



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE
FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Disability Employment Service

19 October 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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FOR EMPLOYMENT
AND LEARNING**

Disability Employment Service: Departmental Briefing

19 October 2011

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen
Mrs Sandra Overend
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Colum Boyle) Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Terry Parke)

The Chairperson:

It is good to see the departmental officials Colum and Terry here. I apologise for the fact that we are running a wee bit behind schedule. We started late. Hopefully, you will be able to enlighten us in the time that we have. Over to you.

Mr Colum Boyle (Department for Employment and Learning):

We can shorten this to whatever length you want it to be.

The Chairperson:

To be as precise as we can, we have a thing that starts at noon.

Mr C Boyle:

We will rattle through our presentation in around five or 10 minutes and then take questions. Is that OK?

The Chairperson:

OK.

Mr C Boyle:

By way of introduction, thank you for having us here to deliver this briefing about the Disability Employment Service (DES) and what we in it are trying to do to increase employment opportunities for the disabled. I also apologise to the Committee for the delay in submitting our paper on Parkanaur College, which is currently with our Minister for his consideration.

We will walk you through this paper quickly. We suggested doing this for the Committee because the whole area of employment for the disabled is a complex. There are different types of disability and different types of support. There is a continuum of available support, and different types of funding go into that when it comes to the support that we provide. In addition, we invite the Committee to visit some of the organisations that we work with. I know that members have already been to Parkanaur, but it would be good to visit some of the other organisations to see some of the innovative stuff being done across the disability spectrum. We would be delighted if you could do that.

I will hand across to Terry, and we are happy to take questions once we have finished the briefing.

Mr Terry Parke (Department for Employment and Learning):

Thank you for the opportunity to talk through the main functions and objectives of the Disability Employment Service. Fundamentally, it is quite simple: our organisation's objective is to support as many people with health and disability-related barriers to progress towards and move into employment. With that as our organisational responsibility, my individual responsibility is to work with others — internal and external partners — to make decisions and try to achieve that

objective of moving people towards and into employment as much as we can. In the current context, that work is done within the human and financial resources that are at our disposal. However, we do it through the normal course of public service.

For example, we do it through people, services and provision.

In my unit, we have a combination of specialists and non-specialists. We have a team of occupational psychologists and a team of specialist disability public servants who have been working in this field for a long time, many of whom have made it their vocation during their career with the Civil Service. We also have programme management teams, which work directly with the external providers, and we have a very important finance function to manage our substantive budget. Through the jobs and benefits network, we have specially trained team leaders and employment advisers. That gives us a geographical spread.

We have a range of disability employment programmes, some of which are delivered by our specialist teams, but many of which are delivered by external providers. They are people who are steeped in disability issues, particularly disability employment. That goes from some of the major national organisations, such as the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), what was the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID) and Mencap, through to some of the more regional organisations, such as Disability Action, Ulster Supported Employment Limited (USEL), Action Mental Health, and some of the brilliant local community organisations, such as the NOW Project, Stepping Stones in Lisburn and Orchardville in east Belfast. There is also Parkanaur College, which you recently visited. It provides a specific and tailored service to people with more profound disabilities.

Our remit is to try to provide a full range of services on a pan-disability basis that meets the needs of those people, no matter where they are on the employability continuum. We recognise that some people with disabilities are very far removed from walking into a job. Equally, there are people who, on the face of it, have quite severe disabilities, but are job ready. It is about us tailoring our service and support to all those individual clients.

In the paper, I split the services into pre-employment provision, transition into employment and in-work support. We realise that our job does not stop when we move people into a job. Too often, people are moved into a job and, if the support does not continue, the employment is hard to sustain. They do not have the support mechanism to help them bed into what is a new

environment for them.

The staff members in the Disability Employment Service are very passionate about what they do. Many of them have spent the vast majority of their careers in this field. I joined just over two years ago. The benefits of the work are particularly obvious when you go out to see the good work that is happening on the ground and see some of the disabled clients who have moved into work. They have moved from being in a very supportive environment into totally unsupported employment, and they have become one of the normal workforce. In fact, some of them are the stars of their organisation. When you see that, it is not hard to see why people build up such a passion for this type of work.

We are facing a very challenging situation. Jobseekers without health-related barriers to work are finding it very difficult; those with a disability find it even more difficult. It is up to us to help those clients and, in particular, the employers to see the benefits of employing people with disabilities and to see that the Department can offer them support.

Mr C Boyle:

There are also some of the flagship support programmes, such as Workable (NI) and Access to Work (NI). Those are the sorts of things that we want you to see in action. We can sit here as officials and tell you about them, but, when you come out and see some of the provision in practice, you will get a flavour of the excellent work that is done and how well the funding that is put into this is used to try to get people into employment and keep them there.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you for coming to speak to the Committee. We were out at Parkanaur, and we saw the benefits that it offers. We got a taste of what it is like for people with disabilities. It is a testimony to the facility that it gets people into independent living and that type of thing. It shows what can be done for people with severe disabilities and how to get them into employment. What level of follow-up is available for the people who get into employment?

(The Chairperson [Mr B McCrea] in the Chair)

Mr Parke:

Two of our flagship programmes are work support programmes. One of those is called Access to

Work (NI), and 650 people who are currently in work are supported through that programme. Those clients have a specific Access to Work (NI) adviser from our own unit who keeps in contact with them on a regular basis and liaises with their employers about any change to their needs.

The other programme that we provide is called Workable (NI). A total of 350 people are currently employed under that programme, and it is delivered through the specialist disability organisations that I talked about. All the participants have a personal development plan, which is not just about keeping them in work, but about ensuring that they avail themselves of the opportunities in work along the same lines as their colleagues. Those participants sit down with their employment support worker from one of those specialist organisations on a quarterly basis, at the very least. However, quite often, and depending on the nature of their disability and employment, that contact could be as regular as every week. So, there is a lot of follow-up. On average, that support lasts for five years, but it can go on indefinitely under that programme.

Mr C Boyle:

Our aim is to support intensively to begin with. Depending on the particular needs of an individual, we then try to draw that back, so that, if possible, they end up working independently.

The Chairperson:

I have three specific questions that came from our visit to Parkanaur College. Staff in the college are concerned that the number of students there is dropping, because those who are responsible for recruiting them are telling potential students things like it is too expensive and that it is their last resort. There seems to be a requirement to reinstate active student recruitment. It is an excellent facility, which is underutilised, and if there is a costing issue, we need to work out how we can deal with that.

Secondly, the Minister said — I think in the House — that, if a case could be made for people who wanted to go to Parkanaur College, he would increase the numbers back to 15. I want to make sure, on the record, that that is also the Department's view.

Thirdly, there was an issue about the course duration at the college. That was reduced from three years to two years, and that has caused certain problems.

Finally, it was originally envisaged that Parkanaur College would help people into employment. However, the nature of the young people who are coming to the college has changed slightly, and those who now attend perhaps have more severe issues. I am keen to find some interim step to get people of that age into employment, and, although I want to help those with severe difficulties, I do not want to lose sight of the fact that we really want to get people into employment.

Mr C Boyle:

I will deal with some of those issues and Terry can deal one of them. When you were out of the room, you missed my apology for the delay in getting the briefing to you on Parkanaur College.

The Chairperson:

I was aware of that; that is fine Colum.

Mr C Boyle:

One of the reasons for that was that we wanted to weave the additional reports that were requested at the last meeting into that briefing. There is some very important information in those reports. The costs that are associated with Parkanaur College are one issue, but the real issue is about choice and about us putting in place tailored provision to meet the needs of those with disabilities. It is for those individuals to choose where they want to go to get the help that they need.

We have a range of providers. We understand and value what Parkanaur College does. There is a role for that college and we will help it in whatever way we can. However, the college also has a role to play in marketing itself and in understanding what its unique selling point is.

One of the points that Terry covered was about the spectrum of providers at the different points in clients' journeys from where they are with their disability at the beginning, and the support that we give them, to getting them into employment. The employment figures for Parkanaur College over the past two or three years are non-existent; people are not getting jobs.

The Chairperson:

There is obviously a mismatch. We were told that the figure for employment was about 50%, and that was on the record at our meeting.

Mr C Boyle:

That is not our understanding.

The Chairperson:

There is a matter of fact that can be established. The fact that you do not have your briefing with you is, perhaps, fortuitous, because it will give me more time to talk about it at another level.

Colum, for what it is worth, I have been impressed by you and your contribution in the past, so I will speak directly to you now. There is a failure in our society to provide employment for people with a disability. We are not doing enough in the public sector or the Civil Service. We need to do something. A one-size-fits-all approach, in which those people are all sent to the further education colleges, does not work. There are some people for whom that is OK and who, with the appropriate amount of support, can go and do it. However, others need a different way. Sometimes, people do not know what is available or even what they need. We have to be a little bit more proactive on this issue.

For the record, I have just absolutely trashed the Department of Justice's attempt to look at disability provision and returned it for further consideration. I have never seen a more atrocious piece of work. It had a tick-box mentality that does not help these people who have a genuine contribution to make to our society. We, as a government body, have to try to address this issue. I know that you are on the same page, and we would like to assist. I think that I speak for the Committee when I say that our initial impression is that Parkanaur has a contribution to make and that people are frustrated that that is not being recognised.

Mr McElduff:

Tom Buchanan said that testimonies were made about how valuable Parkanaur was to people and how it was tailored to their individual needs. I think it was two or three people. There is a general feeling that there are at least 15 people in this region who need to be placed in Parkanaur and who probably are, or will be, misplaced.

Mr C Boyle:

We are very positive about Parkanaur. Parkanaur has a niche role here compared with all the other providers, and that is what the Minister's briefing will state. We want to optimise

Parkanaur's niche role. That is not happening, and it has not happened for some time.

I accept your point about organisations, in both the public and private sectors, stepping up to the plate on disability; we are also of that view. We are both passionate about trying to do something on this issue.

You are correct about the 15 places, and the Minister is willing to fund up to 15 places. Funding has been based on the level of demand. The level of demand and the customer choice is there, and that can be primed. The Minister will go to 15 places by all means; there is no question about that.

The Chairperson:

We are a wee bit pushed for time. Would any other members like to say something briefly?

Mr Douglas:

Colum and Terry, thanks very much for your presentation. Last year, we had the leader of the New York City Council here. She met a lot of people, but, when she went away, she raved about being at Orchardville, where she got lunch. That organisation is developing the social economy model. Colum, going back to what the Chairman said about the public sector: are there opportunities for social economy initiatives up in the Stormont estate? Orchardville has worked with a number of other organisations in Belfast to look at social economy ideas. Secondly, what is the extent of placements for people with disabilities in the Assembly and the Stormont estate? Has any work ever been done on that?

Mr C Boyle:

I do not know whether any work has been done on that. We would need to go back and check on that. There is an issue, as the Chair said, that the public sector is not doing enough. That is one of the issues that we will take forward in trying to activate a lot more of that work. We know how to go about doing that. It will be interesting to see what kind of response we get right across the public sector.

I have been very impressed by Orchardville and other organisations that are engaging in the social economy model. The mileage of that for the Stormont estate is a very specific question. We have not thought that one through, but we will come back to you.

Mr Parke:

I met Margaret Haddock and Alan Thomson from Orchardville. I have one-to-one engagement with some of the key players — Orchardville is one of those — with a view to the strategic look ahead. The social economy is a proven tool that not only provides opportunities but helps those organisations to invest in themselves going forward.

The Chairperson:

We are pressed for time. A date is coming up in the diary that I think would be of interest to you. What is the date?

The Committee Clerk:

It is 29 November.

The Chairperson:

On 29 November, we have young people coming from —

The Committee Clerk:

Orchardville, NOW and Stepping Stones.

The Chairperson:

They are coming up to Stormont. They will prepare some food, like in the celebrity cooking shows. Some are also coming up a bit earlier to have a look at the jobs around security, scanning and various issues. The Committee will get the details, but you are all front and centre in being tasters and doing this, that and the other. It will be a good day. I am putting the offer out to you, because it may be an opportunity for you to engage with the Assembly. We will invite you to be a part of that.

Mr C Boyle:

That will be good. Thank you.

The Chairperson:

I am being quite passionate, but I am not having a go at either of you two. We need to do more, and not for just people with learning disabilities but for people with physical disabilities. We

sometimes wander around and do not deal with everybody. We have got to go and look at those things, and the public sector should be able to make reasonable adjustments for employment for those people who have a contribution to make. So, the opportunity is there, and you can engage with the Committee Clerk to see how best to maximise it. That would be a good thing.

Is everybody else content? Thank you very much.