

Committee for Employment and Learning  
Parliament Buildings, Room 375  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

Dear Sir/Madam

**RE: Committee Inquiry into post Special Educational Need Provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities in Northern Ireland.**

I am writing to you on behalf of CAN, a user-led organisation for people with learning disabilities based in Ballymoney, in response to your inquiry. As you are aware, we were actively involved in pulling together a User Consultation event for the Health and Social Care Board on the provision of Day Opportunities and in supporting the creation of an Easy Read/Accessible document out of this. I was slightly dismayed to find this consultation coming out so quickly without reference to the HSCB one but similarly heartened as hopefully, the request for an enquiry demonstrates a move towards cross-departmental working moving forward. Please find our submission to follow:

**1.0 About CAN**

CAN offers a number of post-18 opportunities for people with learning disabilities including contracted 'Base' provision on behalf of NHSCT and training opportunities for adults with learning disabilities through STEP (Steps Towards Employment Programme) funded by DEL, ESF and NHSCT. In addition, we provide a number of health and well-being programmes and our Shadow Council is the only representative body of people with learning disabilities in NI. Up until recently we ran a youth project which aimed to get children (12-18) with Id into mainstream sports and leisure activities and we operate Best Buddies Northern Ireland enabling children and adults to come together with their peers from mainstream to make friends and develop meaningful peer relationships. Whilst we are not involved in transition services, we see the impact poor planning has on the ground for our young people and indeed the massive difference the right support can make in enabling people with learning disabilities to live meaningful and productive lives.

**2.0 Current range of choice and opportunities for people with a learning disability leaving full time schooling**

It is well over 10 years since Professor David Bamford started on his mission to create a vision for developing services for men, women and children with a learning disability for the next 15 to 20 years. The 'Bamford Vision' as it is known, was widely embraced by us all as something to aspire to and, indeed, many services have been radically transformed on the basis of his *modus operandi*.

We know from our work (and a strong evidence base) that day opportunities and alternatives to traditional day care provision are increasingly important to people with a learning disability.

However, young people with a learning disability continue to tell us about the difficulties they experience when they leave school and take the step into further education, employment or day opportunities. We frequently underestimate how big a step this is for some who are coming out of a highly structured, known environment with all needs (transport, catering, welfare etc) being met by one provider into the world of Day Opps Co-Ordinators, Public Transport and a 'real' workplace.

There is still a lack of preparation to enable a smooth transition from children's services to adult services as well as a significant lack of choice/appropriate courses in further education. Many individuals report going back to college year after year to the 'same course', sometimes inappropriately being pushed into numeracy/literacy courses because that's what is available as opposed to it meeting either their needs or expectations.

Many of our young people are being moved into activities/opportunities/training because it suits the provider/parents/carers rather than there having been a person-centered approach from the outset. Similarly there are assumptions made during the decision process about 'what will suit' the individual when the individual maybe has had limited chance to experience work/know what college will involve and/or sampled opportunities to be able to make an informed choice. Consequently, placements, training opportunities etc break down because the young person has not had the appropriate support in preparation for the transition.

People who have **variety in their week** and divide their time between work, college, social enterprise, work skills training, drop-in or day centres are leading more fulfilled lives with extensive opportunities for training, increasing their independence, employability and decision making skills, playing a part in their local communities, having fun, forming positive relationships and making friends.

However, there is a varied picture of practice throughout Northern Ireland. Much of the development in opportunities has been driven by voluntary and community organisations recognising need and deficits in statutory services and responding to need by sourcing funding from the ever-decreasing charitable/European funding 'pot' available. Several Trusts have entered partnerships/agreements with such organisations, recognising their value as a provider of creative, dynamic, responsive services entrenched in the local communities in which they serve.

Whilst this has led to a wide range of Day Opportunities provision and service providers coming to the fore, it has also meant a 'patchwork' of activity with some areas of the region being better served than others, and the most rural areas missing out.

### **3.0 Areas for Action:**

To create successful Day Opportunities in Education, Employment and Training, the following principles need to be adopted:

- There needs to be a recognition that choice and person-centeredness for individuals is key to the success of individual placements so a wide range of opportunities should be considered including clubs, community groups, social enterprises, Supported Employment, further education, charities, voluntary organisations and outreach projects;
- Any Day Opportunity Created should empower individuals to access and participate in activities independently;

- There needs to be cross-departmental recognition that Day Opportunities is not solely a responsibility of Health & Social Care – it crosses all departments including education, transport and social development. A multi-agency approach must be developed to ensure the sustainability and financing of Day Opportunity Provision;
- There needs to be an acknowledgement and acceptance that service provision will vary depending on geographic location and that that is not a negative thing – simply a demonstration of the wide diversity and creativity within our society but similarly that parties with responsibility for Day Opp provision in these areas will strive to develop opportunities further;
- As the largest employer by sector, government departments need to lead by example in embracing Social Enterprise and providing work placements and Supported Employment for people with learning disabilities – not solely in the traditional catering/admin roles;
- Partnerships with voluntary sector agencies should be just that. Whilst voluntary/community sector partners can traditionally deliver services at less cost than statutory services, the partnership itself should be seen as a cost effective way of delivering services and ‘partners’ should not be exposed to cost-saving efficiencies further down the line. It is not the role of the voluntary sector to subsidise statutory services;
- Day Opportunities partners should be encouraged to regularly evaluate their services and seek continuous improvement, learning from others. There are many examples of best practice throughout Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK and organisations should be encouraged to learn from others and share their learning to the betterment of people with learning disabilities’ lives;
- A set of standards of Best Practice/Quality Mark should be developed to ensure quality of provision of Day Opportunities regardless of type/location;
- There should be stronger links formed between providers including Voluntary Community Agencies, Training Providers, Colleges, Transport Providers and local authorities to provide a much more streamlined transition for people – too often, we are positioned in competition for funding/‘funding beneficiaries’ and in this mix, it is our service users who are failed repeatedly;
- We need to be planning strategically – we know how many of our young people are going to be requiring services (they are well captured in the school system) so why is there an annual ‘knee jerk’ reaction to service provision for these individuals making the transition?
- Capacity Building – there needs to be some longer-term investment in the community/voluntary sector and others to enable the ‘short-termism’ issues to be reduced.

In conclusion, I would like to draw your attention to the appendices which capture the thought of people with learning disabilities/our Shadow Councillors in relation to your enquiry. Our Shadow Councillors would be delighted to provide Oral Evidence to the committee and similarly would like to extend our invitation to the committee to come see the work which CAN does in this important area.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Kind regards,

Janet Schofield  
Director

## Testimonials from CAN People...

### **Amy Rickerby, 21, Coleraine**

"I left school at 19 and wasn't sure what I wanted to do so I chose to go on to tech to do a wider choices course which would hopefully help me in deciding what type of work I would like to do. I enjoy the course at tech as I am able to meet new friends and learn new skills.

I go to CAN Can Recycling one day a week which I enjoy and in particular I love working with the furniture, learning skills such as sanding and painting.



I then moved on to a placement at CAN Can Bazaar where I have learned retail skills and it is through this placement I have learned that I would like to go on to find a job in retail. I work out the back sorting the clothes and tidying the shop and welcoming customers. I have become more confident and talk to customers more now and help them if they are looking for something.

I have found it difficult deciding what I would like to do after leaving school but working at the social enterprises at CAN have helped me try new things and find out what I like".

### **David Spiers, 31, Portglenone**

"When I left school at 19 I went to a job placement and to a day centre (George Sloan). I didn't really know what I could do when I left school and my Day Opportunities Coordinator found places for me. I enjoyed my work placement but I wasn't very happy at the day centre, it was really boring. At the day centre, every day was pretty much the same as the rest and we didn't get out very much. I still go to the day centre on a Friday but 2 years ago I got a place at CAN Base in Ballymena and I go there now on a Monday and a Wednesday. I feel much happier going to the Base and would like to leave the other place completely and go here for three days. When I'm at the Base I get to go out a lot and have freedom to go into town and do things that I want to do with my friends. I find I have more in common with the other people that go here and we all get to have a say in the activities we do. We can also say NO if we don't want to do something, but I am usually up for everything!



On a Tuesday and a Thursday I work at Pennybridge Stores and I really enjoy this, they treat me really well and I always look forward to going here. I would really like to be a Rally Driver but I guess I'll have to settle for the Stores for now, that's ok though.



**Derek Campbell, 34, Aghadowey, Coleraine.**

"I started at CAN Can Recycling 6 months ago and I attend two days a week. Just recently I started another day at the CAN Can Bazaar Charity Shop.

I really enjoy my work at CAN Can Recycling in particular going out in the van with Geoffrey the driver collecting waste materials. I do find some things difficult like weighing the clothes and recording information but I am still learning and the staff help me. The staff and trainees are all very helpful and friendly and I have made many new friends.

At the CAN Can Bazaar Shop I am learning retail skills. I really enjoy meeting the customers and helping them. I get nervous when I'm on the till as I have never worked a till before, but the volunteers always help me if I need them.

My Family thinks my placements are really good for me as there is a lot of variety and I have learned many new skills. I have gained Asdan Qualifications in fire safety, health and safety at work and time management. I really enjoyed completing the Asdan modules and hope to gain many more over the next few months."

I am doing the Horizon course at NRC on a Monday evening. I enjoy going here, it gets me out of the house and gives my Mum a break! I learn things like First Aid, cooking and how to write forms. I am trying to get my own place to live at the moment but it's really hard and I'm not sure if I'll ever get there.



**Emma Patterson, 25, Ballymena**

Emma attends the Base Ballymena and is on the Shadow Council at CAN. She was recently voted onto CAN's Management Board. We asked Emma to speak about what she gets up to during the week and here is what she had to say...

"Hi, my name is Emma and I am from Ballymena. 2 years ago, before the Ballymena base opened I was at home 3 days a week. I was bored had no one to talk to.

When the Ballymena base opened things changed for me for the better. I made new friends and got to see old ones. I got to go on activities like Go-Karting, train trips and circus skills etc. I was happy & looked forward to going to the base.



I want other people to have a chance to do things like this & get to decide for themselves & have fun, meet new friends & learn things.

I also work in a charity shop and for the PDSA in Ballymena. It's good and it gets me out of the house. I like talking to customers & helping them. I learned about the things we sell & how to stock them. Work makes me more confident. I help to sort out the clothes, what's good & what's bad & we sell them. The people that I work with are nice & they look out for me.

2 years ago I wouldn't have been able to speak up for myself & others & wouldn't have dreamed about being able to stand up here today & speak to you. I am much happier now with my life and always look forward to new experiences and challenges."

