

## Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

### SNAP Cymru Conference on 24 September 2004

#### Report from Jeff Cuthbert and Mark Isherwood

The theme of this Conference was "Partnerships and Rights". This was defined as making the voices heard and listening to those voices. It is about creating the conditions so that all people can lead fulfilling lives.

It is worth recording that the organisers and the participants appreciated the presence of two Assembly Members. It demonstrated to them that the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee took the work of SNAP seriously.

Also it was appreciated that Jane Davidson addressed the dinner that took place the evening before the Conference.

The daylong conference was addressed by a number of expert practitioners. These included:

- Dr Kevin Fitzpatrick – Commissioner for Wales, DRC
- Mr Huw Maguire – SEN Tribunal for Wales
- Ms Sue Willan – Estyn
- Mr Dewi Jones – Head Teacher, Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle, Gwynedd
- Ms Jane Morris – Governors Wales
- Ms Victoria Daines – Disability Rights Commission
- A number of children and young people with disabilities

But without doubt the most interesting, and perhaps valuable, presenters were the young people with disabilities. These young people described extremely well the situations that they faced constantly. They all had clear ideas about how their situations can be improved. Their contributions provoked more thought than anyone else's contribution.

This is not to suggest that the sessions addressed by the other contributors lacked value. On the contrary, all that we listened to made important comments about current practices and the need for better attitudes.

Rather than list the contributors and their contributions in order of their presentations we shall try to

present the bigger picture. Hopeful this will give the Members of the Committee a real flavour of the conference. Should anyone want to read a full set of the material presented to the Conference, this has been provided by SNAP and is with the Clerk.

## The Findings and Issues

We were asked to consider what we mean by equal opportunities for disabled pupils in education. Should the priority be qualifications or participation? Is there any conflict? Should we review the relevance of our qualification framework? These issues are referred to later.

Under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act (2002) (the DDA) schools are not required to provide auxiliary aids or services. Neither is there a requirement for the removal or alteration of physical features that might present difficulties for disabled pupils. There appears to be some confusion and overlap between the requirements of the DDA and the SEN Code of Practices. The DDA could become a tool to help overcome institutionalised discrimination in schools.

There is a need for a nation-wide programme of staff development about the DDA and related disability issues. We must do our best to ensure that sufficient resources are available for school building improvements.

Estyn have evidence that shows that schools are most successful when they train staff in effective ways of meeting SEN; make early links across phases; expect all staff to share responsibility for SEN; and, most importantly, have commitment and leadership from senior managers. However it is clear that better planning is needed in the use of learning support assistants.

Nevertheless pupils with SEN, by and large, do well in the education system. In both "mainstream" and "special" schools. However some LEAs have weaknesses in terms of communicating plans with schools; their monitoring and evaluation of services; and there are some long delays in providing support for pupils with SEN. Wales has a higher percentage than any other part of the UK of pupils with Statements. Three quarters of Statemented pupils in Wales are in mainstream schools. Some doubt was expressed about the continued relevance and effectiveness of the Statementing System. Although general support was expressed for mainstreaming pupils with SEN and replacing statementing with early intervention, it was felt that the necessary resource implication made this impractical for the foreseeable future.

It was argued that mainstreaming would require the full incorporation of therapy with teaching and learning via specialist SEN input.

It was welcomed that we had abolished league tables in Wales and the SATs for seven year olds. It was noted that testing for 11 and 14 year olds is under review. These steps, it was argued, helped to focus attention on the actual educational needs of disabled children.

It is acknowledged that many pupils with SEN face difficulties with some parts of the curriculum. In

some cases these problems can arise from the impact of trauma and disadvantage that may have been caused in early childhood. This shows the need for greater and earlier identification and intervention. Such early intervention would require a fully resourced safety net that would catch all young children with SEN so that an individual child centred programme might be agreed and implemented for each child.

Maybe the need for more vocational education and awards is greater for disabled pupils and particularly for those with a learning difficulty. Should we direct more resources towards those schemes that help prepare older pupils with learning difficulties for the world of work? Surely those pupils have as much right to expect employment as anyone else. And are we ignoring a potential source of useful labour by failing to give that support?

In terms of post 16 students with SEN, it is acknowledged that FE Colleges generally make good provision for transition planning into training and/or employment. But disabled students still face major barriers to paid employment. These barriers include transport, employers' attitudes, and benefits.

It is critically important that as students prepare to become adults that they have all reasonable assistance to lead independent lives.

Therefore we need to feel satisfied that the key players in the provision of vocational training, i.e. FE Colleges and Work Based Learning Providers, are not only providing skills training but are also providing opportunities for advice and guidance about independent living. This may be in partnership with a range of suitable organisations.

Put simply, we must promote the notion of independence and not "abandonment".

What the Young People have to say and what they want

"Please listen to what we have to say. We know best about what does, and does not, work for us."

This was the powerful message that came from the children and young people with disabilities that addressed the Conference and the workshops. They did not lack ideas and certainly had the ability to present their thoughts in a logical and coherent manner. To put it simply, they want the same choices in life that the rest of us take for granted.

They explained that they suffered many problems in terms of their education. This ranged from basic practical problems such as science tables being too high for them to work at, to more fundamental concerns such as overbearing (but well meaning) attitudes that caused teachers and carers to think that they needed constant supervision.

Example of some of the problems that they face includes;

- toilet and washroom facilities that demand assistance from able bodied people
- as mentioned above, science tables that are too high to be worked on thus causing some disabled pupils to lose interest in science
- installations that are very difficult to negotiate around if wheel chair bound
- playgrounds that are designed with able bodied pupils in mind only
- swing doors (that could be replaced with sliding doors)
- well meaning adults that think that because they are disabled, they are always at greater risk of doing themselves harm

The phrase "special educational needs" does not help. They pointed out that there is nothing "special" about their educational needs. They want the same education as everyone else. They want to be able to go on and lead useful and fulfilling lives. They need additional assistance to help them make full use of the education system and, in that sense, they have special needs.

During the workshop discussion I (i.e. Jeff Cuthbert) asked the children and young people making the presentations if they would be prepared to give evidence to our SEN Review directly. They accepted the offer readily. I have no doubt that the evidence that they can give us will be extremely interesting and valuable.

Because of the constraints of the Conference I was not able to develop the points with the children and young people to the extent that I would like. Therefore I believe strongly that the Committee should invite evidence from suitable groups of disabled children and young people. I suggest that this could include visits to schools for this specific purpose.

## In Conclusion

The experience was valuable. It gave us an additional insight into the needs and aspirations of disabled children and young people. The main message that I took back with me is that we need to listen more to those that are most affected. Hopefully this is what we will do.