

Education Lifelong Learning and Skills Committee

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Venue: Committee Room 3, the Senedd, National Assembly for Wales

Time: 9:00am-12:30pm

**Expectations, Ambitions and Equality of Opportunity
National Assembly Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Committee
Review of Special Educational Needs, Part 3, Transition**

Evidence presented by Learning Disability Wales

1. Introduction

1.1 Some young people with learning disabilities in Wales benefit as they move through the transition period in life to adulthood through the commitment, inspiration and support they receive from the professionals they work with: teachers, learning support assistants, social workers, careers advisors, vocational trainers, further education lecturers and job coaches.

1.2 Instances of a creative, visionary approach that focus on what the young person wants to be and do in life, which successfully draw out their abilities, aptitudes and skills do exist. Often these instances are attributable to the individual professional, rather than to the policies or procedure of the agency they work for.

1.3 The existence of this life chances lottery is fully accepted. Endless reports and anecdotes highlight transition to adulthood as a key rite of passage where society frequently fails the young person with a learning disability.

1.4 Learning Disability Wales welcomes the initiative by the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee in undertaking this review, and recognises the care being taken to consult with all the key agencies and organisations in Wales.

2. Learning Disability Wales

2.1 Learning Disability Wales is very pleased to accept the invitation to submit evidence. Our mission is to:

"Create a Wales that values and includes every child and adult with a learning disability".

We represent over 120 voluntary organisations active in the field of learning disability across Wales. These organisations are concerned with all aspects of the life of the person with a learning disability, from birth through to old age. Our members include large and small service providers, parent carer organisations, advocacy organisations and self advocacy groups.

2.2 We undertake a range of activities that help us further our mission: information provision through publications like Llais Update and our website, training activity, supporting developing member organisations, input to relevant networks and policy comment work at Wales, U.K. and European levels.

2.3 We believe that the expertise within our membership, and the activities we undertake, give us a special insight into the challenges that the young person with a learning disability faces, as they move through the transition years.

2.4 This paper has been prepared with specific advice and assistance from:

- Agoriad Cyf, Bangor
- Children in Wales
- Learning Disability Wales Life Options Project, Llanelli
- Vision 21, Cardiff
- Ysgol Hen Felin, Community Special School, Rhondda Cynon Taff
- Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities, Cardiff University

2.5 In this paper we do not wish to duplicate or rehearse at length an analysis of the problem. The Committee was sufficiently concerned about transition to organise this review, and we are confident that other contributors have already provided this analysis. Our aim is to be succinct and to consolidate some of the messages you will have already received.

3. Ambitions and Attitudes

3.1 The opportunities available to many young people with learning disabilities as they approach the transition period of 14+ are levelled down by the low expectations of important people around them. This phenomenon is deeply corrosive and undermining. Low expectations lead to the young person with a learning disability being treated differently, a second class approach.

In particular, assumptions begin to be made that the individual is incapable of taking a vocational route to some form of job even in the long term. So, therefore, from age 15, while all non-disabled young people now have undertaken some form of work experience, variations start to occur for young people with a learning disability.

As members of Viva, Interplay and Young Voices for Choices noted in a meeting with the Children's Commissioner in March 2004:

- "the experience of work experience placements for young disabled people was felt to be significantly lower than that of non-disabled young people"

- "schools/colleges do not have high expectations of young disabled people when considering work experience placements and offer limited choices"

There are funding issues that contribute to this malaise, which we shall turn to later, but first and foremost comes attitude.

3.2 In some cases, if there is a negative attitude amongst relevant professionals, this can be combated by the parent. In socially deprived areas, however, the parent may be just as fatalistic as the professional.

3.3 Unemployment amongst young people with learning disabilities has become the acceptable norm.

4. Fail to prepare, Prepare to Fail

4.1 Government policies for disabled children and adults with a learning disability emphasise that the organisation of services and support for the individual must be developed through an approach that places the individual at the centre of the discussion and decision taking. Person centred planning will identify the aspirations, abilities and needs of the individual and agree a range of responses which are holistic in their design and include a mix of formal service actions but also informal initiatives that may involve friends, relatives and neighbours.

4.2 The children's framework for planning, the process of Individual Education Plans and the Unified Assessment Process for adults with a learning disability all provide working procedures for this person centred approach.

Yet the quality of this required planning activity is highly variable, and rarely achieves the standard anticipated by the various procedures. The children's framework process is led by childcare professionals, and they often find it difficult to secure sufficient input from educational professionals. The I.E.P. is often developed and reviewed without the young person with a learning disability and their parent being present. I.E.P's are not always clear about what the objectives in working with young people are, or what progress is being sought. I.E.P's despite being an important planning tool are often not shared with the professionals that will work with the young person after they leave school.

4.3 Transition planning has to be seen as part of a planning process that should start in the early years, when the individual with a learning disability is a young child, and should extend into adulthood. Early investment in sensitive person centred planning can often help the child gain capabilities and skills that will improve their independence as they grow to adulthood. Transition planning cannot be successful as an event, commencing at age 14, if it is sealed off from, and uninformed by any previous planning activity.

4.4 The importance of having a transition plan for every young person with a learning disability, commencing at age 14 is an established part of government policy. Yet the 'transition plan' remains everybody's concern but nobody's responsibility. The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity services states that "all young people should have a transition key worker . . . who co-ordinates the planning and delivery of services before, during and after the

process of transition and will continue to monitor and have contact with the young person until the age of 25 years" (Action 5.33). Not until this standard is fully implemented will we see progress.

5. Lack of Focus

5.1 The lack of ambition for, and low expectations of the young person with a learning disability may, at the extreme, lead to professionals not giving the individual opportunities to explore, experiment or experience.

More subtly, this attitudinal deficit may undermine the planning process. We know that many young adults with a learning disability want to explore the possibility of working in a paid job, like the status and self-confidence that working creates, and like the idea of having a wage in their pocket that they can spend as they see fit. In this respect, they are not different to the general population. The steps that the young person with a learning disability may need to take along this path may extend over several years, but ultimately, the desired objective is the same.

5.2 It could confidently be expected that the transition planning process should place the desired objective of achieving some form of paid employment at the heart of most individual transition plans.

5.3 The Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities conducted research on transition recently, looking in detail at the process in 6 local authority areas across the U.K. Interviews were conducted with all the key professionals. Considerable planning activity was identified by the researchers. It concluded:

"The interviews revealed a remarkable absence of prioritisation of employment as a clear outcome of agency work".

"Service professionals want a smooth, unproblematic transition for young people with learning disabilities but still lack any comprehensive notion of what this actually entails".

Even if professionals have a clear focus, they often do not know what opportunities to explore.

6. Age 14-16 Funding

6.1 Some special schools and mainstream schools want to give the same opportunities for work sampling, work experience and the first steps towards vocational training to young people with learning disabilities that their non-disabled peers enjoy. Research suggests that these practical experiences are crucial to providing a route for young people with a learning disability into paid jobs. It is very evident however that they do not have the levels of funding that will allow them to effectively link with employers, and to support the individual at the place of work if required. At least one special school had to look to generate funds from non-statutory activities and from charitable sources, to deliver even a time-limited project on transition to its students with learning disabilities.

6.2 There are some encouraging example of collaboration between schools and voluntary sector organisations skilled in the vocational training, or supported employment fields. Vision 21 and schools in the Cardiff area organise a summer school, where young people with a learning disability

can try out various vocational activities over a period of several weeks. In the South Wales Valleys, Elite Supported Employment agency provide supported work experience to young people while still at school, in both cases, demand exceeds places available, and funding for such initiatives is often piecemeal, time limited or fragile.

7. Age 16-19 Marking Time

7.1 Many young people with learning disabilities remain in school until age 19. This action may be well-intentioned, focussing on the developmental progress of the individual, but in the absence of appropriate resources being available to the school to pursue vocational options, is often merely a useful way of delaying problematic decisions, or taking less than satisfactory options. From age 16 the only curriculum requirements for a special school are religious education and careers guidance. As a ages 14-16, schools are rarely resourced to work on skill development or vocational training in a proactive fashion either directly with the young person, or in collaboration with professionals from other agencies. It is understood that in at least 1 county funding for young people remaining in school after age 16 is being reduced.

7.2 There are some examples of Young Peoples Partnerships starting to raise expectations about training outcomes for all young people, including disabled young people. We commend material we have seen from Cardiff and are encouraged by work being undertaken by ESTYN.

7.3 Outside of college provision, there are few vocational options available to 16 year old leavers before they reach their 18th birthday. DELL's provision for this age group has been problematic. Generally available vocational training schemes, such as Modern Apprenticeships, have been targeted at providing qualifications often beyond the reach of young people with a learning disability, but who still have the ability to enter employment. The Skillbuild programme has in the past been made available to young people with learning disabilities but is not suitable in its current form: it focuses on too narrow a range of target qualifications; in practice it is time limited for those who fail to meet qualifications criteria, leaving young people with learning disabilities with few options until they reach 18; additional outcome payments for achieving a job did assist providers in supporting this group, but these have been removed and as yet no additional support payments introduced to assist this group.

7.4 Young people who are considered to have a borderline disability are ironically even more vulnerable. Due to eligibility criteria they may not access any adult social care support and there is no funding that they can readily access for vocational training. With support, these individuals might have the greatest potential for gaining and holding down a job.

7.5 At this period, there is also evidence that underpinning healthcare arrangements that for some individuals have provided a stable basis for their social and educational development can begin to unravel. Established and provided through paediatric or child health services, they can fail to transfer to adult health provision. Lack of continuity of healthcare and lack of specialist knowledge of health conditions are common concerns for families.

8. Age 19+ Limited Options

8.1 The great majority of young people with a learning disability are offered one of three options when they leave school: attendance at a social services day centre probably for less than five days a week, staying at home with their parents/carers or attending a further education college. A fourth option, of being referred to a supported employment agency, is only rarely proposed. This is because supported employment is not formally recognised as an option, and funding for these agencies is ad hoc and piecemeal. Anecdotal evidence suggests that almost no young people with a learning disability leave school to go straight to a job.

8.2 Provision in F.E. Colleges is invariably in a segregated unit, interaction and co-learning between disabled and non-disabled students is very limited, and a low priority appears to be given to developing the employability of individuals.

Some colleges actively seek to enrol young people with learning disabilities, but do not ensure that their course tutors are properly trained to work with these students. We are also aware of one F.E. college where there has been a directive from senior management not to enrol students with high dependency because of the costs that would be incurred.

8.3 In some areas F.E. Colleges have been willing to sub-contract with a voluntary sector organisation skilled in vocational training and there have been some encouraging examples of collaboration.

8.4 The Learning and Skills Council in England has powerfully underlined the importance of supported employment to progression from learning into paid work. In their report "Learning for Living and Work" they announce that in 2007/8 they will "pilot the supported employment model with a range of employers" and that after 2010 they will "no longer fund providers to deliver work preparation programmes for learner with learning difficulties and/or disabilities that do not focus on learning in the workplace and the supported employment model."

8.5 U.K government initiatives like 'Welfare to Work for Disabled People' and the reform of Incapacity Benefit have held out the prospect of real support for the generality of young disabled people from the mainstream government agencies.

In a July 2006 briefing to Welsh M.P's however, Learning Disability Wales with Mencap Cymru, Shaw Trust and the Wales Association of Supported Employment Agencies warned that Job Centre Plus would be likely to focus its energies on other 'easier' categories of individuals that young people with learning disabilities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this warning is unfortunately being proved correct.

9. What Priority Vocational Training or Employment?

9.1 The Prime Ministers Strategy Unit report "Improving the Life Chances of disabled people" November 2005 stated in recommendation 6.8: "Disabled young people to have full access to individualised learning and vocational pathways into chosen employment and other meaningful occupation opportunities".

9.2 Significant change needs to happen if young people with a learning disability are to have this

opportunity in Wales. We have noted that:

- some professionals and parents do not have positive expectations about vocational training or an eventual job.
- transition planning frequently lacks any focus upon vocational training, work experience and gaining employment.
- where schools are motivated to develop vocational training, or work experience at ages of 14+ and 16+, they are too poorly funded.
- initiatives by vocational training and supported employment specialists in the voluntary sector to reach into schools and to offer partnerships is constrained by funding restrictions and are not available in all areas of Wales leading to a postcode lottery.
- the school curriculum for age 16+ statemented children places no emphasis on skill development, vocational training or work preparation.
- F.E. provision does not focus on vocational training or work preparation.
- assistance and support from a supported employment agency is rarely available.

10. Actions

10.1 In framing its recommendations we would ask the Committee to consider the following proposals:

- the NSF standard and key actions on Transition with the disabled Children and Young People chapter, should be implemented in full as soon as possible. Additionally key action 5.33 – "a key transition worker is appointed to all disabled young people at 14" be urgently implemented.
- that the central focus of the transition plan should be improving employability of the individual, unless person centred planning identifies an alternative.
- that schools are required to develop vocational training, work experience and work sampling opportunities for young people with learning disabilities at age 14+ and 16+, and are given the necessary resources to make this possible.
- that the curriculum for statemented children 14+ and 16+ is reviewed in light of the Improving Life Chances Report, so that young people are taught the skills needed in real home, work, leisure and community life.
- that to address concerns about how ambitions and expectations, training for key professionals is revised and developed so that they can successfully use person centred approaches and planning in their work.
- that funding mechanisms are identified or created to foster collaboration and partnership working between schools and voluntary sector organisations skilled in vocational training or supported employment.
- policies and provision for young people with learning disabilities are revised so that the teaching of skills and knowledge progressively takes place in those settings where the skills can be used.

11. Contributors

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