



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Disability Employment Strategy:
Department for Employment and Learning

15 October 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Phil Flanagan

Mr David Hilditch

Mr William Irwin

Mr Fra McCann

Ms Bronwyn McGahan

Mr Pat Ramsey

Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Terry Park

Department for Employment and Learning

Mr David Sales

Department for Employment and Learning

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): David and Terry, you are very welcome to the Committee today to give us a briefing on the disability employment strategy. I will give you up to 10 minutes to give us a briefing. We have your papers in front of us, so hopefully Committee members will have read them. We will give you up to 10 minutes, and then we will have some questions.

Mr David Sales (Department for Employment and Learning): I will begin by introducing myself, as this is the first time that I have been in front of the Committee. I am the new director for the employment service. I took over from Colum Boyle at the beginning of September, and I look forward to working with you all over the coming months.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): You are very welcome, and we wish you well in your role.

Mr Sales: Thank you. We are here today at your request to provide an update on our disability employment strategy. I think that March of this year was the last time that Terry was in front of the Committee on it. We will do a very quick recap, because I know that some new Committee members have joined, but we are conscious that you are running behind time, so we will try to catch up. In broad outline, we are going to cover the purpose of the strategy and its objectives; the themes within the strategy; the approach that we have been taking, working with the disability sector in its development; our delivery model and some of the improvements that we would like to see through the strategy; and the timeline. Then we will be happy to take any questions. I will hand over to Terry who will take us through it.

Mr Terry Park (Department for Employment and Learning): Thank you. I will start with a brief update from the previous briefing in March. Most of the activity has been around the development of what will be the public consultation document on the strategy. That has been quite time-consuming,

but we now have a fairly robust document of around 60-odd pages, the key aspects being the proposals that we intend to take forward with the strategy and the questions that will go out to the wider public, who will be the target audience of the public consultation process.

During that time, I have also had input to the consultation process on Enabling Success, the economic inactivity strategy, as have some of my colleagues on the strategic working group from the sector. As much as anything, it was about putting forward our support for that particular element, which is aimed at a much wider target group — predominantly, people who have been long-term incapacity benefit recipients and lone parents — but, in doing so, highlighting why we think that there is still a genuine need for a specific disability strategy for people with more significant disabilities.

Then, as you will have seen from the papers, the very recent development, just when we thought we were there, was the support from the Department to extend the strategy beyond just employment and to include the other services that DEL has prime responsibility for; mainly careers, training, skills and further and higher education. While that may slow down the process a little bit for us, it is definitely the right way to go. As I said the last time, that is where our consultations started. It has taken us a while to get there, but if we have departmental and ministerial support, I would certainly not want to miss out on that opportunity.

As for the continued rationale, I have given you a few slides that explain the evidence base. There is the very local evidence base that arose from the eight user-engagement events that we ran in the Department, but also the recent research paper from the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion in GB, which, in many ways, agreed with our original proposals. Different levels of employment support are required for our various unemployed clients, from the job-ready to those in our target group with more significant disability barriers. Without specialist additional support, they will be very unlikely to make their way into employment. The focus on young people in particular is one of the other differences from the economic inactivity strategy. The economic inactivity strategy is, by and large, aimed at people who have been on benefits for five years and more. We want to prevent the next generation of young people, especially young disabled people, becoming economically inactive, so we intend to target the various streams that those young people will come through.

Lots of good work is happening across our various areas of departmental responsibility to extend the remit. However, I see the two key benefits of extending the remit as formalising and strengthening the linkage between the various aspects, and the opportunity it gives us to review what is being delivered in FE, HE, Training for Success (TFS) and other initiatives, because they will be totally drawn into the strategy itself. Ultimately, what we are trying to achieve through the departmental approach is a clear, simple and easy pathway for those young people, from the time when they leave full-time education through to sustained employment. I think that the strategy, as now constituted, will give us that ideal opportunity.

In terms of the disability specialist roles, we are still looking, as I explained last time, at a cohort of nine specialists, giving us three per employment service region. By extending the strategy, there will be a very clear link between those employment officers and our careers advisers, with the idea that there will be a certain cohort of our existing careers advisers who will have specific responsibility for dealing with young people with disabilities. What I am really trying to do is develop teams that will be experts in their field, have a real passion for that role and cement the already positive relationship that we have with the disability sector employment teams.

I will outline what we are currently doing and how that ties in with the timeline. Inevitably, there will be slippage as we try to extend this remit. That is not to say that we are standing still. From a departmental perspective, we are still supporting lots of people, and lots more people month on month, into employment. The disability sector is doing likewise, and a lot of the time it is doing it on behalf of the Department through some of the contracted provision.

It would be remiss of me not to mention that the likes of the European social fund (ESF) round of applications, covering the years 2015 to 2020, is now upon us, and they have said to us that that is going to be a major priority for them over the next couple of months. Around £25 million of departmental money has been added to the £40 million, which comes from Brussels for those ESF projects, purely to do with disability and employment initiatives. That, in many ways, dictates the structure, capacity, and even the future of some of those organisations. They will obviously be attracted to that particular piece of work. The disability employment service is a public match funder for a lot of those organisations, so I will be working closely with them on that piece of work. That is not to say that we will not continue to develop the consultation document. The disability sector has worked with us and we had a subediting group that comprised two members of the sector, along

with me and a colleague. We had the document at a stage where it was almost ready to go. All I need to do now is build in the other elements of the departmental services that I referred to earlier.

That is a very quick summary of where we are now and what has been happening since I was last before the Committee. I am very happy to take questions.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): Your presentation refers to your strategic working group and you provided a membership list of the group. The only thing that I notice missing is that no Departments are mentioned in it. Is that something that is taken forward by OFMDFM?

Mr Park: OFMDFM takes forward a number of initiatives for which it coordinates responses on behalf of other Departments. In my experience, it is not the easiest job in the world to get other departmental officials to commit themselves full time to pieces of work like this. We took a decision at the outset that, if the other Departments were not fully on board at the outset, we would proceed from a departmental approach. Our focus has got to be on employment. In response to the Bamford action plan, there are a number of actions that other Departments certainly need to take the lead on. However, if we are going to focus on what we can realistically achieve between skills and employment, within the Department, we have the authority to do so. So, we took a decision to proceed rather than to wait for others to come on board because goodness knows how long we would have waited.

Mr P Ramsey: You are very welcome. Good luck, David, in your new post.

Mr Sales: Thank you.

Mr P Ramsey: We look forward to the challenges that we all face. In the past, I have been critical of the Department on this issue, but I am much more content with some of the language and actions on this one.

Your latter point about ESF moneys is fine, and it makes a statement that we are going to focus on disability. Will there be areas of that that will be fundamentally focused on or ring-fenced for the programme of activities that involve disabled people?

Mr Park: Yes, the amount that I referred to, Pat, is a proportion of the total ESF money. A particular category of the ESF programme for 2015-2020 will focus on social inclusion, with an emphasis on disability. That actual amount is the amount that is going to be ring-fenced for those disability projects. It is around £65 million in total, and that has to be topped up with 35% of match funding that the respective organisations will have to seek out from various sources, including their own organisation. If they are a social economy business, for example, they can supplement that. They can also go to the Big Lottery Fund for match funding, and, as I mentioned, we will be a match funder of some of those projects. It is a significant amount of money for disability projects.

Mr P Ramsey: We look forward to seeing how that rolls out. Earlier, you used the word "integration", and you were concerned at the lack of collaboration, for want of a better phrase, between Departments. This Committee, for example, is still undergoing a post-18 inquiry, particularly into special needs. How do you involve that element? There are a lot of good programmes within the Department. How do you make absolutely sure that they are synchronised with one another to have the greatest output and effect on the most vulnerable and marginalised in the community?

Mr Park: You are right, Pat. It is a challenge, but we have some clear ideas, interestingly with the Careers Service. The fact that we have the resource there is one major advantage. In some ways, we would be going back to how it was, as we sometimes do in the Civil Service. We would go back, maybe more than 10 years, to when you had a cohort of special needs careers advisers working closely with the disability employment advisers of that the time. One of my objectives through the strategy is to reintroduce that model. You would have had dedicated careers advisers who worked across the various regions with mainstream and special educational needs schools. They would have a caseload of young people who required special and additional support, and they would work hand in glove with the employment officers that we would recruit into the system. We would have a clear entry point into some of the other transitional services that we have responsibility for, particularly the FE and TFS programmes, and then we would allocate an employment officer who would track their progress from they enter until they are coming out and are ready to engage in work activity.

Mr P Ramsey: I have a final point, Chair. A huge amount of investment and time by you and the Department goes into making a difference. What are the targets? What outputs are you expecting from delivering this disability strategy?

Mr Park: I am going to be totally honest with you about the figures: because we do not have a robust baseline, I do not know what our targets will end up being. I have made a commitment that, by the first year of the launch of the strategy, we will have indicative targets of moving people with more significant disabilities into work. That will probably be based around what the centre is doing for those young people, along with what we are doing through our own specific programmes. The one thing I am certain about is this: when you look at the participation levels of young people with disabilities in the likes of TFS and FE, you see that their destination rates into employment are nowhere near as high as they could be. The FE pilot project that we engaged in, which is ongoing, demonstrated that. In one campus, we moved from two people moving into employment the previous year, to 12 in one year, and, now, that is sitting at around 25 to 30 through the leavers from last year. So, it shows that you can make a significant difference. We need to get the baseline figures and work on them year on year.

Mr F McCann: Thanks for your presentation. David, best wishes on your job.

Pat raised the issue of the inquiry that we are doing into special educational needs post-19. One of the things that we have learned through that is the major difficulties that not only people with disabilities face but parents and teachers. There seems to be a gap there between the Department, the educational establishments and how a young person progresses. I noticed that a number of the groups deal with mental health issues. Do you ever get an opportunity to talk to groups of parents about how they feel and how they would see the progression of young people going into employment?

Mr Park: There have been various representations to the Department and correspondence from some parents. At a previous Committee meeting, I was present when one of the parents' groups was there. A number of parents and carers were at our eight regional engagement events along with the young people. Again, it only highlights for me why we need to do this departmentally. As I was focusing on the employment aspect, we were only going to pick up the people who were already engaged in some training or educational services. By locking ourselves in with the careers advisers and the Careers Service, we need to do a review, because it is the careers advisers who engage with the young people as early as year 9, and they are part of the team that looks at the transitional plan.

I will not commit us to taking responsibility for that full transitional plan through this strategy, because a lot of it moves into the area of social care and social services. However, when it comes to those young people who, between them and their parents, genuinely think that it is work, career, or, at least, further education that they want to achieve, that is where that critical aspect of the strategy will come together. We are very aware of the parents' groups, particularly in terms of respite. A lot of them have to come out of employment because they fall through that gap after full-time education. That is one of the things that I am trying to address.

It is also to make sure that the people who are going to FE colleges are going because it is the right place for them. There might be a challenge for other Departments to step up to the mark because there will be people who are going into FE colleges now, which might not be the best fit for them, and they are in classes where they are not at the same level as other disabled people, so they need something else as an alternative. So, this is about creating a menu of choices for parents as well as those who fall to our Department.

Mr F McCann: You talked about employers and a number of groups. Do you find that you are pushing at an open door when you meet employers? One of the difficulties that we have picked up in the past is that many employers have turned away from employing people with disabilities. For those who gain employment, is there a tracking mechanism to allow for back-up support and to determine how long they are in the job?

Mr Park: that is a really good question. There is no straightforward answer to either, particularly to the first question. On the second one, one of the advantages of the disability programmes is that one of our key objectives, unlike the mainstream employment service, is about sustained employment. Two flagship programmes that we deliver are Access to Work and Workable, which are about providing in-work support, sometimes indefinitely, but the aim is for that support to reduce over time.

Workable, as it sits, is specifically aimed at this target group because it is about those with more significant disability-related barriers, particularly mental health and learning disability. We average around five years of in-work support, by which time the employers become accustomed to it and the individual feels comfortable, but, in some cases, we will provide that for the duration of their career. So, in-work support will be a major piece that we will want to build on. That is why employers is one of the key themes.

Employers are becoming better, I must say. They have become more educated, but there are still a lot of prejudices and misconceptions out there. It is a case of not only educating employers about how good disabled employees can be but what supports we have in place. Sometimes, if they are lacking knowledge about what we can provide for them from a Department point of view, it can put them off. Once they experience it, we find that they are sold. Usually, the feedback from employers about people who went in through the special recruitment exercises is that not only can they do the job but they are some of their best performers. They are the most loyal and committed employees, and they really appreciate the opportunity they were given.

Mr F McCann: Your submission refers to DEL provision at local offices, and you recognised that it was daunting for people to go there. Having dealt with people, I know that sometimes that barrier can put people off. What can be done to ensure that it is friendlier, welcoming and that people feel comfortable going into those offices?

Mr Park: The recruitment of the specialists allows us much greater flexibility. Those members of staff will be mobile and will often work hand in hand with disability sector organisations. I envisage a situation whereby meetings with young disabled people would take place in the likes of the NOW project or the Orchardville Society premises, which, as you say, are less daunting and do not have any benefits connotations. That is one of the advantages. One of the successes of our condition management programme model is that it is delivered, by and large, in community facilities as opposed to health or jobs and benefits office (JBO) environments.

Ms McGahan: You are both welcome. I would like more information on an initiative that you had earlier this year. It was the joint employer conference with the Equality Commission, Employers for Disability and Belfast City Council. How can that apply to areas west of the Bann?

Mr Park: We have ongoing and positive relationships with the likes of Employers for Disability and the Equality Commission. We are often the key driver for a lot of those events. In this case, Belfast City Council came on board, and it has been fantastic through the opportunities it has provided for people with disabilities over the past couple of years.

We took forward an initiative in Derry last year with Premier Inn. Again, it was a classic case of getting one employer that was willing to engage. We brought the local disability organisations on board — Disability Action, Mencap and Action Mental Health — and the Department then facilitated all the accommodation issues. That initiative resulted in three disabled people gaining employment in the new hotel on the Waterside.

It is happening all over. The good thing about the sector and the Department is that we have a presence in every region. I do not see that as being a major problem for us. It is about identifying the opportunities. You will be aware from your constituency that we have started to do progressive work with Parkanaur College. We have now had two employer events at Parkanaur College, where we invited a cohort of employers. The board of trustees is on board and a lot of them have influence with local employers. We see that as the way to go.

Ms McGahan: Have you got any plans to roll out this initiative in conjunction with, for example, the new Mid Ulster District Council?

Mr Park: There is no doubt that councils will be major players in this. Belfast City Council has given us a bit of a model to work on. Obviously, we need the new councils to be up and running in terms of their structure and operational capacity. The whole idea of having employers as a theme will focus thinking on what we need to do differently with employers. Maybe it has been a bit too piecemeal and almost waiting for a recruitment opportunity to arise. There are things we can learn from other jurisdictions. The Disability Confident campaign is running in GB at the moment. Whilst I would not absorb all of it, there are definitely things in it that are very worthwhile. Those could include a local and maybe a major annual event that is not about the Department telling employers how good this could be but about employer champions coming on board and speaking from their own experience.

Ms McGahan: So, you are being proactive with employers in looking at initiatives to get young people with disabilities into employment.

Mr Park: Yes. Even in the youth employment scheme, we have built in flexibilities for young people with disabilities around the hours that they can work and the qualifications they need to gain during the first year, which have been very heavily relaxed.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Buchanan): No other members have indicated that they want to speak. Thank you for coming along to the Committee this morning.