



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Migration of Incapacity Benefit

21 September 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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AND LEARNING**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Colum Boyle) Department for Employment and Learning
Ms Sheila McNeill)

The Chairperson:

I welcome Colum Boyle to the Committee and invite him to make his presentation.

Mr C Boyle (Department for Employment and Learning):

This presentation is a little different from the session on welfare reform. In that one, we set out where we are going in the future. In this one, we are already moving. Incapacity Benefit (IB) migration is already under way. Clients from the Social Security Agency (SSA) who were receiving IB are coming across to the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to receive personalised support and assistance from us. We will give the Committee a quick outline of the paper, highlight the support and assistance we have available and detail some developments that we are taking forward to improve that support and assistance. We are trying to

remove barriers to employment and facilitate the removal of those barriers, which is a huge challenge.

The SSA clients will not be the normal job seekers; you have experienced them for yourselves. As regards capability, we know that our staff and our programme providers will have to deal with them with a great deal of empathy, sensitivity and care, and we do not take lightly our responsibility to service those clients and their needs. Crucially, we are building on the experience that we have built up in the organisation of Pathways to Work, which was the precursor to employment and support allowance (ESA). I will ask Sheila to take you through the paper fairly quickly, and then we will take questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. Sheila, you are very welcome.

Ms Sheila McNeill (Department for Employment and Learning):

I am going to take you quickly through the paper, which explains where the Department has reached on the IB reassessment initiative. As you know, this is part of the wider welfare reform programme, which aims to drive forward a simpler, fairer and more efficient benefits system.

The reassessment initiative for IB is the second phase of the introduction of ESA, which was introduced in 2008. The first phase was for fresh claimants to ESA; those making an application for a health benefit. The second phase for is for what we would call stock clients; people who have been on IB for a long time and who are now being reassessed. In the past, those people would have been categorised as incapacitated — not capable of work — and viewed as never being able to work. However, the reassessment looks at what they are capable of doing rather than what they are incapable of doing.

We have worked very closely with the SSA. This is not just about benefit reform. We have a big part to play in making sure that there is appropriate work-focused support for such people to help them into work. We are not expecting all of them to be ready for work when they move across. As you said in the session on welfare reform, the people concerned have been on benefit for a long time. They face many obstacles and multiple barriers, particularly around mental health. We did some research on how those people's characteristics are different from those of our current set of clients and the changes that we would need to make in order to support them.

As I said, we have been working very closely with the SSA. I have been part of its project, and it has been part of ours. The SSA started its process in February, when it sent out the first set of letters to the clients who were being reassessed. It has gone through that whole process. We started our service to the clients this month. That allowed for the migration period, when the SSA was working with the people concerned, sending them out letters of assessment, giving them time to appeal, and so on. We did not expect clients to come across to us until this month.

If clients who are reassessed are found to be fit for work, they will not be eligible for ESA. However, a claim to jobseeker's allowance will be open to them if they have an underlying entitlement to that benefit. If they are found to be capable of some work or some work-focused activity, they will be moved into the ESA support group, where they can get access to our support on a voluntary basis. If they are found to have a limited capacity for work, they will be moved to the work-related activity group. Those people will be required to come across, and we will provide them with support. That will be a condition of their benefit.

As a standard of service, we will provide clients with three work-focused interviews. As I say, we are not expecting all of them to be ready for work when they come across, because they will have been out of the workplace for such a long time; and, as you say, some of them might come from households in which there is generational unemployment. We need to try to make those people more employable. We acknowledge that there is not the same number of jobs that there was in the past number of years. However, employment will take an upturn at some stage, and we need to ensure that those people can compete just as well as all of the other unemployed clients.

As far as numbers are concerned, the SSA is going to reassess 76,000 people over a three-year period. That will take into account the people who will not be in the system during that period, namely those who leave because they have gone to another benefit or into work, and those who, unfortunately, die during that period.

I know that you asked some questions earlier about the numbers of people that we expect to come across to us. At this stage, we can work only on estimates of what will happen by the end of the three-year period. We estimate that we will be working with about 36,000 to 39,000 clients who will come into what we are calling the work-related activity group. In addition,

approximately 7,500 clients will claim jobseeker's allowance and will come into the normal jobseeker's allowance regime, because they will have been found fit for work.

As I mentioned at the start, we are very conscious that this group of people will comprise a different category of client and will have different issues. We have an in-house occupational psychology service, and we asked them to do some research for us. We also did some research with our personal advisers, who are already working with people who claim ESA, albeit that those people have recent work records, although they could have been unemployed or economically inactive for about two years. We found out the characteristics of those people that were different to those claiming jobseeker's allowance, and we looked at our provision and made some changes to it to take that into account.

Colum mentioned the new Work Connect programme, which is being introduced specifically for people with more difficult health barriers. We have also extended our Condition Management programme, which was previously open only to ESA clients. Some IB clients who have been found fit for work will now move across to that, and they will claim jobseeker's allowance. They will not have worked for a long time, they will have low confidence, low morale and some underlying health conditions, and the Condition Management programme will help them to identify the issues and how to manage their health conditions in the work environment. Therefore, we have extended that and opened it to IB clients who migrate across to claim jobseeker's allowance.

As mentioned in the session on welfare reform, we already have a Steps to Work Programme, which provides a wide range of flexible support that can be tailored to each individual's needs. The plan is developed around an individual's needs and obstacles to work and is delivered to them on that basis.

We also have a disability employment service, which offers programmes to provide adaptation to premises, support to get to work, job introduction programmes and trials that give disabled people an opportunity to get work experience. Therefore, there is extensive support available to them, as well as essential skills training and qualifications.

We are conscious that more finance will be involved to deliver the service to those people. We made a bid in the June monitoring round and were successful in getting money to help us

towards the provision to assist them. We also made a bid to the SSA/DEL modernisation fund and have been successful in obtaining money from that as well to increase the service on the front line from our personal advisers. We are in the process of putting people in place, albeit that numbers are very small at this stage. However, by the time those clients have gone through the reassessment process and move over to our Department, they will get three mandatory work-focused interviews. We will also provide voluntary support beyond those three mandatory interviews if clients want that.

The Minister approved the business case for our programme in June 2011, and the preferred model was for in-house delivery. We looked at options for delivery outside the Department, part in-house, part outside, as well as looking at the programme in GB, and we have taken into account what our counterparts have been doing in the single work programme in GB. We have tried to maintain parity with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) in policy, where it is appropriate for Northern Ireland, but, unfortunately, we cannot maintain parity of process because of its access to the work programme and its AME/DEL agreement with Treasury where outcome is based on savings from benefit for those who are placed in employment. We do not have access to that, although we have had some success with our bidding this year, which I am delighted about.

The SSA's work will be completed over three years. Some clients will still come into our Department beyond that three-year period because of the processing time involved. Our service went live to clients in the work-related activity group on 5 September, and we launched that with the Minister. We have had clients moving to jobseeker's allowance from July, but we have only 20 so far, so it is really quite a small number. We have a major communications plan to try to make sure that it is communicated well. We have been joined at the hip with the SSA in joint presentations to community representative groups, to voluntary sectors, advice groups and constituency offices. We held an event yesterday for MPs and MLAs to come along and hear what was happening on that.

The Chairperson:

What was the event yesterday?

Mr C Boyle:

It was a DSD-hosted event. Minister McCausland spoke about the changed customer pathway to

get ESA and how the migration was being operated. Not many attended.

The Chairperson:

I can tell you why we were not there.

Mr P Ramsey:

I found out about it by text at 4.15 pm. I do not know what time it started, but that was the first notice that I had. I would have liked to have been there, but perhaps we can do something else on that.

You said that 76,000 people are receiving IB. How many are there in each constituency? You also talked about the possibility of that figure falling to about 36,000 and the possibility of additional finances. At present, how many DEL staff are involved in the preparation of training programmes for the clients coming through; I am talking about people such as advisers? How many new advisers do you expect to bring in to meet the demands of those additional 36,000 people?

Mr C Boyle:

Our policy branches are involved in the preparation of those programmes. I will write to you and confirm the number. I do not have the specific number with me. In terms of the additional numbers for —

Ms McNeill:

We have 19 advisers up to December and we will be putting in a further 18 by next March. I have yet to get approval for those 18. We will require another 20 in the following two years, and then it will start to drop again once the migration period is complete.

The Chairperson:

Will those recruits be people who are working in the system but in a different department?

Ms McNeill:

It will be a mixture of both. We started by putting out a call for interest from current staff who are working part-time hours, to identify those interested in increasing their hours. We have had quite a good response. We are putting out another call today for those who just need a little more

encouragement. Beyond that, our personnel unit will look at whether there are surplus people in our Department and others.

Mr C Boyle:

People will be coming in from other Departments. Given the nature of the clients, we will want to allocate our more experienced people to those roles and put the new staff into roles that are, maybe, a wee bit more settled.

The Chairperson:

I understand.

Mr P Ramsey:

The letter of 9 September refers to:

“new provision/support for those with more complex health issues”
and “improved linkages/access to” such provision. I am keen to see where that will start. What new provision are you going to provide? What will that entail? That question may be for later.

Mr C Boyle:

OK.

The Chairperson:

I have a few questions. Colum, the whole issue is still fairly complicated.

I am aware that there has been some consultation with constituency staff. Have any of the Committee members’ constituency staff been involved in this?

Mrs Overend:

I went to one of the meetings and asked them about the breakdown and they e-mailed me. I just had a look and they e-mailed the figures by social security office, so I can forward that to you. It was useful. However, I forgot about the event yesterday; I did get notice of it.

The Chairperson:

What is the officials experience of their interaction with staff in constituencies?

Ms McNeill:

We did a joint presentation across six to eight meetings. All staff were invited to come along. It was an open presentation on the —

The Chairperson:

How many attended?

Ms McNeill:

Some were attended by six, others by 10.

The Chairperson:

It strikes me that you have been clear about the sensitivities around people with long-term issues. However, I suspect that there will be quite a reaction to this when people who have been receiving benefit for a considerable time no longer do so. You have not really got into that yet, you have only just started the process: is that right?

Ms McNeill:

The SSA has put a customer advice and support team (CAST) in place. They ring people and advise them of the decision and the options, including whether the decision can be appealed if the person thinks that certain factors have not been taken onboard, if there is a new medical condition, or if the person thinks that the decision was not fair. We provide input to the advice given to clients to ensure that they are aware that, if they are found to be fit for work, they must undertake the activities with us to improve their employability and help them to get back into work where possible, even if underlying health conditions remain.

The Chairperson:

I am not sure whether I am right, but it is in the back of my mind that people who are registered disabled have more difficulty finding employment in Northern Ireland than in other places. I think that I am right in saying that.

Mr C Boyle:

That was in some of the evaluation reports.

The Chairperson:

What steps are you going to take to deal with that, particularly in the public sector?

Mr C Boyle:

That is an interesting question. If you were to ask the disability organisations, they would say that the public sector is not doing enough. The challenge for us is to try to get employers, including the Civil Service, to think in a much more mainstream way. Up to now, it has been more about compliance. The drive to think about disability programmes in relation to job outcomes is relatively new in Northern Ireland. It has been a bit soft up to now. We are genuinely trying to push it on, which may be done through trying to pull a bit harder on the issue of corporate social responsibility and making employers step up. However, they will say to us that that is fine but that the difficulty lies in the high unemployment level among other people. In some senses, we are trying to do this at the worst possible time. Therefore, I do not think that there is a quick fix. It will take a bit of time. We need to keep the drip of water on the stone and keep at it.

The Chairperson:

Forgive me if I do not get the detail right, but it seems unfair to take people, for all the right reasons, tell them that there is work that they can do, put them on jobseeker's allowance, and then there are no jobs for them. Rightly or wrongly, all other things being equal, in a difficult employment situation, people with disabilities have more difficulty getting employment than other folk. We need an intervention to tackle that issue.

Mr C Boyle:

Things such as Workable are trying seriously to cut a road into that issue by providing good placement and experience opportunities for clients with a disability. I am trying to convert those opportunities into jobs. We had a graduation event here yesterday for the graduate acceleration programme, and 50% of graduates found their way into employment off the back of placements. If we were to get half of that figure for disabled clients, that would be something else. However, our figures will be much lower. Even in GB, where there is much better economic opportunity, the figures are much lower. A lot of realism is needed, but I want to ensure that we focus on the job outcome targets and make them realistic and stretching enough so that we can push this on.

The Chairperson:

I have already commented on the gap issue. I did not make it to yesterday's meeting, but I have recruited one of those people myself. I think that getting in people with learning or other disabilities to see what they can do is a really good thing and can lead to work. However, as regards taking the lead, the public sector dominates our economy and should make provision for those people. We need to be a bit more proactive. I would be interested to know the level of employment for people with a disability in the Department for Employment and Learning, for example.

Mr C Boyle:

I do not know the answer to that.

The Chairperson:

There are issues on which we need to lead by example. We all live in the real world, and we know that there are people with long-term disabilities who are reluctant to move over. However, we have to find a way of giving those who are least able to compete in this world every advantage possible. They can and do make a contribution to society. I would be interested in finding out what we might do in that area. Colum, I understand that you are trying to stretch the targets, but I think that there is another step forward; you have to put pressure on our colleagues.

Mr C Boyle:

We need to explore that.

The Chairperson:

You might look at that. Similarly, when we were talking about other issues earlier, you were kind enough to talk to us about bite-size chunks. That is something that you will need to work out when communicating with the Committee. The trouble with meetings and consultations is that it is more in the absence than in the going that one realises that they were good meetings. You need to find a way of getting people to those events. You may need to think again about how to communicate with constituency staff and MLAs and ensure that we are invited to all the appropriate events.

Mr C Boyle:

May I ask about the level of awareness of our MLAs about the likes of our disability

programmes?

The Chairperson:

Perhaps it is just me, but you may find that people's knowledge, even among those who are genuinely interested, is relatively scant. I am not trying to embarrass anyone, but I would not have known about quite a lot of things.

Ms McNeill:

Can I add some information about the new work programme? The money available for people with disabilities is higher than for those with no disabilities. In addition, we have the Step Ahead employability programme for those who are long-term unemployed and who may have disabilities and mental health issues. It provides work placements in the community and voluntary sector to give people work experience and improve their CV.

The Chairperson:

It would be useful to have a briefing paper on that issue. I will make a general observation; if we get too much information at once, we miss the significance of things. I would rather take the disability issue and have a briefing, after which we can ask questions, and you can point to other issues and say that you will come back to us to discuss them. You may just take it on board that you are dealing with a simple soul here. Fortunately, I have my colleagues to keep me right. It would be useful to talk to the Committee Clerk about when we could get the briefing paper and how we can go through the specific issues. Thank you both very much.

Mr P Ramsey:

Would it be possible to visit places where the concept is being operated in our constituencies? I do not mean for the Committee to go as a group; I could go to the Foyle social security office, meet someone and find out what you are doing.

Mr C Boyle:

There are ways to do that.

The Chairperson:

Please just have a think about it. Thank you.