

Mr Robin Swann MLA
Committee for Employment and Learning
Room 375
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Our Ref: COR/50/2014

20 March 2014

Dear Robin

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

Thank you for your letter dated 23 January 2014 advising that the Committee for Employment and Learning is undertaking an inquiry into post Special Educational Need (SEN) Provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities.

You will be aware the Executive approved a new Disability Strategy “A strategy to improve the lives of disabled people – 2012 to 2015” on 24 January 2013 which was formally launched on Thursday 28 February 2013. This strategy covers **all types of disability and all ages – children, young people, adults and older people.**

The purpose of the Executives Disability Strategy is to set out a high level policy framework to give coherence and guidance to government departments’ activities across general and disability specific areas of policy. It provides a framework for the implementation of the UNCRPD, to take forward work to improve the lives of children and adults with a disability.

The strategy contains 12 cross-cutting themes and 18 Strategic Priorities which require a strategic approach across government. Some of these themes and strategic priorities specifically apply to Transitions. They are:-

Theme 7 – Transitions from Childhood to Adulthood

It is widely recognised that young people with disabilities making the transition from childhood to adulthood face specific barriers and the inclusion of recommendations in the PSI Report clearly illustrated the needs of this particular group. People with disabilities have told us about the difficulties they face when going through adolescence and finding the appropriate support through this important life transition. This transition prompts issues around emotional well-being as well as the complications and additional resources (especially time) that people with disabilities need if they are to share equality of opportunity with non-disabled people. We believe that young people with disabilities should be supported in addressing these needs so that they have the same opportunities for growth and fulfilment as non-disabled young people.

Strategic Priority 11

- Transform the process of transition to adulthood for young people with disabilities.

Theme 10 – Employment and Employability

Article 27 of the UNCRPD relates directly to work and employment and recognises the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others.

Article 24 of the UNCRPD is in relation to education which includes access to an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning.

- Employment and employability are issues which require a number of government departments to work together to support people with disabilities to gain and retain employment.
- It is recognised that those who face greater barriers in accessing work will need more intensive and focussed support.

Strategic Priority 15

- Work towards increasing the number of people with disabilities entering all levels of employment and safeguard the rights of those disabled people in work.
- People with disabilities are twice as likely not to hold any qualifications compared to non-disabled people, and as likely to hold a degree-level qualification. Furthermore, 35 per cent of working age disabled people do not hold any formal qualification, compared to 14 per cent of working age non-disabled people.
- Emphasis on qualifications alone has the potential to restrict opportunities and choice for disabled people. Supported work placements, volunteering, mentoring and community learning are additional non-qualification based forms of learning that should have recognition in developing the skills and confidence of people with disabilities in gaining employment.
- We will also set out actions to promote education, vocational training and employment opportunities as well as safeguarding the employment opportunities of those already in work.

Strategic Priority 16

- Increase the opportunities for people with disabilities to attain skills and qualifications through access to appropriate training and lifelong learning opportunities.

In taking forward the delivery of the Strategy **all Departments** have committed to consider what needs to be done and how they will measure progress. Within the strategy we have committed to produce an annual report this will demonstrate the actions that departments have taken to support the delivery of the Strategy. The Annual Report should be published April 2014.

Following the outcome of the last Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Mental Health and Learning Disability (Bamford) on Thursday 21 November 2013 at which Minister Farry presented a paper regarding Transitions, it was confirmed that OFMdfM would facilitate/co-ordinate a meeting across departments to further discuss 'Transitions' and post 19 provision for people with a learning disability.

A meeting, chaired and recorded by DEL, took place on 27 February 2014.

OFMdfM, DEL, DE, DRD, DCAL and DARD attended. At the meeting DEL advised that it would, with the assistance of the other departments, draft a second Transitions paper which will clarify roles and identify current gaps in provision and opportunities. Further meetings of this Transitions group will take place to discuss and finalise this paper before it is presented at the next Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Mental Health and Learning Disability planned for May.

We look forward to hearing the outcome of your Inquiry and receiving a copy of the Committee's report.

Yours sincerely

The Rt Hon Peter D Robinson
MLA
First Minister

Martin McGuinness
MLA
deputy First Minister