



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Post Special Educational Need  
Provision in Education, Employment and  
Training for those with Learning Disabilities:  
Research and Information Service

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Children in Northern Ireland who have SEN are assessed under need on a five-stage continuum. That ranges from stage 1, where teachers identify and register a child's special educational needs, consult the school's SEN coordinator and then take initial action, to stage 5, where the local education and library board (ELB) considers the need for a statement of special educational needs and, if necessary, will subsequently arrange, monitor and review provision to meet that child's individual needs. Pupils who remain at school after the age of 16 are the responsibility of the education and library boards until the end of the term in which they turn 19.

An important consideration of the Committee inquiry is the identification of prevalence of learning disabilities in Northern Ireland. The Bamford action plan for 2009-2011 estimated that there were 26,500 people with a learning disability in Northern Ireland. That is based on an estimation of between 1% and 2% of the population, which is taken from national and international studies that estimate that between 1% and 2% of a population will have some form of learning disability. Based on that estimate and the population data for the 2011 census, it was estimated by RaISE that, in 2011, there were between 18,109 and 36,217 people in Northern Ireland with a learning disability. However, there is great variation in statistics regarding learning disability prevalence in Northern Ireland. That is reflected in the Bamford review itself, which also found it difficult to secure accurate information.

A major shift in Northern Ireland's services for people with learning disabilities or mental ill health was introduced in 2007, following publication of the Bamford review, which called for a number of changes to the system, including a continued shift from hospital- to community-based services; development of a number of specialist services to include children and young people, older people, those with addiction problems and those in the criminal justice system; and an adequately trained workforce to deliver the services. In further developments under the 2012-15 Bamford vision action plan, a number of broad actions have been developed, including consideration or support for children in school and for young people going through the transitions process.

In 2013, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister introduced its own strategy to improve the life of people with disabilities, reflecting the Executive's commitment to deliver the requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The strategy has two goals that are of note to this presentation. Under "Transitions to Adulthood", the goal is:

*"every young person with a disability should lead a confident, enriched life and be given appropriate support to make a seamless transition to a fulfilled adult life in which they can participate socially, politically, culturally and economically."*

Under "Employment and Employability", the goal is:

*"to improve the opportunities for people with disabilities in the labour market by providing appropriate support, advice and skills development to enhance employability; and obtain, retain and progress in employment while also supporting employers with the provision of targeted information and practical guidance."*

Support for people with learning disabilities who have left the secondary-school system is provided mainly by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Employment and Learning. In 2011, DHSSPS carried out a review of the provision of health and social care services in Northern Ireland. It made recommendations on the future shape of services, making a number of proposals, including further development of a more diverse range of age-appropriate day support and respite and short-break services; development of information resources for people with a learning disability to support access to required services; advocacy and support for people with a learning disability, including peer and independent advocacy; and a commitment to closing long-stay institutions and completing the resettlement process for 2015.

To meet the needs of people with learning disabilities, DHSSPS uses service frameworks to provide clear standards of health and social care. The learning disability service framework has 33 standards in a number of areas, including entering adulthood, inclusion in community life, and communication and involvement in the planning and delivery of services.

DEL provides support for people with learning disability in three main areas, which are further education (FE), higher education (HE) and employment. The majority of its services are targeted at developing skills and finding employment. In Northern Ireland, FE colleges are responsible for determining their own provisions and adjustments to support people with learning disability to access courses. DEL facilitates that via the additional support fund (ASF), which is intended to help colleges meet the additional costs of provision for those students. In 2013-14, £3.5 million of ASF funding was

provided by DEL. It could be used for a range of supports, including specialist tutors, support workers and technical support.

Access to Success is the DEL strategy for widening participation in HE. Although no specific provision is made for those with learning disabilities, there are four actions pertaining to the wider grouping of those with disabilities, which will, of course, include those with learning disabilities. The actions include the Department engaging in a longitudinal study of educational attainment to identify patterns of disadvantage when applying to higher education and the Department working in partnership with universities, FE colleges and employer representatives to increase the number of enrolments in foundation degrees each year to 2,500 by 2015. Each of the four actions in the strategy identified in the paper includes consideration of provision for people with disabilities.

Support is also provided via the ELBs through the disabled students' allowance (DSA). That provides four elements of support: non-medical help; specialist equipment allowances; a general allowance; and travel allowances. That is to support students who have gone to higher education to facilitate any of the needs that they have.

DEL's Disability Employment Service (DES) provides a number of training and employment services for people with disabilities. The service is designed to help employers recruit and retain disabled employees. It also provides practical and financial support to companies. The services that it runs include the job introduction scheme (JIS). If people find a job that they are interested in, the JIS allows them to try it out to ensure that it is suitable for both any prospective employee and the employer. DES can also help employers to meet initial wage costs.

Workable (NI) is a programme that gives people with disabilities the opportunity to work in a variety of jobs. It offers a range of support designed to meet the individual's needs and, again, those of the employer. Access to Work offers practical advice and help to make the working life of people with a learning disability easier. It provides communication and support at interviews, adaptation to premises, special aids, assistance with travel to work and a support worker if needed. Throughout Northern Ireland, there are, as well as higher-level government support, other sources available in the community and voluntary sector through organisations such as Mencap, the Bryson Charitable Group and the Orchardville Society.

That is a brief overview of the first paper. If the Committee has any questions, I am happy to take them.

**The Chairperson:** Thanks, Eóin. I have a minor query about table 3 in the briefing paper. It relates to learning disabled persons with whom health and social care trusts had contact. You were able to break down all the trusts by age, apart from Belfast, which is a total unknown. Is there any reason for that?

**Mr Murphy:** I would have to go back and check that. I got a response, so I can check it. As far as I know, the Belfast Trust does not track ages, but I will confirm that for the Committee.

**The Chairperson:** The disabled students' allowance is managed by education and library boards. Do you have a total for that per board or is it variable?

**Mr Murphy:** I do not, but I can try to get one for you.

**Mr P Ramsey:** It is a good report. There is a lot of information that will be useful as the inquiry proceeds.

I find it concerning that we have not identified definitively the number of people with these issues. For 2009-2011, Bamford told us that there were 26,500 people, and the census figures range between 18,000 and 36,000. It is alarming that we cannot definitively tie down a number.

**Mr Murphy:** Yes. That is one of the reasons why I contacted the DHSSPS to see whether it had more accurate figures. It was able to provide the number of people who were in contact with health and social care trusts regarding issues they were having if they had learning disabilities. Part of the problem identified was that, occasionally, you will find people who are not aware that they have learning disabilities, especially people who have very mild learning disabilities, such as very mild dyslexia. Those people may have developed coping mechanisms over time and not be aware that support is available for them out there.

The 1% to 2% estimate of the population is not highly accurate, but it has been used internationally. In Bamford, it was highlighted that it was an issue that there was no specific identification of people with learning disabilities. There was some attempt made to try to narrow it down. I looked at the number of pupils with special educational needs. There are issues with that because, on the five-stage continuum, you will have pupils who will start off with a stage 1 special educational need. They may grow out of it or they may develop mechanisms to deal with it. Therefore, they may not necessarily still have that level of educational need once they leave the education service.

**Mr P Ramsey:** The Committee came in because there was a growing post-19 lobby, made up of parents and community and voluntary groups, telling us that parents of children with moderate to severe learning difficulties leaving the education system felt that they were being abandoned by the state. One would imagine that there must be a true reflection, even in education terms, of the numbers, through statementing or some other process. Can we tie the figure down?

The Chair mentioned student support. There is a figure in my head that tells me that somebody with a learning disability is four times less likely to secure work. I am reflecting on the NEETs inquiry and the difficulty that we had in getting data, and not being able to secure the information to reflect accurately the background of the circumstances is a case of *déjà vu*. I know that universities appear to be doing a reasonable job in widening participation. Can we get the figures for recent years of participation, including those for the Open University, as many people with learning disabilities are there. If we take the Bamford figure of almost 27,000 people as being accurate, do we have any idea how many of them are in employment?

**Mr Murphy:** No. I can do a statistics paper and pull together as much as I can on employment, training and prevalence rates. That way, I can try to identify whether there is coherent monitoring.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Sorry for bugging you, Eóin.

**Mr Murphy:** It is grand. When you look at the paper, you notice that there is a lot of vagueness in the stats.

**Mr P Ramsey:** The groups from the community and voluntary sector that you named are likely to be a good source of information.

**Mr Douglas:** Thanks for your presentation, Eóin. My question is very similar to Pat's. Obviously, we need the figures if we are going to plan for services. The paper states that there are 25,000 or whatever with a learning disability. However, if that is out by 10% or 20%, you are talking about thousands of young people.

I have been involved with a group over the past four or five years that deals autism spectrum disorder (ASD). It is based in an estate in east Belfast. When we started, we had six families, and we are now up to almost 100 families. The reason for that is that there is a higher detection rate, with more young people being diagnosed. That is one section of the people that we are talking about in which there has probably been growth in numbers, because people are aware of the symptoms of autism.

This is a very important issue. We are talking about huge amounts of money that we may not put aside because we do not have the figures.

**Mr Murphy:** I can take a look at whether other regions in the UK are tracking numbers or somebody has a system for doing so.

**Mr Douglas:** That is a good idea.

**Mr Buchanan:** On more or less on the same point, 26,500 have a learning disability, but the issue is how many of those have fallen through the net because there has been no provision for them. Whenever they reach 19, there is not provision for them to get into employment or to go into further education. We need to get the figure for how many of those people have fallen through the net because there has been nothing there for them. If we want to get our teeth into this, we really need to know those figures or from where we can get them.

**Mr F McCann:** A number of valid points have been made. Thank you for the presentation and the paper, which is very interesting.

Sammy made a fairly valid point about the community network that exists in areas. Some parents may realise that their children are having difficulties only when they hear of a group that deals with autism or something else and approach it. One of the difficulties that we picked up on when we were over at Glenveagh Special School — Pat mentioned this — was the question of young people being stated as they go through their life. I have dealt with cases in which children and young people have been heavily medicated going to school, and that has meant that the person in the school with the responsibility for identifying special educational needs cannot identify the true extent of their condition.

We need to try to identify good practice elsewhere. I think that Sammy is right to say that there may be thousands of people who have fallen through the net. You cannot carry out an inquiry properly unless you are dealing with facts and figures that are fairly accurate and allow you to move it forward.

**Mr Murphy:** If the Committee looks at table 1, which is from the initial review titled 'Equal Lives', which formed part of Bamford, it identifies 16,366 people. Again, that is based on data from the health and social care trusts. One of the comments was that, as you say, that represented only part of the figures, because those are people who have approached the health and social care trusts. Bamford estimated that there could be 16,000 more people with learning disabilities who have not approach the trusts. Therefore, there are gaps in what information is available, and it also depends on what level of learning disability someone has.

**Ms McGahan:** Thanks for your presentation. It is a good paper, and a lot of good questions have been asked here in Committee. It has been asked how many of those people have gone into employment. From looking at the Scottish model, I see that it is difficult to get employment and that, where people with disabilities have got employment, they have left because of bullying. That is something important that we need factor in.

**The Chairperson:** Eóin, do you want to go on to your second paper?

**Mr Murphy:** The second paper I am going to discuss today is on models of support for people with learning disabilities after they have left the secondary-school environment. The paper discusses the approaches taken in four countries: Scotland, Sweden, Canada and the USA.

In 2000, the Scottish Government published a 10-year strategy, 'The same as you?', which was designed to meet the needs of people with learning disabilities. It had 29 recommendations and proved to be highly successful. Scoping studies in 2010 found that there was a shift in the balance of care, with greater local coordination and considerable development in the legislative framework. In June 2013, the Scottish Government updated the strategy, making 50 additional recommendations. Of those, 13 were on the issues that this paper is concerned with, including the following recommendations: educational authorities must exchange information with other agencies to inform their plans to support the young person; and young adults with learning disabilities should be given the opportunity to use further and higher education to learn skills that relate to social skill development, daily life skills and continuing education.

A key part of the implementation of the strategy is the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability (SCLD), a centre of excellence established following the 'The same as you?' review. It provides a range of services, including training, research and consultancy, and runs a number of projects that promote supported employment, increase innovation and diversity in what is available for people directing their own support. The SCLD is specified in legislation to produce official statistics on people with learning disabilities. Under 'The same as you?', local area coordinators were introduced. Those are specialised workers who help individuals and families navigate services based in local areas. In 2013, there were over 80 local area coordinators in 20 local authorities. They provide information, signpost the services and promote independent living. The services can, however, vary between local authorities.

The second country that I looked at was Sweden. There, central government establishes guidelines and policies for support for people with disabilities. Government agencies are then responsible for specific aspects of the policies. In some cases, the roles are further disseminated, with municipalities taking responsibility. Government grants are provided to deliver those services. Implementation of that is handled by a number of agencies, including the Swedish agency for disability policy coordination, known as Handisam. It is tasked with accelerating the implementation of government policy and has three main tasks: promoting the strategic implementation of disability policy; providing the Government with relevant facts; and supporting accessibility.

Handisam works on a number of projects. It gathers the views and experiences of children and young people with disabilities on the support that they receive and how it can be improved. Other programmes include Särvox, which is the adult education programme for people with learning disabilities. It is provided at basic and upper-secondary level and has the same curriculum as municipal adult education. Participants must be 20 years old or older and have a learning disability or an acquired brain injury. Courses are provided at three levels: basic Särvox, corresponding to training school; basic Särvox, corresponding to compulsory school; and secondary Särvox, corresponding to secondary special school national programmes. An important aspect of the programme is that 15% of all teaching time must be in the workplace, providing practical experience for participants. It is also possible for people to undertake apprenticeships with work-based learning.

Another organisation is Samhall, which is a government-sponsored agency tasked with the creation of stimulating jobs for people with disabilities. Those include intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities and repetitive strain injuries. It matches people who have a functional impairment — its term — with appropriate assignments. It operates under a model with three phases: initial assessment; temporary rehabilitating employment; and long-term employment in the mainstream employment market. Samhall employs approximately 22,000 people across Sweden in 250 locations. Of those, 19,000 have disabilities, and 1,000 are additional employees. It offers employment in five areas: cleaning and laundry; warehousing and logistics; workplace and property services; elderly services; and manufacturing.

The third country that I looked at was Canada. One of the most successful provinces in Canada in providing support to people with learning disabilities is Ontario. In Ontario, schools are obligated under Bill 82 to provide special education programmes to SEN pupils. Each district school board is required to appoint a special education advisory committee to provide input on the particular needs of pupils. The Ministry of Education also receives advice from an advisory council on the establishment and provision of special education programmes and services.

Specific higher education programmes that provide support for students with learning disabilities include the University of Guelph's universal instructional design (UID). This is based on a universal design for learning model that provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials and assessments that work for everyone. It is not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but, rather, flexible approaches that can be customised and adjusted for individual needs. UID at Guelph involved a number of changes to courses to ensure that students with learning disabilities could receive the maximum value from teaching. That included aspects such as purpose-built websites for courses. In one case, for a clinical nutrition class, they designed a website with distinctive graphics, course notes, databases, conferencing and up-to-date timetables so that people were made aware of any changes quite quickly. An evaluation of the programme found that UID had a positive impact on the learning environment, that students had greater confidence in their abilities to succeed, and that student performance increased.

To introduce these services around Ontario, there is a group called Developmental Services Ontario (DSO), which was created in 2004 as part of a large-scale change to Ontario's support for people with learning disabilities. Its main goal is to help adults with developmental disabilities to find services and supports in their community. There are nine DSO agencies across Ontario helping people with learning disabilities to access support in the community. It provides a number of services including community participation supports, person-directed planning and adult protection service workers.

The final country that I want to discuss is the USA, which has enshrined in legislation protections and support for people with learning disabilities. In addition, a number of organisations and government bodies work to support people with learning disabilities. These include the Office of Disability Employment Policy, the National Centre for Learning Disabilities and Disability.gov, which is a web portal that provides information and is easily accessible for anyone who has issues or concerns regarding learning disabilities or any disabilities.

As regards legislation, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes provisions to ensure that transition services are available to those who need them. IDEA transition planning services must begin no later than the first individualised education programme, which is effectively at age 16, and must be updated annually. The USA has implemented a number of projects and programmes to support the system of transition.

One such programme is the youth transition demonstration (YTD) project. The project is run by the US Social Security Administration and was developed to provide support to young people aged 14 to 25 with disabilities in finding employment and accessing other services. It is intended to empower

young people and their families to be more proactive in their approach to the transition from youth to adulthood by creating integrated coordination systems. Services provided include individual works-based experiences, youth empowerment and family supports. Six US states participated in this programme, which commenced in 2003 and was completed in March 2012. Participants on the course showed increased earnings and employment, and marginalised workers moved into employment. They are expecting further benefits from it in the long term for people who completed the course.

On a federal level, the USA provides a number of supports for adults with learning disabilities. These include the life skills programmes, which are post-secondary training programmes for people with learning disability in need of additional support to encourage independent living and are generally provided in a residential setting, and the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AIDD). The AIDD is a division of the US Department of Health and Human Services. It provides financial and leadership support to organisations in each state to ensure that people with learning disabilities and their families can participate and contribute fully in all aspects of community life.

The final area that I will look at is supported and integrated employment, which the Committee may be aware of from the briefing that you received from the disability employment service recently. In the USA, supported employment has been a central part of support for people with learning disabilities since the early 1980s. Indeed, between 1987 and 1990, 1,400 supported employment programmes were authorised in 27 states. Supported employment is defined in legislation and supported by federal and state funding.

A major strategy for employment for people with learning disabilities entering supported employment is Employment First, which supports people with learning disabilities into employment. Under Employment First, community-based integrated employment is used by employment services to meet the needs of young people and adults with disabilities. It promotes integrated employment, whereby people with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities, are employed in the typical workplace setting. The policy behind integrated employment operates on the principle that programmes and services should presume that all people can work and that work outcomes are expected.

As the paper shows, a wide variety of support systems have been identified, including helping people into employment; identifying the needs and interests of people with learning disabilities to ensure that they find training and employment that they have an interest in; and ensuring that there is an effective transition from school to the post-secondary setting. If the Committee has any questions, I will be happy to try to answer them.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Thank you very much, Eóin. Is there any reason why you did not look to our closest neighbour in the Republic? Could you have a look at that for us?

**Mr Murphy:** I found a study that said that Canada, USA, the UK and Sweden are very good, so those are the ones that I focused on. From speaking to a few people about the Republic of Ireland, I know that it also has a fairly extensive supported employment system. In the Republic, there is a group called CARE that is quite high up and actively promotes the programme. If the Committee is interested, I could certainly —

**The Chairperson:** Would you, please? It would be good if we could get a comparison.

In the Swedish model, Samhall, which is a subcontractor, employs 22,000 people directly in cleaning, laundry, warehousing and logistics. Are you aware of whether it gets preference for state contracts because it is a state-owned company, or does it compete on a competitive basis?

**Mr Murphy:** I think that it competes competitively, but I can take a look and confirm that for you. I know that, because it is state-owned, government has put in place targets that it has to hit; that is in the paper.

**The Chairperson:** I am curious, because there seems to be a government-led initiative there to put everybody into employment. Of the four countries that you looked at, what is the closest comparator to Northern Ireland in size, demographics etc?

**Mr Murphy:** In terms of historical developments and how the systems have developed, it is probably Scotland. It has a lot of similar legislation. One of the reasons why I included Scotland is that it has had a fairly long-term programme in place since 2000 and has put in a lot of reforms. Scotland is a



good example of how to change a system to develop this. Things like local area coordinators are quite interesting as regards how you can coordinate services locally so that people can be signposted to programmes or information that they may need. There is that kind of higher level coordination of services so that people are not left looking for things from multiple avenues but can go to one person to find information.

**The Chairperson:** Eóin, thank you very much for your time and for your presentations.