

**Written evidence to Committee of Employment and Learning inquiry into post Special Educational Need provision in education, employment and training for those with learning disabilities**

1. As Mid and East Antrim Borough Council continue its new role as the lead partner for Community Planning for our area, we have become increasingly aware through our community engagement for the need of joined up working between public service providers and agencies in providing support, information, and services to our citizens and communities.
2. This is necessarily so as we support our young people with learning disabilities out of the classroom, and into further education, training and/or work. This transition period is a challenging and anxious time for both the young person and their family, and we believe all agencies involved must work together to make this transition process as positive and straightforward as possible.
3. Key to this is providing the young person and their family and carers with the information and advice about the options available, to make informed choices about next steps. Support must be provided on an individual basis, and a plan established prior to the young person leaving full-time education.
4. We understand that “learning disability” encompasses a diverse and wide range of needs and ability, and a “one size fits all” approach is not appropriate. The approach must be person-centred, and developed in partnership between the young person, their family or carer and the service providers. However, it is difficult to put a plan in place if no options are available in the local area in relation to further education, training and work.
5. Within our Borough we have good examples of work in this area. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust Learning Disability Teams provide a range of services to persons with a learning disability from the age of 18 years onwards, including a Day Opportunities Programme which offers a person centred day opportunities plan in areas such as education, employment, leisure, volunteering and also community involvement.
6. The Northern Trust’s Day Opportunities Programme was established to modernise and reform day services to enable adults with a learning disability to access community based services instead of those that are Day Care Centred.
7. A Day Opportunities Co-ordinator works with the individual and their families/carers and provides a “package” of community based opportunities

tailored to the needs and aspirations of the individual and wherever possible within the participant's home area.

8. Almost 600 participants are involved with the Northern Trust's Day Opportunities Service.
9. The Northern Regional also aims to enable people with learning disabilities to access, participate and progress within and from learning programmes, through the establishment of appropriate support mechanisms including full-time classroom support.
10. Additionally, Kilcreggan Urban Farm and Garden Centre in Carrickfergus works with adults and young people with a learning disability, providing a valuable community hub and social enterprise and Acceptable Enterprise (Larne) Ltd provides access to a wide range of inclusive, community-based, educational, vocational and social opportunities.
11. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, however, believe more can be done in our area to support our young adults with learning disabilities, but with the diminishing resources and cuts to services this will remain a challenge. New, innovative and cost-effective ways must be sought to drive improvements in this area.
12. To develop the range of options available, an established network of dedicated employment/voluntary service officers to engage with local businesses, social enterprises and community groups to identify meaningful work opportunities of benefit to all parties involved.
13. Council also believes that the development of procurement procedures, which allow for the inclusion of social clauses, which would require potential contractors with the public sector to employ and/or provide training to individuals with learning disabilities.
14. Solutions reflective of society such as fully embracing information and communications technology to facilitate essential skills learning and social engagement. For example, Mencap's LiveNet project provides a range of learning opportunities, enabling children and adults with a learning disability and their carers to use ICT to improve their health and wellbeing, gain access to information, connect with their community and help achieve their full potential.
15. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council would support the creation of social hubs, where further education and training can be provided to people with severe learning disabilities, providing a safe and stable learning environment. Traditionally, formal education has not been associated with day centre services and a more joined up approach between the Department of Education, Department of Employment and Learning and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will be of great benefit in this area.

16. Transport provision to access services must be reviewed. Once out of full time education our young people with learning disabilities, unless attending a day centre, are no longer offered educational transport provision, and public transport may not be suitable in all cases. Safe and cost effective transport to work placements and further education will do much to support persons with a learning disability access these opportunities. Council is especially concerned following the recent cuts to rural school transportation and Translink consultation on cuts to public transport links in Mid and East Antrim Borough.
17. Additionally, the range and types of opportunities should be explored. Many working parents/carers find it difficult to facilitate traditional Monday to Friday, 9am to 3.30pm placements. A range of full day, evening and weekend opportunities would be beneficial.
18. To facilitate joined up working between public service providers and the community sector Mid and East Antrim Borough Council believe Community Planning must be fully utilised. This requires full buy-in from all our statutory partners, local partners such as the further education colleges, and our communities and citizens. Working together we can target resources where they will make maximum impact, access further sources of funding, provide a united voice and challenge the status quo.
19. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council would welcome the opportunity to engage further with the Committee in the development of recommendations in relation to post special educational need provision in education, employment and training for those with learning disabilities.

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