



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Access to Work — People with Hearing  
Loss: DEL Briefing

15 May 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Access to Work — People with Hearing Loss: DEL Briefing

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)  
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jim Allister  
Mr Sammy Douglas  
Ms Bronwyn McGahan  
Mr Pat Ramsey  
Mr Alastair Ross

**Witnesses:**

Mr Colum Boyle	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Terry Park	Department for Employment and Learning

**The Chairperson:** We now move to the second presentation, which is being given by Colum Boyle and Terry Park from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). This will be a departmental briefing on Access to Work, with the emphasis on people with hearing loss. This issue came forward in some of the evidence we received during our careers inquiry.

**Mr Colum Boyle (Department for Employment and Learning):** Access to Work is a specialist programme that is well used and we have seen growth in it over the past couple of years. We believe that it needs to be more heavily promoted than it is currently. This is one of the things that we want to pick up on in the review that we discussed previously.

The Sayce review in GB looked at Access to Work and said that it was one of the best kept secrets regarding disability support. There is a significant drive in GB to try to promote the work heavily. We are happy to take any questions on the paper.

**The Chairperson:** We had to change the order of business, Colum, so we only got to the paper just now.

**Mr C Boyle:** Thank you for your indulgence.

**The Chairperson:** It just unsettled the flow in certain areas.

The presentation states that 20% of the total amount is directed towards supporting people with hearing loss. Is your budget sufficient? If 20% of it is dedicated in that one direction, is there enough to support other disability groups?

**Mr Terry Park (Department for Employment and Learning):** Certainly, in the past couple of years there has been pressure on the Access to Work budget. We have been able to afford that through some internal transfers of disability employment service budgets, but I think that it is an indication that there is an increased demand.

All the disability employment-related programmes are demand-led. Access to Work is one on which we have seen slight pressure, year on year, particularly over the past two to three years. We are identifying that there is pressure on the programme, which, in some ways, is positive. I alluded to the fact that there have been concerns in the past that not enough people out there know about it, and that when it comes to Access to Work, clients and particularly employers are possibly not aware of some of our provisions. We intend to increase publicity on this. In increasing the publicity over the next couple of years, we might find that there is even greater demand, and that is something that we as a disability employment service and Department will have to manage.

**The Chairperson:** You are already under pressure without advertising it to any great extent and you are talking about pressures and internal transfers. Do you have a figure for how much you are transferring? Is it a standard rate, or is there a steady increase that you can identify?

**Mr C Boyle:** It has been a couple of hundred thousand over the past couple of years.

**Mr Park:** It has been around £100,000 to £200,000 over the past year. In fact, it came in at just under £1.5 million, with a starting budget of £1.3 million for Access to Work.

**The Chairperson:** So, you are seeking an additional 20%, realistically.

**Mr C Boyle:** In trying to push Access to Work harder, we could see a spike when that happens. As Terry said, this is demand-led, and we would be pushing for resources if that were the case. If there is genuine need out there, and people are coming forward looking for it, we will have to push very hard to make sure that it is made available.

**Mr Park:** In GB, there have been various ministerial announcements over the past number of months. They are certainly putting a lot more money into publicising the programme and into the corresponding funding to ensure that if that publicity produces increased demand, it will be forthcoming.

**The Chairperson:** Access to Work has been used to provide interpreters for the big recruitment campaigns as well. If somebody gains employment through one of those recruitment campaigns, is there follow-on support through interpreters? Is there a back-up service there?

**Mr Park:** Only a very small percentage of the expenditure is used during the recruitment exercise. That is a good specific example, because it has really helped people to compete and get into work over the past couple of years in particular, but the vast majority of the profiled expenditure and actual expenditure is on existing employees. There are people who need ongoing interpreter support, some for as much as 15 or 20 hours per week, and they avail themselves of that support. The 20% of spend is for around 14% of our clients, so the ratio of those people who are availing themselves of the specialist disability provision because of their hearing disability is relatively high.

**Mr Buchanan:** You said that 26 assessments were carried out by Action on Hearing Loss between April 2012 and March 2013 and that 90 people with a hearing disability were retained in employment. Do those figures represent an increase or a decrease?

**Mr Park:** The figure for assessments — 26 — is down from that of the previous year. The Department would never say no to an assessment that was requested. A client, an employer, or most commonly, Action on Hearing Loss, will come to us and say that they have a client whom they have a job opportunity for and that they need an assessment carried out. So, although this is demand-led, we have never imposed a ceiling on the number of assessments that can be carried out.

**Mr Buchanan:** But, 90 people have been retained in employment. Does that figure represent an increase or a decrease?

**Mr Park:** I am not too sure. I would need to check.

**Mr C Boyle:** We can write to you and confirm that.

**Mr Park:** It is probably fairly steady, because, within Access to Work, each client normally receives a three-year profile and a corresponding letter of offer. So, a lot of those people would be reassessed every three years. Year on year, there will be a number of new people coming on board, because they are moving into work for the first time, their hearing condition has deteriorated or they have only found out about Access to Work. So, there are small fluctuations year on year, but the level is probably fairly steady.

**Mr Buchanan:** In your presentation, you list a number of employers who take on people with hearing difficulties. What are you doing to encourage others to do the same? Does employing somebody with a hearing difficulty create extra expense for the employer?

**Mr Park:** Certainly, without Access to Work support, there would be extra expense. Access to Work helps employers to comply with their duty of responsibility to people with disabilities under the Disability Discrimination Act. Depending on the size of the employer, the employer's affordability and the specific needs of the individual, there can be certain negotiations. For example, the NICS has a number of staff who have specific needs when it comes to hearing impairment. We, as a large employer, would be expected to meet those needs through the reasonable adjustment fund.

For a lot of small and medium-sized employers, Access to Work can be at its most effective, because it can help the employer with the cost. For a large proportion of clients, the need is for dedicated interpreter support to help them during meetings, seminars, or training events that they go to. That is where the bulk of the expenditure comes into play.

**Mr Douglas:** Colum, you mentioned that there has been a growth in the number of people with hearing loss accessing the service. What steps are you taking to raise awareness of the help and support that is available? Over the past couple of years, since I have had my office in east Belfast, I have heard from people who worked in the shipyard and in Sirocco, and people such as police officers. They have realised that they have major hearing loss problems because of the work in which they are, or were, involved. Action on Hearing Loss is a smashing organisation. Is it raising awareness? Is it targeting specific sectors?

**Mr Park:** Action on Hearing Loss certainly has a marketing division. I am not too sure what its existing campaign is doing. Part of the review, and Action on Hearing Loss was part of the workshop element of that, highlighted that PR and marketing can be very expensive. When it comes to Access to Work and the other provisions, we need to target our publicity more cleverly. Where are we most likely to have the greatest impact? At a lot of the employer events that the Department runs, we have Access to Work material, publicity and stands. Access to Work advisers are there to talk to people about what it can offer. They target places such as GP surgeries and try to get the message through to people in places where it might be most effective.

**Mr C Boyle:** We promote it on our front line as well. One of the issues for many employers is that they do not know about it until something happens with one of their employees. One of the issues is to try to raise awareness and consciousness about it. We need to be a bit more creative about how we do that. We need to do it in a way that is not going to cost us a fortune, either. You could try to do a big blast at it. It needs to be very well targeted.

**Mr Douglas:** A lot of ex-shipyard workers go to the welders' club in east Belfast. Perhaps there could be some sort of information session. Maybe I should contact Action on Hearing Loss to suggest that, because there is a growing awareness that people are having problems with hearing.

**Mr C Boyle:** We will pick that up.

**Mr Park:** We work a lot with Employers for Disability NI as well. We have co-sponsored and funded a couple of booklets with it in the past couple of years. We have also become involved with the 'The Irish News' employer awards; we helped to introduce a specific disability employer category last year. That has continued into this year. There was a specific employers' booklet highlighting the benefits of employing people with Asperger's and autism that was launched in Parliament Buildings last year. We see groups such as these, and other representative employer groups, as being key to getting the message out to their members as well with maybe limited cost.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Is there a database of people with hearing difficulties who are in the workforce, or does Access on Hearing Loss provide you with a database of those people?

**Mr Park:** We have only the ones who are supported by our own programmes. We have all the details of the people who are profoundly deaf or have a hearing impairment and are being supported through Access to Work. Some are being supported through Workable NI. We do not have access to the database of people who Action on Hearing Loss is supporting in work or even the clients it is supporting. It would be only when it approaches a situation in which it helps a client to move into work that it would be in touch with us to avail itself of the Access to Work support.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Ninety people were retained in employment through direct measures, and 26 assessments were carried out. Is that 26 individual assessments, or is that workplace assessments?

**Mr Park:** Those are assessments for individual clients. Ninety people are being supported. It goes back to the question that Tom asked earlier. There would have been people who would have been assessed previously and are continuing to be supported in work, possibly through regular interpreter support, but there were 26 assessments. Those could have been reassessments for people who came to the end of their existing profile, or they could have been new clients referred to us by the front line employment advisers or Action on Hearing Loss. It would certainly be a different figure, year on year. For example, I think that 43 assessments were carried out in 2011-12. It just so happened to be 26 this year. That will be a fluctuating figure, probably more so than the broader figure of those who are supported regularly.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Just to tease it out again, are those 90 people in public sector or private sector employment? Maybe that answer is not for now, but maybe you could share that information with us.

**Mr Park:** I can give you a detailed breakdown. I have a couple of case studies of people who are being supported. The first one is a primary 1 school teacher. The second is a therapist who is working in one of the health trusts. The third is a self-employed tennis coach who requires interpreter support for group sessions and one-to-ones.

**Mr P Ramsey:** My final question is about the adaptations that employers may require in order to enable somebody with a hearing difficulty to work. What grant assistance do you give for the adaptations or specialist equipment that is required?

**Mr Park:** For people with hearing loss, the typical situation would involve putting in place a loop system and specialist telephones that block out surrounding noise. When people go to conferences, we can work with the venue to put in place some devices that will help individuals and the venue to ensure that people can avail themselves of the services.

**Mr P Ramsey:** If I have a small business, can I get access to grant aid to bring a loop system to my business?

**Mr Park:** Within reason. If you run a small business and you have a person with a hearing impairment or who is deaf, we would provide that type of thing.

**Mr P Ramsey:** How many businesses have you given that assistance to?

**Mr Park:** I will need to follow up on that. A lot of the businesses have received specialist provision, but I do not have that information to hand.

**Ms McGahan:** The combined cost of support is £295,000. Does that figure include financial assistance for travelling? The document says that support can be provided when a disabled person incurs extra costs when travelling to and from work.

**Mr Park:** Yes. A number of clients are receiving travel-to-work costs. They perhaps have another underlying condition or disability, but a number of our clients whose predominant disability is hearing loss, as well as receiving some interpreter support costs, are in receipt of travel-to-work costs. That is through taxi service provision to and from work.

**Mr Allister:** I will go back to Pat's point about how many businesses you have helped with hearing loops. If you cannot tell us how many businesses you have helped, do you know how much has been spent from the budget on that sort of thing?

**Mr Park:** On the specialist equipment?

**Mr Allister:** Yes.

**Mr Park:** Again, I do not have it to hand, but the information is readily available.

**Mr Allister:** Is it from a different budget than the £1.5 million budget that covers the disability employment service?

**Mr Park:** No, it is from the same budget.

**Mr Allister:** So, the totality of the budget for helping people with travel, support workers, adapting premises, providing special aids, communication support at interviews, and so on, is £1.5 million?

**Mr Park:** Yes.

**Mr Allister:** Is it fair to deduce that if that is the totality of the budget, there has not been very much capital spend on providing loop systems? We know that 20% of it goes on one specified area.

**Mr Park:** Twenty per cent of the cost is going to support people with hearing loss or a hearing disability.

**Mr Allister:** So, instead of being a £1.5 million budget, it is a £300,000 budget, out of which all the matters that I listed have to be supported?

**Mr Park:** Access to Work is providing support for people with the full range of disabilities. A large proportion will be for people with very profound physical disabilities.

**Mr Allister:** Just so I am clear: is the budget to cover such matters as special aids, equipment, adaptation to premises, support workers and all of that for people with hearing loss £295,000 or £1.5 million?

**Mr Park:** The overall budget for Access to Work is £1.5 million. The actual spend drawn down by those people with disabilities based on the need of the individual and the employer for last year was £300,000. There is not a set cap for any particular disability, but it just happens that, last year, those people who have hearing disability as their prime disability —

**Mr Allister:** It is a very small amount of money in the scale of your budgets.

**Mr Park:** The overall disability employment service budget covers a range of programmes.

**Mr Allister:** Does it speak to not a lot being done in adapting premises for special aids?

**Mr Park:** I would not draw that conclusion. As I said, the predominant thing is that this is a demand-led provision. In overseeing the service and the spend, I am not aware of the disability employment service having said no where it has been an identified that there is a need from an employer or a client.

**Mr Allister:** Is your Department and the entire Civil Service loop-system compliant.

**Mr Park:** I genuinely do not know.

**Mr Boyle:** I do not know either; I am not sure.

**Mr Allister:** If you were serious about providing employment, one might think that the public sector — and not least the parent Department that is taking pride in providing employment for those with hearing loss — would provide hearing loops. Do you not know whether that is the case?

**Mr Boyle:** To drive the programme, we work on the basis of individuals coming to us and looking for help. We apply resources on that basis.

**Mr Allister:** So, there is no approach in the public sector to kit out buildings with hearing loops where, potentially, civil servants would work.

**Mr Boyle:** In my time, nobody has come to us for support with any of that. Terry, are you aware of anything?

**Mr Park:** No. Again, I think that the answer is that I am not too sure; it may well be the case. From my current role and my previous role in DEL, I know that, from a HR perspective, provisions were made for individuals with hearing impairments.

**Mr Allister:** Maybe you could find out for us.

**The Chairperson:** No other member has indicated that they want to ask a question. Colum and Terry, thank you very much for both presentation. As you are aware, Hansard has been reporting this session. We will go through the report and write to you about the information that you have promised us. If there is anything that you wish to share or any additional information that you wish to forward to us, please do so.

**Mr Boyle:** Thank you again for your flexibility in adjusting the agenda. We appreciate that.