



## Mencap NI Response to Department of Finance Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-20

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### **1.0 Introduction**

#### **1.1 What is a learning disability?**

A learning disability is 'a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities. For example, household tasks, socialising or managing money, which affects someone for their whole life. The level of support someone needs depends on the individual person and the extent of their learning disability. With the right support, most people with a learning disability in the UK can lead independent lives.'<sup>1</sup>

In the UK, 2.16% of adults are believed to have a learning disability. In Northern Ireland there are an estimated 42,000 people with a learning disability, including 31,000 adults.<sup>2</sup>

#### **1.2 About Mencap**

Mencap is the leading voice of learning disability in the UK. Everything we do is about valuing and supporting people with a learning disability, their families and carers. Our vision is a world where people with a learning disability are valued equally, listened to and included.

Each year in Northern Ireland we work with up to 1,500 children, young people and adults and families, including around 400 young people via our Employment and Personal Development services.

Mencap NI welcomes this opportunity to highlight concerns that reductions and removal of funding or cuts to vital services, many of which are already under pressure, will lead to further marginalisation and impact on the life chances of people with a learning disability .

### **2.0 Resource Scenarios**

#### **2.1 Department for Agriculture, Environment and RURAL AFFAIRS (DAERA)**

In all three DAERA scenarios there is the proposed cessation of Rural Affairs Programme. If implemented this will result in the removal of all funding support to The Rural Community Development Support Service (RCDSS) and will detrimentally impact the majority of local rural Community development in tackling rural poverty and social isolation within rural communities. Mencap NI believe the proposed cessation of the Rural Affairs Programme would prevent DAERA from fulfilling their strategic aims and would be scrutinised within the rural proofing aspect of an EQIA.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/what-learning-disability>

<sup>2</sup> These approximate figures have been calculated using learning disability prevalence rates from Public Health England (2016) and population data from the Office for National Statistics (2017)

## **2.2 Department for Communities**

Young people with a learning disability are more likely not to be in education, employment or training (NEET) by age 19. Mencap NI is therefore particularly concerned about the potential impact of Scenario 3 if, as indicated, the Department would largely be constrained to mandatory statutory functions by 2019-20. This could potentially have remove European Social Fund (ESF) match funding and have a detrimental impact on the delivery of the Disability Employment Strategy; Workable NI programme; Volunteer Strategy and NEET's strategy.

In Northern Ireland, the European Social Fund (ESF) provides skills development, training and employment opportunities for young people most at risk of becoming NEET. It is likely that the UK's withdrawal from the EU will lead to the loss of vital European structural funding when the current round of funding ends in 2020, including ESF. It is therefore critical that a clear plan is put in place regarding future funding for interventions currently delivered through ESF following the UK's exit from the EU. Without this funding, the most vulnerable adults in society will struggle to find opportunities to support them into paid work and may result in higher benefit dependency.

## **2.3 Department for the Economy (DfE)**

Mencap NI is concerned that the DfE has indicated the potential cessation of skills programmes that offer entry level and Level 1 qualifications in all three scenarios. It is estimated that withdrawal from entry level and Level 1 provision will impact on almost one quarter (22%) of all regulated provision in FE Colleges, affecting around 15,000 young people.<sup>3</sup> Students who avail of these courses are some of the most vulnerable individuals in society. They include those with learning difficulties and learning disabilities, the economically inactive, and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).

We are also concerned that the focus on higher level courses (Level 2 / 3 and above) fails to recognise the distinct needs of people with a learning disability or the significant barriers they face when accessing FE provision. For some people with a learning disability, achieving a level 1 or progressing to a level 2 qualification will be a reflection of their optimum level of achievement and evidence of progression in learning. In our experience, the focus on provision at a level 2 and above has resulted in people with a learning disability experiencing disadvantage; and reduced the opportunities available to them to gain the skills and qualifications they need to enter and progress into work.

It is important to note that the draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2016-21 acknowledges the importance of reducing economic inactivity and creating accessible employment opportunities in creating a more equal society. However, one of the potential programmes being cut within this scenario, EmployAbility2, clearly aligns with the draft Programme for Government (PfG) (indicators 17, 32) and the Industrial strategy - by tackling disadvantage, reducing economic inactivity, increasing economic opportunities and helping some of those furthest away from work to enhance their skills.

Mencap NI is concerned that the absence of any provision for vulnerable young people, particularly those living in areas of social deprivation and with a learning disability, would prevent the Department from meeting its core strategic aims. Without alternative arrangements in place, the removal of these courses could significantly impact on young people's life chances. In our view, equitable access to further education opportunities is vital to ensure that they can fulfil their potential.

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<sup>3</sup> NI College Information System 2016-2017/ FE Bulletin Dec 2017

### **2.3 Department for Infrastructure (DfI)**

The DfI have highlighted within all three of their scenarios a potential reduction or fundamental change to the delivery of demand responsive services such as DATS, Dial-A-Lift and Shop Mobility. Mencap NI would like to highlight the difficulties experienced by people with a learning disability when using transport and the impact this scenario may cause.

Most people with a learning disability do not drive and will rely on public transport, Door-2-Door services, community transport or on others to provide transport to work, college, shops, doctors, social and fun activities etc. The majority of people with a learning disability do not have the opportunity to work and rely on benefits as their source of income. They also have extra costs because of their disability – paying for things like extra support to do the things they want and need.

The current system of obtaining the concessionary fares can cause difficulties, for example the requirement to be known to a social worker, and the inability to buy return or multiple tickets. The policy that smart passes are only valid within district council areas on community transport is very restrictive and affects a large number of people with a learning disability, their families and carers who need to cross council boundaries to access services. This results in many people with a learning disability staying at home and not having the choice to learn new skills or improve their current skills. They will not have the same opportunities as others in the community or the chance to live more independent lives.

Mencap NI would be concerned about the proposed changes to response services and reduction of rural services and the impact it would have on current or potential users of the service with a learning disability. While it is understandable that the Department has identified the need to tighten the criteria, the changes could disproportionately affect people with a learning disability.

### **3.0 Equality Impact**

Mencap NI recommends that the Department of Finance adopt a rights-based approach and would encourage a full EQIA assessment be carried out on any proposed changes and/or reductions made.

### **4.0 Conclusion**

We would like to thank the Department of Finance for providing us with an opportunity to respond to this important consultation on the Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-20. If you require further comment or information, please contact; Fiona Cole Campaigns and Policy Officer [fiona.cole@mencap.org.uk](mailto:fiona.cole@mencap.org.uk)

