



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Disability Employment Service: DEL Briefing

15 May 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr 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: Good morning, Colum and Terry. We are joined by Colum Boyle, director of the employment service, and Terry Park, head of the disability employment service. Gentlemen, we have received a briefing paper, so if there is any further information that you want to give or any further evidence that you want to put forward before we move to questions, it would be appropriate to do so now.

Mr Colum Boyle (Department for Employment and Learning): The need for a strategic review of the disability employment service was identified at the end of last summer. The purpose of a strategic review was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current delivery and policy arrangements for the disability employment service. It had been some time since the service had been looked at in any holistic sense, and we were keen to do that, particularly given some of the imminent changes over the next year or 18 months; for example, the advent of universal credit, which is a key thing. Our services are less driven by the benefits that someone is on than by the level of conditionality they are to have under the new benefit structure for universal credit.

Vitally, I want to make sure that we are able to align the resources that we have in the disability employment service with the needs, whether those needs are against particular disabilities or more generic health conditions.

The other thing that I am at pains to stress is that the review was never intended to be a big-bang event. What we are trying to do is take a very professional service and evolve it to take account of some of the changes that are coming down the line at it. We also wanted to unfold the service, so that we have much greater inclusiveness with the disability sector, and, to that end, we have worked pretty closely over the past year with the disability sector. We are very keen, as a matter of principle, to retain the expertise that we have in the employment service on the disability side. We want to be able

to use that expertise more flexibly but, crucially, we want to build in better external links with the disability sector and further specialisms to help us with the challenges that lie ahead.

So, the emphasis is on building a proactive service, and one that is able to sell its services. One of the issues with the disability employment service, for the outsider looking in, is its complexity. I know, from my own experience, having come into the employment service role just over two years ago, that it is very hard to get one's head around all the programmes, services and mechanics involved. So there is an issue about building on transparency, and another about improving accessibility. We look to the disability lobby groups and sector to help us to try to do that. We want to build on existing strengths. We know that there are some gaps as well.

Progress with the review is slow because we are working with the disability sector. We have lost a couple of key members of staff who were working on the review, and that has slowed us down. We aim to have the review completed by March 2014.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Colum. Your staff travelled to Sheffield and Glasgow to see practice there for the strategic review. Your report says that our service compares favourably. Could you put a wee bit more meat on the bones?

Mr C Boyle: Terry was on one of those visits, so I will hand over to him, and he can walk you through some of the findings.

Mr Terry Park (Department for Employment and Learning): I went on the visit to Glasgow, and colleagues then went to Sheffield. We went to see the Jobcentre Plus offering for people with disabilities. One of the weaknesses is that, rather than focusing on people with disabilities, it very much focuses on those who were on employment and support allowance (ESA). When we asked questions about the services available for the employment and support allowance clients, we found that the front line offer was very light touch. In fact, when the people on ESA came in to deal with the employment service adviser, a very small percentage of them were referred to any programme at all. A greater number of jobseeker's allowance (JSA) clients are availing themselves of the Work Choice programme in GB, which is deemed to be the specialist disability programme, leaving a smaller percentage of those on employment and support allowance. The front line resource for dealing with those people even on that benefit type, as opposed to those who have more significant disabilities, has been reduced vastly over the past number of years in line with the welfare reform changes. Typically, in Glasgow, the ratio was 15 jobseeker's allowance advisers to one employment and support allowance adviser, whereas, in our jobs and benefits offices, we have retained a specialist employment service adviser for people on the incapacity-related benefit. From a front line resource point of view, we fare better.

Secondly, in the past six months or thereabouts, we have introduced a new programme, rather than a more generic employment service programme, for that particular client base. Some of the disability sector organisations in GB feel that the large mainstream programme is not tailored for those with disability-related and even health-related barriers to employment. That was one aspect of the front line offer.

As for contracted programmes, a lot of the people with disabilities were finding their way to programmes by way of local organisations that they knew about or, maybe, through school or through family members as opposed to being specifically directed there through contracted provision. Those are some aspects of the service that we feel we are better resourced to deliver.

The Chairperson: Colum, you said that you have lost members of staff, and we appreciate that that happens. Will it have an adverse effect on your timeline?

Mr C Boyle: No, we have replaced those members of staff now. The critical thing was that we had expertise and momentum built up to do this. In the Civil Service, when someone gets promoted, you lose them almost immediately, and we lost one person who was pretty crucial to taking the work forward for us with the sector. We had to wait to get a replacement, and, unfortunately, that does not happen very quickly. We are over that hurdle now, and we have someone in post. Hopefully, it will not happen to us again in the intervening period.

Mr Park: As well as our staff situation, I issued a follow-up note after the workshop that we held with the disability sector, and it coincided with the Department's announcement of additional European social fund (ESF) money. However, there was a tight timeline for each sector organisation to put in its

bid and revise its targets. They were given an extended year of ESF funding. Some of the feedback was that they were very keen to keep the work going but that they had ESF project work to complete by a certain time, and that, naturally, was a top priority for them. As recently as this week, we reopened communications with a view to taking some of the work forward with the sector.

The Chairperson: Terry, I will move on to your next steps and your user-engagement events. Your document says that there is one in Belfast and one in the north-west. Do you have any intention of going south-west or taking it throughout the Province?

Mr C Boyle: We could broaden that out very easily.

Mr Park: In the note that I drafted for the sector, I increased the number from two to three and suggested that the sector might wish to suggest where in the southern region it would like that to be. I do not know whether, as a result of its organisation base and population base, we would be talking about having an event in the Newry area or closer to Enniskillen, but there certainly will be at least three.

The Chairperson: So, it is up to three. Thank you.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. Colum, earlier you mentioned that services will be less driven by what benefits an individual is on. Will you elaborate on that? Secondly, I welcome the engagement that you are having with the disability sector. That is obviously very important. Have urban and rural differences been factored into your strategy? Obviously, transport is a massive issue in rural areas.

Mr C Boyle: Clients who come to us had been on incapacity benefit and have now switched to employment and support allowance. Increasingly, because of the health checks, clients who also have health conditions are being placed on jobseeker's allowance. Traditionally, we would have dealt with incapacity benefit clients or ESA clients and we are now dealing with JSA clients, who all present with health conditions. Many of those conditions are multiple barriers to employment because they may be mental health conditions as well as physical conditions.

All clients will switch to universal credit, and our front line has to be flexible and adaptable enough to cope with that. However, at the same time, we have to retain the specialisms in the front line and build links externally to provide further specialisms to help staff to cope with that. As a result of new conditionality requirements, there will be a lot more people with health conditions who are on the hunt for work. That is really what the issue is for me.

Ms McGahan: I suppose, at the minute, you have people on ESA, who, when they go through that process, will be put onto jobseeker's allowance. I think that you said that they are still presenting with health difficulties. How do you deal with that?

Mr C Boyle: That is where our programmes such as Access to Work, Workable (NI), Work Connect and even Steps to Work come in. We have to make sure that we have mechanisms available to help people overcome those barriers and get them into work. We have a track record in our specialisms of being able to deal with people who are from an ESA or incapacity benefit background. Simply, what has happened is that those people have been funnelled into another benefit route. We have to apply the same skills to them as well.

Mr Park: The other issue is that a lot of clients who engage with the disability sector organisations would not fall into the ESA, work-related activity group (WRAG) or the jobseeker's allowance group. As the result of the work capability assessment, many of those clients would be deemed to be in the support group and perhaps have no requirement to engage with jobs and benefits offices. Those people are desperate to move into employment; their disability is severe, but their motivation for work is high. That is where a lot of the specialist provision comes into play through the local disability organisations, which may have been engaging with those people since they were of school age.

The difficulty with jobseeker's allowance and the employment and support allowance WRAG cohort is that they often present at offices with myriad barriers. Quite often, a health-related barrier is not the number one barrier. Drug and alcohol addiction is becoming prevalent, particularly in certain areas. For others, it is may be down to domestic circumstances due to break ups or difficulties with caring responsibilities. That was another reason why we had the review. At times, it is hard to identify what

disability related support those clients need as opposed to the many other additional supports they require, maybe from a social services point of view. It is about trying to identify what acute disability employment support we need to provide. A lot of that will be done in conjunction with the sector organisations that deal with those clients.

You asked about the urban and rural differences, and that is why we have specifically involved so many of the disability organisations. Some of those will be very locally based, particularly in the likes of Belfast and Derry, etc, whereas others are Province-wide. They know the problems their clients face in local areas. We are aware that Disability Action, for example, has had issues with the transport contract, which I believe is still a challenge. That is why the likes of Access to Work is such an important programme because it provides travel support for those who cannot avail themselves of public transport or are not able to drive.

Ms McGahan: Have you had any engagements with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD)?

Mr Park: No. We know that one of the gaps here is the interdepartmental relationship. We have some good engagement with the Department of Health on the condition management programme, but part of the review workshop identified the need for greater linkage with a couple of key Departments, and DARD —

Ms McGahan: Will that be happening?

Mr Park: We in the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) want to lead this strategic review, and that will see us approaching some of the other Departments that are key to succeeding.

Mr P Ramsey: Clearly, it is an important but sensitive subject. Do you know how many students with learning difficulties are enrolled in further education at present?

Mr Park: One of the reasons why we asked for the change in the order of business is that the further education director from DEL is not here today.

Mr P Ramsey: The Chair made the point that the user-engagement forums that you did in Belfast and the north-west were important in getting people's views, particularly in rural areas, about the courses that were available or they would choose. Hopefully, you can ensure that there is a rural perspective to that as well.

The additional support fund is being used by further education colleges, and there is a lot of expertise among people in the voluntary sector who could help to deliver the programme. Is there any likelihood that they will be subcontracted?

Mr C Boyle: Apologies: is this to do with the third section?

Mr P Ramsey: It is as well. OK.

Mr C Boyle: Sorry.

Mr P Ramsey: There are so many here today.

Mr C Boyle: Sorry about that.

Mr P Ramsey: No, you are grand. There are a number of points. I will leave it.

Last week, I raised the general point that we are expecting a major tsunami of people coming onto the system again, and, with that, there will be the requirement to have what I would best describe as specialist disability advisers, which we do not have at the minute. Is the Department planning to increase the number of disability advisers with a specialised portfolio to help deal with people with complex medical problems?

Mr C Boyle: That is one of the fundamental reasons for undertaking the review, Pat. We want to understand how best to tackle this. We do not quite know yet what the best way to tackle it is. We

know that that is one of the issues, and that is really why I am so keen to unfold and unpack this with those in the disability sector. They will give us a perspective that we, as civil servants looking out, will not be well informed enough to have. We have got to draw the answers back in. So, I am looking for a strong steer from the sector as to how it thinks we could best play this.

Mr P Ramsey: That is a valid point. In fact, we had a presentation from part of DEL last week on the economically inactive, and the officials did not have any intention of engaging with the disability sector until the Committee raised the issue with them. That was a fierce slap-down, because, never mind collaboration between Departments, there has to be collaboration within a Department as well to make sure that we are getting the product right.

Mr C Boyle: One of the additional strengths that those in the sector have is that they are already delivery agents in their own right for existing programmes that we have, and they are doing a very good job. That gives them that sense of dealing with those clients day in and day out. So, they understand, and that gives us a better opportunity to frame a proposition on how we service this, going forward.

Mr Park: It is fair to say, Pat, that we have a very positive and professional relationship with the sector. Some very strong personal relationships have developed with our local disability organisations, particularly through colleagues who have been working in the disability employment service for a long time. We have specialists in the service who were previously disability employment advisers and are now team leaders for our Access to Work advisers, a specialist cohort of advisers who specifically work on the Access to Work programme but lend support to the front line.

Mr P Ramsey: How many specialist advisers do you have?

Mr Park: We have a complement of nine or 10 Access to Work advisers in the disability employment service. When the Department took the decision to move towards a pathways adviser service function, the vast majority of disability employment advisers who would have previously had that specialist title in the Department became pathways team leaders. So, although their title changed, those people are still in the system, and they are still dealing with clients who are on employment and support allowance. Some have a small caseload of clients, and others play a team leader role, providing advice to the employment service advisers. So, the expertise has not been totally lost. I totally accept that it has been a while since they had that title, but a lot of them are still doing very good work on the front line with those clients.

Mr P Ramsey: I am conscious that a lot of other people want to speak, but, at some point, we might want to come back to the subject of specialist advisers.

Mr Douglas: Thank you for your presentation. You talk about the workshop that you had and about specific issues impacting on employment prospects for people with a disability. Terry has mentioned some of the urban and rural issues. Are there any big issues or major changes or things that are hitting you up the face?

The other question relates to the consultation. You talked about Disability Action and some of the other bigger organisations. There are fledgling organisations out there; for example, there is a group in east Belfast that is involved with 80 or 90 families who have been affected by autistic spectrum disorder. It does not tend to work with the bigger organisations, yet some of those families now need help and direction, as their children have now grown up. Will there be an opportunity for them to feed into the consultation? Do you have any linkages, or are you consulting with other organisations as well? There are people here from universities and colleges, and this is an issue for them as well. This is about sharing information and providing help and support.

Mr Park: There were almost too many themes to condense into an action plan, but the key theme was the overarching disability employment strategy that, within it, had a very close number two priority, which was the transitions link. There is a clear need in the strategy to have a process in place whereby we pick up on those people with disabilities at key stages throughout their career path from education into further education and training and that key linkage through to a qualification with employment. That is where the sector has a vital role to play.

I know that you are very close to the Orchardville Society, which was present at that workshop, and we see it as a key strategic partner. It is one of the organisations that I am approaching to get it

involved in the working group on the overarching employment strategy. Organisations such as the Cedar Foundation already have models that we could look at with a view to expanding, as a joint approach going forward. So, we feel that we are touching the local base and the wider national organisations. That is our full intention. Colum mentioned that we have contracted arrangements with those organisations. The strength of the sector is that it came together as seven local organisations, covering a breadth of disabilities, to win the recent contract for the Work Connect programme. So, it shows that there is a real willingness and understanding that they need to collaborate within the sector and work with the Department. I do not see any problem with that being fragmented in any way going forward.

Mr Douglas: That is very helpful.

Mr C Boyle: In respect of any other biggies, universal credit is probably big enough.

Mr Douglas: That is a big concern for Disability Action.

Mr Allister: I am sorry that I missed the start of your presentation. When did your strategic review begin?

Mr C Boyle: We originated the idea of doing it around 12 July. I am not sure whether you were here at the beginning, but we explained it to the Committee. We have been slowed down a little bit for a number of reasons, the first being that we lost one of the key players in our team.

Mr Allister: Yes, I heard that. When did the strategic review actually begin?

Mr C Boyle: We started the programme last September.

Mr Allister: In September 2012. It is going to take 18 months?

Mr C Boyle: Yes, there or thereabouts.

Mr Allister: That seems a long time, does it not?

Mr C Boyle: Rather than trying to do it as a big bang, we could have looked at it in a different way and, perhaps, tried to compress it and do it more quickly.

Mr Allister: How many staff are devoted to the strategic review?

Mr C Boyle: Terry's team has about half a dozen staff.

Mr Park: The review is led by four key people from the disability employment service.

Mr Allister: They have other responsibilities as well?

Mr Park: They do.

Mr Allister: I want to get a picture of how they prioritise their work. How much of those four key people's daily routine is taken up by the strategic review?

Mr Park: There will obviously be peaks and troughs.

Mr Allister: Is it something that they dip into when they can, or is it something that they prioritise?

Mr Park: It will be given a priority now that we have a bit of momentum with the sector organisations. You will have heard that the sector has its own priorities. Like ourselves, the key people from the sector, who we want to be involved, obviously have conflicting priorities as well.

On the back of the note that I will issue to the sector representatives by this Friday, I intend to set in place a new timeline for taking the work forward. I want the first meeting of the strategic group that I have targeted to happen in June. That first meeting will allow us, in conjunction with the sector rather

than us doing it from a departmental perspective, to set in place a realistic timeline with them. We want to include them.

Mr Allister: OK, so just to be clear, you started the process in September, but it will be nine months later, in June, before you will have a first meeting of this strategic group?

Mr Park: There were a number of other aspects to the —

Mr Allister: Is that factually correct? It will be nine months before you have a first meeting?

Mr Park: Of the newly established group? Yes. We had the workshop in February. The key strategic workshop with all the disability representatives —

Mr Allister: Forgive me, but that suggests to me that, whatever else the Department is doing, this is not a very high priority.

Mr Park: It is from my perspective.

Mr Allister: But it has taken nine months to get to the point of getting people into a room to decide how they are going to take things forward.

Mr C Boyle: I accept that there is a degree of slow burn. That does not mean to say that it is a low priority. We are trying to unpack certain things as they go along. We could not have rushed into this and tried to do it within three months before understanding the full implications of universal credit, for example, or before understanding what the disability sector could bring to the process. I do not think that it could have devoted the resource in a compressed timescale.

We looked at the option of subcontracting a third party to do it for us and get it done quickly, but I do not think that that would get us the result that we are looking for. We are looking for a really strong partnership with the disability sector. I do not want this to happen to people or to the sector, because we are trying to do it together.

Mr Allister: The review is funded in-house.

Mr C Boyle: Yes, it is.

Mr Allister: So there is no separate budget line or allocation for it?

Mr C Boyle: No.

Mr Allister: That suggests that it is, perhaps, being done on a shoestring.

Mr C Boyle: We are trying to burn it into business as usual, Jim. We have tried to factor it in as part of the day job.

Mr Allister: Were I to leave this meeting with the impression that there is not a great deal of urgency driving it, if it takes from September to June to get a first meeting and there is an ambition to have it completed in a further nine months, would I be wrong?

Mr C Boyle: You are entitled to your view. I am absolutely committed to making sure that we come out of this with a better disability employment service than we currently have. The speed of it was less of an issue for me than getting it right. I am trying to dovetail the outcome of that with the other significant welfare changes that are coming about in order to make sure that our front line and disability employment service are ready.

Mr Allister: Even if you have the work completed by March, and we all know that slippage is a common problem, there would be another lapse in time in implementing changes.

Mr C Boyle: That will depend on how significant the changes are, but there would be a period of time to bed those in.

Mr Allister: May they, in fact, not be kicking in until the following financial year, in 2015-16?

Mr C Boyle: I am not sure about that. We will not know until we see what comes out of the review.

Mr Allister: Is that a possibility?

Mr C Boyle: It is a possibility, yes.

Mr Allister: So, we could have spent the guts of three years before we see any change being perfected?

Mr C Boyle: You are talking about a function that has probably not changed much or been examined holistically for a long time.

Mr Allister: Yes, but realistically, could we be talking about three years before any change is implemented?

Mr C Boyle: I would not think so. Potentially, yes, but I do not envisage that happening.

Mr Allister: If we judge it by the standard of the urgency that is reflected in nine months for a first meeting and an ambition of nine months after that for some sort of proposals, three years may be more realistic than you want to admit.

Mr C Boyle: Having had the initial strategic workshop with the sector, I am content that we can now build momentum with the sector and drive this pretty hard. If we had the resources to put extra people on to this, that would be great, but we do not have the resources to do that.

Mr Allister: Did you seek more resources?

Mr C Boyle: Did I seek more resources?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr C Boyle: We have limitations on target staffing levels.

Mr Allister: Did you seek more resources?

Mr C Boyle: No, I did not seek more resources.

Mr Allister: So, when you talk about more resources, it is a bit meaningless if you did not seek any more resources.

Mr C Boyle: I had to seek more resources, for example, to manage the incapacity benefit migration. We got an extra 60 staff for that. I had a belief that I could run this with what we had.

Mr Douglas: Colum, following on from what Jim said; you said that the disability employment service is a professional organisation. Are you saying, with respect to the consultation to date, that we will not see major changes and that it will be literally the same model with a bit of tweaking here and there?

Mr C Boyle: I think that it will evolve. I do not think there will be a massive step change; it will evolve. Terry may have something to add to that. I will be interested to see what the sector brings to it. Some of the ideas that they have may well result in significant changes but we do not know the answer to that yet.

Mr Park: There could be a mix of short-term changes that we could introduce quickly and others that will be planned changes that will happen over time, which could be over a couple of years.

A number of organisations are involved in delivering programmes that are proving to be successful. They have a contract period to run. The most important thing is that we do not stop doing what we are doing to help those disabled clients.

However, what we can do is to plan for when each individual programme or service comes to an end. Do we go with a continuation of the same or would it be better to introduce something new and fresh? Ironically, universal credit, may present opportunities in relation to the number of hours that a person with a disability has to work and retain their benefit. That would allow us to be much more flexible with some of our specialist programmes that could be delivered by specialist organisations.

Mr Buchanan: My question is more about hearing loss.

The Chairperson: That will be covered in the next session.

Mr Buchanan: That is OK.

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, thank you very much.