courses tailored to meet demand.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): We will look at that.

Mr Anderson: Thank you all for your helpful and interesting presentation. Claire, on some of the facts and figures, I think that 63% with hearing loss are employed. Is that at present? That was a few years ago. How does it compare with previous years?

Ms Lavery: To be honest, that figure is probably a bit dated, because our employment figures have changed in recent years, but the issue remains —

Mr Anderson: Has it improved?

Ms Lavery: No, it has not improved.

Mr Anderson: Has it got worse?

Ms Lavery: I do not know the answer to that, although it certainly has not improved. The barriers still exist, and deaf people are still not getting into the workplace.

One by one, we have small gains. We have an employment service, and we work with people to get placements, for example with Belfast City Council. We also work with the council to make recruitment more accessible. One guy we worked with who was on a work placement with Belfast City Council got a job with it and is enjoying it very much. However, those are small numbers of individual cases, and it takes intensive work between the employer and the person to make that happen.

Deaf people are generally less employed than hearing people. That is just a fact. As I said, those statistics may be dated now, and I apologise for that.

Mr Anderson: I apologise for missing the start of your presentation, so my next question might have been touched on. Two hundred and forty deaf students enrolled in university in 2006-7; eight years on, there are now just 95. Has that number been gradually reducing?

Ms Lavery: Yes.

Mr Anderson: There needs to be more proactive work by universities to get them to understand the situation and help those people. There has been some discussion about that.

Ms Lavery: Yes, but in the presentation I said that there were many other factors that start during your schooling and education which affect your confidence. It is a complex issue, and it is not clear. If the universities improved what they do, there would be no magic wand to increase that number. There are a whole lot of other complexities associated with attitudes to deafness, accessibility for deaf people, and the use of the DDA. All that comes into play, but the numbers have been reducing.

The other thing that we do not know is how many of those 95 students completed their courses; they might have dropped out. We know of one who recently dropped out, and I am sure that there are many more. That is where the longitudinal study will come in, as it might track how many enter university and stay on their courses. We would really like to see that happen.

Mr Anderson: As Sara said, attitude seems to be the big issue; that seems to come through every time and it was certainly very forceful in her point. Are attitudes changing, or are we not making inroads in that area?

Ms Lavery: There is still a long way to go for deafness to be accepted as a normal part of society. Often, people just do not know what to do. That comes down to a lack of awareness. We promote deaf awareness training and a basic introduction to sign language and, for example, if you are speaking to someone with a hearing loss, you should look at them. All those basic communication tips would improve access for us all.

There are significant numbers of people with hearing loss, and no doubt that is the case among Assembly Members as well; it cuts a swathe across society. Attitudes are still pretty poor. Discrimination may or may not be overt. In many cases, it is quite a subtle thing; that is harder to tackle and comes back to that attitudinal problem.

Mr Anderson: I know that Sara wanted to progress to a career in midwifery. Would some teachers or tutors have the attitude that this may not be for you because of your disability. Is that coming across?

Ms S Kelly: Absolutely. I see it every day of my life. I tell people that I would like to become a midwife, and they do not know how to react and whether to say yes or no. They think that it is just an imagining in my mind. I tell people that I want to do that, but they say, "But you are deaf. That will be an issue. How would you communicate? How would you hear?" I tell them that there would obviously need to be adjustments and that I can make adjustments in my communication and could make it work. I am always having to fight that fight, and I am sure that, at some point, I will have had enough of it. It is so easy to settle for another job, because I cannot be bothered to change attitudes any more. If I am always the one fighting the fight, and if I am always the one trying to change things, then, yes, I will just settle for something where they will accept me to do the job that they expect me to do. I will just give up. I want to see positivity; I want to hear people encouraging me. I have been fighting this and have been saying for two or three years that I want to be a midwife, and it is always the same attitudes coming back.

Mr Anderson: I think that what we are saying is that the encouragement is not there to let the person go on their chosen career path. That attitude is sending them on a career path that they do not really want and which, in the long run, could have the opposite effect. That is what is coming through.

Mr B Campbell: I agree. There needs to be more cooperation with colleges and universities to provide more positive stories of other people's achievements. I know of a few people who have achieved degrees; they qualified at university. One person achieved an English degree and became a teacher, which is a fantastic achievement. I know a few people who have achievements in other areas of life from other universities. There are stories of achievement through universities and colleges, and we need universities and colleges to promote that and to work with the success stories to change attitudes. That is my first point.

My second point is that there needs to be more support for students struggling at university and college. If we can have support through difficult times, they can build up students' confidence and expectations, and if we work with colleges and the attitudes there, the person will be able to achieve. The drop of 300 is really disappointing; it is disappointing to see the figures drop so low. There needs to be more cooperation with colleges and universities.

Ms Lavery: One way of addressing attitudes is to use the example of deaf role models. At a transitions meeting when a young person is in the room with all the hearing adults, it would be really good if they had a deaf person with them who was successful in their own right. It would also be useful for parents, as they too can have negative attitudes. Some deny their children's deafness and try to fit them into a mould that is more suitable for them, rather than allowing the deaf child to find their own path through the examples of other successful deaf role models in the community. It is so important to have successful deaf people in the system so that other young deaf people can see that and the parents can see that and know that they will be fine. They can see that they have a job, that they have married and have kids, so it will be fine. That is the key to changing attitudes.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): No one else in the group has indicated that they wish to speak. Claire, Barry, Sara and Sally, thank you for addressing the Committee. We will discuss further what action we will take on this.

Ms Lavery: Thank you very much. I am happy to help in any way.

Mr F McCann: We asked whether there were key points that needed to be brought up. I am sure that you have a number of priorities. Could that be supplied to us?

Ms Lavery: On the back of the briefing paper you will find three asks in bold, and those are the three main priorities for us at the present time. Thank you very much for your time.