



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Special Educational Needs Post 19: 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 Jim Allister
Mr Sammy Douglas
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey

Witnesses:

Ms Donna Crothers	Department for Employment and Learning
Dr Mary McIvor	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Terry Park	Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson: Our next item of business is a departmental briefing on post-19 special educational needs (SEN). Terry, are you staying for another go?

Mr Terry Park (Department for Employment and Learning): I am.

The Chairperson: Folks, you are very welcome. With us for this session are Terry Park, the head of the disability employment service; Dr Mary McIvor, the director of further education; and Ms Donna Crothers from the further education policy and strategy branch. We have received your papers. Is there anything additional that you want to add at this stage?

Dr Mary McIvor (Department for Employment and Learning): I will say a few words about SEN post 19 in further education (FE). I will then ask Terry to say a little bit about the Department's employment-related programmes.

Looking specifically at people with disabilities and how they are accommodated within FE colleges; colleges of further education have a very wide range of programmes for different categories of disability. They range from where a person is able to take part in mainstream education and is accommodated to do so, to discrete programmes in colleges for more moderate to severely disabled people. One of the issues across all the programmes is improving access.

Mr Ramsey asked about budgets, and there is budget support to colleges for these programmes through the additional support fund (ASF). There are two parts to that fund. It is worth £3.5 million, with £1.5 million to help with the cost of additional technical or personal support and £2 million for discrete programmes in particular, which need smaller class sizes, classroom support, additional lecturer time and additional contact and advice time with students. The ASF is ring-fenced and targeted. Therefore, it is not used for any other purpose in the Department. It is also demand-led. FE

colleges are asked to provide reasonable support, which can involve a judgement about what is proportionate and affordable.

Mainstream FE is probably not for all those with severe disabilities, particularly those who have complex health and personal care requirements. In those circumstances, colleges normally collaborate with local day centres so that the colleges look after the educational and employment-related needs and the day centres take care of the personal care aspects.

The Minister had a number of meetings recently with parents and lobby groups, and one very recently with Lord Morrow, who brought a delegation of parents from the Dungannon area. They raised issues about access, particularly in rural areas, the range of courses available and different standards in different areas. The Minister was obviously concerned about those issues and agreed to undertake an audit of the programmes available in further education, particularly to identify whether there are gaps.

I think, Mr Ramsey, you asked for numbers in FE in this group. There are 3,000 students enrolled in the discrete programme and just over 3,000 enrolments of students with disabilities in mainstream programmes. Support, where needed, is provided through the ASF. About 500 courses are available to that group, ranging from the more employment-related to more life skills-related programmes. That gives you a flavour of what is available in FE. Terry will add a little about the employment programmes for post-19s.

Mr Park: I will be brief to allow the Committee to ask questions. On the matter of the programmes that the disability employment service supports for the group that we are referring to, I see our European social fund (ESF) projects as being the primary programme that, in many instances, provides something similar in course options and levels of qualification as the colleges. European social fund projects have an additional sharp employment focus, so a number of them will take a person through training, then into work placement or work experience. Quite often, they will then move them directly into employment through their own social enterprise businesses. The Orchardville Society, the NOW Project, and Stepping Stones in Lisburn are prime examples where young people are taken through training to work experience and into paid or voluntary employment.

The Department funds around 20 projects that are aimed specifically at people with disabilities. The disability employment service match-funds 11 of those projects. The likes of the Cedar Foundation, Mencap, the NOW Project, Stepping Stones and the Orchardville Society focus primarily on people with a learning disability. Across the 11 projects that we directly match-fund, for the period 2011-12 to 2012-13, there have been more than 4,000 participants with a disability. There are also achievements around qualifications, essential skills and paid and unpaid employment.

Other ESF projects are supported by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) but not match-funded by the disability employment service simply because we were not asked for match funding at the time of the application process. We have a good relationship with the Clanrye Group in Newry and Dr B's Kitchen in Belfast, but not a funding relationship at the moment. The Association for Real Change, which is in Belfast, the Triangle Housing Association and Compass Advocacy, which are in Ballymoney, and Greenlight Gateway, which is in Ballycastle, run some of the really amazing projects that are being delivered on the ground.

In the past year, the occupational psychologist who heads up our occupational psychology team worked with a colleague from the FE division and the various colleges on a pilot project with the discrete learning units. It started off with the Northern Regional College and the Southern Regional College and has recently extended to the North West Regional College. The objective of that pilot is to develop a transition service coming out of the discrete learning unit courses. We found that there was a reasonable transition sometimes — depending on where it was — between careers, the special needs school and the FE college with regard to the discrete learning unit, but quite often, the people went through the two-year course and then had no direct signposting.

Our objective is really to work with the discrete learning unit tutors and the college co-ordinators during that period with a view to identifying, towards the last term, those students who have a real interest in moving into employment and are progressing well enough to be able to achieve that. Then we want to work closely with local employers to advocate on behalf of those young people and try to, in the first instance, maybe get them a work placement, possibly using some of the Department's programmes, and hopefully then move them into work. There have been one or two successes with moving people into employment. It is fair to say that it has a major positive impact not only on the young person but

on their family and their family's expectations about what the young person can achieve. That is something that we are going to commit to taking forward in the next educational year.

The Chairperson: Terry, you are talking about engagement with tutors and all the rest of it. Do you engage with parents and carers as well, or is it just the educational element?

Mr Park: At this early stage, there are a number of co-ordinators who work on behalf of the discrete learning units, and then the course tutors. That is as far as our engagement has gone thus far. This has been the first year of it. However, I know that, at local level — we are getting constant updates — in the north-west, an ex-disability employment adviser who now works in the Foyle office is engaged with some of the young people and parents, and he is advocating on their behalf. Initially, it involves direct engagement with those young people whom we have identified to take forward, as opposed to a wider consultation process.

The Chairperson: Your briefing paper states:

"A pilot has commenced to improve the relationship and transition between the Discrete Learning Unit vocational programme and the Employment Service".

How large is that pilot programme, when will we see the outcomes and when will you decide to roll it out?

Mr Park: Initially, it was with two colleges. It is typical of a pilot to trial something to see whether it can have real impact. It was because of interest in the north-west that they asked whether they could come on board. At the moment, it is confined to three colleges with one of the classes. From an employment service point of view, we are working with probably about half a dozen students in each of the locations.

The Chairperson: So, the pilot projects were by request rather than by departmental design?

Mr Park: It was initiated when Donna made an approach on behalf of the FE colleges that identified, on seeing some of the disability employment service literature, that they were not aware of that possible next-step approach for the young people who were coming to the end of their further education courses. I think there was a concern that a lot of good work was happening with them and they got a qualification, but it was then a case of: what next?

The Chairperson: There are 20 ESF projects out there, nine of which are not funded by the Department. Have you approached those nine about additional funding? Anybody around this table who works with any sort of European funding knows that, as soon as a project starts to come to an end, your staff are going and you are spending time looking for more funding. Support from the Department is crucial for all 20 projects, not just the 11 that you are part-funding. Is there any engagement with the other nine?

Mr Park: The application process is fairly robust and is something that people know about well in advance. The Department is core-funding all those organisations, including the other nine. Through the European unit, they are receiving a bulk of core funding from DEL. The majority of them are being match-funded by other organisations, predominantly by the health and social care trusts, and some of them, because they are social enterprises, can part-fund themselves.

The way the ESF application process works means that, when a local organisation identifies a project that it feels meets the requirements, it can approach potential match-funders so that, when it puts in its application for drawing down the European money and the DEL core money, it can maximise the match-funding element.

We have been approached by 11 organisations for this round. Having looked at their business cases and having seen who their target audiences were, we agreed to match-fund them. Some of the other organisations, for whatever reasons, did not feel the need to apply for the additional match funding from us because they were covered.

One of the problems with ESF money is that if you set your targets too high and you cannot draw down the money, it has implications for the project. I can only presume that those other organisations felt that they were financially covered for their targets.

The Chairperson: The big thing that we hear about, especially from the SEN sector, is the issue of transition. There is a big problem with moving SEN children at any stage in their lives, but especially from childhood to adulthood, which is the step into further or higher education. What support do you provide for that transition?

Dr McIvor: We recognise that transition is an issue. The group on children and young people is looking specifically at the improvements that need to be put in place at those crucial decision-making points. I will ask Donna to say something about that group's plans for improving the transition side of things.

Ms Donna Crothers (Department for Employment and Learning): The transitions subgroup is part of the children and young people's strategic partnership. The purpose of the action plan that follows from that is to develop an integrated plan across all services, from child services to adult services. Part of that plan is to track those students, which is a big thing in further education as well because a lot of them are drifting along. We want to make sure that we know exactly where they are going and what they are coming into and, working with Terry's branch, know that we can move them into employment if that is where they can go.

A lot of work is also being done on transitions in the further education colleges. The colleges engage specifically with people who are leaving special care schools, and directly with the special care provision staff long before those students move on. In that way, they can be assessed to see whether they have the ability to go into further education, be it in the mainstream or in discrete provision with additional support. That is done in advance of those young people leaving the special care schools so that a plan is developed for them. The careers transitions groups in DEL, the Department of Education, the further education colleges and the trusts work very closely together. That relationship is growing; it is better in some areas than in others, but it is improving and a lot of good practice is spreading to try to improve those transition movements.

The Chairperson: This is, I suppose, a slight deviation from the subject, but there are figures from higher education that were mentioned in our Committee inquiry. The issue of deaf people and people with serious hearing loss was discussed, and further numbers were highlighted. Thirty students with personal care support went into higher education in 2007-08. How many students are there now in higher education who require personal care support?

Ms Crothers: For hearing loss only?

The Chairperson: No — require personal care support.

Ms Crothers: In further education?

The Chairperson: In higher education. None?

Ms Crothers: None.

The Chairperson: So, in 2007-08, 30 managed that transition. However, in a modern, progressive society, in which, we hear, there are care plans and everyone is working in conjunction, we have gone from 30 students in higher education who required personal care support to none. There is a lot of scope there. I hear about plans for all-party groups, but when we get such statistics from the Minister, it is clear that the issue should have been high up the agenda before now.

Mr Allister: We also know from an answer from the Department that the number of students in higher education who have hearing impairment has radically dropped, not because it is less of a problem but because there obviously is less of an intake. In 2006-07, there were 250 students at our universities with hearing impairment. Five years later, in 2011-12, there were 95. Is that not a very clear indication of a lack of provision to accommodate those students?

Dr McIvor: I cannot comment in detail; I am not a specialist in higher education, but there could be a lot of different reasons for that.

Mr Allister: For a drop of two thirds?

Dr Mclvor: There could be a different cohort. All I am saying is that it does not necessarily follow that the drop means that there is less provision. There is provision in higher education for students with disabilities, which is very similar to what we have in further education. In further education, students with hearing loss are accommodated, and it is the same in higher education. There has been no change in that policy over the years that you mentioned.

Mr Allister: There obviously has been a change in intake, which has to be correlated with a lack of provision, making it less attractive and less possible for people with those disabilities to avail themselves of university. It is unreal to try to tell this Committee that the drop is due to some abstract issues that have nothing to do with the level of provision.

Dr Mclvor: I am not saying that. I am saying that our policy, our funding and the support that is available has not changed in that period.

Mr Allister: So, the policy is failing. Do you agree with that?

Dr Mclvor: I can only speak for further education, because I know about it in detail from being responsible for the budget. From my experience there, the policy certainly is not failing. The funding —

Mr Allister: Do you agree that an intake drop from 250 to 95 speaks to a failure of policy in getting students with hearing impairment into higher education?

Dr Mclvor: I can only speak from the perspective of further education. The policy does work. I cannot comment on —

The Chairperson: Jim, it is something that follows on very much from the transition problem. Jim referred to hearing impairment, but the number of students who were blind or had serious visual difficulties in 2007-08 was 360, which was down to 85 in the last academic year. Those figures are for higher education, Mary, which I know is not your area. That transition is failing our young people. That is something that we will take further.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning. Donna, you talked about the tracking that is in place for those with learning disabilities. How many young people who left further education last year got into work?

Dr Mclvor: We collect those figures, but the number escapes me. Donna, can you recall it from last week's bulletin?

Ms Crothers: I do not have it to hand. The tracking system that I referred to is under development across all services; it is not specific to education. The tracking system will be developed as part of the children and young people's plan.

Mr P Ramsey: I suggest that you do not have the figures because they are so poor.

Dr Mclvor: Do you mean the number of young people with disabilities who go into employment?

Mr P Ramsey: Yes.

Dr Mclvor: We do not track that group specifically. We have a number for all leavers from FE.

Mr P Ramsey: Do those 19-year-olds not come under the NEET — not in education, employment or training — bracket when they leave school?

Dr Mclvor: The NEET bracket?

Mr P Ramsey: We were told after we carried out an extensive inquiry into NEETs that a full audit and tracking system was put into place. Are you telling me that people with learning disabilities are not being tracked?

Dr McIvor: People with learning disabilities in the NEETs category are being tracked through that system. FE tracks its own students, and that will obviously not include NEETs because they are not in education. It will include the various categories of disabled student from the mildly severe to the very severe. The majority of leavers from FE will either go into employment or on to further education, but I do not have the specific statistics.

Mr P Ramsey: There has been a surge in the post-19 lobby during this mandate, and parents feel that their children have not only been let down but have been failed and abandoned by the system. What is your comment on that?

Dr McIvor: I will talk again from an FE perspective. Since 2007, we have had 31,000 enrolments in that very group. That is substantial. Generally, there will be a higher percentage of people in the disabled category in FE colleges than there is in the population. I know that there are always issues, and I know that individual parents want the best for their children. I will not sit here and say that everything is perfect, but when you look at it as a whole, you see that FE is performing and is servicing a lot of those post-19 people, but obviously not all of them.

Mr P Ramsey: So, Mary, are you suggesting to me that there is good practice whereby those with disabilities can secure employment in the workforce?

Dr McIvor: I am saying that there is good practice but that it is not perfect and that we can always look to improve that.

Mr P Ramsey: If there is good practice, surely you should have figures at your side. For example, this year, as you said, we have 3,000 students with learning disabilities and discrete learning in the colleges. If we had 3,000 last year in the colleges and 3,000 left school or colleges last year, is there no tracking when they leave school?

Dr McIvor: Not that I am aware of.

Mr P Ramsey: What if they become part of the NEETs? I have to get back to this.

Dr McIvor: If they become part of the NEETs —

Mr P Ramsey: But they are NEET then.

Dr McIvor: If they go to an FE college, they are not in the NEET category, but if they become NEETs, the NEET tracking system —

Mr P Ramsey: That is where it comes back to the parents. The parents are saying that, once the children leave college and education post-19, they are being failed and abandoned. I am not hearing anything to give any hope to the parents who are in that predicament.

Ms Crothers: I certainly understand the parents' point of view, and I have been involved in some of the meetings. One of the key things that parents have raised is that, when their young people leave special care at 19, there are not an awful lot of opportunities for them. We have met some who have mentioned that, in their specific areas, they do not see a lot of further education provision. Taking that on board, we are conducting an audit of provision across Northern Ireland. It is specifically in direct relation to what those parents raised about one area, but we are putting it across the entire area and are looking at provision and standards. That audit is under way following a meeting that we had recently.

Mr P Ramsey: At some stage, I would like to have it explained to me where the models of good practice are; I genuinely do not know of them.

I want to go back to the additional support fund that the colleges get. The figure of £1.5 million per annum was mentioned. How much of that goes directly into discrete learning?

Ms Crothers: It is actually £3.5 million. The £1.5 million is for additional technical or personal support. There is £2 million allocated for discrete learning.

Mr P Ramsey: None of the £1.5 million goes to discrete learning?

Ms Crothers: It does. The discrete package is to provide smaller classrooms and specialist lecturers. The £1.5 million is for additional technical support and additional support that is needed. That can also apply to those in discrete learning. If someone is accessing a discrete programme and also needs an additional one-to-one support worker, that support worker will be provided and paid for out of the £1.5 million.

Mr P Ramsey: I will suggest the fundamental point to you now. The Patient and Client Council and the Bamford review made some very serious recommendations, particularly about a person-centred planning process and individually tailored programmes for those with disabilities. Is that practice in place?

Ms Crothers: It is. In the additional support policy guidance, we have supplementary learning agreements, which involve student-centred processes. As part of the DEL policy, every student who enters further education and requires additional support must undergo an assessment, which will lead to a supplementary learning agreement between the student and the college. It also involves their parents, if a parent is needed to help them through that process. Part of that process is to agree the course of study that they are most able to do and to agree the level of support that they need. That plan is reviewed as part of the policy. It is reviewed at least twice a year to make sure that it is still appropriate and to make any necessary changes. It is very much an individual student personalised plan. They are involved in the whole process going through the entire course.

Mr P Ramsey: Is there enough money in the budget? I accept in good faith and honourably the statements that you are making, which we may challenge later. We have 3,000 students who are in discrete courses and a further 3,000 — I take it that they are in mainstream?

Ms Crothers: Yes.

Mr P Ramsey: We have it in the system. There is collaboration between the Health Department and DEL to look at the person-centred planning processes. So, there are 6,000 individually tailored programmes in the system at present that are being evaluated every six months.

Ms Crothers: They are not tailored programmes; they are learning agreements. It is agreed what course they are doing and what additional support they need to do that course. There are not 6,000 tailored programmes going through further education.

Dr McIvor: You asked whether there is enough money in the budget. It is a demand-led budget. There has been some pressure on the £1.5 million aspect of it in the past two years. Colleges have said that the demand is greater than what we have provided. The Department has found the money to meet that demand. There is no unmet demand in that budget. We will bid for more to go into the further education division budget because we think the need is rising.

Mr P Ramsey: How much?

Dr McIvor: Donna is working on the business case right now. We will look at the trends. I do not have a figure to give you at the moment; we have not worked it out, but it will be based on the trends of the past number of years. It looks like the demand is rising. The evidence is that there are more individuals who are being given a designation of disabled, so we are looking at that and we will bid for more.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. I welcome the fact that an audit is being carried out in the FE sector. One of the complaints that I have been getting is that, whenever a student with disabilities undertakes a course, there is no room for progression and they do the same course over and again. Will that be looked as part of your audit of the FE sector?

I represent the Dungannon area. Obviously, you are aware of the very serious concerns that have been flagged up. I would like a commitment from you that there will be a dedicated and focused approach in the Dungannon area to try to resolve those issues.

Ms Crothers: First, I will take the issue of progression. That is part of the additional support fund policy guidance for colleges. We have looked very closely at that, and we have taken on board a lot of

the papers that have been produced in recent years, specifically around students being put on a wheel, as such, and not being given provision. There does not seem to be any upward or onward movement. We have really taken that on board, and our policy stipulates that an agreed progression route must be built into the supplementary learning agreements as part of the individual assessment. That was written in last year and covers the current academic year, which ends in June. That has been specifically drawn out, and it has been highlighted that the progression route must be there and must be identified. In a lot of cases, that progression route may be moving on to a higher level or to something more employment- or vocational-related that will assist with independent living. Each individual will be assessed on their ability and needs.

Progression is built into our policy circular on the additional support fund, which clearly stipulates that progression —

Ms McGahan: Do you work in partnership with parents and families?

Ms Crothers: The colleges work in partnership with parents and families. They are the ones who engage with them on a one-to-one basis.

Ms McGahan: What about the Dungannon problem?

Ms Crothers: That issue has instigated the sector-wide audit. It will be looked at, as will all of them. Hopefully, this will be a starting point, and it probably will involve us having to engage with other government agencies. Our Minister has made a very strong commitment to do this, and we are very committed to following it up.

Ms McGahan: Thank you.

Mr Buchanan: Are the 20 projects supported by DEL being delivered across Northern Ireland or in specific areas?

Mr Park: I mentioned some of the local areas and referred to a couple of projects in Ballymoney and Ballycastle. We support some that are Belfast-based and others in Derry city. I know that Action Mental Health has a number of ESF projects. It has one in Newtownards, one in Antrim and may have a third. That information is readily available —

Mr Buchanan: What do you have in the west of the Province?

Mr Park: I know that there are some projects in the north-west, down as far as Strabane. I am not totally au fait —

Mr Buchanan: What about Omagh or Fermanagh?

Mr Park: I honestly do not know, Tom, but I could find out for you very quickly.

The ESF project strand supports a lot of disadvantaged groups. I am not aware that any of the 20 disability projects that I referred to are based in Fermanagh. There could be reasons for that. Fundamentally, the ESF projects are driven by local community and voluntary sector organisations. If a community and voluntary organisation was to set up in a particular location and submit an application to the European social fund, which has now been extended to 2015, its project would be treated like all the others in the application process. I can find out whether there are projects that are being supported currently and whether any have applied for funding but did not receive it.

Mr Buchanan: Yes, that would be helpful because I am not aware of any being delivered in Omagh or Fermanagh. It is somewhat worrying that these programmes are going on, yet it appears that disabled people and those with learning disabilities in those areas are being disadvantaged. Others are able to participate in programmes that are not being delivered in the west of the Province.

What percentage of those participating in the 20 projects do you envisage being able to move into employment, or will get to moving into employment, once the programmes have been completed?

Mr Park: Of the 11 projects that the disability employment service is match funding, 330 participants from a total participation of just over 4,000 have moved into paid employment in the first two years of this round. An additional 750, or thereabouts, have moved into voluntary employment. Quite often, voluntary employment for these clients will precede their moving into part-time paid employment.

I have visited a lot of those projects, and clients come into and progress through the projects at various levels. Some are more interested in gaining the qualification to advance into mainstream or discrete further education. Others are much more employment-focused. In many instances, those who gain the qualifications and are very minded to move into employment go into the labour market, in which competition is fierce. One thing in their favour is that ESF projects have a very loyal band of employers who work specifically with them. That is based on years of good relationships that they have built up. I have been very impressed with the nature and calibre of some of their clients' employers.

It is fair to say that, for some clients, full-time paid employment is not their primary objective. For those for whom it is, it is not just as easy as progressing straight into employment because they face all the barriers that non-disabled people face. However, they have strong advocates, and they also avail themselves of our mainstream programmes. A large number of people going through ESF projects, once they move into employment, avail themselves of the Department's Workable (NI) programme, which is a medium- to long-term dedicated support that helps them and the employer. Of the almost 400 clients whom we support in the Workable (NI) programme, about 240 have a learning disability, which is a high percentage, and many have come through the ESF route.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, folks, for your time and for coming here this morning. The meeting has been recorded by Hansard, so, if there is any follow-up information that we require from you, we will write to you. If there is anything else that you want to provide to us, please feel free to do so.