

A Healthier Future

Comments by Mencap in Northern Ireland

4.0 About Mencap

- 1.0 Mencap is a voluntary organisation which works alongside people with a learning disability and their families and carers, representing their views and interests.
- 1.1 Mencap believes that everyone with a learning disability should have equality of opportunity, choice and respect. We believe that these rights should be available to everyone, young and old and whatever the nature or severity of their disability. We also believe that support for carers is vital to achieving these rights.
- 1.1 Mencap supports a membership network of over 60 local groups and provides a range of services to children, young people, men and women with a learning disability and their families.

4.0 About learning disability

- 1.1 It is estimated that about 2% of the population has a learning disability - about 33,000 people in Northern Ireland. As the draft Strategy indicates, over 16,000 people with a learning disability are in contact with Health and Social Services.
- 1.1 A number of research studies have confirmed that, even though people with a learning disability have poorer health than the rest of the population, little has been done to improve this situation. A recent report by Mencap, entitled **Treat me Right**, for example, stated that
 - people with a learning disability were much more likely to die before the age of 50 and that life expectancy is shortest for people who have the most support needs. In addition, the leading causes of death for people with a learning disability differ from those of the rest of the population.
 - people with a learning disability experience a greater variety, complexity and range of health problems than the rest of the population, such as epilepsy, dementia, schizophrenia, thyroid problems, osteoporosis, sight problems, hearing problems, poor dental health, underweight or overweight, mental health difficulties.

The report also drew attention to the impact of disadvantage, poverty and exclusion on the health of people with a learning disability and to their reliance on others for support to lead a healthy lifestyle - such as taking part in sports and leisure activities, and for the food that they eat.

- .1 People with a learning disability begin their service using career in birth or early childhood. They need services that are strong on identification and early intervention, which are family directed, which recognise the person and not just the disability, and which anticipate emerging needs and possibilities.
- .1 People with a learning disability and their families are likely to rely upon a range of health and social care services. Too often there is an over reliance on the willingness of carers' to care at home with little or no support.
- .1 Mencap supports the conclusions and recommendations outlined in the report of the Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability entitled **Equal Lives**. We urge the Department to adopt the recommendations and adequately resource their implementation.

4.0 General comments

- .1 Mencap acknowledges the challenge in drafting a Strategy that would reflect and respond to the changing health and social care needs and pressures in Northern Ireland. We believe that the drafters of the document should be congratulated on producing the Strategy.
- .1 We welcome, too, the attempt to reflect the wide range of health and social care responses that lie within the responsibility of the Department. We suggest, however, that this was more successful in the larger document and that the Executive Summary should be amended to reflect the range and extent of health and social care responses.
- .1 We are disappointed, however, that the draft Strategy did not address the fact that
 - people with a learning disability do not enjoy equality of access to services, .
 - people with a learning disability will need much more support if they are to benefit from the emphasis on encouraging individuals and communities to be responsible for their own health and lifestyle choices and decisions
 - some people with a learning disability may not be able to "take control of their own care and take an active role in promoting the improvement of their own health and well being and that of their communities". The Strategy must, we believe, ensure that everyone benefits from its impact
 - there will be an increase in the population of people with a learning disability, including more older people with a learning

disability and more people who have complex needs and are technology dependent

- .1 We welcome the fact that the draft Strategy recognises that there will be changes in the nature and makeup of the family, that there will be an "information divide" and that technology will impact on the range and ways in which health and social care is delivered.

We are extremely disappointed, however, that the Strategy did not identify how the Department was going to address these changes and their possible negative impact on some groups. The changing nature of the family, for example, is likely to impact on the number of carers able to continue caring for their son or daughter with a learning disability. In addition, the advances in technology and the increasing reliance the internet and telephone to provide information, support and the method of contact with health and social care services will, we believe, disadvantage people who have difficulties with communication, understanding and memory.

4.0 **Equal Lives**

- .1 Mencap congratulates the Department on including information from the current Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability in the draft Strategy. We also welcome the inclusion of the values and objectives within the section relating to people with a learning disability.

- .1 We urge the Department to ensure that the values and objectives from the **Equal Lives** report are not just confined to the section relating to people with a learning disability, but are included throughout and become an integral part of all sections of the Strategy.

- .1 We are extremely surprised and disappointed that the draft Strategy identified only one key outcome for people with a learning disability. We believe that this outcome does not reflect the extent or number of recommendations identified in the **Equal Lives** report. We believe that the decision to include only one key recommendation about the resettlement of people with a learning disability will not only disadvantage people with a learning disability but will exclude the majority of people with a learning disability who do not live in or use hospital services.

We urge the Department to include the recommendations outlined in the **Equal Lives** report.

- .1 We also urge the Department to ensure that the Strategy benefits from, and incorporates into, all aspects of the Strategy, information contained in the **Equal Lives** report about children and young people with a learning disability, men and women with a learning disability and older people with a learning disability. We also urge the Department to include within the Strategy the recommendations

outlined in **Equal Lives** relating to staff training and development and changes to the ways in which services are to be designed and delivered.