

To: cel@niassembly.gov.uk

Committee Inquiry into post Special Educational Need Provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities in Northern Ireland

Response from: ASPIRE Group, Dungannon

Background:

ASPIRE (Accessing Support Provision Inclusion Respect and Equality - for people with learning disabilities) formed from a group of parents and friends of young people in the Dungannon area who were experiencing frustration and difficulty with the transition process.

These parents reported that their young people were experiencing a lack of choice and opportunity for further education on leaving Sperrinview, the local special school for children with severe learning difficulties.

Following the BBC "Special Me" documentary about the lack of post-school opportunities, a public meeting was held in Sperrinview. This raised awareness with local MLAs and prompted a UTV Live broadcast highlighting the difficulties faced by families in the Dungannon area.

ASPIRE was officially constituted in June 2013 and has engaged in lobbying for individuals with learning disabilities from the Dungannon area. This has included representation to DEL Committee, meetings with Southern Trust, and consultation with the local council.

Monthly meetings have focussed on gathering and disseminating information to parents, concentrating on working with community access and day opportunities providers.

ASPIRE has also been invited to sit on a short term working group with The Southern Trust and has representation on the local carers' group, Dungannon and South Tyrone Council Disability Forum and Disability Arts. They are affiliated to the Post-19 Lobby Group.

Recommendations:

- Continued further education for 2 to 3 years for all individuals with learning disabilities, post 19, including those with profound and multiple learning disabilities in day care.
- In addition to traditional FE Colleges, to develop supportive further education environments exclusively for those with SLD. Further investment in Parkanaur Training College to develop day time training opportunities would serve the Dungannon area in this capacity.

- Working across departments, organisations and providers to develop a social hub and social enterprises.
- Creation of further social enterprises such as Print It, in the areas of horticulture and catering/food service, potentially in partnership with Willowbank.
- Employment officers to canvas local business and industry for work placements after training is completed.
- Transport should be based on the rural community transport model, but should be able to cross areas, for example, Cookstown to Dungannon.
- Inter-departmental co-operation is needed to allow a joined up lead from Stormont.

1. To examine the current range of choices and opportunities available for those with Learning Disabilities on leaving full time schooling.

- a. ASPIRE would like to see an opportunity for young people to consolidate the work completed through learning programmes in special schools, with an emphasis on developing life skills.
- b. Currently in Dungannon we have limited range, choice and opportunity. The transition process for pupils leaving Sperrinview is a frustrating experience that leaves young people and parents with little choice for continued education. Those with less severe learning disabilities certainly have more scope in further education, with courses being pitched at Entry Level 3 to Level 1, with a focus on progression. Not all young people with learning disabilities will make this type of progress with many unable to achieve above Entry Level 1 or 2.
- c. With the proposed "Transforming Your Care" changes in day care criteria, there is a need for those who would have traditionally gained places in day care to have appropriate and meaningful placements. This group has been overlooked in much of the planning. This should include elements of day opportunities and further education, with a view to supported employment. This change of criteria is going to have an immediate impact on the numbers requiring FE or day opportunities placements on leaving school.
- d. Those individuals with medical needs or in need of support due to challenging behaviour will continue to be accommodated in day centres. Further education should also be available in day centres, with a range of recreational, physical or creative options for less able individuals. In addition to discrete taught programmes, tutors should also be able to set up learning programmes for personal development that could be implemented by centre staff.

- e. Transport issues between towns (Cookstown and Dungannon, Armagh and Dungannon) prevents young people from safely accessing opportunities in neighbouring towns. There is a need for transport that is escorted, door to door and flexible if the most vulnerable individuals are to be afforded a degree of independence in travel.

- 2. To seek the views of young people, family carers and groups representing children and young people with learning disabilities what services they would like to see in place and how the current situation meets their needs.

Having previously stated that the current situation is not meeting the needs of young people in the Dungannon area, we would like the following services in place:

- a. Further Education for all with a range of levels of courses for all young people leaving Sperrinview, including appropriate levels for individuals with profound and multiple learning disabilities. Those in day centres should continue to access recreational courses, but this should be extended into the community, for example, trips to local leisure facilities, visits to exhibitions and musical events. This is not necessarily to be provided by the existing FE Colleges.
- b. All FE College campuses should be required to have a minimum offer for part-time and full-time courses, appropriate to numbers. We acknowledge, however, that the inclusive college environment is not going to be suitable for every young person leaving school.
- c. Those with increased need for support and supervision may find the more sheltered placement of a college exclusively for those with learning disabilities more appropriate.
- d. The needs of individuals with autism and learning disabilities requires careful consideration. Their increased need for routine and familiarity of setting is at odds with a "day here, day there" mix-and-match week. The change from the school routine can prove particularly challenging in these cases.
- e. A joined-up approach from all departments is required to define responsibilities, improve communication and fill the gaps in provision. A committee for people with learning disabilities is needed to hold all departments to account. Ideally, this should be protected by legislation and have a commissioner such as NICCY.

3. To research best practice in post school provision for those with learning disabilities

ASPIRE can identify three local providers who could offer a model of good practice:

- a. Parkanaur College is within our area. This represents a possible solution for those who are unable to cope with the environment of local FE Colleges, or for whom the level of qualification is pitched too high. There is a need for continued funding and additional monies to finish the premises and workshops to provide both day opportunities and residential facilities. This College has the potential to be a centre for severe learning disability adult education, but we feel that there is a need for investment in management and staffing.
 - b. Willowbank Organic Producers is an excellent facility, again on our doorstep in Dungannon town. It offers opportunities for training in a range of practical skills. A social enterprise in horticulture is ripe for development.
 - c. Print It is our only social enterprise and offers a secure environment where young people can learn transferable employment skills along with computer/office skills. It has proved very popular for young people leaving Sperrinview.
4. To examine if the quantum and quality of post school provision for those with Learning Disabilities is meeting the demand and develop recommendations to address barriers to participation and delivery of high quality provision

We acknowledge that the numbers leaving special schools are not large and fluctuate on an annual basis, but with recent moves to change criteria for day care, the numbers of young people with more care and supervision needs are increasing. These young people are now not in day care and in need of continued, supported education, training and employment.

Partnership between DEL, DE and Health at an Executive level would improve communication about these matters and reduce the "pass the buck" experience of parents and carers. The major barrier to those with learning disabilities in our society is the low expectations of the general population, from those in charge to potential co-workers in industry. The change in attitude must be led from the top, with investment of time, funds and esteem by all government departments,

especially OFM/DFM. Education of the public and particularly employers is needed to assist those with learning disabilities take their place in society and feel that they make a valuable contribution. All contracts, grants and loans provided by government departments should include a clause that requires employers to provide a work placement or job for a person with a learning disability. Those who currently have work placements are now facing a loss of benefits as they demonstrate "fitness to work". This can only be counter-productive. Families are under financial pressure and any suggestion of losing benefits will also cause loss of opportunities for those with learning disabilities.

This concludes the written submission to the Committee Inquiry into post Special Educational Need Provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities in Northern Ireland from ASPIRE.

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