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Page last updated at 05:55 GMT, Wednesday, 7 October 2009 06:55 UK

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# Patient target missed 14 years on

**More than 250 patients with learning disabilities are still in hospital 14 years after the Department of Health said they should be in the community.**

In 1995, the department said that long-stay patients at three hospitals should be moved by 2002.

But a report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office has revealed that in March this year 256 were still in hospital.

The department now says it hopes to resettle the patients in the community by 2013.

The report by Northern Ireland Auditor General Kieran Donnelly focused on three hospitals for people with learning difficulties - Muckamore Abbey near Antrim, Longstone Hospital in Armagh and Lakeview Hospital in Londonderry.

It says that three-quarters of the patients had been there for 10 years or more while 10% had been there for 50 years or more.

In 2007, the BBC revealed that some patients were being kept in Muckamore Abbey 10 years after their treatment had been completed.

### Critical

The report is critical of how the department repeatedly missed its own targets for moving people to the community.

"While we accept that targets can be varied for a number of reasons, in our view the continual revision of time targets has hindered the momentum of the resettlement process," the report states.

The report details how the Department of Health and the health trusts blamed a lack of funding compared to England and Wales for the failure to provide alternative accommodation.

But it says that the money must be found if the department wants to meet the new 2013 target.

"We acknowledge that the department faces real difficulties in meeting current demand for resettlement," the report continues.

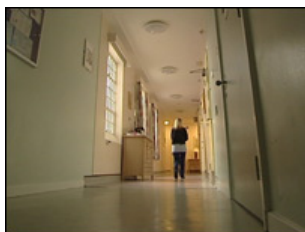
"However, if the latest target for full resettlement is to be met, learning disability must be given a higher funding priority."

Northern Ireland has by far the highest proportion of people with learning disabilities living in long-stay hospitals - 222 per million of population compared to 15 per million in England and Wales and 163 in Scotland.

### Sympathetic management

The report adds that the department considered that, with careful and sympathetic management, resettlement could be successful for all patients - regardless of the length of time that they had spent in hospital.

It highlighted a review showing that of 157 patients resettled in the five years to March 2008, only two were so unsettled in their new environment that they were returned to hospital.



Muckamore Abbey Hospital is one of the hospitals where the patients are being accommodated

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Welcoming the report, Health Minister Michael McGimpsey said that his department would work to resettle more patients, while taking account of clinical circumstances.

He said that another £33m would be invested in mental health provision.

"Learning disability and mental health services have been the 'Cinderella' services for too long," Mr McGimpsey said.

"They have suffered from years of under-investment and reflect the £600m underfunding of health and social care services when compared with England.

"The Bamford Review recognised that it will take 10 to 15 years and significant additional investment to transform services for people with a mental health condition or learning disability.

"The additional £33m I have secured has allowed me to make real progress in addressing the recommendations of the Bamford Review.

"As well as addressing the issue of resettlement, there will be a considerable increase in the numbers of community-based staff and in the number of respite places."

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