

Anti-poverty strategy

Comments by Mencap in Northern Ireland

1.0 About Mencap

Mencap works with children, young people and adults with a learning disability and their families and carers throughout Northern Ireland. We provide a wide range of services, support a membership network of over 60 local groups and clubs and campaign for equal rights to choice, opportunity and respect for people with a learning disability. We believe that these rights should be available to everyone with a learning disability regardless of age or severity of disability. We also believe that support for carers is vital to achieving these rights.

2.0 About learning disability

It is estimated that about 2% of the population - over 33,000 people in Northern Ireland has a learning disability. Over 16,000 people with a learning disability are known to social services in Northern Ireland.

Equal Lives (draft), a report of the Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability stated that there is "clear evidence for a link between higher prevalence rates of mild/moderate learning disability and poorer socio-economic status and unstable family backgrounds." The report stated, too, that whilst the "link with SLD (severe learning disability) is less clear-cut ... recent research does suggest a link with socio-economic status".

The report also stated that there was a significant association between the indicators of socio-economic measures of deprivation and the prevalence of people with a learning disability and drew particular attention to research which suggested that there tends to be more people with a learning disability in wards that have:

- Higher proportions of people aged 16 to 74 with no educational qualifications
- Higher proportions of children in households with job seekers allowances
- Higher proportions of adults with a limiting long term illness.

The **Equal Lives** report also highlighted the fact that families who have a member with a learning disability may be poorer for other reasons.

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3.0 Measurements of poverty

Mencap is disappointed at the lack of figures relating to the levels of poverty experienced by people with a disability in the consultation document. We acknowledge the lack of research in this area in Northern Ireland and urge the Department to carry out or commission research which would help outline the true extent and impact of poverty amongst disabled children, young people, and adults with a disability. We draw particular attention to the conclusions of research that has been carried out by a number of social policy research bodies in England with respect to disabled children:

- One in two families with a disabled child are living in poverty or on the margin of poverty
- Disabled children cost three times as much to bring up compared with all children
- One in seven families with disabled children are living in debt
- Families with a severely disabled child spend on average £27 per week on debt repayments compared with £3 per week for all UK families
- Families with disabled children are four times more likely as all UK families to have debts in excess of £10,000
- Child care costs twice as much for parents of disabled children compared with parents of non-disabled children
- Seven out of 10 families with severely disabled children have an income below the UK mean income of £384
- Families with a severely disabled child spend on average an extra £26 on food compared with all UK families

4.0 Indicators of need

Mencap notes that in the allocation of mainstream budgets in health, education and economic development, account is taken of "objective indicators of need" and that regeneration initiatives in urban and rural areas are targeted at the most disadvantaged areas. Mencap believes, however, that these indicators are not reflective of, and are not sensitive to, the unique circumstances of people with a learning disability. We also believe that these indicators fail to capture the extent of poverty and exclusion experienced by this complex, small population.

5.0 Existing policies and programmes

Mencap notes that the programmes of some departments are aimed at targeting those most in need. The **Equal Lives** report, however, drew attention to the fact that people with a learning disability do not enjoy equality of access to or benefit from a number of mainstream programmes and initiatives. We believe that, in seeking a more "joined up approach" the government must ensure that small groups of people who can easily become invisible within neighbourhoods and communities, such as people with a learning disability, are not excluded from the benefits of any government initiatives, policies or programmes.

We also note the range of programmes and initiatives undertaken by the different departments in relation to New TSN. We believe, however, that much more work needs to be done to ensure that such programmes and initiatives take account of the distinct needs and circumstances of people with a learning disability so that they enjoy equality of access to and benefit from the initiatives and programmes identified.

We also believe that the government must ensure that recommendations identified through PSI groups are acted upon by all the departments identified in the PSI reports.

6.0 Setting targets and indicators

Mencap is extremely disappointed at the targets and indicators identified within the consultation document. We are also extremely disappointed at the limited sources of evidence referred to. We believe that the government needs to give more serious consideration to the targets and indicators that will capture the extent and impact of poverty on children and adults with a learning disability and their families.