



Department for Social Development –draft Budget 2010 Mencap comments (draft)

1.0 About Mencap and learning disability

Mencap is a voluntary organisation with over 60 years experience in representing the views and interests of people with a learning disability and their families. We provide a range of services, including housing with support and information and advice; support a membership network of local groups and Clubs which are largely organised and run by volunteers; and we campaign for an end to the exclusion, prejudice and discrimination experienced by people with a learning disability.

Learning disability is a lifelong disability which affects around 2% of the population – over 33,000 people in Northern Ireland. People with a learning disability are likely to experience significant difficulties in understanding, communicating and learning new things. A learning disability can be mild, moderate or severe. Some people with a mild learning disability will only need a bit of support with everyday tasks, others, such as those with profound and multiple learning disabilities will need extensive support with every aspect of their life. Whilst research indicates that there is a link between higher prevalence of mild or moderate learning disability and areas of deprivation, the link with severe learning disability is less clear cut.

2.0 Circumstances and needs of people with a learning disability

Less than 1 in 5 people with a learning disability work. Research carried out at the time of the Bamford Review indicated that over half of families caring for a person with a learning disability are reliant on benefits as their main source of income and a further 6% were rated as having an income of less than £12, 000 per annum. Of the remaining 40%, only 6% were rated to have an income in excess of £24, 000. It is estimated that it costs three times as much to bring up a child with a disability compared to bringing up a non-disabled child and 1 in 2 families caring for disabled children live in poverty¹.

Most people with a learning disability (66%) live in the family home, many with carers who are aged 65+ and 256 individuals continue to live in a hospital because alternative community based accommodation and support is not available. Few adults with a learning disability have a choice about where they live or who they live with. Few people with a learning disability are registered as being in need of housing and the Housing Selection Scheme fails to take account of their distinct needs and circumstances².

¹ Bamford Review 2004, UJJ, Audit of Learning Disability in Northern Ireland. Roy McConkey, Eamonn Slevin, Owen Barr with Laurence Taggart and Margaret Sowney; Bamford Review 2005 Equal Lives, DHSSPS.

² The Bamford Review stated in 2005 that up to 1600 people with a learning disability would need alternative accommodation and/or support arrangements within 5 -10 years; that an increase of 700

People with a learning disability face many barriers to becoming involved in the life of their local community, including the lack of accessible public transport, the absence of accessible information and support, as well as the attitudes of others about their ability to take part and be included. Many people with a learning disability rely on services and support which is provided outside their local community. Many people with a learning disability also rely on specialist groups and Clubs for the opportunity to meet up with friends, enjoy sports or leisure activities outside a day centre or special school and develop skills and experience in speaking out on issues that matter to them. Families caring for a person with a learning disability are more likely to be part of disability specific groups rather than members of local community groups.

3.0 Comments

Mencap welcomes the commitment of the Minister and Department to protecting vulnerable groups and frontline functions. We acknowledge the challenges facing the Department and believe that new ways of working across Departments and sectors are required if we are to respond effectively to the economic context and the increasing numbers of people with a learning disability who need support and more accessible services. We believe that active steps must be taken to ensure that children, young people and adults with a learning disability are not disproportionately and adversely impacted upon by the Department's spending plans and that specific initiatives are identified to address the inequalities they currently face in finding out about and accessing frontline services.

We agree that much more needs to be done by the Northern Ireland Executive to protect those in need and ensure that they do not have to bear the burden of public spending cuts.

3.1 Commitment to Bamford Review: supported housing

The Bamford Review drew attention to the myriad ways in which people with a learning disability experience social exclusion and made a number of recommendations across government departments if they were to enjoy equal lives.

Mencap supports and welcomes the Department's commitment to Supporting People, to new build housing and to the Disabled Facilities Grant. We particularly welcome the decision to allocate specific funding to Bamford in capital and revenue budgets. Supporting People has been an important factor in developing more opportunities and increasing the availability of supported living services for people with a learning disability.

We believe that to delay or halt any progress that has been made in implementing Bamford would not only be a devastating blow to the 26,500 people with a learning disability and their families in Northern Ireland but lead to a significant increase in their isolation, segregation and exclusion and result in more intensive and costly interventions in the longer term.

places in Northern Ireland would bring the overall ratio of provision to the minimum suggested for England.

3.2 Welfare Reform

Mencap welcomes the Minister's determination to highlight the distinct circumstances of people living in Northern Ireland regarding welfare reform, including the impact of removal of the mobility component of DLA on people living in residential accommodation.

Mencap recognises that there are many problems associated with the complexities of the benefits system and the in-built disincentives within the benefits system, including the earnings disregard amount and steep benefit tapers, as well as the associated 'risks' of coming off the security of benefits and moving into employment. We know that many people with a learning disability would like to work and we therefore welcome the focus on 'making work pay' and the principle of improving and simplifying the welfare system. We are extremely concerned, however, that the barriers faced by people with a learning disability in finding and keeping a job have not been addressed in the Coalition government's proposals.

We are concerned, too, about the effects of other areas of welfare reform that we believe are likely to adversely impact on people with a learning disability. These include benefit cuts, such as DLA and Housing benefit after one year on JSA, a lack of appropriate support to find work, issues with the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) and the sanctions associated with non-compliance. We are also concerned about the proposal to replace housing benefit with Universal Credit and believe that the Universal Credit model needs to allow for local and regional rental cost differences when it comes to Housing Benefit payments and recognise that disabled people may have additional housing costs associated with their disability, such as the need for more space or living close to parents. We welcome the announcement of the review of the Support for Mortgage Interest rules in the context of the Universal Credit and would like to see changes made that ensure that people with a learning disability can access home ownership. While we welcome the commitment that "an appropriate amount will be added to the Universal Credit award to help meet the cost of rent and mortgage interest" we would question whether the current support provided is appropriate.

3.3 Housing Executive reductions

Mencap acknowledges the attempts by the Department to protect frontline services. We urge the Department, however, to monitor the impact of reductions in the maintenance programme on the quality and accessibility of housing stock and proposals for savings in the IT, advertisement and survey budgets on excluded groups who currently do not enjoy equal access to or benefit from such services.

3.4 Social Security Agency

Mencap recognises the Department's desire to modernise the delivery of SSA services. We urge the Department to ensure that this approach takes account of the need for targeted initiatives to ensure that people who experience communication or understanding difficulties can continue to access the face to face support they need. In addition, we urge the Department to ensure that the proposed savings do not impact on initiatives which improve accessibility, understanding of learning disability or compliance with disability equality and anti-discrimination legislation.

3.5 Urban regeneration, community development, advice services

Mencap supports the commitment to the role of the voluntary and community sectors and to protecting frontline funded programmes. We recognise the importance of working across sectors and agencies and are willing to work in partnership with others. We draw attention to the exclusion and isolation of people with a learning disability from the opportunities and activities available, including volunteering and being able to participate and contribute to their local community. We urge the Department to ensure that people with a learning disability enjoy equal access to and benefit from such programmes. We welcome the commitments on funding Housing Rights Service and Supporting Communities.

The Bamford Review highlighted the difficulties that people with a learning disability and their families face when trying to get the information and support they need to make decisions in all aspects of their life. We believe that a targeted, tailored approach is required to reach people with a learning disability, provide information in an accessible way and ensure they are aware of the benefits and services they are entitled to. We believe that much more needs to be done by the Department to recognise and address the barriers faced by people with a learning disability and their family carers.

3.6 Equality impact assessment

Mencap recognises the difficult choices and challenges faced by the Department. We welcome the commitment to direct budget cuts away from frontline services. We believe, however, that the Department must do more to ensure that its decisions promote equality of opportunity as well as avoid discrimination. People with a learning disability and their family carers will be adversely impacted upon by the Department's proposals if active steps aren't taken to address the inequalities and barriers they currently face in accessing or benefiting from the functions funded or provided by the Department. Targeted initiatives and programmes are required to ensure people with a learning disability do enjoy equal lives and the same opportunities and services others take for granted.

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